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SummitTIMES

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ON TOP OF THE NEWS

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Sikkim's overall Test Positivity Rate down to 9.04%, but fatalities remain a worry

**SAGAR CHHETRI
GANGTOK, 02 JUN:**

In a clearly combined effect of the lockdown and growing awareness among the people to maintain Covid-protocols, infections of novel coronavirus in Sikkim are showing a marked fall in the Test Positivity Rate even if the absolute numbers remain higher than the State saw in the first wave.

Today's 250 new cases, for instance, were picked up in the testing of 2,765 samples in the last 24 hours. This gives Sikkim a Test

Positivity Rate of 9.04%, a substantial reduction in the TPR recorded at the peak of the second wave for the past few weeks when this number was consistently crossing the 30% mark.

The mass testing drive underway in the State is also helping detect new infections early and isolating people before the virus can be transmitted on a scale that was seen when tests were taken only after severe Covid symptoms had set in.

While 164 cases were detected in RT-PCR testing of 890 samples [giving this test a

TPR of 18.42%], one new case was detected in TruNat testing of three samples and only 85 persons returned positive for COVID-19 in rapid antigen testing of 1,872 samples [TPR of 4.54%].

What the latest data also hints at is that the virus is reasonably under check in East Sikkim where only 100 new cases were reported today, overtaken in a rare occasion by South district where 107 new cases were reported. West Sikkim had 41 new cases while two more cases were reported from North Sikkim.

Fatalities due to COVID, however, keep Sikkim under a pall of gloom with three more Covid deaths reported in the last 24 hours taking Sikkim's COVID toll to 260. All three deaths were reported from STNM Hospital.

Meanwhile, there were 29 Covid patients were hospitalised today after they reported severe symptoms. There are currently 228 patients in Covid wards of hospitals across the State, of whom 34 are in ICU. Also over the same 24 hours, 18 patients responded well to care received in hospitals and were discharged into home

isolation.

At present, there are 339 Covid-positive people in Covid Care Centres being run by the State Government, 15 in paid quarantine centres and 3,422 in home isolation.

In the latest set of recoveries, 136 were discharged from home isolation after making full recoveries, taking the number of recovered cases of COVID-19 in Sikkim to 11,299.

The number of active cases of novel coronavirus in Sikkim currently stands at 4,103 while Sikkim's tally of confirmed cases of COVID-19 recorded thus far has now reached 15,876.

CM welcomes cancellation of class XII Board exams

SUMMIT REPORT

GANGTOK, 02 JUN:

Chief Minister Prem Singh Tamang has welcomed the decision of the Central Government regarding the cancellation of the CBSE 12th standard exams as announced by the Prime Minister, a press communique from the Chief Minister's Office informs.

In his official Twitter account, he has stated, "The decision to cancel the 12th standard exams announced by the Hon'ble Prime Minister is a logical one and I welcome it. The health and well-being of the students are of the highest importance and should not be compromised."

He has further stated that the present scenario due to the pandemic is already difficult and exams would have added further anxiety to the students, parents and the teachers.

CRH lowers prices of RT-PCR and RAT tests

SUMMIT REPORT

GANGTOK, 02 JUN:

Central Referral Hospital, Tadong has reduced the price of RT-PCR and RAT tests to Rs 1300 and Rs 350 respectively, a press release informs. The hospital management has said that these rates are much below their operational costs and have been extended as part of the hospital's "onerous responsibility to our society".

Earlier, the price for RTPCR test was Rs 2200 and for RAT test it was Rs 400.

The VRD Lab at CRH was set up on 10 Dec 2020 and has so far conducted 4469 RTPCR tests, 256 CBNAAT tests and 12,009 RAT tests.

The release also mentions that 70 beds have been apportioned by SMU & CRH for the free treatment of the poor and BPL patients. In addition, major concessions are given for treatment under the aegis of the PM-JAY, Ayushman Bharat,

MMJRK, ESIC and the Manipal Cigna Schemes (earlier SMSS).

As on 31 May, 2021, 233 COVID patients have been admitted, out of which 203 have recovered. Currently, there are 58 patients admitted for COVID-19 care, including those on life saving intensive care, the release further mentions.

CRH has also been supporting the Government with free COVID vaccination from 25 Jan, 2021 and has given approximately 8500 doses till date. The management is currently planning for vaccination of 18-45 years' category based on the State Government's guidelines, the release adds.

"We are working closely with Government of Sikkim and local administration to provide high quality healthcare services and safe hospital care with empathy to those in need," Medical Superintendent, Dr Yogesh Verma, CRH said.

"Irrational": SC on Centre's vaccination policy for 18-44 group



NEW DELHI, 02 JUN

[NDTV]:

The Centre's policy of giving free vaccination to 45-plus age group and a paid system for those below is "prima facie, arbitrary and irrational", the Supreme Court said today in its detailed order on the issue.

Calling the issue of vaccination "absolutely crucial" the court said, "Reports indicate that persons between 18-44 years of age have not only been infected by COVID-19, but have also suffered from severe effects of the infection, including prolonged hospitalisation and, in unfortunate cases, death. Due to the changing nature of the pandemic, we

are now faced with a situation where the 18-44 age group also needs to be vaccinated, although priority may be retained between different age groups on a scientific basis."

"Hence, due to the importance of vaccinating individuals in the 18-44 age group, the policy of the Central Government for conducting free vaccination themselves for groups under the first 2 phases, and replacing it with paid vaccination by the State/UT Governments and private hospitals for the persons between 18-44 years is, prima facie, arbitrary and irrational," the order read.

CM provides new ambulance to Yangang PHC



SUMMIT REPORT

GANGTOK, 02 JUN:

A new ambulance was provided to Yangang PHC today

by Chief Minister, PS Tamang. The handing over event, however, was attended by Yangang SDM, Sujata

Subba. SKM's area in-charge for Rangang-Yangan, Raj Kumar Basnet and Confidential Secretary

to the CM, Bikash Basnet, who thanked the Chief Minister and MLA, Aditya Golay for the gesture.

Pneumococcal Conjugate Vaccine launched at Namchi hospital

NAMCHI, 02 JUN (IPR):

The launch of Pneumococcal Conjugate Vaccine (PCV) in South District was commenced at District Hospital Namchi today. The programme was attended by the Chairman, Namchi Municipal Council, Ganesh Rai as the chief guest in the presence of DC (South), M Bharani Kumar, CMO (South), Dr DC Sharma, DMS Dr SN Adhikari, DRCHO Dr Junita Yonzon, CDPO Namchi, Laxman Tamang, NMC Councillor, Pema Norbu Bhutia alongwith Paediatrician-Doctors, staff of the hospital, ASHA and Aganwandai Workers.

Speaking on the occasion, Chief Guest Ganesh Rai expressed his gratitude to the health care workers for their selfless dedication towards well-being of people amid the pandemic. He also said that the vaccine that provides immunity against life threatening disease will not only improve the health of children but also reduce unnecessary hos-



pitalisation and other conditions associated with pneumonia disease, hence he urged that the vaccination must be achieved at community levels to attain optimum benefit.

Further, He requested the administration to highlight the vaccination drive of COVID-19 on the physically challenged persons and other daily workers under the Namchi Municipal Council in order to achieve 100 percent vaccination target.

Addressing, DC (South), M Bharani Kumar encouraged to raise awareness amongst the public especially to the

parents of newly born babies so that the young children get timely vaccinated and reduce mortality associated with the disease. He stressed on intensifying awareness with constant and active participation at grass-root level with the help of ASHA and Aganwandai Workers. He also informed that the District Administration would provide a necessary logistical support for successful campaign of the vaccination drive.

DRCHO Dr Junita Yonzon spoke about the importance of PCV which provides an effective

and long-lasting protection for children against pneumococcal diseases caused by pneumococcal bacteria such as pneumonia, sepsis, meningitis and many others.

It may be mentioned here that as part of this vaccination process, the vaccines will be provided free of cost at various government healthcare centers such as Community Health Centre, Primary Health Centres, Primary Health Sub-Centres in the district. Three doses of PVC is administered at the age of 6 weeks, 10weeks and 9months gaps.

After 6-year-old's appeal, J&K administration issues new online learning guidelines

SRINAGAR, 02 JUN [PTI]:

A day after Jammu and Kashmir Lieutenant Governor Manoj Sinha assured a policy in 48 hours to ease the burden of homework on school children, the administration on Tuesday came out with fresh guidelines limiting daily online classes to half-an-hour for pre-primary students and 90 minutes for primary and middle students.

The guidelines came within 24 hours of Mr Sinha's directions to the school education department to come out with a policy in 48 hours after a video of a six-year-old girl went viral on social media in which she appealed to Prime Minister Narendra Modi to ease the burden of homework.

"The school education department has decided to limit daily online classes for a maximum one and half hours for class 1 to 8, spread across two sessions. For class 9 to 12 online synchronous learning will not be more than 3 hours," the L-G said on his official Twitter handle.

He said in the case of the pre-primary students, the interaction with their teachers on a given day shall be only of half-an-hour and also asked the teachers to avoid assigning homework to students of classes up to 5.

"Concerned authorities to ensure the strict implementation. Homework up to class 5th should be avoided. Authorities and schools should plan joyful learning experience engaging parents as well," he said in another tweet.

Mr Sinha said the children need more time to play and interact with parents which is "the biggest learning experi-

ence a child can have".

In the fresh guidelines for classes 1-2, the teachers have been asked to plan joyful learning experiences for digital/online learning as in the case of face-to-face classes.

"Daily life experiences must be shared for enhancing their competency. Give interesting assignments to children such as listening, and reading, stories followed by activities like drawing inferences, adding/changing the climax at the end, picture reading, art and craft, puzzles, simple observation projects, learning new words etc," the guidelines issued by Principal Secretary, School Education Department, BK Singh, said.

The teachers have also been asked to occasionally organise brief and casual meetings with the parents and children through video conferencing and give them a chance to narrate their feelings and experiences.

"Encourage the parent to document the child's work through a photo or a short video in order to stay connected to the child's early learning experience without making it stressful or going for rote learning. Guide parents regarding monitoring TV program viewing, about what cartoons/programs are being watched by children," the guidelines said.

For the senior students, the teachers have been asked to give 10-15 minutes break between two consecutive classes for the students to freshen up, relax and re-energise themselves to focus on the next class.

"Encourage peer discussion and interaction during online classes," they said.

Jacob Khaling reaches essential supplies to families in need

SUMMIT REPORT

GANGTOK, 02 JUN:

Sikkim Krantikari Morcha party spokesperson and Political Secretary to the CM, Jacob Khaling, distributed essential food items to families in need in Soreng-Chakung constituency, West District.

Inspired by the Chief Minister's call, Mr Khaling, on his personal initiative, distributed a total of 3,000 kgs of rice, 150 kgs of cereals and 132 liters of cooking oil to families at Chumbung, Chakung and Mindogaon blocks of Soreng-Chakung constituency on Tuesday and Wednesday, a press release informs. Sanitizers and masks were also provided to COVID Task Force teams of the area.

Mr Khaling informs that such supplies will also be provided to families in need in Soreng in the coming days.

He shares that although this relief distribution



will not make a big difference in itself, if everyone extended support depending on their individual capacity, the situation will be alleviated

substantially and stronger social bond cemented in the State.

The release adds that BDO [Chumbung], Kailash Gurung, SKM panchayat

cell chief convener, Kiran Gurung, CLC general secretary, Chozang Bhutia, youth convener, Suman Gurung, BLC president, Yogesh Rai and Suren

Rai, panchayat Milan Gurung, social worker, Anita Gurung and Dil Kumari Gurung and others supported the relief distribution programme.

Yuksam-Tashiding MLA visit health centres in his constituency

PRITAM LAMA

YUKSAM, 02 JUN:

SLA Deputy speaker, Sangay Lepcha also the MLA of Yuksam-Tashiding, visited health Sub-Centres across the Constituency and handed over various medical equipments and accessories to health workers (including PPE kits, Gloves, Sanitizer, Medicines, etc).

On Tuesday, the MLA visited remote Karzee-Mangnam and Labdang villages health

centres and handed over medical equipments to health workers deployed there.

Mr Lepcha also visited health workers who have tested positive for Coronavirus and currently are in home isolation. He provided essentials as a token of encouragement from the state government.

Health workers and ASHA workers have thanked the area MLA for all the support and encouragement.



The people's Chief Minister Tamang leads Sikkim's charge against covid-19

ViewPoint

POOJA SHARMA

The Coronavirus disease (Covid-19) pandemic has impacted every segment of life like commercial establishment, education, economy, religion, transport, tourism, employment, entertainment, food security, sports, etc.

Ever since February 2020 when the first cases of Covid-19 were reported across the world and also in our country, it has affected all segments of the population and has been particularly detrimental to members of those social groups in the most vulnerable situations. Now, in 2021, in its second wave, it continues to affect populations, including people living in poverty situations, older persons, persons with disabilities, youth, and the children alike.

There are the human costs of the pandemic also, from the deaths of friends and family to the physical effects of infection and the mental trauma and fear faced by almost everyone. Social distancing, lockdown, closure of educational institutes and not knowing how this pandemic will play out affects our economic, physical and mental well-being against a backdrop of a world that, for many, is increasingly anxious, unhappy and lonely.

As countries across the globe along with India battle the raging Covid-19 virus with various strategies, it would be safe to say that we as a country have acted and reacted to this virus in the most proactive manner and have achieved relative success in handling the virus.

And the pro-active Government of Sikkim, led by our Chief Minister, Prem Singh TamangGolay has been leading from the front and has shown exemplary foresight and dynamism in this fight against this virus. Our government was the first to respond to the global crisis and impose complete lockdown in 2020, even when not a single positive case had been detected in the State. The decision changed the State's trajectory. It helped not only contain the virus during that crucial phase, but also



avoid deaths and overburdening hospital capacity at the early stage. Moreover, this was a crucial period for the government to build up infrastructure to deal with the pandemic. And as we battle a second wave, the government machinery has been relentlessly working round the clock to curb the spread of the virus, and is fully prepared to fight this pandemic tooth and nail.

But even we are out in all our resources and manpower to combat the virus, there are a section of the society still nit-picking and indulging in mud-slinging and spreading false information and propaganda against the government, which is severely affecting the morale of our front-line warriors and their selfless sacrifices. The government of Sikkim has acted with alacrity to ensure that everything in its capacity is done to mitigate the problems faced by the people in this pandemic period. There is no denying that there will be short-comings and delays but the efforts of the government, which just turned 2, cannot be compared to the bad governance of the previous government of 25 years.

I, POOJA SHARMA, being a part of the Government have been closely following

our Chief Minister's pro-active and people-centric policies and Covid-19 mitigation measures. The janta of Sikkim have whole-hearted welcomed and embraced the initiatives of the government and have fully endorsed it.

A few extreme appreciable tasks undertaken by the Chief Minister this year have been:

1. Visit to Khecheopalri Lake in West Sikkim, interaction and presentation of gifts to the people there on the occasion of his birthday, on 05 February this year.
2. Visit to DhupiDara, Pokhari the remotest corner of West Sikkim, interacted with the people, rendered possible support and spent the rainy night in a tent, during the first week of March this year.
3. Incentives to ASHA workers as a reward for their selfless services.
4. Medical kit home delivery for the Covid patients in home quarantine.
5. Grocery items to the patients and attendants who are poor and underprivileged.
6. Handed over nutritious food items and vitamins to the Covid patients touring the Covid wards across the state.
7. Ventured to visit the serious patients in Covid ward, donned with PPE Kit, interacted with them, and lent a hand wherever it was direly needed.
8. Arrangement of oxygen plants, previous year 500 ltr and ongoing setup of 1000 ltr at STNM Sochyagang, 500 ltr at Namchi District hospital, 500 at Army Hospital Gangtok, 200 ltr at Gayzing District Hospital, 200 ltr at Singtam Hospital and 200 litres at Mangan District Hospital. Apart from that, the government has a plan to setup 500 ltr oxygen plant at Dedicated Covid Care Centre, SICB Karfektar, South Sikkim.

Chief Minister, Prem Singh Golay donating a PPE Kit visited different Covidcare centers and hospitals in the state and interacted with the patients and medical staff on 30 May, 2021.

[the writer is chairperson, Sikkim Films Promotion Board, Govt of Sikkim]

Agri Minister visits Sirwani Gram Panchayat Unit



GANGTOK, 02 JUN (IPR):

Minister, Agriculture, Horticulture and Animal Husbandry & Veterinary Services, Lok Nath Sharma visited Sirwani Gram Panchayat Unit, East Sikkim and interacted with the farmers at Pekulakha and Dochung village today.

The Minister carried out field inspection of Pradhan Mantri Krishi Sinchai Yojana (PMKSY) cluster belt wherein he was professed with the farming practice of the local

farmers. The farmers in the area have prominently developed integrated vegetable farms of pumpkin, bottle gourd, banana, ginger, cucumber, bitter gourd, beans etc. He went to the interior field of cultivated lands in various pockets and acquired feedback from the vegetable growers.

The farmers and concerned Panchayat members expressed gratitude to the state government for providing support and essential inputs. A

progressive farmer, Ram Subba informed that he is earning Rupees Ten Thousand from selling of Vegetables on a weekly basis.

The Minister also applauded the services rendered by the field functionaries and urged them to work continuously for the betterment in the farming sector. He was accompanied by Secretary Horticulture, MT Sherpa, Director, Additional Directors, MD SIMFED, officials and field functionaries.

"My message from Covid sickbed": Shashi Tharoor's video on vaccine policy



NEW DELHI, 02 JUN

[NDTV]: Congress leader Shashi Tharoor, who is recuperating after testing positive for coronavirus in April, this morning tweeted a message for the government on the vaccine policy. "Save India from Covid. Make vaccines free for all," he said in a nearly two-minute long video.

The Congress MP from Kerala's Thiruvananthapuram targeted the centre over its ambitious plan to vaccinate the entire country by the end of this year.

"As you can see, I am in bed, suffering the complications of a long Covid infection. I just want to say to everybody... having seen the government statement that everybody will be vaccinated by (the) end of December, while seeing the availability of vaccines or lack thereof of the vaccines, I wonder how the government is going to get there."

Last week, Union Minister Prakash Javadekar had made it clear that India's vaccination drive is

on track while re-asserting that the government plans to vaccinate all the people by December.

"I support the Indian National Congress's campaign for a massive change in the government's policy to permit universal vaccination of all Indians within the promised deadline of December, and to do so free of cost," Mr Tharoor underlined today.

Slamming the government for the differential vaccine pricing, which has emerged as a contentious issue, the 65-year-old leader further said: "It is unacceptable that this government should be demanding that states, private hospitals and others compete in some sort of market free for all to buy vaccines at different prices, extortionate prices in some cases, when the central government has an arrangement to buy vaccines at affordable prices and give them to the public for free. That was the policy at the beginning of the vaccination drive."

Under the centre's new "liberalised" policy, which came into effect May 1, states can buy up to 50 per cent of their vaccine needs from manufacturers, although at higher prices than that fixed for the centre.

India has logged over 2.8 crore Covid cases so far; 3.35 lakh people have died.

The Congress has been attacking the government over the handling of the pandemic, specially the second wave, and slow pace of vaccination.

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Horti Dept provides 4 Refrigerated Transport Vehicles to FPOs and Progressive Farmers

GANGTOK, 02 JUN (IPR): The Department of Horticulture, Government of Sikkim, handed over four numbers of refrigerated transport vehicles to the Farmers Producers Organization (FPOs) and Progressive Farmers in a programme organised at Horticulture Farm, Mahitar, East Sikkim today.

The Minister for Agriculture, Horticulture and Animal Husbandry and Veterinary Services, Lok Nath Sharma flagged off the Refrigerated Transport Vehicles and handed over the vehicle keys and documents to four FPOs and Progressive Farmers. The recipients of refrigerated transportation vehicles were Khamdong Singtam Organic Farmers Producers Cooperative Society Ltd, East District, Alleydara Sanjivani SHG, South District, Lily Self Help Group from Tikpur and M/s Sikkim Vegetable Growers As-



sociation, Berthang, Hee Bermiok, West Sikkim. The cost of each vehicle is Rs.18,19,995 (Eighteen Lakhs Nineteen Thousand Nine Hundred and Ninety Five only).

The Minister also launched the "White Marvel" Button Mushroom, produced and promoted by Integrated Mushroom Development Unit, Mahitar, Horticulture Department, Government of Sikkim during the occasion.

Speaking on the occasion, the Minister highlighted the objectives

of providing transportation vehicles to FPOs and SHGs. He mentioned that the transportation vehicles will make it convenient to ensure marketing of the vegetables produced in rural areas of Sikkim. He urged every beneficiary to wisely utilise the transportation vehicles with proper maintenance. He also informed that the vegetables can be stored in vehicles which have temperature control system with single phase AC provision that has storing capacity of fifteen Quintals.

He also mentioned that the Department of Agriculture, Horticulture and Animal Husbandry and Veterinary Services have been working tirelessly to benefit the farmers of Sikkim even during the pandemic. He also appealed to the farmers of Sikkim to continue the lucrative and life-saving profession of farming, extensively. He expressed gratitude to the Chief Minister for making it possible to provide the much-needed transportation vehicles to the farmers. Minister Sharma also touched upon the various efforts of the state government to combat the ongoing crisis of COVID pandemic.

The Minister also mentioned that systematic training will be provided to the farmers of Sikkim to produce White Marvel Button Mushroom. The Unit will produce and supply newly

launched mushroom to various parts of Sikkim and the collected revenue will be deposited in the Government's account, he added.

Secretary Horticulture, MT Sherpa in his opening remarks highlighted on the purpose of providing Transportation Vehicles and launching of White Marvel mushrooms. He informed that the White Marvel Button Mushrooms is purely organically produced by the Mushroom Production Unit.

The programme was also attended by the Director Horticulture, Sadan Tamang, Additional Directors (Vegetable, Spices, National Bamboo Mission) Additional Chief Engineer, Joint Directors from all districts, officials and others. The programme was organized with due adherence to the Covid-19 safety protocol.

CEPCS provides relief at Pakchey

**SUMMIT REPORT
GANGTOK, 02 JUN:**

Council of Evangelical Presbyterian Church of Sikkim [CEPCS] Social Service Committee in collaboration with Damthang EPCS Church South Sikkim under the guidance of Rev PN Sherpa started relief distribution at Pakchey under Poklok Kamran Constituency today, a press release informs. The relief includes food grains and



other essential items to 45 families of the village who are in quarantine due to Covid-19.

Essential goods provided to five remote villages in East



**SUMMIT REPORT
GANGTOK, 02 JUN:**

Housing & Building Board, Chairman, Karma Tashi Bhutia and Culture Chairman, Sonam Sherpa along with Sarathi Executives visited five remote locations namely, Rolep, Machong, Loosing, Ankuchin & Firferay under Gnathang-Machong Constituency today and provided essential goods following directions of Chief Minister, PS Tamang.

A press release informs that they handed

over essential commodities to the Sarathi Org East in the presence of President (East), Hari Rizal and General Sec, Bishal Sharma and SKM Youth Org Secretary cum Sarathi East Coordinator, Gagan Gurung and Gnathang Machong SKM CLC President, MB Gurung. The items were further distributed to the constituency executives in the presence of the concerned Panchayats and Ward Presidents.

KB Rai (Rolep), Dawa Doma Bhutia (Machong), Kamala Sub-

ba & Hari Prsd Sharma (loosing), Hari Neopany (Ankuchin), and MB Gurung (Firferay) were asked to collect the essential goods to be distributed to families through concerned Ward Panchayats.

The Sarathi team has thanked Chairman Housing, Karma Tashi Bhutia for bringing in the help as directed by the CM to the people through Sarathi organisation and Chairman Culture Dept, Sonam Sherpa for his guidance.

Sanitization drive at Saka Samaj in lower Ghurpisey concludes

NAMCHI, 02 JUN (IPR):

The two days long Sanitization of Saka Samaj under lower Ghurpisey, Namchi concluded today. The sanitation process was undertaken under the guidance of CLC General Secretary Incharge, SJ Lepcha, Youth Convenor, Rinchen Bhutia and Samaj President, Chewang Lepcha.

Sanitization of the entire Saka Premises and

Mandir Dara road was done by Adeip Chettri and Dawa Bhutia along with the youth of Saka Samaj.

They also sensitized about COVID-19 appropriate behaviour and other Standard Operating Procedures issued by the State Government which needs to be strictly followed by every individual to combat the disease.



To beat Covid, provide universal access to vaccines

Viewpoint

SHIRISH KHARE

Majority of world's population today is plagued by the fear of infection with Corona. As big companies have monopoly rights due to patents on medicines and vaccines for the treatment and prevention of this infection, those are not accessible to everyone. Right to life of humans is a universal fundamental right. By giving unlimited rights to make profits from the patents of some companies, the right to life of crores of people is being compromised, which cannot be allowed to happen.

In order to make these vaccines and medicines cheaper and accessible, an intensive campaign is being launched by the people of India to transfer the technology of these vaccines and medicines by making them patent-free. Although a number of drugs related to the treatment of Covid are being produced locally, the quantity available is insufficient to meet the growing demand due to the severity of the problem.

The corona crisis is almost over in 6 countries where the adult population has been almost fully vaccinated, such as Israel, America, United Kingdom, UAE, etc. Therefore, immediate vaccination of the entire adult population of the world including India is necessary. For this, Swadeshi Jagran Manch has launched a mass awareness campaign, seeking to make Covid vaccines and drugs patent-free, and to make their technology accessible to all producers capable of producing them. Under this, "Universal Access to Vaccines and Medicines" that is, UAVM has been started seeking complete access of vaccines and medicines across the country and the world.

Under this endeavour, webinars, seminars, demonstrations etc. are being organised and mass contact including online signature campaign is going on. In India about 200 crore doses are required to vaccinate at least 70% of the population. For this there is an urgent need for large scale production, for which international technology & raw material will be needed. Measures would be required to facilitate the transfer of technology and to overcome the barriers related to intellectual property rights, including patents and trade secrets.

Under the 'Universal Access to Vaccine and Medicines' campaign cooperation is being sought from various social, cultural and other organizations, educational institutions, enlightened people, academics, judges from India and abroad. An international conference in this regard was also organized by the some universities and Association of Indian Universities on 28 May, 2021.

120 Countries have so far supported the proposal of the Government of India in the World Trade Organization, along with South Africa, to facilitate patent-free vaccines and medicines made in October itself, seeking waiver from TRIPS agreement. We strongly urge the countries/companies/individuals groups opposing this proposal to stop opposing it in the interest of humanity without any delay.

UVAM strongly urges all governments of the world and the WTO:

- All the facilities including technology transfer, availability of raw materials, trade secrets should be ensured for all potential manufacturers including trade secrets, in order to increase the production of vaccines.
- To ensure abundant production of Remdesivir, Faviracir, Tocilizumab and new medicines like Molnupiravir.
- Effectively control the prices along with adequate production of



vaccines and medicines at the global level.

- To speed up diplomatic efforts through WTO, G-7, G-20 and other global forums for achieving the objective of TRIPS waiver.

So far nearly five lakh people have signed the petition in the digital signature campaign from India and 20 more countries. In another petition 1600 top academicians/enlightened citizens from India and abroad have signed demanding that:

1. World Trade Organization should relax the provisions of intellectual property rights.
 2. Global pharmaceutical manufacturer and vaccine manufacturer companies should voluntarily grant patent-free rights, including transfer of technology, to other manufacturers for the sake of humanity.
 3. All other drug manufacturers, other than the patent holders, should take all necessary steps for the right to manufacture vaccines and medicines, availability of necessary technology and production material. Encouragement is given to such manufacturers.
 4. To fight against Corona and to ensure global availability of vaccines and medicines, all patriotic people, concerned individuals and organizations come forward and join these efforts.
- Swadeshi Jagran Manch (SJM)'s Sikkim State Convenor, Shrish Khare hopes this would not only help our people here but with a few companies in Sikkim getting into production of vaccine/medicines will benefit local economy too. SJM Sikkim's Co-Convenor Advocate, Bhupendra Giri and Prant Prachar Pramukh, Tikaram Sunuwar showed happiness for more than ten thousand online petitions having been signed from Sikkim itself and also thanked football icon Bhaichung Bhutia for supporting this humanitarian campaign.

Indian traders seek import quota to stem influx of soybean oil

KRISHANA PRASAIN

KATHMANDU, 02 JUN [KATHMANDUPOST]: Indian traders have again complained to the Indian government that a huge influx of soybean oil from Nepal in violation of the rules of origin under the South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA) was hurting refineries and farmers in India.

SAFTA is the free trade arrangement of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation of which Nepal and India are founding members.

The Solvent Extractors' Association of India, one of the oldest organisations of vegetable oil and trade, has asked the Indian government to fix quotas on imports, saying that soybean oil has become Nepal's top export commodity even though the country does not produce it commercially.

According to Nepal's Trade and Export Promotion Centre, soybean oil shipments reached Rs35.75 billion in the first 10 months of the current fiscal year, a year-on-year jump of more than four times.

"Nepal has violated the rules of origin privilege granted under SAFTA," the association said.

Exports of soybean oil amounted to Rs8.36 billion in the first 10 months of the last fiscal year.

The trade data of the Department of Customs showed that Nepal imported crude soybean oil worth Rs39.46 billion in the same period.

Soybean oil exports alone make up 32.96 percent of Nepal's total trade.

The country imported 355.29 million litres of crude soybean oil during the review period. Nepal bought most of its soybean oil from Argentina, Egypt, Paraguay and Ukraine.

In March, following a huge increase in the export of refined soybean oil from Nepal, the Indian government wrote to Nepal's Ministry of Foreign Affairs to "confirm the genuineness and authenticity" of the product originating criteria or the certificate of origin issued by Nepali authorities for the export of edible oil to India under SAFTA.

Dinesh Bhattarai, secretary of the Ministry of Industry, Commerce and Supplies, told the Post that the ministry had replied to most of the issues raised by the Indian government regarding the authenticity of the certificate of origin of the

product through the Foreign Ministry.

He said that his ministry, after a proper study, investigation and discussion with the concerned stakeholders, had sent proof and data regarding the authenticity of the certificate of origin of the product, including the value addition to the product in Nepal. "The ministry has not received any further communication from the Indian government."

Bhattarai said that the export of soybean oil was being done according to international trade norms, but that some traders had been exploiting the zero tariff privilege in a negative way.

"As long as it generates employment by adding some value and helps the government to raise revenue, it is worth trading," Indian traders have the right to raise concerns over the certificate of origin with their government, he added.

A certificate of origin is a document declaring in which country a commodity was produced or manufactured. The paperwork contains information regarding the product, its destination and the country of export.

It is required by many treaty agreements for cross-border trade, and can help determine whether certain goods are eligible for import, or whether goods are subject to duties.

Tariff exemptions on Nepali exports to India under the SAFTA agreement give domestic traders an advantage. Countries outside of South Asia are slapped with tariffs of 54 percent on palm oil and 45 percent on soybean oil.

A proof of origin is required to claim preferential tariff treatment. The government has authorised three associations—the Federation of Nepalese Chambers of Commerce and Industry, Confederation Nepalese Industries and Nepal Chamber of Commerce—to issue the certificate of origin.

The Solvent Extractors' Association of India said that massive imports of soybean oil from Nepal was hurting refiners in eastern and northern India and Indian farmers, besides incurring loss of revenue to the government.

"It is harming the interests of oil-seed farmers as it distorts the domestic market. Thus, the very purpose of keeping import duties on edible oils is getting negated," the association said.

Drought in the Rainforest

Prepare better for Climate Change

A NASA-led study has revealed that more than 7,00,000 sq km of Amazon rainforest has been hit hard by a mega-drought that began in 2005 and caused widespread damage to the canopy that blankets the dense vegetation.

Drought in the rainforest!

Climate Change anyone?

What has happened in the Amazon rainforest could be a localised cyclical climate-related blip or part of a larger climate change impact. Either way, it is important enough to have NASA tracking it and keeping the region and world informed. That's a start. But what about corners as small as Sikkim?

Against the 7 crore hectares affected in the Amazon, Sikkim spreads out a mere 7 lakh hectares. It is unlikely that the impact of climate change or droughts or extreme weather conditions here will flash on the monitors of anyone tracking such events. But the signs are there for all to see. Winters have not been normal in recent years, recording at either too wet or too dry; so dry two years back that the Rabi crops in fields which depend on winter rains and receiving inundation so unhealthy that crops rotted away. The monsoons, after the Met offices vacillated between normal to above average predictions and verdicts, will likely be heavy this year, and most definitely erratic, coming too early or arriving too late.

For those who see these as cyclical events, there are other signs like areas in Sikkim which received only snowfall, now also receiving frequent rainfall; glaciers which used to course kilometres into valleys now having retreated as hanging glaciers leaving behind only scree and debris.

This last reference was experienced firsthand by mountaineers attempting the Zemu Gap in West Sikkim some years back. Relying on surveyor notes from around 80 years ago, they realised that glaciers across which the pioneers had walked across had now receded, leaving a nearly kilometre deep scar of extremely fragile rocks and unstable blocks which were now impossible to navigate. This has to be a result of climate change. Not that this phenomenon requires any reiteration since the discourse has already moved on to preparedness.

To Sikkim's credit, it has a department dedicated to Climate Change [the Department of Science & Technology now includes for Climate Change in its name]. Unfortunately, while recognition of climate change as a major future challenge has been taken at the policy level, at the executive level, nothing has changed. Sikkim's understanding of climate change is no better than any person with access of the internet or relevant literature. Worse still, the impact of climate change on Sikkim has neither been studied nor shared. Unless the impact of climate change is explained with 'local' references to the stakeholders, the policy directives and preparedness plans will not succeed. Sikkim had commissioned a study of its glaciers, and while some references have been made to the findings, the final report has not been shared in the public domain yet. As everyone knows, the study of glaciers can provide important insights into climate change impact. Sikkim has already committed itself to prepare better for climate change; as already shared, no one else is going to help Sikkim study or prepare. It will have to do so itself, hence the sooner the available data is shared with the stakeholders, the faster will the analysts be able to make sense of it and put things in perspective and the quicker Sikkim can expect to start, well, preparing better for climate change...

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MAUREEN MILLER

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As more and more people around the world are getting vaccinated, one can almost hear the collective sigh of relief. But the next pandemic threat is likely already making its way through the population right now.

My research as an infectious disease epidemiologist has found that there is a simple strategy to mitigate emerging outbreaks: proactive, real-time surveillance in settings where animal-to-human disease spillover is most likely to occur.

In other words, don't wait for sick people to show up at a hospital. Instead, monitor populations where disease spillover actually happens.

THE CURRENT PANDEMIC PREVENTION STRATEGY

Global health professionals have long known that pandemics fueled by zoonotic disease spillover, or animal-to-human disease transmission, were a problem. In 1947, the World Health Organization established a global network of hospitals to detect pandemic threats through a process called syndromic surveillance. The process relies on standardized symptom checklists to look for signals of emerging or reemerging diseases of pandemic potential among patient populations with symptoms that can't be easily diagnosed.

This clinical strategy relies both on infected individuals coming to sentinel hospitals and medical authorities who are influential and persistent enough to raise the alarm.

There's only one hitch: By the time someone sick shows up at a hospital, an outbreak has already occurred. In the case of SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19, it was likely widespread long before it was detected. This time, the clinical strategy alone failed us.

ZOONOTIC DISEASE SPILLOVER IS NOT ONE AND DONE

A more proactive approach is currently gaining prominence in the world of pandemic prevention: viral evolutionary theory. This theory suggests that animal viruses become dangerous human viruses incrementally over time through frequent zoonotic spillover.

It's not a one-time deal: An "intermediary" animal such as a civet cat, pangolin or pig may be required to mutate the virus so it can make

initial jumps to people. But the final host that allows a variant to become fully adapted to humans may be humans themselves.

Viral evolutionary theory is playing out in real time with the rapid development of COVID-19 variants. In fact, an international team of scientists have proposed that undetected human-to-human transmission after an animal-to-human jump is the likely origin of SARS-CoV-2.

When novel zoonotic viral disease outbreaks like Ebola first came to the world's attention in the 1970s, research on the extent of disease transmission relied on antibody assays, blood tests to identify people who have already been infected. Antibody surveillance, also called serosurveys, test blood samples from target populations to identify how many people have been infected. Serosurveys help determine whether diseases like Ebola are circulating undetected.

Turns out they were: Ebola antibodies were found in more than 5% of people tested in Liberia in 1982, decades before the West African epidemic in 2014. These results support viral evolutionary theory: It takes time – sometimes a lot of time – to make an animal virus dangerous and transmissible between humans.

What this also means is that scientists have a chance to intervene.

MEASURING ZOONOTIC DISEASE SPILLOVER

One way to take advantage of the lead time for animal viruses to fully adapt to humans is long-term, repeated surveillance. Setting up a pandemic threats warning system with this strategy in mind could help detect pre-pandemic viruses before they become harmful to humans. And the best place to start is directly at the source.

My team worked with virologist Shi Zhengli of the Wuhan Institute of Virology to develop a human antibody assay to test for a very distant cousin of SARS-CoV-2 found in bats. We established proof of zoonotic spillover in a small 2015 serosurvey in Yunnan, China: 3% of study participants living near bats carrying this SARS-like coronavirus tested antibody positive. But there was one unexpected result: None of the previously infected study participants reported any harmful health effects. Earlier spillovers of SARS corona-

viruses – like the first SARS epidemic in 2003 and Middle Eastern Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) in 2012 – had caused high levels of illness and death. This one did no such thing.

Researchers conducted a larger study in Southern China between 2015 and 2017. It's a region home to bats known to carry SARS-like coronaviruses, including the one that caused the original 2003 SARS pandemic and the one most closely related to SARS-CoV-2.

Fewer than 1% of participants in this study tested antibody positive, meaning they had been previously infected with the SARS-like coronavirus. Again, none of them reported negative health effects. But syndromic surveillance – the same strategy used by sentinel hospitals – revealed something even more unexpected: An additional 5% of community participants reported symptoms consistent with SARS in the past year.

This study did more than just provide the biological evidence needed to establish proof of concept to measure zoonotic spillover. The pandemic threats warning system also picked up a signal for a SARS-like infection that couldn't yet be detected through blood tests. It may even have detected early variants of SARS-CoV-2.

Had surveillance protocols been in place, these results would have triggered a search for community members who may have been part of an undetected outbreak. But without an established plan, the signal was missed.

FROM PREDICTION TO SURVEILLANCE TO GENETIC SEQUENCING

The lion's share of pandemic prevention funding and effort over the past two decades has focused on discovering wildlife pathogens, and predicting pandemics before animal viruses can infect humans. But this approach has not predicted any major zoonotic disease outbreaks – including H1N1 influenza in 2009, MERS in 2012, the West African Ebola epidemic in 2014 or the current COVID-19 pandemic.

Predictive modeling has, however, provided robust heat maps of the global "hot spots" where zoonotic spillover is most likely to occur.

Long-term, regular surveillance at these "hot spots" could detect

spillover signals, as well as any changes that occur over time. These could include an uptick in antibody-positive individuals, increased levels of illness and demographic changes among infected people. As with any proactive disease surveillance, if a signal is detected, an outbreak investigation would follow. People identified with symptoms that can't be easily diagnosed can then be screened using genetic sequencing to characterize and identify new viruses.

This is exactly what Greg Gray and his team from Duke University did in their search for undiscovered coronaviruses in rural Sarawak, Malaysia, a known "hot spot" for zoonotic spillover. Eight of 301 specimens collected from pneumonia patients hospitalized in 2017-2018 were found to have a canine coronavirus never before seen in humans. Complete viral genome sequencing not only suggested that it had recently jumped from an animal host – it also harbored the same mutation that made both SARS and SARS-CoV-2 so deadly.

LET'S NOT MISS THE NEXT PANDEMIC WARNING SIGNAL

The good news is that surveillance infrastructure in global "hot spots" already exists. The Connecting Organisations for Regional Disease Surveillance program links six regional disease surveillance networks in 28 countries. They pioneered "participant surveillance," partnering with communities at high risk for both initial zoonotic spillover and the gravest health outcomes to contribute to prevention efforts.

For example, Cambodia, a country at risk of pandemic avian influenza spillover, established a free national hotline for community members to report animal illnesses directly to the Ministry of Health in real time. Boots-on-the-ground approaches like these are key to a timely and coordinated public health response to stop outbreaks before they become pandemics.

It is easy to miss warning signals when global and local priorities are tentative. The same mistake need not happen again.

[the writer is Adjunct Associate Professor of Epidemiology, Columbia University]

Why are there so many text scams all of a sudden?

GARETH NORRIS & ALEXANDRA BROOKES

THECONVERSATION.COM

A new "fraud wave" has been reported in the UK, targeting mobile phone users with texts that, at first glance, appear to be from delivery companies or government institutions.

You may even have been targeted by the text scams yourself, which often ask you to pay missed delivery charges or tax fees and are sent from numbers that claim to belong to Royal Mail, Hermes or HMRC.

While these scams are actually nothing new, there does appear to have been a sudden and dramatic increase in their volume in recent weeks, coming after the recent spike in coronavirus vaccine scams and scams targeting those seeking to buy a pet online during the pandemic.

The resurgence of text scams in the spring of 2021 also appears to be taking advantage of circumstances brought about by the pandemic – but learning more about them can help us to stamp them out.

INCREASING TEXT SCAMS

To understand the apparent increase in text scams, we need to consider two key factors. The first is timing. Missed delivery charge scams are most often rolled out around the busy Christmas postal period, while tax scams are usually timed around April to coincide with the new financial year.

The pandemic has extended the window of opportunity for fraudsters to successfully target people with both types of scam. More of us are expecting a parcel in the post after increasing our online shopping since March 2020, while novel financial measures related to the pandemic, such as the furlough scheme, may have given people the impression that HMRC has temporarily altered its operations.

The second factor is volume. These types of scams are delivered en masse, and fraudsters only need to receive responses to a handful of the thousands of texts they send out to make significant sums of money.

That's not because of the money they're

asking people to send them – which appears tiny in the case of a £1.43 delivery fee – but because criminals can use the card details they're provided to empty victims' bank accounts. Other text scams, which prompt you to click on a link, are designed to infect your phone with malware that can help criminals steal your personal data.

The increasing volume of these scams suggests that they do work. And because their success encourages "copy cat" scams, with new criminal groups experimenting with their own text scams, it's difficult to stamp them out entirely, despite recent arrests. The best way to counter these scams is to reduce their success rate, and we can do this by making the public aware of how and why text scams work.

WHY DO WE FALL FOR TEXT SCAMS?

Despite the apparent crudeness of these fraudulent messages, which often feature misspellings or incorrect grammar, they take advantage of timeworn techniques that exploit our psychological vulnerabilities. The aim is to encourage us to respond on impulse rather than thinking through whether we may be being scammed.

Exploiting emotion is the main method used by scammers to achieve this. The delivery charge scam, for instance, often threatens a loss if you don't immediately pay for redelivery, with fraudsters issuing a tight deadline before they claim your parcel will be returned to its sender. Emotions such as fear, panic and anxiety can cause us to respond impulsively to scam messages.

On the other hand, positive emotions, such as excitement or hope, can also bias our judgement and encourage impulsive behaviour. The HMRC tax refund scam is built on the promise of financial gain if you click on a link – but instead of transferring you cash, the link is built to facilitate phishing that gives criminals access to your personal data or bank details.

People are far more likely to fall for this scam if they've already received a genuine communication from HMRC that they're due a tax refund. Psychologists refer to this feeling as "illusory

correlation", which happens when we see events as linked when they're not. Illusory correlation tends to confuse or relax our natural caution, making us more vulnerable to scams.

WHO ARE SCAMMERS TARGETING?

Anyone can fall victim to scams. Contrary to popular opinion, older people are not more likely to be victims of text scams, partially because many older people may be less likely to bank and shop online, have dealings with HMRC, or even use mobile phones.

It's the use of mobile devices for these text-based scams that may actually make younger people more susceptible. While we're somewhat used to scam emails, scam texts are relatively new. Texts also feel more intimate – we expect them to be from people we know, or from institutions we've trusted with our mobile number. And we often access texts on the go, when we're busy or distracted and less likely to question their veracity.

To avoid falling victim to text scams, we suggest you take a few simple steps before choosing to respond. First, make sure you take some time to properly look at the content of any message you receive. Any written message containing email addresses, phone numbers or language errors could help you spot a scam.

If you can't spot any blatant errors, just wait – even for a few minutes – before responding. This will allow you time to think whether it's normal for a company to communicate with you via text.

For delivery scams in particular, which are currently surging in the UK, it's well worth interrogating everything about the text you receive. Checking websites for the delivery companies they use, or even making a quick call to the delivery company the text claims to be from, can help clear things up. And at the end of the day, it's better to miss your parcel than to lose thousands of pounds to scam artists.

[Gareth Norris is Senior Lecturer, Department of Psychology, Aberystwyth University; Alexandra Brookes is Associate lecturer / PhD researcher, Aberystwyth University]

Mizoram logs 235 new COVID-19 cases, 4 more deaths

AIZAWL, JUN 2 (PTI): Mizoram on Wednesday reported 235 new COVID-19 cases, taking the state's tally to 12,634, official sources said.

The state also reported four more COVID-19 deaths on Tuesday, which took the death toll to 44 on Wednesday, the state information and public relations department said in its official Twitter handle.

At least 3,752 new samples were tested for COVID-19 in the last 24 hours and 6.26 per cent of them came out positive for COVID-19, the department said.

Of the 235 fresh cases, Aizawl district registered the highest at 164, followed by Lawngtlai district, which reported 20 cases, it said.

The remaining cases were from Lunglei district (18), Serchhip district (5), Kolashib district (18), Siahla district (3), Khawzawl district (5), Champhai district (1) and Mamit district (1).

More than 41 children were among the newly infected people, it said.

Seven patients have travel history while the rest 228 patients were found to have locally contracted the infection, it said, adding that 139 patients have developed symptoms of COVID-19.

Mizoram currently has 3,243, active COVID-19 cases while 9,347 people have recovered from the infection.

At least 133 people were discharged from various Covid-19 care centres on Tuesday.

The state has so far tested 3,97,433 samples for COVID-19 till date.

According to state immunisation officer, Dr Lalzawmi, as many as 2,59,498 people have been administered the first dose of Covid-19 vaccine of which 52,121 people have received both doses till Tuesday.

Tathagata Roy to present report on BJP's Bengal defeat

NEW DELHI, 02 JUN: The turbulence in the Bharatiya Janata Party in West Bengal, which recently lost the Assembly elections, does not seem to have an end as the party's veteran leader and former Governor of Tripura and Meghalaya Tathagata Roy is ready to visit the top BJP leadership in the national capital.

The BJP leader said that he has prepared a detailed report factoring in various reasons why the party lost the West Bengal elections and would present it to the party's top leadership once he comes to Delhi.

Asked about when is he planning to come to the national capital, Tathagata Roy said, "Is lockdown relaxed in Delhi? If yes, I will come to Delhi pretty soon."

Days after losing the West Bengal polls to the ruling Trinamool Congress, Tathagata Roy in a series of tweets had put the blame on "KDSA", BJP's top leadership of Bengal (BJP national general secretary Kailash



Vijayvargiya, state party chief Dilip Ghosh, national joint general secretary (organization) Shiv Prakash and national secretary Arvind Menon).

Tathagata Roy alleged that tickets were given "while sitting in Hastings and 7-star hotels to incoming garbage from TMC".

He also reacted sharply on leaders not coming to aid the "ideologically driven workers or devout swayamsevak working for the party since the 1980s and fac-

ing persecution at that hands of Trinamoolis".

Soon after his tweets blaming these leaders for the loss and sufferings of cadre, Tathagata Roy posted another tweet stating that he has been called to Delhi by the party's top leadership.

Asked about if his thoughts about senior party leaders in charge of West Bengal during polls same, Tathagata Roy said, "Bengal was lost because of these persons" incompetence. Beyond I do not want to say anything."

He further stated that he has analysed the results of the polls and has prepared a report to be presented to the party's top leadership.

"I have said these things in public in order so that they (Central leaders) do manthan (deliberations). If they ask me to not say these things in public which I have already stated then I have to think. I will submit my report. Beyond that, I cannot say. I will prepare my reactions accordingly," the veteran BJP leader said when

asked if the party tells him to not make public statements about fellow party men

On whether he thinks that more TMC turncoats will go back, Tathagata Roy said that he suspects that quite a few are likely to go eventually.

He also stated that Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee's leaving a meeting with Prime Minister Narendra Modi early with the latter still sitting shows discourtesy on part of the Chief Minister.

Tathagata Roy believes that former West Bengal Chief Secretary Alapan Bandyopadhyay is just a "pawn in the game".

"He has acted unprofessionally. The home ministry is at liberty to do so and justified in doing so," added Tathagata Roy.

TMC secured 213 seats in the eight-phased West Bengal Assembly elections while the BJP won 77 seats in the recently concluded Assembly elections.

Assam Police step up war on drugs, over 1,000 peddlers arrested in May

GUWAHATI, 02 JUN [NDTV]: As part of new Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma's war on drugs, police have arrested several dealers and seized large quantities of illegal substances over the past week.

The Assam DGP (Director-General of Police) said 35 arrests were made and 20 cases registered on Sunday alone. DGP Bhaskar Jyoti Mahanta told reporters in Guwahati that the seizure list from that day consisted of 469.7 grams of heroin, 574.31 kg ganja, 1499 tablets and ₹ 20,700 in cash.

Mr Sarma tweeted his congratulations: "Good work by Assam Police to address menace of narcotics."

Last month, 2,439 grams of heroin, 91 kg of ganja, 17,551 bottles of



cough syrup, around 1.57 lakh methamphetamine tablets, 14.16 grams of morphine and ₹ 10.5 lakh in cash were seized.

Overall, the DGP said, 1,008 people have been arrested and 618 cases registered since the crackdown on drugs began in January.

"We have launched a massive operation against the drug trade in

Assam. Our focus is on drug peddlers because we need to break the supply chain and they are at the lower levels... transporting drugs to the customers. Our fight will be long but we will continue," he said.

"If we want to hit supply we have to go from the lower level. We have changed our strategy and are focusing on

peddlers not big smugglers. Insurgents groups in the northeast are also involved," the DGP explained, indicating that insurgents often provide security for the drug smugglers.

"I appeal to the society to not treat addicts as criminals... rather as patients and help them in rehabilitation. Many are trying to change. We

have talked to many former addicts and are trying to understand them. Society has a big role to play in supporting them to go to rehabilitation centres for treatment," he added.

The DGP also referred to poppy farms that are the main source of drug production.

"We have also launched a crackdown against this illegal cultivation. Recently we freed 15 bighas (approximately 0.7 acres) of land from this illegal cultivation," he said.

The top cop also said: "Poppy plants were smuggled to Myanmar from the northeast (and) made in to different drugs that are mostly consumed by youths. Drugs are destroying the society... so people should stand against this menace."

24 held in Assam doctor assault case: CM

GUWAHATI, JUN 2 (PTI): Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma said on Wednesday that 24 people have been arrested for allegedly assaulting a doctor at a medical facility in Hojai district following the death of a COVID-19 patient there.

The police said that it will submit a "strong chargesheet" in the case in a short period of time to punish the people involved in the alleged attack on Dr Seuj Kumar Senapati at the Udali Care Centre on Tuesday.

"Twenty-four culprits involved in this barbaric attack have been arrested and the chargesheet will be filed at the earliest. I am personally monitoring this investigation and I promise that justice will be served," Sarma said on Twitter.

Director General

of Police Bhaskar Jyoti Mahanta said they are taking the incident very seriously as doctors are fighting the pandemic at the forefront and the attack on Senapati is "like assaulting all the frontline workers".

"And @assampo-lice would not let that happen... We WILL bring the perpetrators to justice... Let this be known, assaulting frontline worker will not be tolerated... A strong case is being made against them," he said in a series of tweets.

Special DGP (Law and Order) Gyanendra Pratap Singh said the main accused persons and conspirators, including a woman seen in a video of the incident, have been arrested.

"We would submit a strong chargesheet in

the shortest possible time and ensure the criminals are brought to justice," he said on the microblogging site.

Hojai Superintendent of Police Barun Purkayastha had said a critically ill coronavirus-positive patient succumbed to the disease at Udali Covid Care Centre on Tuesday afternoon.

"Immediately after that, the relatives and a group of people known to the victim arrived there and started beating up the doctor. After getting the information, our team reached there and arrested three persons. Further investigation is on," he told PTI on Tuesday.

A video of the attack which went viral on social media showed that a person, apparently looked like the doctor, was being assaulted by a group of people, in-

cluding women.

All political parties have condemned the incident and asked the government to take strict action against the culprits.

Meanwhile, the Assam Medical Service Association (AMSA) announced that their members will hold demonstrations to protest against the assault and said they would boycott all OPD services on Wednesday across Assam.

"If next time, any such incident occurs to any health workers, AMSA will immediately go for complete cease work of all services all over the state," the association said in a statement.

The staffers in emergency services and COVID Centre will wear black badges, and they demanded enhanced security at all

hospitals and healthcare facilities.

"Assam Health Security Force should be started in the line of CISF (Central Industrial Security Force) and AISF (Assam Industrial Security Force).

"As initiation of 'Health Security Force' will take longer time, we request immediate recruitment of temporary security personnel for hospitals," the AMSA said.

In a letter to Union Home Minister Amit Shah, the Indian Medical Association termed the attack on Senapati as "extremely inhuman" and sought strict action against the culprits immediately.

"India needs a comprehensive, uniform & effective law against healthcare violence. We request you to kindly approve an effective & strong act," it added.

60 to 64-year-olds to get Chinese jabs as WHO urges world to give shots to Nepal

ARJUN POUDEL KATHMANDU, 02 JUN [KATHMANDUPOST]:

The grant of one million doses of Covid-19 vaccines from China, most of which arrived on Tuesday, may provide some respite from the ongoing second wave of the pandemic as people between 60 and 64 years of age will be inoculated with them.

But the situation in Nepal continues to be dire.

"The speed of the surge in cases has resulted in acute shortages of essential supplies—human resources, oxygen, critical life support equipment and trained critical care health workers," said World Health Organisation's Nepal representative Dr Rajesh Sambhajirao Pandav, while addressing a UN media briefing on Tuesday.

"Hospitals have been forced to turn away patients due to unavailability of beds, health care workers are compelled to carry on with their duties despite experiencing exhaustion and in many cases, testing positive themselves."

The number of daily positive cases may be coming down in the last few days but Nepal is not out of the woods and vaccines are the only way out, he said.

"Nepal's health system is bursting at the seams," Pandav said. "If Nepal does not receive vaccine supplies soon, we can expect continuation of the hardship that we are seeing now."

With Nepal's efforts to buy vaccines coming to naught, the country's northern neighbour last week announced a grant of 1 million doses.

Of the grant, 900,800 arrived on Tuesday—800,000 from Beijing and 100,800 from Kunming.

The rest will be brought on Wednesday from Kunming in two flights by Himalaya Airlines which is ferrying the 200,000 vaccines that the Tibet Autonomous Region of China donated as part of its philanthropic activities, according to the company.

A meeting of officials at the Department of Health Services on Tuesday decided to inoculate those aged between 60 and 64 years with the newly-arrived vaccines throughout the country.

"We will administer the vaccine from all 77 districts throughout the country," Dr Jhalak Gautam, chief of the National Immunisation Programme, told the Post. "Second dose of the vaccine will be preserved from this supply."

It is estimated that the population between 60 and 64 years is around 850,000 but authorities believe that there will be enough in stock for two doses.

Gautam said that most of the eligible people from several mountain districts have already taken the first dose of Covishield vaccine and therefore all will not seek immunisation with the Chinese vaccine.

"We have around 100,000 doses in stock, which were provided to us by China earlier," said Gau-

tam. "We will also use these doses in the campaign."

Authorities have been wary of not exhausting all vaccines in stock by inoculating people as many as possible with the first dose as those above 65 are yet to get their second dose.

It is unclear when they will get them since the Serum Institute of India is yet to supply the 1 million doses that Nepal has already paid for. India banned the export of vaccines after the country suffered a devastating second wave.

Those over 65 had got their first dose between March 7 and 15 and should have received their second dose from May 16. But the government extended the gap between the two doses to 12 to 16 weeks.

Nepal launched its vaccination drive on January 27 with the one million doses of Covishield that India had provided under grant assistance. It also received 348,000 doses from the COVAX facility. Of the 2 million doses of vaccines that Nepal bought from Serum Institute half has been delivered.

On March 29, China had provided 800,000 doses of BBIBP-CorV vaccine developed by an affiliate of state-backed pharmaceutical giant Sinopharm.

Only about seven per cent of Nepal's total population or just over 2.1 million people have been immunized. Of these, only less than seven hundred thousand have received their second dose, according to the Health Ministry.

"Ongoing second wave of the infection shows that all people are vulnerable to the coronavirus infection," Dr Sarad Onta, a public health expert, told the Post.

Despite that the country sees signs of stabilization and even a slight reduction in the numbers, the situation still remains critical, the UN health agency said.

"While things are very gradually improving in some cities, what we are seeing now is indications that the virus has penetrated rural areas," said Pandav of the WHO. "In such rural settings there is limited access to secondary health services and lesser inclination among the population to seek early testing and care due to various structural and social issues."

On Tuesday Nepal reported 5,285 new coronavirus infections taking the total number of infections to 566,587 of which 104,789 are still active. The death toll has reached 7,454 with the Ministry of Health and Population reporting 68 new deaths, the lowest in three weeks, from Covid-19 complications on Monday.

The positivity rate was more than an alarming 30 percent on Tuesday down from more than 40 percent a couple of weeks back.

Pandav warned that with the lockdown restrictions eventually being eased, new variants still emerging in the Asian region and lack of reliable supply of vaccines to ramp up coverage rapidly, there is a remarkably high likelihood that Nepal may witness another surge in cases.

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South America restarts World Cup qualifying amid COVID rise

BUENOS AIRES, JUN 2 (AP): South American World Cup qualifiers resume on Thursday after a seven-month interruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, though that doesn't mean the virus has waned in the region.

Top-of-the-table Brazil and second-place Argentina could take decisive steps in the next two rounds to assure somewhat calm pathways to Qatar, while Peru, which made it to Russia three years ago but now has one point after four matches, is already fighting to survive.

The latest rounds of South American World Cup qualifiers were in November. More games scheduled to be played in March were postponed when clubs of other confederations refused to allow their players to travel due to the pandemic.

The top four teams will automatically qualify. The fifth-place squad will go into an inter-continental playoff. The current standings show Brazil (12 points), Argentina (10), Ecuador (9) Paraguay and Uruguay (6) in those spots.

The two rounds will also be preparatory for this month's Copa Amer-



ica, which will now be hosted by Brazil after Argentina was dropped because of the spread of COVID-19 in that country, even though analysts expect another wave of the virus to hit Brazil by late June.

BRAZIL vs ECUADOR

It will be the only match of the fifth round on Friday.

Brazil coach Tite said in a mid-May press conference that the halt in South American qualifiers will affect all South American teams, both in the short and long run.

That is a reality we would rather not live. But we will have to be capable of moving other tools so we can keep our

competitiveness high up, he said before the clash with Ecuador's pragmatic team of Argentinian coach Gustavo Alfaro.

Tite initially brought veterans defenders Dani Alves and Thiago Silva for the qualifying matches but neither are expected to play due to injuries.

Brazil is also mired in doubt on who will be its target man, eyeing Copa America and beyond. Tite's options include Gabriel Jesus, who didn't score as a starting striker in the last World Cup, Roberto Firmino, whose is more of a creator than a scorer, and former Inter Milan flop Gabriel Barbosa, now a local hero at Flamengo.

ARGENTINA vs CHILE

After dropping out as host of Copa America due to the pandemic, Argentina will try to lift some spirits at home against Chile (4 points), now under Uruguayan coach Martin Lasarte.

Striker Sergio Aguerro, newly signed to Barcelona, will be back to the squad after several absences due to injury. Coach Lionel Scaloni, though, has shown he prefers Lautaro Martinez up front with captain Lionel Messi.

Chile lost midfielder Arturo Vidal to COVID-19 only two days before the clash against its rival. The same reason forced Lasarte to leave defender

Paulo Daz out.

Ben Brereton, a 22-year-old striker, will be the new element in Chile's squad. His father is English and his mother is Chilean.

PERU vs COLOMBIA

Both teams made it to the World Cup in 2018 and both need to win to keep track of the leaders.

Colombia, with four points, will count on the return of coach Reinaldo Rueda after a disappointing spell at Chile. Rueda has had a lot to explain from the start after he left midfielder James Rodriguez out of his squad for alleged poor physical conditions.

James said in a statement he was disappointed with the coach.

Peru will once again count on veteran striker Paolo Guerrero, its top goal scorer in history, after he recovered from a knee injury.

The other matches of the fifth round of South American World Cup qualifiers are Bolivia against Venezuela and Uruguay against Paraguay. Bolivia has one point and Venezuela, three. Uruguay has six points, but trails Paraguay, also with six, on goal difference.

Absent Ramos still attracting attention ahead of Euro 2020

MADRID, JUN 2 (AP): For the first time in 15 years, Spain finds itself preparing for a major tournament without Sergio Ramos.

The veteran defender, however, is still attracting much of the attention ahead of the European Championship as Spain starts its preparations in Madrid.

Sergio Ramos has always been with the national team, so it's a bit strange that he isn't here now, Koke Resurreccion said Tuesday at the team's training camp.

Ramos had been with La Roja for every major tournament since the 2006 World Cup, having first made the senior team in 2005 at age 18. He was a surprising absence for the Euro 2020 squad despite a season plagued by injuries. Coach Luis Enrique decided to leave the veteran captain off his list because of a lack of play in recent months.

The 35-year-old Ramos missed most of the second half of the season with Real Madrid after a series of muscle injuries and a knee problem that required surgery. He also tested positive for COVID-19 in April, but was expected to be injury free by the time Euro

2020 started.

Many in Spain criticized Luis Enrique for leaving the star defender out, especially because the coach decided not to use two of the 26 spots available, with Ramos potentially benefiting the squad with his experience and leadership even if he wasn't fully fit.

In the end, these decisions are made by the coach, he is the one who announces the list, said Koke.

It wasn't only Sergio Ramos who was left out, but also other very important players for their clubs, and other very important players for Spain. We have to respect these decisions.

Luis Enrique said he didn't want to pick a full complement of 26 players because some wouldn't end up being used at all.

There is always controversy when it comes to any decision related to Ramos, Luis Enrique said when the list was announced.

But I see it as something normal, I don't think his absence will affect the national team.

Ramos came out supporting the coach's decision, saying that in his case it was best to rest and try to fully recover

for the future. He had hinted before that he could play in the Tokyo Olympics, and was still aiming at playing in the 2022 World Cup in Qatar.

Ramos is close to breaking the record for most appearances for a national team. He already holds the European record with 180 appearances, four fewer than the world record held by Egypt player Ahmed Hassan.

Spain is in Group E along with Sweden, Poland and Slovakia. Its two warm-up matches are against Portugal on Friday and Lithuania on June 8. Its first group match is against Sweden in Seville on June 14.

The team held its first practice session on Monday without a full squad. Players from Villarreal and Manchester United, which played in the Europa League final last week, arrived for the training camp on Tuesday. Players from Manchester City and Chelsea, which contested Saturday's Champions League final, were scheduled to arrive on Wednesday.

Ramos won't arrive at all this time, and will watch Spain play on television.

I'll be another fan cheering on from home," he said.

Osaka steps out of French Open and onto sport's third rail

PARIS, JUN 2 (AP): Most athletes are comfortable talking about injuries, so long as they can point to a bruise, a bandage, a cast or a spot on an X-ray. Some will even venture an educated guess at how long they might take to heal. Their mental health is a different story.

Or at least it was before Naomi Osaka ended a damaging standoff with top tennis officials by withdrawing from the French Open earlier this week, citing concerns for her well-being.

It marked the first time a major star walked away from a major tournament without a visible injury. Judging by the reaction, it appeared Osaka landed on the third rail of sports.

Other athletes, notably Olympian Michael Phelps, spoke candidly about mental-health issues before. Some, like Los Angeles Lakers great Jerry West, detailed their struggles in books only after their playing days were long over. Still others wrestled that tortured secret for a lifetime.

None of them sparked a conversation this wide, in no small part because of what was at stake and a very public back-and-forth that played out on social media. How much more oxygen it draws going forward likely depends on Osaka, already a four-time major champion at age 23; whether more athletes follow her lead; and if so, how fans and the sports establishment react.

When someone tears an ACL, it's 6-8 months, we know the time frame. And like with everything



else in life, we want a finite number. But that's not how mental health works, said Dr. Wendy Borlabi, a Chicago-based performance psychologist who works with pro, Olympic and college athletes.

People are different, we experience things differently, but we all want the process to say, 'This is what you do to get better.' It's not that simple. There's no one-size-fits-all,' she continued.

But the more we talk about mental health in the open, the more we put the stigma behind us, especially in sports. This is a big opportunity.

There's a long list of athletes who could have benefitted from the chance. Some may still.

In recent years, NBA players Kevin Love and DeMar DeRozan and the WNBA's A'ja Wilson have spoken very publicly about their bouts with depression, sharing both the successes and setbacks.

Baseball fans of a certain age remember the late Jimmy Piersall, portrayed in the movie Fear Strikes Out, and whose 17-year major league career was littered with well-publicized fistfights, scrapes and stunts all while he was battling bipolar disorder.

Piersall parlayed his relative fame into a second career in broadcasting and scouting, suggesting that some of the stunts he pulled were just that stunts to fulfill the public's perception of him.

Probably the best thing that ever happened to me was going nuts, he wrote in his autobiography.

Who ever heard of Jimmy Piersall until that happened?

Mental-health specialists who work in sports remind the rest of us that the visibility afforded athletes is both a blessing and a curse. There's precious little privacy, and every doctor's note seeking time off scrutinized like a tax return. Imag-

ine having a bad day at work and then sitting down in front of a dozen microphones to explain in detail how and why it happened, over and over.

That's why those same specialists note that by the time an athlete is acting out, the injury has already occurred.

That's the challenge with mental health in sports, said Dr. Ross Flowers, a San Diego-based sports psychologist whose client list also includes Olympians and several pro and college teams.

Athletes get attention precisely because they're above average, and sometimes it's easy to forget they're humans first. They're supposed to be dominant and not show vulnerability, yet in most cases we don't learn they're struggling until it shows up in their behavior, he added.

That's why what Naomi did was brave. She was proactive. She recognized something

was holding her back and said, 'I want to be at my best and I can't be that at the moment.'

Whether Osaka's example and a growing public awareness about mental health issues encourage athletes facing similar problems to more forcefully speak out, the people running sports would do well to prepare.

While most of Osaka's contemporaries defended the requirement that players engage with the media to help grow the game, no more than a handful actually enjoy the give-and-take dynamic.

And right on time came further proof that media obligations can be damaging to a player's health. No. 11 seed Petra Kvitova, herself a two-time major champion, announced she, too, had withdrawn from the tournament after falling and twisting her ankle on the way back from what else? my post-match press requirements.

No better preparation for Ashes than clean sweep against India, NZ: Root



LONDON, JUN 2 (PTI): England skipper Joe Root says a clean sweep against the top two sides in Test cricket -- India and New Zealand -- will be the best preparation for the iconic Ashes series against arch rivals Australia later this year.

Before heading to Australia for the Ashes in the winter, England play seven Tests at home against New Zealand and India this summer.

They will take on the Blackcaps for a two-match red-ball series, starting Wednesday and then clash with India in a five-Tests series across August and September.

"There are going to be constant conversations about Australia through-

out this whole summer, there is no getting away from that," Root told reporters on Tuesday ahead of the series-opener.

"We have said for a long time now that we are planning towards that series and as an English fan, an English player, it is such an iconic series.

"It is of utmost importance, absolutely. But the way we are best going to prepare ourselves is by performing well in these seven Tests, by winning seven Test matches against the best two sides in the world," he added.

New Zealand and India are slated to take on each other in the inaugu-

ral World Test Championship final scheduled to be held in Southampton from June 18-22.

Although planning to regain the Ashes will remain in the back of the mind, Root said the full focus will be to have successful summer.

"Planning for Australia is something in the background, it's something we are very aware of and consistently talk about. But that won't be in our thoughts when we are out there this summer.

"You couldn't be asking for two better opponents right now - to take on the best is what sport is all about and every Test means a hell of a lot to our players and to me. These Tests are our full focus.

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Australian power generator takes Greenpeace to court

CANBERRA, AUSTRALIA (AP): Australia's largest electricity generator AGL Energy took Greenpeace to court on Wednesday alleging breaches of copyright and trademark laws in the environmental group's campaign describing AGL as the nation's "biggest climate polluter."

Greenpeace Australia Pacific has accused AGL, which predominantly generates coal-fired electricity, of "greenwashing" by promoting itself as a leading investor in renewable energy.

AGL has targeted in the Federal Court Greenpeace's use of its logo in an online advertising campaign featuring the slogan, "AGL – Australia's Greatest Liability."

Greenpeace lawyer Katrina Bullock said the lawsuit was an example of a "fossil fuel" company using the law to try "intimidate their critics."

AGL unsuccessfully applied for an interim court order in early May that would have forced Greenpeace to stop using the logo.

Greenpeace argues that Australian trade-

mark law allows for the logo to be used for satire, parody and criticism.

AGL lawyer Megan Evetts told the court there was a "clear intention to harm the brand" through the Greenpeace campaign. The court must decide whether Greenpeace owed AGL damages, she said.

"AGL is not seeking to stifle public debate. What it is seeking to do is protect itself, protect its intellectual property rights," Evetts said.

Greenpeace lawyer Neil Murray told the court the campaign did not breach the law because it did not use the AGL trademark in a trade context and its motives were "pure."

"The conduct of the campaign to cause people to be critical of AGL for continuing to operate coal until 2048 in the hope that that criticism will create pressure on AGL to change is a legitimate goal: initiating public debate for a beneficial cause," Murray said. "To punish a charity for doing that would be unjust."

AGL accepted in its



latest annual report that it was Australia's largest greenhouse gas emitter with plans to continue generating electricity by burning coal until 2048, Murray said.

"This is not a frolic invented by Greenpeace. This is a serious issue, the dynamics of which are recognized by AGL in its own documents," Murray said.

The campaign was aimed at ending Australian reliance on coal-fired power by 2030 as recommended by the Intergovern-

mental Panel on Climate Change.

"It's not... an exercise in gratuitous denigration of AGL, it's not about trying to inflict maximum harm to them," Murray said. "It's a socially responsible campaign addressed to a very specific issue based on international research."

AGL lawyer John Hennessy said the campaign involved the "wholesale reproduction of the logo" and could not be considered satirical.

Greenpeace campaigner Glenn Walker

described the amended AGL logo used in his campaign as a parody.

Under questioning by Hennessy, Walker denied that the aim of the campaign was to persuade AGL to change its policy through a loss of customers.

Walker said Greenpeace advised AGL customers to write messages on social media pages, send emails to the AGL chief executive and telephone AGL's customer service center to raise concerns about the company's climate policy.

"We've been very clear in our communication with any AGL customers that we'd actually prefer them to engage with the company because we think that has greater impact in this campaign," Walker said.

Walker did not accept Hennessy's proposition that Greenpeace considered AGL a "villain."

"We regard them as a temporary villain," Walker said. "Because many of the companies that we target through our campaigning end up becoming quite good corporate players and we congratulate them for that."

"Ultimately the purpose of the campaign is to get them to shut down their coal-burning power stations and to become a renewable energy leader," he added.

Australia's Clean Energy Regulator confirms that AGL is the nation's largest greenhouse gas polluter, accounting for 8% of the nation's total emissions.

Justice Stephen Burley said at the end of the one-day hearing that he would deliver his verdict at a later date.

Malaysia to summon Chinese envoy over jets intrusion

KUALA LUMPUR, JUN 2 (AP): Malaysia's government will issue a diplomatic protest against an intrusion" by 16 Chinese military aircraft into its airspace, the foreign minister said.

Foreign Minister Hishammuddin Hussein said late Tuesday that he will summon the Chinese ambassador to explain this breach of the Malaysian airspace and sovereignty."

Malaysia's air force said its radar picked up the Chinese aircraft Monday near Malaysian-administered Luconia Shoals, a rich fishing ground in the disputed South China Sea.

The Chinese planes then moved nearly 60 nautical miles (110 kilometers) off the coast of Sarawak on Borneo island.

After attempts to contact the aircraft failed, the air force sent its fighter planes to identify them. It said they were Ilyushin Il-76 and Xian Y-20 strategic transporters, flying at between 23,000-27,000 feet (7,000-8,000 meters) altitude typically used by commercial flights. Malaysia called the incident a serious threat to national sovereignty and flight safety."

Malaysia's stand is clear having friendly diplomatic relations with any countries does not mean that we will compromise our national security," Hishammuddin said in a statement. He said he will relay Malaysia's serious concern on the matter to his Chinese counterpart.

There was no reaction from Beijing.

China claims almost the entire South China Sea on historic grounds. Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines, Taiwan and Vietnam also have overlapping claims, and tensions have ramped up since China built several man-made islands and turned them into military outposts.

The strategically important area straddles some of the world's busiest sea lanes and is also rich in fisheries and may hold underground oil and natural gas reserves.

Malaysia says Chinese coast guard and navy ships intruded into its waters in the South China Sea 89 times between 2016 and 2019. Malaysia has filed six diplomatic protests to China, including one in 2017 in response to a Chinese note asserting its claim to the South Luconia Shoals.

AshaNegi to feature in Voot series 'KhwabonKeParindey'

MUMBAI, JUN 2 (PTI): Actor AshaNegi is set to star in "KhwabonKeParindey", a Voot drama series, the streaming platform announced Wednesday.

Directed by Tapasvi Mehta, the show explores the journey of friendship, hope and life of three friends through the picturesque landscape of Australia.

Negi said she is thankful to the makers for giving her the opportunity to play a challenging character like Bindiya.

"My character of Bindiya on the show is this complete wild child, who believes in embracing life every single day. I enjoyed playing the role; although challenging, the transition of my

portrayal of roles from television to web has been extremely refreshing," the 31-year-old actor, who became a household name with the TV show "PavitraRishta", said in a statement.

The experience of shooting for the show, Negi said, made her realise the importance of friends.

"They are like your truth serum, who help you unravel your deepest secrets and fears and then help you get through it," she added.

Negi, who was last seen in AnuragBasu's anthology film "Ludo", made her digital debut with the 2019 series "Baarish".

"KhwabonKeParindey" is slated to start streaming from June 14.

Iran's largest warship catches fire, sinks in Gulf of Oman

TEHRAN, IRAN (AP): The largest warship in the Iranian navy caught fire and later sank Wednesday in the Gulf of Oman under unclear circumstances, semiofficial news agencies reported. The Fars and Tasnim news agencies said efforts failed to save the support warship Kharg, named after the island that serves as the main oil terminal for Iran.

The blaze began around 2:25 a.m. and firefighters tried to contain it, Fars said. The vessel sank near the Iranian port of Jask, some 1,270 kilometers (790 miles) southeast of Tehran on the Gulf of Oman near the Strait of Hormuz — the narrow mouth of the Persian Gulf.

Photos circulated on Iranian social media of sailors wearing life jackets evacuating the vessel as a fire burned behind them. State TV and semi-official news agencies referred to the Kharg as a "training ship." Fars published video of thick, black smoke rising from



the ship early Wednesday morning.

Satellite photos from Planet Labs Inc. analyzed by The Associated Press showed the Kharg off to the west of Jask on Tuesday. Satellites from the U.S. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration that track fires from space detected a blaze at the site of the Jask that started just before the time of the fire reported by Fars.

The Kharg serves as one of a few vessels in the Iranian navy capable of providing replenishment at sea for its other ships. It also can lift heavy cargo and serve as a launch point for helicopters. The warship, built in Britain and launched in 1977, entered the Iranian navy in 1984 after lengthy negotiations that followed Iran's 1979 Islamic Revolution.

Iran's navy typically

handles patrols in the Gulf of Oman and the wider seas, while the country's paramilitary Revolutionary Guard operates in the shallower waters of the Strait of Hormuz and the Persian Gulf. In recent months, however, the navy launched a slightly larger commercial tanker called the Makran it converted into serving a similar function as the Kharg.

Iranian officials of-

fered no cause for the fire aboard the Kharg. However, it comes after a series of mysterious explosions that began in 2019 targeting ships in the Gulf of Oman.

The U.S. Navy later accused Iran of targeting the ships with limpet mines, timed explosives typically attached by divers to a vessel's hull.

Iran denied targeting the vessels, though

U.S. Navy footage showed Revolutionary Guard members removing one unexploded limpet mine from a vessel.

The incidents came amid heightened tensions between the U.S. and Iran after then-President Donald Trump unilaterally withdrew America from Tehran's nuclear deal with world powers.

In April, an Iranian ship called the MV Saviz believed to be a Guard base and anchored for years in the Red Sea off Yemen was targeted in an attack suspected to have been carried out by Israel. It escalated a yearslong shadow war in Mideast waters between the two countries.

The sinking of the Kharg marks the latest naval disaster for Iran. In 2020 during an Iranian military training exercise, a missile mistakenly struck a naval vessel near the port of Jask, killing 19 sailors and wounding 15.

Also in 2018, an Iranian navy destroyer sank in the Caspian Sea.

Russian upper house votes to exit from overflight treaty

MOSCOW (AP): The Russian parliament's upper house voted Wednesday to withdraw from an international treaty allowing surveillance flights over military facilities following the U.S. exit from the treaty.

The vote comes after U.S. officials told Moscow last month that President Joe Biden's administration had decided not to reenter the Open Skies Treaty, which had allowed surveillance flights over military facilities before President Donald Trump withdrew from the pact.

As a presidential candidate, Biden had criticized Trump's with-

drawal as "short-sighted." Moscow has signaled its readiness to reverse the withdrawal procedure and stay in the 1992 treaty if the United States returns to the agreement.

After the Russian upper house voted to leave the treaty, it would now come to Russian President Vladimir Putin for signing. If Putin endorses the exit, it would take effect in six months.

Putin and Biden are to have a summit in Geneva on June 16. The meeting comes as Russia-U.S. ties have sunk to the lowest levels since the Cold War times after Russia's 2014 annexation of Ukraine's



Crimean Peninsula, the accusations of Moscow's interference in U.S. elections, hacking attacks and other irritants.

The Open Skies Treaty was intended to build trust between Russia and the West by allowing the accord's more than three dozen signa-

tories to conduct reconnaissance flights over each other's territories to collect information about military forces and activities. More than 1,500 flights have been conducted under the treaty since it took effect in 2002, aimed at fostering transparency and allowing for the monitor-

ing of arms control and other agreements.

Trump pulled out of the pact last year, arguing that Russian violations made it untenable for Washington to remain a party. Washington completed its withdrawal from the treaty in November.

Moscow has deplored the U.S. withdrawal, warning that it will erode global security by making it more difficult for governments to interpret the intentions of other nations, particularly amid heightened Russia-West tensions.

The European Union has urged the U.S. to reconsider its exit and called on Russia to stay

in the pact and lift flight restrictions, notably over its westernmost Kaliningrad region, which lies between NATO allies Lithuania and Poland.

Russia has insisted the restrictions on observation flights it imposed in the past were permissible under the treaty and noted that the U.S. imposed more sweeping restrictions on observation flights over Alaska.

As a condition for staying in the pact after the U.S. pullout, Moscow has unsuccessfully pushed for guarantees from NATO allies that they wouldn't hand over the data collected during their observation flights over Russia to the U.S.

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Starz sets season 6 return for 'Outlander'

LOS ANGELES, JUN 2 (PTI): The sixth season of the fantasy period drama "Outlander" will air on Starz in early 2022, the premium cable network has announced.

Starz also shared some first look images from the new and shortened season, which wraps production in Scotland this week.

According to Entertainment Weekly, Caitriona Balfe, Sam Heughan, Sophie Skelton, Richard Rankin, and John Bell will all return to reprise their starring roles.

Mark Lewis-Jones, Alexander Vlahos, and Jessica Reynolds are the new additions to the show.

The new season will consist of eight episodes, including a 90-minute season premiere, and showrunner Matthew B Roberts promised fans that the seventh installment will have 16 episodes as the situation



gets better amid the coronavirus pandemic.

"Filming in 2021 has presented an unprecedented set of challenges which led us to the decision to truncate the season in order to bring the fans the most vibrant and dynamic season as soon as possible.

"Dinnaflash (Scottish for 'don't worry'), we will then film an extended season 7 with

16 episodes next year as life returns to normalcy," Roberts in a statement.

Adapted from Diana Gabaldon's best-selling book series of the same name, the upcoming season is based on material from the sixth book, "A Breath of Snow and Ashes".

It will see Claire (Balfe) and Jamie (Heughan) fight to protect those they love, as they navigate

the trials and tribulations of life in colonial America as the country moves towards Revolution.

Per the logline: "Establishing a home in the New World is by no means an easy task, particularly in the wild backcountry of North Carolina and perhaps most significantly during a period of dramatic political upheaval. The Frasers strive to maintain peace and flourish within a society which as Claire knows all too well is unwittingly marching towards Revolution. "Against this backdrop, which heralds the birth of the new American nation, Claire and Jamie have built a home together at Fraser's Ridge. They must now defend this home established on land granted to them by the Crown not only from external forces, but also from the increasing strife and conflict in the community within their care.

Alicia Silverstone boards comedy feature 'Senior Year'

LOS ANGELES, JUN 2 (PTI): "Clueless" star Alicia Silverstone is set to return to the high school comedy genre with "Senior Year".

Silverstone joins previously announced cast members Rebel Wilson, Justin Hartley, and Angourie Rice, reported Deadline.

A Paramount Players film, "Senior Year" follows a cheerleader who wakes up after a 20-year coma and returns to high school in order to try to regain her status and claim the prom queen crown that eluded her.

Alex Hardcastle, known for his work on shows "Love, Victor" and "Grace And Frankie", will direct the film.

Brandon Scott Jones is writing the script of the film based on a speculative screenplay from Andrew Knauer and Arthur Pielli.

Todd Garner, Tim Bourne, Wilson and Chris Bender are attached to produce the comedy.

Sam Richardson, Zoe Chao, Mary Holland and Chris Parnell also round the cast.

Silverstone most recently appeared in the series reboot of "The Baby-Sitters Club" from Netflix.

She is also set to voice star in Netflix and Kevin Smith's animated "He-Man series Masters of the Universe: Revelation".

So communicate your truth and do so in a gentle, loving manner. Your squad won't know who to show up for you until you give them a chance to.

Tip: Communicate your truth in a gentle and loving manner.

CANCER: You tried your best, but it wasn't enough. It simply wasn't enough, Cancer. It's time to open your eyes gently and become aware of what the signs are revealing to you. It may be time to let this relationship go—for now—and redirect your attention towards self-growth. If you've been pouring and pouring unconditionally from your cup and tending to the needs of those around you, set some time aside for meditation, journaling, and self-care rituals. The key is to engage in activities that help you reset on a mind, body, and soul level.

LEO: We, as a collective, tend to glorify the fast life, not realising that magic actually begins to take form in the void. That in-between space where the old hasn't quite completed itself, and the new is beginning to show signs of life. You'll find that this is especially true for you right now, Leo. So, surrender to the cosmic currents, and allow yourself to be in yin mode for as long as it takes. For some of you, the past could be returning in a big way. It will be easy for you to get caught up in the illusion that things are different this time around.

VIRGO: Hello, multitasking maven! How's trying to do everything at once working out for you? Today, the cards are urging you to pause, breathe, and reassess matters. There's a good chance you're staggering your progress by going about things in an unfocused

manner. So, consider changing the approach a little. Make a priority listing consisting of no more than five tasks. One step at a time: this is a mantra that will take you places.

LIBRA: It's time for a cup of truth tea, Libra. You're not stuck because you're limited by your circumstances. You're stuck because you don't fully believe in your power. It's time to address the imposter syndrome. It's time to address the blocks within that are keeping you from realising your potential. Remember, it's all unfolding as per the plan and you have been chosen for this mission for a reason.

SCORPIO: The thing is, when we're emotionally attached to something or somebody, our perception of them is usually coloured by our feelings. In such cases, it's easy to dismiss the red flags or to give them the benefit of doubt. But, in doing so, you could be betraying yourself deeply. Words of wisdom by Maya Angelou to give you the perspective you need: "When somebody shows you who they are, believe them the first time."

SAGITTARIUS: Our conditioning plays an important role in determining the beliefs we hold onto. Not all of these beliefs are healthy, though. Some of them are limiting and keep us from realising our true potential. One of the most common narratives that is repeated is 'money is the root of all evil'. Another one that keeps us stuck in the matrix is that 'wealth and happiness cannot co-exist'. Today, you're being encouraged to identify the stories that *you* have been repeating in your head. Remember, you were created in the likeness of the Divine

Kelly Osbourne opens up about drug and alcohol addictions



NEW YORK (AP): Kelly Osbourne is opening up about her battles with drug and alcohol addiction, stopping by "Red Table Talk" to discuss getting hooked as a teen and relapsing after the pandemic.

The TV personality said she ended almost four years of sobriety in April 2021 as the COVID-19 pandemic was waning, triggered into drinking alcohol again after seeing a couple sipping champagne.

"I was alone, sitting by a pool and waiting for somebody to come have a meeting with me. And I saw this woman and her husband had a glass of champagne. It looked really nice and I was like, 'I can do that, too,'" she said on the Facebook Watch show. "And the next day, I had two glasses. And the day after that, it was bottles."

Osbourne's episode of "Red Table Talk" airs on Facebook Watch on Wednesday at 9 a.m. PDT/noon EDT.

Osbourne also told the hosts — Jada Pinkett Smith, her daughter, Willow Smith; and her mother, Adrienne Banfield-Norris —

about the origins of her addictions.

Her first opiate-based drug addiction was with Vicodin which was prescribed to her after an operation to remove her tonsils when she was 13, sending her on a lifelong battle. "That was all I needed," she said sadly.

Osbourne said the drug silenced her insecurities. "It felt like life gave me a hug," Pinkett Smith responded wryly: "Vicodin will do that." Osbourne added that Vicodin led to her misusing Percocet to eventually heroin "because it was cheaper."

Osbourne has discussed her drug and alcohol battles before in several interviews, her 2017 memoir and on podcasts like Dax Shepard's "Armchair Expert."

She has said her drug use became the heaviest during her mother's cancer battle and after her father, "Crazy Train" singer Ozzy Osbourne, almost died after an ATV accident in 2003.

"Red Table Talk" has recently made headlines with its interview with Olivia Jade Gnanuli and when Pinkett Smith and her husband, Will Smith, discussed their marriage.

Producers' body to conduct free vaccination for 500 members

MUMBAI, JUN 2 (PTI): Indian Motion Picture Producers' Association (IMPPA) will organise a free coronavirus vaccine drive for 500 of its members this month on a "first-come-first-served" basis, the film body announced Wednesday.

The association, which has 6,000 members, will set up a camp at its Andheri (West) office here on June 15 or June 16.

"All members including those who are facing financial problems... requesting them to fill enclosed form with the Aadhaar card and personal phone number. (It) must be sent immediately on reading this message because entry will be on first come first served basis for the first 500 members," T P Aggarwal, president of IMPPA, said in a statement.

Members who want their spouses to be vaccinated can do so by paying Rs 1,000 per person in advance at the time of filling up the form, Aggarwal added.

The producers, whose membership was valid till 2005, are also eligible for the vaccination drive, he said.

Last month, IMPPA wrote to Maharashtra Chief Minister Uddhav Thackeray to set up a vaccination centre for its members.

On Monday, the Producers Guild of In-



dia (PGI), the association of Indian film, television and digital content producers, announced a vaccination drive for its members and associated production crews beginning Tuesday.

Recently, producer Sajid Nadiadwala also held a vaccination drive for over 500 of his employees and their families.

The central government launched the nationwide drive in March this year to vaccinate everyone above 60 years of age and those aged between 45 and 59 with co-morbidities.

From May 1, the central and state governments started vaccinating people aged between 18 and 44.

Maharashtra on Tuesday recorded 14,123 new COVID-19 cases, the lowest since March 10, taking the caseload to 57,61,015, while the fatality count increased to 96,198.

ARIES: Aries, you're likely to find yourself at a crossroads this week. The first pathway is synonymous with familiarity and will keep you limited to your comfort zone. The second, on the other hand, will open the door to infinite possibilities. Here's the catch, though: your mind will try to convince you against the latter by raising questions such as 'Is it really worth it?' Instead of giving in to the voice of the small ego self, connect with the wisdom of your soul. The wisdom that always knows what is and isn't in alignment with your truth. Something tells us you are more courageous than you give yourself credit for being.

TAURUS: Today, you're tapping into your nurturing side and honouring the energy of the Great Mother within. The collective needs your services now more than ever, Taurus. So, think of yourself as conduit. A conduit for hope, a conduit for love and a conduit for miracles. Removing the 'I' from the equation will help you give back in the best possible way. The good news is, you don't have to do it all by yourself. The Universe is your co-conspirator in this mission, providing you with all the support you need in this moment.

GEMINI: These are testing times for all of us, Gemini, and you're doing your best to keep yourself and those around you afloat. But, are those around you supporting you in the same manner? An unequal distribution of responsibility is showing up on your cards. In some cases, the lack of initiative from the side of a family member or loved one could be a cause of concern. Remember, the theme for Mercury retrograde remains unchanged through the years.