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SummitTIMES

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ON TOP OF THE NEWS

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CM celebrates birthday in West Sikkim



**SUMMIT REPORT
GANGTOK, 06 FEB:**

On his birthday, Chief Minister, PS Tamang visited the holy Khechoepalri Lake, TashiChyolingGumpa and JaleshwarMahadevMandir, in West Sikkim on 05 Feb. He expressed gratitude to his parents and family members for being the pillar of strength and support.

The Chief Minister dedicated this day to the people of Sikkim and expressed his delight to be among the people of Yuksam-Tashiding. The CM thanked everyone for all the good wishes and blessings.

On the occasion, blankets and other gifts were distributed to the people and the CM had also made arrangements for lunch and dinner. He urged the people to contribute and help the poor and needy in their area stating that it will be the biggest gift for him on this day.

11,713 new cases take India's coronavirus tally to 1,08,14,304

NEW DELHI, FEB 6 (PTI): India's COVID-19 infection tally climbed to 1,08,14,304 with 11,713 new cases in a day, while 1,05,10,796 people have recuperated so far pushing the national recovery rate to 97.19 per cent on Saturday, according to Union Health Ministry data.

There are 1,48,590 active cases of coronavirus infection in the country which accounts for 1.37 per cent of the total caseload, the data stated.

The total coronavirus cases mounted to 1,08,14,304 and the death toll climbed to 1,54,918 with the novel coronavirus virus claiming 95 lives in a span of 24 hours in the country, the data updated at 8am showed.

The COVID-19 case fatality rate stood at 1.43 per cent. According to the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR), a cumulative total of 20,06,72,589 samples have been tested up to February 5 with 7,40,794 samples being tested on Friday.

India's COVID-19 tally had crossed the 20-lakh mark on August 7,

30 lakh on August 23 and 40 lakh on September 5. It went past 50 lakh on September 16, 60 lakh on September 28, 70 lakh on October 11 and crossed 80 lakh on October 29 and 90 lakh on November 20 and one crore on December 19.

The 95 latest fatalities include 40 from Maharashtra and 19 from Kerala. The total 1,54,918 deaths reported so far in the country include 51,255 from Maharashtra, followed 12,379 from Tamil Nadu, 12,230 from Karnataka, 10,873 from Delhi, 10,201 from West Bengal, 8,682 from Uttar Pradesh, 7,158 from Andhra Pradesh, 5,635 from Punjab and 4,393 from Gujarat. The health ministry stressed that more than 70 per cent of the deaths occurred due to comorbidities.

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

College students arrested and detained on Education Secy's complaint

**SUMMIT REPORT
GANGTOK, 06 FEB:**

The protest by a section of students of Gyalshing Government College took an ugly turn after two of the protesting students were arrested and many others detained by the police on Friday evening. The arrests were made following a police complaint filed by Additional Chief Secretary, Education Department, GP Upadhyaya.

The arrested students were released on bail Saturday evening, sources inform.

In the police complaint filed by Mr Upadhyaya, it is alleged that two students, Praveen Upreti and Praveen Basnett forcefully entered his office on 05 Feb at 4pm and threatened him. It further alleges that the students then tried "to assault and forcefully restrain him by way of making human chains."

The students said that police took away 18 male students from the protest site at around 11 pm on Friday night. There were around 10 female students who had left the protest site by 9 pm, it is informed.

As per sources, six of the students have been detained by Ranipool Police Station, three by Rangpo Police Station, and three by Singtam Police Station.

They alleged that the male students were taken to different police stations in Sikkim while some, they said, were even taken all the way to Gyalshing.

The two students who have been arrested by Sadar Thana police are members of the students' representative council.

It may be mentioned that a section of students representing Gyalshing college had been on a sit-in protest in front of the Education Department Office at Tashiling Secretariat since 02 Feb. The group had been demanding a dialogue with the Education Department officials to discuss expediting the construction of the college infrastructure.



The students had also been demanding a meeting with the Education Minister, Kunga Nima Lepcha.

The Department is trying to use COVID to justify the delays in construction which does not hold true, said Praveen Upreti.

According to the students, the college has been under construction for the last 11 years and after protests were held in Gyalshing last year the Chief Minister gave them written assurance in March that all work would be completed in 3 months. They allege that even after the government relaxed rules and allowed construction works to resume, the construction of the college did not resume.

Today, the students also tried to file an FIR against the ACS, Mr Upadhyaya.

Meanwhile, the Contractors, Karma Sonam Sherpa and Dilli Ram Sharma who are tasked with the construction of the Gyalshing Government College have claimed that construction of the college is almost complete.

Along with the Ward Panchayat, Somnath Sharma, the two contractors said that major work like construction of Library, Guest House, Kanchenjunga Block, Principal Office (Polytechnic) Administrative Block, Admin Block, Rusha Building, have been completed.

Work on polytechnic, auditorium, playground, gate, fencing, etc, is still going on, they said.

Meanwhile, the Chief Minister's political secretary, Jacob Khaling, while addressing a press conference today, thanked students for highlighting the issues and explained that the infrastructure development plans at Gyalshing College were delayed due to the Covid pandemic and not because of disinterest.

He alleged that the previous SDF government, after having acquired land for the project, had allowed campus development to fall by the wayside and informed that after SKM formed the government, not only did it clear Rs 5 crores in pending dues for the project but also called tenders for a Rs 35 crore

phase-2 development of the campus.

To underline the State Government's commitment to the project, he pointed out that not only did the Chief Minister meet disgruntled students last year, but also expanded the scope of the infrastructural development for the college based on their feedback.

The Chief Minister, the State Government and the Education Department, he stressed, were serious about meeting the needs of the college and its students.

About the arrest of two students, he alleged that they were being misled by agent provocateurs and even alluded that they might have been involved in more mischief not only in other protests in Sikkim but also, possibly, the incidents surrounding the farmers' protest in New Delhi recently.

Hamro Sikkim Party, in turn, has condemned the arrests and demanded the immediate release of students taken into custody and detained. It has threatened to take to the streets if this was not done immediately.

3 test positive for COVID-19, 233 vaccinated

**SUMMIT REPORT
GANGTOK, 06 FEB:**

Sikkim recorded three new cases of COVID-19 in the last 24 hours ending 8 am Saturday. The fresh cases were detected while testing 128 samples of which 2 were detected in RT-PCR testing at Central Referral Hospital, Tadong and 1 in Rapid Antigen Testing in West Sikkim.

In his daily health

bulletin, State IEC Officer, Health Department, Sonam G Bhutia informed that in RT-PCR testing in CRH Tadong, one person from near Government School Bardang and one person from Shantinagar, Singtam tested positive for the virus. One person from Tingting Yuksom tested positive via RAT in West Sikkim.

The number of cases recorded so far has

reached 6108 while the number of active cases has gone down to 75 with the release of 5 persons from isolation.

On Thursday, one person from SNT colony in Tadong and one from Rongli had tested COVID-19 positive while 7 persons had been discharged.

Meanwhile, vaccination against the virus continued with 233

person being vaccinated across the state. Giving the break-up, Mr Bhutia informed that 97 were vaccinated in South Sikkim, 49 in West Sikkim and 87 in UPHC Gangtok.

He informed that of the 233 vaccinated today, 184 were health workers and 49 were other frontline warriors. Sikkim saw the highest number of

vaccinations so far on Thursday with 933 persons receiving the shots against COVID-19.

Of these, 480 were in East District, which included 121 in Urban PHC, Gangtok, 120 in Central Referral Hospital, 90 in STNM hospital and 149 in East District Rural. In South District, 167 person were vaccinated, 201 in West District and 85 in North District.

Civil Society requests govt to reconsider plans for mandatory drug-tests and hard policy on drugs

**SUMMIT REPORT
GANGTOK, 06 FEB:**

A group of 19 organisations has written to the Chief Minister requesting him to reconsider his announcements that drug tests will be made mandatory for police personnel and about the State government's plans for Zero Tolerance Drug Policy.

The organizations which have made the joint petition include those working to combat addiction in Sikkim and have called for a more nuanced approach to combating addiction and highlighted that mandatory drug tests and a hard-line approach to substance abuse have an adverse negative impact.

"We as Civil Society and Community understand the concern and noble intention for the people you serve however from our experience, expertise, and global evidence tells us that mandatory drug testing will have an adverse negative

impact," they write in the letter.

The letter, written by Sikkim Drug Users' Forum president, Rinzing Bhutia, has been endorsed by 19 organizations and 24 individuals from Sikkim and other parts of the country.

Copies of the letter have also been submitted to the Chief Secretary, DGP, Special DGP [Law & Order], Secretary to Department of Social Justice & Empowerment and State Human Rights Commission.

The letter states that the growing drugs problem was a serious concern globally. The letter adds that the more serious concern was how the drug problem is addressed, adding that there was no evidence in the world that drug tests stop police personnel or anyone else from using scheduled drugs but will further lead to more grave problems in society.

The letter further points out that

efforts to control the abuse of schedule drugs to make a drug-free society have been underway for more than 50 years, a period over which even more lethal drugs have been produced and supplied across the globe.

"In the name of drug control or drug free society more people are being incarcerated, tortured, denied education, employment & social schemes, more so people have lost their lives. The unfair drug policy has done more damage than any good to the humankind," the letter highlights.

"In 2014, Government of Hungary proposed for a mandatory school drug testing but it was never implemented due to the many negative consequences. United States of America, Georgia, Ireland and several other countries tried mandatory/volunteer/compulsory drug testing among students and others but it never resulted as it was intended rather

invited more concern. Mandatory drug testing will not only discourage people to seek employment but it will also fuel more stigma, torture, arrest, social exclusion, unemployment etc," the letter adds.

The letter goes on to mention that in 2018, the Chief Executive Board of United Nation (representing 31 UN agencies) adopted a common position on drug policy that endorses decriminalisation of possession and use of scheduled substances, UN body along with member state recognise "the concern for the health and welfare of humankind underpins the three international drug control conventions" and aims to "support the development and implementation of policies that put people, health and human rights at the centre".

International drug control policy requires that people who use and/

or are dependent on drugs be given access to treatment, rehabilitation, after care and social reintegration. This is also recognised in the NDPS Act and SADA. The proposed measure of mandatory testing of police personnel and termination of employment of those who test positive is against this policy of inclusion, care and support and worsens the stigma and discrimination faced by people who use drugs,' it is added.

"Sir, we as Civil Society and Community understand the concern and noble intention for the people you serve however from our experience, expertise, and global evidence tells us that mandatory drug testing will have an adverse negative impact. We the people would like to request your able and kind leadership to reconsider the announcement of the mandatory drug testing for police personnel and any citizen," the letter urges.

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Training on flower crops by CAEPHT

SUMMIT REPORT

GANGTOK, 06 FEB:

A one day off-campus training programme on “Precision production technology of flower crops” was jointly organized by All India Coordinated Research Project on Plastic Engineering in Agriculture Structure and Environment Management (AICRP-PEASEM), CAEPHT, Gangtok centre and Multi Technology Testing Centre and Vocational Training Centre, CAEPHT, Ranipool, Sikkim on 05Feb at Upper Soureni, Assam Lingzey, East Sikkim.

A press release informs that 25 progressive farmers from in and around Upper Soureni, East Sikkim, participated in the training programme. At the onset, Prof. Deepak Jhajharia, PI of AICRP-PEASEM), CAEPHT explained



indetail about the mandates of the project. Dr. Sunil Kumar Ch., Assistant Professor (Agronomy), briefed about the centre and its main mandates.

After the inaugural program, the technical sessions were started with a lecture on different polyhouse structures by Prof. Deepak Jhajharia. Dr. S. Vinodh Asst. Professor (Hort.) explained about

the importance of flower crops and discussed the precision production and post-harvest technology of major flower crops like Orchids, Anthurium and Gerbera at Sikkim conditions.

Dr. Sunil Kumar Ch., Assistant Professor (Agronomy) gave a lecture on organic nutrient management of flower crops and Dr. Diganggana Talukdar Assistant Professor

(Plant Pathology), CoH, Bermiok delivered her lecture on organic pest and disease management for major flower crops in Sikkim condition.

At the end of the programme, banana saplings (G-9 variety) and 50 kg Cocopeat bricks were distributed by Prof. Deepak Jhajharia and faculties of MTTC & VTC to the farmers of Upper Soureni, Assam Lingzey, East Sikkim.

Undertrial dies by suicide

SUMMIT REPORT

GANGTOK, 06 FEB:

An undertrial prisoner at State Central Prison, Rongyek, died by suicide on 05 Feb. The 47-year-old was found hanging outside his barrack in the evening of 05 Feb.

Centre urges states, UTs to speed up Covid vaccination

NEW DELHI, 06 FEB [PTI]: The Centre on Saturday urged states and Union territories to exponentially increase the pace of coronavirus vaccination and schedule the inoculation of all healthcare workers at least once before February 20.

Union Health Secretary Rajesh Bhushan also asked the states and Union Territories to ensure that beneficiaries of the inaugural vaccination day on January 16 should start getting a second dose on February 13.

In a statement, the health ministry said there remains a substantial scope for improvement in the number of

average vaccinations per inoculation session.

“The state health secretaries were asked to analyze the daily variation in the number of average vaccinations and take necessary steps to increase them. States/UTs were advised to ensure 100 per cent saturation of people who have already been registered on CoWin digital platform. They were also asked to organise simultaneous vaccination sessions/day in the health facility wherever possible. Each state/UT was advised to devise a state specific strategy to achieve this target,” it said.

The states and Union Territories were

also advised to ensure regular review meetings of the state, district and block task force to assess emerging challenges, understand ground issues and promptly address them at appropriate levels, it said.

“Every state/UT must schedule all healthcare workers for vaccination at least once before February 20, 2021 and immediately thereafter organise mop-up rounds for them. Similarly, all frontline workers must be scheduled for vaccination at least once before March 6, 2021 and immediately thereafter organise mop-

up rounds for them,” the ministry said.

The ministry said the failure of potential beneficiaries to get vaccinated in the mop-up round would automatically push them to age-appropriate vaccination category.

The health secretary also reiterated the need for adequate attention to issuance of provisional digital vaccination certificates after the first dose and final certificate after completing the second dose, importance of authentication of beneficiaries and timely data reconciliation on CoWIN application.

He added that CoWIN 2.0 version will be released soon.

India restoring fast mobile internet in Kashmir after 18 months

FAYAZ BUKHARI

SRINAGAR, 06 FEB (REUTERS):

India said on Friday it was restoring high-speed mobile internet in the federal territory of Jammu and Kashmir for the first time since August 2019, when the government withdrew the special rights of the restive Muslim-dominated region.

Jammu and Kashmir

was India's only Muslim-majority state before Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Hindu nationalist government split it into two, including an enclave with many Buddhists, and took direct control of both.

Much of the Himalayan mountain territory is also claimed by Pakistan, India's arch-rival in South Asia.

“4G mobile internet

services being restored in entire J&K,” local administration spokesman Rohit Kansal said on Twitter.

India broke up Kashmir in mid-2019 by sending additional troops mainly to the Kashmir Valley, and detaining political leaders to crack down on dissent in the region where India has been fighting an insurgency

for decades.

One of those detained and released politicians, former J&K Chief Minister Omar Abdullah, tweeted his happiness at the New Delhi government's move on the internet.

“4G Mubarak!” he said, using an Urdu word for congratulations. “For the first time since Aug 2019, all of J&K will have 4G mobile data. Better late than never”.

Covid Vaccine 2nd dose on Feb 13 for those who took jab on Day 1

NEW DELHI, 06 FEB [NDTV]:

The second Covid vaccine dose for those who took the first shot on Day 1 of inoculation drive on January 16, will be administered on February 13, the government has said. The Centre also said while the country has made remarkable progress in terms of the number of people vaccinated -- reaching the 5 million mark in Covid-19 vaccination in record 21 days -- there is “substantial scope of improvement” in the number of average vaccinations per session.

Twelve states and Union Territories have achieved 60 per cent or more vaccination coverage of healthcare

workers, the government said. But all state were advised to “improve the percentage coverage of vaccinated beneficiaries,” a statement from the government read.

The government gave the states a deadline today. “Every State/UT must schedule all healthcare workers for vaccination at least once before 20th Feb 2021 and immediately thereafter organize mop-up rounds for them. Similarly, all frontline workers must be scheduled for vaccination at least once before 6th March 2021 and immediately thereafter organize mop-up rounds for them,” the statement read.

The failure of potential beneficiaries to get vaccinated in the

mop-up round would automatically push them to age-appropriate vaccination category, the government said.

The slow pace of vaccination has been a matter of concern, with public health expert and administration officials pointing out that at this rate, the country will not be able to meet its own six-month deadline to vaccinate 30 crore people -- health workers, frontline workers, people over the age of 50 and those with co-morbidities.

Doctors and administration officials agree that the dip in numbers is due to what they called vaccine hesitancy -- concerns about the vaccine in the mind of beneficiaries.

Many are in a wait-and-watch mode after reports on after-effects. Others are waiting for more options.

Currently two vaccines -- Serum Institute's Covishield and Bharat Biotech's Covaxin -- are being administered. There is also a chance that a third vaccine -- Russian-made Sputnik -- will be available in India in April.

On January 30, Union Health Secretary Rajesh Bhushan had told states that there is a “huge scope for improvement in the number of average vaccinations per session” and had asked them to increase the number of vaccination sites. Soon after, several states, including Delhi, increased the number of vaccination sites.

Bike rally held to promote Read and Grow book fair

SUMMIT REPORT

GANGTOK, 06 FEB:

Sikkim Krantikari Morcha's Student Wing organised a bike rally promotional ride today for the Read and Grow book fair to be held from 12 to 14 Feb at MG Marg, Gangtok.

The bike rally is being held under the leadership of MLA, Aditya Golay. The promotional ride was flagged off by Transport Minister, Sanjeet Kharel and Forest Minister, Karma Loday Bhutia.

The rally started from MG Marg covering Ganesh Tok, Tashi



View Point, Luing, Rey Mindu, Rumtek, Sang, Sang Khola, 32nd Mile, Ranipul, Palace Gate

and finally culminated at Guards Ground, Tathangchen.

This campaign is

being held to inculcate and promote reading habit and culture among Sikkimese.

Micro enterprise development training at Samdong Kambal

SUMMIT REPORT

GANGTOK, 06 FEB:

Micro enterprise development training program started at SamdongKambal, East Sikkim, today. A press release informs that the training program was implemented by Lupin Foundation and supported by NABARD Gangtok along with SRLM RaktongTintek and Gram Panchayat. The training is based on making soft toys, paper bags, and envelopes for women involved in self help groups of the area.



‘Chakka jam’: Farmers block roads in Punjab, Haryana

CHANDIGARH, FEB 6 (PTI):

Farmers on Saturday parked their tractor-trailers in the middle of roads and raised slogans against the Centre during a three-hour-long “chakka jam” agitation in Punjab and Haryana. Women took part in the stir in a sizeable number at several places.

The call for the nationwide “chakka jam” was given by the Samkyukt Kisan Morcha, an umbrella body of farm unions protesting the Centre's farm laws at the Delhi borders.

The agitation from 12 noon till 3 pm was announced to register protest against the internet ban in areas near their agitation sites, alleged harassment meted out to farmers by the authorities and other issues.

Farmer leaders claimed that their three-hour stir remained peaceful in both states.

Though police authorities diverted traffic at many places, commuters faced traffic snarls.

Kokrikalan said they blocked roads at 33 places in 15 Punjab districts, including Sangrur, Barnala and Bathinda.

diversion, said officials, adding adequate security personnel were deployed in Punjab and Haryana.

Several highways, including the Chandigarh-Zirakpur, Amritsar-Pathankot, Tarn Taran-Kapurthala, Ferozepur-Fazilka, Muktsar-Kotkapura, Bathinda-Chandigarh, Fazilka-Malout, Ludhiana-Jalandhar, Panchkula-Pinjore, Patiala-Kaithal, Jind-Karnal, Karnal-Kaithal, Bhiwani-Hisar, Ambala-Chandigarh, Ambala-Hisar and Mansa-Sirsa were blocked by the protesting farmers.

Protests were also held at Shambhu near Ambala and at many toll plazas in both states. Traffic was also disrupted at the Kundli-Manesar-Palwal expressway. Protesting farmers said ambulances, army vehicles and school buses were allowed during the ‘chakka jam’.

Though police authorities diverted traffic at many places, commuters faced traffic snarls.

Kokrikalan said they blocked roads at 33 places in 15 Punjab districts, including Sangrur, Barnala and Bathinda.

Around 6,000 to 7,000 protesters on an average took part in ‘Chakka jam’ at each place, claimed Kokrikalan while commenting on the protest by the BKU (Ekta Ugrahan).

Farmers carried placards with slogans “Jai Jawan, Jai Kisan” and “Kisan Ekta Zindabad”. They also raised slogans against the Centre for not acceding to their demand of repealing the farm legislations.

In the morning, farmers started assembling at their earmarked protest sites in both states.

They parked tractor-trailers and other vehicles on roads. Women took part in the agitation in sizeable number at several places, including in Punjab's Sangrur and Ludhiana.

“The government should repeal the three laws as they are not in the interest of the farming community,” said a protester at the Shambhu border.

Punjabi actors Binnu Dhillon, Dev Kharoud and singer Pammi Bai took part in a protest in Patiala.

In Phagwara, Bharti Kisan Union

(Doaba) leader Kirpal Singh Moosapur said protesters squatted near a sugar mill and raised slogans against the BJP-led Centre.

Protesters also honked horns for one minute, said Moosapur.

Thousands of farmers have been protesting since late November at the Delhi borders with Haryana and Uttar Pradesh, demanding a rollback of the Farmers’ Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Act, 2020; Farmers’ (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement on Price Assurance and Farm Services Act, 2020; and Essential Commodities (Amendment) Act, 2020.

The protesting farmers have expressed apprehension that these laws would pave the way for the dismantling of the minimum support price (MSP) system, leaving them at the “mercy” of big corporations.

However, the government has maintained that the new laws will bring better opportunities to farmers and introduce new technologies in agriculture.

Nepal’s PM seeks public support for early election amid protests

KATHMANDU, 06 FEB (REUTERS):

Nepal's Prime Minister K.P. Sharma Oli insisted on Friday he had the legal right to dissolve parliament and said he was justified in calling an early election in the face of widespread opposition from within his own ruling Communist party.

Oli was addressing thousands of supporters in Kathmandu, a day after leaders of a rival party faction called a national strike to oppose

what they said was his “unconstitutional” move to seek a fresh poll amid a pandemic-induced economic crisis.

“The prime minister has the prerogative to dissolve the parliament,” Oli told a crowd gathered on a main road in the capital.

The 68-year-old prime minister, who is facing almost daily protests by political opponents and rights groups, said he had been compelled to take a tough decision because many colleagues were

refusing to cooperate with him.

Nepal was plunged into crisis on Dec. 20 when Oli, who has two years of his term left to run, declared he could no longer work with rivals in his Nepal Communist Party (NCP), dissolved parliament and called for a fresh election.

The Supreme court is now hearing more than a dozen petitions challenging the legality of that action, with a verdict expected this month. If Oli wins the legal battle, the Himalayan

nation of 30 million people, wedged between India and China, will go to the polls, in two phases, on April 30 and May 10.

Oli's critics - including many in his own party formed in 2018 in a merger of the United Marxist-Leninist party and the main Maoist party - say Nepal's 2015 constitution, intended to preserve political stability, does not give the prime minister the prerogative to dissolve parliament.

Outdoor blood donation by Patriotic and Genius clubs



SUMMIT REPORT GANGTOK, 06 FEB:

Patriotic Youth Club of West Pendam and Genius Club, Mamjay [West Sikkim] organized an outdoor blood donation camp at the former club's office on Thursday in

collaboration with Voluntary Blood Donors Association of Sikkim and supported by STNM Hospital's blood bank. 44 units of blood were collected at the camp for STNM Hospital, a press release informs.

'Playing with fire': Twitter's India snub sparks debate on compliance, free speech

SANKALP PHARTIYAL & ADITYA KALRA NEW DELHI (REUTERS)

- Twitter Inc's refusal to comply with an Indian government directive to block more than 250 accounts and posts has put the social media giant at the centre of a political firestorm in one of its key markets.

Government officials, business people and ordinary netizens are split over free speech and the U.S. company's compliance practices, in a controversy that comes soon after Twitter's top lobbyist in India resigned.

The showdown, after the firm this week "declined to abide (by) and obey" the order to remove posts and accounts that the government said risked inciting violence, is the latest instance of worsening relationships between Prime Minister Narendra Modi's administration and U.S. social media platforms like Facebook and WhatsApp.

For Twitter, the stakes are high in a country of 1.3 billion where it has millions of users and is ardently used by Modi, his cabinet ministers and other leaders to communicate with the public.

Farmers are conducting a growing protest against new agriculture laws, with tens of thousands camping out on the outskirts of New Delhi and launching a nationwide road blockade on Saturday.

As the prolonged crisis escalated, the government this week sought an "emergency blocking" of the "provocative" Twitter hashtag "#Modi Planning Farmer Genocide" and dozens of accounts.

Twitter initially complied but later restored most of the accounts, citing "insufficient justification" to continue the suspensions. The technology ministry warned the company, in a letter seen by Reuters, of legal "consequences" that could include fines or jail, saying the government was not required to justify its demand to ban accounts.

Twitter's public policy director Mahima Kaul recently resigned from her role, two sources said. A LinkedIn

ad showed the company is seeking candidates for the key government relations position.

Kaul did not respond to a request for comment. Twitter confirmed Kaul's resignation, saying she would stay on through March and was helping with the transition, but otherwise declined to comment. It said this week that it withholds access to content on receiving a "properly scoped request from an authorized entity".

'NOT LAWMAKERS'

Free speech activists say the government should not attempt to use legal provisions to muzzle freedom of expression, while others argue Twitter should comply or go to court.

"Twitter is playing with fire," said an Indian social media executive who was surprised by the company's non-compliance. "If there is a legal request, you are required to take down content. You are free to challenge it" in court.

In 2019, a parliamentary panel headed by a lawmaker from Modi's Hindu nationalist party warned Twitter after CEO Jack Dorsey failed to appear before the committee. The previous year Dorsey sparked a social media storm after a picture of him holding a poster saying "smash Brahminical patriarchy", referring to the highest Hindu caste, went viral.

This week, Dorsey became a talking point on Indian TV news after he liked a tweet suggesting the company should consider introducing a farmer protest emoji.

Meenakshi Lekhi, a lawmaker from Modi's party who heads a parliamentary panel on data privacy, criticised Twitter for disobeying government orders, adding she has yet to decide whether to summon company executives.

"Twitter needs to understand they are not lawmakers," Lekhi told Reuters. "It is not their policy which will work, it is the policy of the state, country which will work."

Calling the showdown "inevitable", the Hindu newspaper said in a Friday editorial: "Provocative posts have no place on any platform, (but) free speech should not be hit."

Hamro Varta announce 'Sikkim Idol'



SUMMIT REPORT GANGTOK, 06 FEB:

Hamro Varta TV, on Friday, announced plans to organize, 'Sikkim Idol,' a reality-show format contest for singers. The media house is confident that this will help pot talent from different corners of the State and then take them to higher levels.

Auditions for the contest are scheduled to start from South District on 13 March.

The logo of the show was unveiled at a press conference held here on Friday.

Addressing a press conference, Editor, Hamro Varta [Nepali], Pradeep Lohagun, said that the main objective behind the show is to provide a better platform to singers of the State who, he said, have not received proper opportunity, platform or encouragement thus far.

"We want to provide better exposure to hidden talents of the State and support and encourage talented singers to take them to the higher levels," he said.

He informed that auditions will be held in all major towns of the State and selected contestants invited to perform at the mega audition in Gangtok from which 24 will be shortlisted.

The finale, scheduled to be held in May, will see six contestants vie for the Sikkim Idol title.

Mr Lohagun informed that respected musicians and singers from Sikkim and the neighbouring hills will be in the jury.

The top-3 will receive cash prizes and support

to get into the playback singing.

"Hamro Varta also plans to organize Himalayan Idol to include contestants from Sikkim and Kalimpong and Darjeeling districts and the top-three of Sikkim Idol will get direct entry into Himalayan Idol," he said.

Editor, Hamro Varta [English], Zamyang Kazi, informs that there will be on-the-spot registration for the audition rounds. She added that the contest will be held in two categories - senior and junior.

Centre imposing cess, surcharges to deny states: Mitra

KOLKATA, FEB 6 (PTI):

West Bengal Finance minister Amit Mitra Saturday said the Centre is on a spree to impose cess and surcharges to deny the states from getting their share of revenues. The Centre has increased cess and surcharges from eight to 16 per cent over and above the taxes so as not to share with the states, he told reporters here a day after the vote-on-account by Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee in the state assembly.

The Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) had already asked the Centre not to raise cess surcharges in this manner, he said.

"The quantum of cess and surcharges have been increased from



eight to 16 per cent by the Centre in the last several years. Since collection from cess and surcharges are not to be shared with the states, that is why they are being raised", he said.

About the vote-on-account, Mitra had said that the state's tax collection has increased 3.57 times since 2011 since

Trinamool Congress came to power and its debt/GDP ratio had declined from 40.65 per cent in 2011 to 34.81 per cent at present.

Banerjee had presented the Rs 2.99 lakh crore vote-on-account on Friday as the state polls are round the corner.

Mitra said fiscal deficit too had fallen

from 4.24 per cent to 2.94 per cent in the latest count, he said.

The finster minister said West Bengal's development expenditure had risen six times, capital expenditure 14 times and social expenditure 9.15 times.

Expenditure on physical infrastructure had increased 5.58 times since TMC came to power in 2011.

According to him, the state government has taken massive strides in developing school and higher education, minority affairs and public works and in health expenditure.

Sukhim Yakthung Sapsok Songchumbho elects new body



SUMMIT REPORT GANGTOK, 06 FEB:

The new Governing body of Sukhim Yakthung Sapsok Songchumbho was elected during the Annual General Meeting held today at LimbooBhavan DPH Gangtok.

A press release informs that Chandan Singh Limboowas elected president, NosangLimboo as vice president I, SBSubbaas vice president II, SantoshLimboo as general secretary, BP Nembang as treasurer, Indira Limboo&AyushriLimboo as assistant treasurers, and JeewanLimboo,

Meena Subba, Ajit Subba & Gulshan Limboo as joint secretaries.

Anusha Hangma Limboo, Suzane Limboo, Mang Hangma Limboo, Muieena Limboo were elected coordinators while Hangsama Limboo, Sarita Limboo, Kaushila Limboo & Anisha Limboo were elected cultural secretaries. Bikash Limboo and Sashay Hang Limboo were elected publicity secretaries.

Advisor Education Department, MP Subba, Advisor IPR, Birendra Limboo, Chairman SABCO, J. B. Limboo were present along with registered members from all parts of Sikkim.

Assam govt to increase minimum wage of tea workers soon

GUWAHATI, FEB 6 (PTI):

Assam Finance Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma on Saturday said the government will issue a notification in the next 10 days to increase the minimum wage of tea garden workers in the state.

Addressing a public rally here in the presence of Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman and Chief Minister Sarbananda Sonowal, he said the proposal to raise the minimum wage of tea labourers will be approved in the next cabinet meeting.

"Wait for 10 more days. We will issue a notification to increase your wages. After the next cabinet meeting, you'll hear good news," Sarma told tea garden workers.

The opposition Congress had criticised

Union Home Minister Amit Shah after his recent visit to the state, alleging that the government did nothing to grant ST status to tea garden workers.

The party also alleged the government has failed to ensure that tea workers in the state get the minimum daily wage of Rs 351.

Countering these allegations, Sarma slammed the Congress for not opening bank accounts of tea garden workers.

He claimed that the BJP-led government opened over 6.33 lakh bank accounts in three months after the announcement of demonetisation in 2016.

Sarma also mentioned that the state government has spent Rs 1,400 crore for building roads inside gardens and opened high schools there.

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Introduce Employers to the Resource Pool

Skills need introductions after they have been imparted

The skill development initiatives in Sikkim have been around for longer than the national initiative got underway. Meanwhile, news about the homegrown acquired skills leading to reassuring employment. The livelihood schools must still be functioning and imparting skills to the youth, but for such an exercise to bear real fruit, they need to be consistently promoted and publicized. That never appeared to have happened enough. By now, employment melas, events during which the courses on offer in the State and the human resource being created there are unveiled, should have become at least biannual events, the pandemic notwithstanding. Not events in which only employers, and more likely private institutions offering supposedly professional courses, open stalls, but also ones in which the livelihood schools showcase their graduates and mediate employment deals on their behalf. Don't do that, and the initiative gets reduced to another bureaucratic routine which tries to make up with paperwork what it lacks by way of inspirational involvement.

Career Fairs are not a new concept, but they have become more about promoting more courses and uninteresting jobs than actually leading to careers. A proper one is long-awaited in Sikkim and pregnant with a lot of potential. To begin with, such events should make it worthwhile for all investors and private companies based in Sikkim to maintain a stall. These can be venues, which, even if they do not hand out hiring slips, offer opportunities for livelihood school managements to collect information on the nature and volume of jobs available there. This would help them plan their own course materials and intake capacities accordingly.

Job openings have definitely multiplied substantially in Sikkim in recent times, but one rarely sees employment notices to match the number of jobs being placed and claimed. Fact remains, that while private investments and new jobs have been created in Sikkim, the hiring practises still remain old-school, the ranks filled through recommendations, contacts and by chance. Something like a proper employment mela is desperately required. Career fairs could begin the process to make the hiring process more professional and transparent; and this will be to the benefit of both, the job-seekers as well as the employers. It is important that every agency which employs people in Sikkim is allowed space at such events even if they have no immediate job-openings; they could inform potential employees about the profile of existing positions and the qualities and qualifications they seek whenever they hire next.

The next step for the State authorities would be to encourage private agencies in Sikkim to visit educational institutions [schools and colleges] and the Livelihood Schools, if those are still operational, not necessarily to hire a workforce from the campuses, but at least to introduce the young to their organisations and the kind of employment and emoluments they offer. The young can plan better that way and the units based in Sikkim will get a wider pool to choose from. This transparency will also reward merit more than contacts. One might contend that such an initiative does not require State involvement and can be initiated by the 'morally upright' investors themselves. What one ignores with such a projection is that educational institutions are impossibly bureaucratic and the only way that an attempt to inform the youth about prospects awaiting them locally can succeed is if the Government mediates.

What this concept of bringing the unemployed and the employers together at one venue also triggers is a parallel initiative in which the industrial and production units here and the local growers and suppliers are brought into direct contact. Supplies need not always be about raw materials for the industry, and can even be about supplies of basic and essential commodities for the workforce. Take for example, the substantial number of universities, pharma companies, schools and hostels in Sikkim, all of which at least have canteens and kitchen which need supplies which can be met by local growers and suppliers provided they know the exact nature of their requirements and have the time to plan ahead. Yes, they tender these requisitions, but a 'notice inviting tenders' works only for existing suppliers who are already in the business. Village self help groups and such bodies could deliver the goods just as well if they had enough lead time and information on what is required. What such interactive events also initiate is the first step forward in a process that gets increasingly more refined in its ability to introduce employers to the available resource pool and local entrepreneurs to opportunities.

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Joe Biden's First Foreign Policy Speech – an Expert Explains What it Means For the World

MICHELLE BENTLEY
THECONVERSATION.COM

Delivering his first major foreign policy speech since taking office on January 20, US president Joe Biden has sent a strong signal to the rest of the world that they will see a very different America on his watch. In a wide-ranging address at the US State Department in Washington, Biden outlined his new foreign policy vision, declaring that – in what has become something of a catch-phrase – “America is back.”

As well as communicating an important message to other international leaders about what the US will do over the next four years, the statement was also a public repudiation of many of the policies of the previous occupant of the White House, Donald Trump. It was a speech designed to restore order and global faith in the US, things that Biden clearly feels were lost under his controversial predecessor.

US foreign policy will now focus more on multilateral diplomacy and working with other nations in a more positive way. But Biden stressed this should not be considered a soft approach, insisting that diplomacy would be the best way to get what the US wants: “Investing in our diplomacy isn't something we do just because it's the right thing to do for the world ... We do it because it's in our naked self-interest.”

This is also about democracy. Biden has consistently trumpeted the importance of democratic values as a key aspect of America's identity and ethos. In a meaningful reference to his predecessor's refusal to accept defeat and to the recent riots at the Capitol, he said this “fight” to uphold democracy would underpin the US's future role in the world.

Biden also stressed that his foreign policy values would be informed by what his administration considered beneficial to the US public:

There's no longer a bright line between foreign and domestic policy. Every action we take in our conduct abroad, we must take with American working families in mind.

Domestically, however, some of the policies he announced in the speech might be difficult to implement. Biden wants a more sympathetic approach to



immigration, a raised cap on the number of refugees (from 15,000 migrants per year to 125,000), and the promotion of LGBTQ rights. These policies are likely to upset right-wing Republicans, so Biden could face opposition at home.

FRIENDS AND FOES

Addressing US relations with Russia, Biden said he had “made it clear to President Putin, in a manner very different from my predecessor” that the US would no longer “roll over” in the face of Russian aggression. He singled out “interfering with our elections, cyberattacks, poisoning its citizens”. He also raised the plight of Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny, demanding his release and condemning “Russian efforts to suppress freedom of expression and peaceful assembly” as “a matter of deep concern to us and the international community”.

But Biden also stressed his willingness to work with Putin on controlling nuclear weapons and noted that the two countries had already agreed to extend the New START treaty that seeks to reduce US and Russian nuclear stockpiles for five years. Again this is a major break with the Trump approach, exemplified by the former president's decision to abandon the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces

(INF) and Open Skies agreements.

He described China as “our most serious competitor” and vowed to “push back on China's attack on human rights, intellectual property, and global governance”. But, at the same time, he indicated to Beijing that he was willing to collaborate when it was in “America's best interests”.

The question of America's attitude to Iran was noticeable by its absence, except in reference to Iran's proxy conflicts with Saudi Arabia. This is another major break with the Trump administration's hostile attitude towards Tehran. Biden also made it clear that the US would end all support and aid for warring parties in Yemen, one of the major conflict points between Saudi Arabia and Iran that is destabilising the region.

He said the new US secretary of state, Antony Blinken, had appointed a special envoy to Yemen tasked with working with the UN and all parties to the conflict to bring hostilities to an end.

'I AM NOT TRUMP'

One of the main takeaways from the speech is that Biden was setting out to show the world the gulf of difference between

his administration and that of his predecessor. On one level, Biden is openly criticising and reversing pretty much everything Trump did in the foreign policy arena and, at the same time, attacking the ideology that underpinned it. This stance is reflected in the words that Biden used, such as “re-build” (America's alliances) and “re-engage” (with the world).

It's going to take time to rebuild what has been so badly damaged. But that's precisely what we're going to do.

At another level, Biden deliberately chose to reassure the international community that the era of American unpredictability was over. He sought to outline a clear vision of what the US will do next and how he hopes this will improve and stabilise international relations.

But while Biden clearly wants allies and enemies alike to know where they stand, his speech was silent on Europe, the UK, and Brexit – as well as any threat it may pose to the Good Friday Agreement, which we know is very close to his heart. What this means for the future of the “Special Relationship” is anyone's guess.

[the writer is Reader in International Relations, Royal Holloway]

Narcissistic Leaders: Even Children Fall For Their Superficial Charms

EDDIE BRUMMELMAN
THECONVERSATION.COM

We live in an age of narcissistic leadership. Around the world, we are witnessing the rise and fall of narcissistic leaders – people who hold grandiose views of themselves, who believe laws and regulations don't apply to them, and who crave the respect and admiration of their followers.

Could narcissistic leadership have roots in childhood? As psychologists, my colleagues and I set out to investigate.

Narcissism is a personality trait that is characterised by an inflated sense of self-importance and entitlement. Our work shows that narcissism develops in childhood. From the age of seven, there are stable differences between children in their levels of narcissism. Narcissistic children are more likely to make claims such as “I am a very special person”, “kids like me deserve something extra”, and “I am a great example for other kids to follow”.

As adults, narcissists often emerge as leaders in groups. Narcissists captivate others with their alluring charm, bold vision, and unshakeable self-confidence.

Given that children spend most of their free time at school in groups, we wondered whether narcissistic children would be seen as leaders by their peers. They may be the playground's prime ministers.

For our study, we recruited a sample of 332 children between the ages of seven and 14. We assessed their narcissism levels and then asked children to write down the names of classmates whom they perceived as a “true leader”. We explained that a leader is “someone who decides what a group does, someone who's the boss”.

Narcissistic children were often seen by their classmates as true leaders. The association between narcissism and leadership was so consistent that it emerged in 96% of all the



classrooms we investigated.

So now we know that narcissistic children often emerge as leaders in their classrooms. But do they actually excel as leaders?

To address this question, we invited children to perform a collaborative task. They formed a three-person committee to select the best police officer from several candidates. They received detailed descriptions of each candidate, with attributes such as “likes helping other people”, “is good at karate”, and “is afraid of the dark”. The task was designed so that children could only identify the best candidate when they shared information about candidates with their group members. Collaboration was key.

We randomly assigned one child to be the leader. This child sat at the head of the table and was responsible for guiding the group discussion and making the final decision.

Despite having positive perceptions of their own leadership skills, narcissistic children did not excel as leaders. Compared to other leaders, they did not show better leadership and did not guide their groups to better performance. They were perfectly average.

If narcissistic children didn't actually excel as leaders, why did their classmates still see them as true leaders? Children, like adults, may take the

big talk of narcissistic individuals at face value. Indeed, people are often unable to look through the narcissistic façade, mistaking confidence for competence.

This might help us understand what drives people to choose narcissists to lead them but it doesn't mean that adult narcissistic leaders should be compared to children. It is concerning that former US president Donald Trump was, at various points, described as a “toddler in chief”, “an insecure boasting little boy” and “a spoiled five-year old throwing a tantrum”. That's not only unfair to toddlers but also legitimises Trump's behaviour while in office. An adult can be considered accountable for inciting violence and undermining democracy; a toddler cannot.

In 1931, Sigmund Freud wrote that narcissists “impress others as ‘personalities’” and are well-suited “to take on the role of leaders”. Our work shows, however, that narcissists excel at impressing others – not at leading others. As a society, we should be more careful about selecting our leaders based on their competence rather than their confidence.

[the writer is Assistant Professor and Jacobs Foundation Research Fellow 2021-2023, Research Institute of Child Development and Education, University of Amsterdam]

Nepal's Home minister announces 'third people's movement', but many wonder what it means

ANIL GIRI

KATHMANDU, 06 FEB [KATHMANDUPOST]: Home Minister Ram Bahadur Thapa was deputy to Pushpa Kamal Dahal when he led the decade-long armed conflict launched in 1996 to abolish monarchy. On Friday, Thapa, standing on a stage set up at the main entrance to Narayanhiti Palace, the seat of Nepal's Shah monarchs and where the last Shah king, Gyanendra, announced his departure in 2008, challenged his former chief Dahal.

"If anyone tries any reckless effort to carry out the 'non-vegetarian' agitation, that person will be locked inside the zoo," the usually taciturn Thapa thundered in front of thousands. "Our law and constitution consider such 'non-vegetarian' agitation a crime."

Thapa was referring to Dahal's words.

Some days back, Dahal had said at a public function that there was a need to change the style of ongoing agitation against the House dissolution from "vegetarian" to "non-vegetarian," meaning that the leaders and cadres of his faction of the Nepal Communist Party must be more aggressive and violent on the streets so that the government will respond to them.

After Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli dissolved the House of Representatives on December 20, the Nepal Communist Party has split into two—one led by Oli and the other by Dahal and Madhav Kumar Nepal.

Despite efforts by Dahal to bring his former comrade-in-arms Thapa into his fold, the latter chose to side with Oli keeping his home minister's chair intact.

The two factions have been at each other's throats since the dissolution of House.

Being the powerful home minister with the Nepal Police and the Armed Police Force under his command, Thapa can afford to threaten Dahal with the might of the state.

Besides, Thapa has now become a trusted lieutenant of Oli, who seems to be acting as if he is the state, threatening the judiciary, filling the constitutional bodies that are supposed to keep a check on the functioning of the government with his henchmen and making a mockery of the constitution.

Thapa, on his part, has also been trying to foil the agitation of the Dahal-Nepal faction, according to leaders of the faction.

"We have reports about his instructions to security agencies to foil our agitation, his directives to take stern action against our movement and our cadres," a Standing Committee member of the Dahal-led faction said.

Now that he is in the Oli camp, Thapa as the home minister had a role to play to bring supporters from different parts of the country to Friday's mass gathering of the faction.

According to a senior Home Ministry official, Thapa had also instructed security agencies to



facilitate people coming from outside Kathmandu on Thursday despite the nationwide strike called by the Dahal-Nepal faction to protest the 32 appointments in 11 constitutional bodies on Wednesday.

If Thapa seems to have a point to prove to Dahal, he also seems to have a point to prove to Oli that he deserves to be his deputy.

He is now playing a role to bring about a tie-up between Prime Minister Oli and some former Maoist combatants in order to bring them into their fold by making some commitments to the former fighters of the armed conflict.

Thapa is also trying to revive the Young Communist League, a controversial youth organisation of the dissolved CPN (Maoist) formed after the Maoists signed a peace deal in

2006.

After the merger between CPN (Maoist-Centre) and CPN-UML in May, 2018 to form the Nepal Communist Party (NCP), the Young Communist League was merged with Yuwa Sangh Nepal, a youth organisation of the UML to form Rastriya Yuwa Sangh Nepal.

But with Nepal Communist Party vertically divided, its sister organisations too have been divided with Ram Prasad Sapkota, chair of the Rastriya Yuwa Sangh Nepal joining the Dahal-Nepal camp. Thapa, therefore, is trying to revive the Young Communist League under the leadership of Biru Tamang, a former league leader.

A 99-member central committee of the Young Communist League was formed in the last week of January.

A central committee

member of the Oli faction said that Thapa is trying to show his own strength inside the faction to increase his clout.

"That is why Tamang-led youths held a separate motorcycle rally in Kathmandu on Thursday," the leader said on condition of anonymity.

Before Friday's protest, Thapa had instructed his own district leaders and cadres of Bagmati Province to bring the maximum number of people to Friday's mass gathering, the leader of the Oli faction said.

While Thapa may be trying to cozy up to Oli and create his own base within the faction as is natural in political games, what surprised many was Thapa's announcement on Friday of the "third people's movement", despite being part of the government.

The people's

movement of 1990, led by the Nepali Congress and the United Left Front, an alliance of seven left parties, ushered in multi-party democracy ending three decades of monarchial one-party Panchayat rule.

The people's movement of 2006 led the seven mainstream political parties and the armed CPN (Maoist) against the autocratic rule of Gyanendra Shah came to be known as the second people's movement.

"We do not know what he wanted to say but this is not a political language that one expects," Dev Gurung, a former colleague of Thapa, who is now with the Dahal faction, said. "As the home minister, he should speak political language but when the fall is near, people use such language."

As Thapa is known to speak little in public

and is considered introverted, it was all the more reason for those who know him to be surprised at his outburst.

"His statement as home minister is very disgraceful," another former Maoist leader from the Dahal-Nepal faction said on condition of anonymity.

Janardan Sharma, a former home minister and long-time colleague of Thapa's during the 'people's war', said Thapa's "third people's movement" announcement did not even deserve to be commented on.

"What should I say for such a nonsense statement?" Sharma said. "I could not get the meaning of what he wanted to indicate."

Some security experts say that individuals like home minister should not speak the language of threat: otherwise, there will be no differences between the home ministers of the Panchayat era and now.

"The home minister should speak the language of rule of law, should remind the people what is written in the law," former deputy inspector general of Nepal Police Hemanta Malla said. "A person holding such a sensitive post should not speak the language of threat. The home minister should tell what the law says if anyone is going to break the rule and should sensitise them accordingly."

Security agencies deal with issues related to law and order, Malla said.

Sharma, a former

Maoist commander, was even more scathing in his reaction to Thapa's announcement of a 'third people's movement'.

"He must have forgotten what revolt and agitation is. I want to remind him. Morally speaking, how can he lead the revolt now! He is now part of regression and is now giving us a lecture on another round of revolt and revolution," said Sharma. "This is pathetic. He must be pleasing Oli by speaking such nonsense. But if he does not speak like that, how can he secure his position in the Oli camp?"

Long-time Oli ally Pradeep Gyawali, the foreign minister, however, was diplomatic when asked to comment on his Cabinet colleague's outburst.

"He [Thapa] has his own style of speaking so I do not want to make comments on his statements," Gyawali said. "Since we have a strong people's mandate, that is why he was referring to another people's movement."

As for his statement on locking up agitators inside the zoo, Gyawali said that it was due to Thapa's old schooling [from the days he was an armed fighter].

But observers are, nonetheless, shocked by what Thapa said on Friday in front of Narayanhiti Palace.

"The home minister's statement or warning is not law," said Malla. "He is inviting a very serious confrontation. This is a provocation. People sitting in responsible positions should be aware of this fact."

Nepal traders say China imposing 'undeclared blockade'

KRISHANA PRASAIN

KATHMANDU, 06 FEB [KATHMANDUPOST]: Nepali traders have accused China of conducting an 'undeclared trade blockade' as their merchandise-laden container trucks have not been allowed to cross the border into Nepal for the past 16 months.

Naresh Katuwal, president of the Nepal National Traders' Federation, said their shipments were still being held up at the northern border on the pretext of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Almost 2,000 containers loaded with clothes, shoes, cosmetics, electronics and industrial raw materials were stopped at the border during the October-November festive season. Only a fraction of the goods have been released, traders said.

"Around 300 containers have remained stranded at the Kerung and Tatopani border points for the last 16 months," Katuwal said.

China permitted only a few trucks to enter Nepal for the festive season, and most importers rerouted their goods through Kolkata port in India, adding tremendously to their transportation costs, several traders told the Post.

"Some goods are still stuck at the border.

We have discussed the matter multiple times with China, and have asked all key political leaders including the concerned ministries. We even requested the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to resolve the issue diplomatically. But no outcome has been forthcoming," Katuwal said.

"We have taken this gesture of China as an unofficial blockade," Katuwal told the Post. "If this situation continues, there is no point in doing trade with China," he added.

While the traders were waiting anxiously for their goods to be allowed to pass, Chinese transporters hiked the freight charges, he said. The cost of transporting goods over the 26-km distance from the Chinese border point to the Nepali border point has been raised from RMB 15,000-16,000 to 60,000-65,000 per container.

According to the Trade and Export Promotion Centre, imports from China dropped 18.5 percent year-on-year in the first half of the current fiscal year. Nepal bought Rs96.33 billion worth of Chinese goods in the first six months, down from Rs118.25 billion in the same period in the last fiscal year.

Exports to China also fell by 50 percent in the first six months of the current fiscal year. Shipments were valued at Rs500 million, down from Rs1.02 billion in the same period in the last fiscal year.

Nepal imports readymade garments for all age groups, cosmetic products, footwear, fast-moving consumer electronic items and stationery goods, among other products, from China.

"We have been trying to sort out the issue, but nothing is going in our favour," said an official at the Ministry of Industry, Commerce and Supplies, who wished to remain unnamed.

"Not more than two-three containers have been crossing the border daily from the Kerung and Tatopani border points. Now Tatopani has been shut down for maintenance," Katuwal said.

Traders have stopped ordering new goods from China, he said, adding that Kerung was the easiest route for traders to import goods.

Manish Lal Pradhan, president of the Export Promotion Committee at the Federation of Nepalese Chambers of Commerce and Industry, said that the trade points in China were almost closed, and they were unable to export handicraft items like metal statues.

3 new COVID-19 cases push Andamans tally to 4,997

PORT BLAIR, FEB 6 (PTI): After remaining COVID-19 free for four days the Andaman and Nicobar Islands has reported three new coronavirus cases, an official said on Saturday.

The three new COVID-19 cases were detected in South Andaman district on Friday, pushing the coronavirus caseload to 4,997, the official said.

The union territory had zero COVID-19 active

16,675 more health workers get COVID-19 vaccine in Assam

GUWAHATI, FEB 5 (PTI): At least 16,675 health workers in Assam received the shots of COVID-19 vaccine on Friday, taking the total number of people inoculated so far to 77,264, according to a bulletin issued by the National Health Mission. 'Covishield' vaccine was given to 15,360 beneficiaries at 289 session sites, while 1,315 received 'Covaxin' shots at 29 sites.

Two cases of adverse event following immunisation (AEFI) were reported from Kokrajhar and Barpeta districts, it said.

The COVID-19 tally in Assam mounted to 2,17,193 as the northeastern state reported seven new cases, the lowest since May last year

cases from February 1 to February 4, he said.

Of the 4,997 COVID-19 cases in the archipelago, 4,932 people have recovered from the disease and

62 have died due to the infection, the official said.

The union territory administration has so far tested 2,31,633 samples for COVID-19 and the test positivity rate is 2.16 per cent.

All passengers arriving by flight or ship has to produce a COVID-19 negative report before they are allowed entry into the Islands.

Meanwhile, another health official said 3,298 health care workers have received COVID-19 vaccine till February 5 in the union territory.

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Mourinho points to trophy prowess but cannot hide Spurs’ woes

LONDON, 06 FEB [THEGUARDIAN]: So, José Mourinho. Are you feeling the pressure after three Premier League defeats in a row? His Tottenham team’s abject 1-0 home loss against Chelsea on Thursday night represented the first time since 2012 that the club had slipped up on three successive occasions in the competition.

“So since 2012 without three defeats in a row? But since when without a title [trophy]?” Mourinho shot back.

The answer to that is 13 years and it was the Carling Cup, claimed after a 2-1 victory against Chelsea in the final.

“Maybe I can give one,” Mourinho added, meaning a trophy.

A gentle reminder, then, at a bitterly low ebb, that Mourinho still has Spurs alive and kicking in three cups. They have the Carabao Cup final against Manchester City to look forward to on 25 April and, on Thursday week, they begin the third phase of the slog towards Europa League glory with their first tie of the knockout rounds against Wolfsberger of Austria. They have worked through three qualifying games and six more at the group stage.

Before that, there is the FA Cup fifth-round tie at Everton next Wednesday – a game in which Mourinho hopes to have Harry Kane back from ankle trouble. And not a moment too soon, judging by the manager’s comments after the Chelsea game and, in general, since Kane was forced off at half-time in the home defeat against Liverpool on Thursday of last week.

Since then, also taking in the defeat at Brighton on Sunday, Spurs have been close to bankrupt in terms of posing a goal threat. Mourinho’s first-choice midfielders – Pierre-Emile Højbjerg, Moussa Sissoko and Tanguy Ndombele – are not noted for their scoring prowess and the winger Steven Bergwijn has disappointed in that regard since his arrival from PSV Eindhoven.

Is Son Heung-min the same player when Kane is not on the field? Certainly, it is asking too much of Carlos Vinícius, the backup No 9, to bring the same quality. And then there is the sad story of Gareth Bale. He appeared to be enjoying himself as he went through his warm-down with the other unused substitutes after Chelsea, smiling and joking with Joe Rodon. But Bale’s contributions to matches have been fleeting and no laughing matter. Maybe Lucas Moura and/or Érik Lamela could offer something different from the start in Sunday’s home league game against West Brom.

Australian Open men’s tournament pales in comparison as women draw focus in 2021



JONATHAN HOWCROFT

MELBOURNE, 06 FEB [THEGUARDIAN]: Men’s sports and male athletes dominate attention; twas ever thus. But anybody looking to get the most out of the 2021 Australian Open needs to shift their focus. The best stories, the most interesting characters, and the greatest chance of drama are in the women’s draw.

After years of major tournament tennis being synonymous with The Big Three™ men, it might require some effort to retune the heuristic, but it will be rewarding. The list of contenders for the Daphne Akhurst Memorial Cup is long, diverse, and full of candidates for a fortnight-long loan of a living room “c’mon”.

Serena Williams remains the headline act, 23 years since she first stepped on court at Melbourne Park. She is playing now for history: to end her career only the fourth mother to lift a major singles trophy, to become the oldest grand slam singles champion in the Open era, and to equal Margaret Court’s all-time record of 24 grand slam titles. It would be Williams’ crowning glory, and a feat bursting with symbolism.

If Williams has not engendered universal love during her career, Ashleigh Barty has. The Queenslander is simultaneously the world No 1 in a cutthroat sport and the happy-go-lucky Vegemite kid adored in the

locker room as well as the bleachers. Barty’s matches will be the most boisterous, and the bandwagon that accompanies her will be joyful and open to all-comers.

Moreover, Barty’s matches are interesting. While she can serve bombs and trade blows from the baseline, her success is underpinned by guile. No weapon in the women’s game is as deadly as Barty’s backhand slice, a shot she uses to manipulate her opponent into uncomfortable areas of the court, making them reply with unpractised strokes. Rallies unfurl

like cryptic crossword clues, impenetrable at first glance but concluding with a satisfying ‘ah-ha’ moment.

While the WTA rankings have Barty in pole position, the title of the tour’s dominant force belongs to the gnomic Naomi Osaka. The Japanese star offers the strongest all-round package – technically, athletically, and mentally – reflected in her triumphing in three of the past eight slams, including most recently at Flushing Meadows. But off-court she does not subscribe to the cookie-cutter expectations of high performance athletes. She is introverted, which can come across as coy. She thinks deeply about how she communicates and often treats mundane press conferences as reflective therapy. She is increasingly finding her voice, evidenced most clearly by her powerful support for the Black Lives Matter movement during her US Open triumph. She accomplished a rare feat of drawing attention to a matter of significance and engaging with it fearlessly, all while avoiding gimmickry.

At 23 Osaka is a positive veteran in a sport where grand slam champions spring fully formed onto the circuit every season. Iga Świątek was not long 19 when she won last year’s French Open, and Sofia Kenin had only just turned 21 when her determination stunned Rod Laver Arena this time last

year. The season before that was supposed to herald the dawning of the age of Bianca Andreescu but since winning the US Open as a 19-year-old, injury has denied the Canadian another grand slam appearance.

Throw in the inspiring comebacks of Victoria Azarenka and Petra Kvitová, the drought-breaking quests of perennial contenders Karolína Plíšková and Elina Svitolina, or the possible swansong of 40-year-old Venus Williams, and the reasons to tune in from the first serve are plentiful. Each round’s match-ups will provide a tournament’s worth of column inches.

The female influence extends off court too with the AO Inspirational Series continuing with keynote speaker Julia Gillard. Even the weather is getting in on the act with the tournament taking place during a La Niña summer in Australia.

The men’s draw pales by comparison. Roger Federer’s absence reduces the Big Three to a head-to-head between Novak Djokovic and Rafael Nadal. Between them these titans have sequestered nine of the past 10 slams, and 33 of 51 dating back to 2008. Should they meet in a 10th major final, the hype will be deserved, but the road to that destination does not promise to be scenic.

A case could be made in favour of US Open champion and last year’s beaten finalist, Dominic Thiem, but his is not a compelling story, and it is slim pickings beyond. The popular Andy Murray and Juan Martín del Potro are not around. Alexander Zverev is, but shrouded in controversy.

Perhaps a better way into the men’s draw this year is through what wrestling fans might term the heels. Rather than sweat over the details before a Djokovic v Nadal decider, revel in the chaos that could be caused by someone like Daniil Medvedev, a master of hardcourts and at ease playing to the crowd as the pantomime scoundrel, or you could take another white-knuckle ride on the back of Nick Kyrgios.

Kyrgios should at least avoid the added heat under his collar of the stereotypical Australian Open scorcher. La Niña summers mean cooler, wetter conditions. There could even be the occasional interruption to play on the outside courts. Consider it extra time to pick your way through the women’s singles draw and its cast of characters.

Bayern leaves for Club World Cup after beating Hertha 1-0

BERLIN, FEB 6 (AP): Robert Lewandowski missed a penalty but a deflected effort from Kingsley Coman helped Bayern Munich eke out a hard-fought 1-0 victory at Hertha Berlin in the Bundesliga on Friday.

Bayern stretched its winning run in the league to five games, while Hertha remained in relegation trouble with just one point from its last six games.

New signings Sami Khedira and Nemanja Radonjic went on in the second half to make their Hertha debuts, but the home side was left to rue a late missed chance from Matheus Cunha when he had only Manuel Neuer to beat.

The Brazilian’s chip over the Bayern goalkeeper drifted to the right of the unguarded net and wide.

Hertha toiled and made life difficult for the eight-time defending champions amid heavy snowfall.

Dodi Lukebakio beat

the offside trap but failed to beat Neuer with the first big chance in the third minute.

Leroy San then failed to beat Hertha’s Rune Jarstein from a similar position at the other end.

Jarstein conceded the penalty for a late challenge on San . But the Norwegian atoned by saving Lewandowski’s effort in the 11th.

Jarstein became only the second goalkeeper to save a penalty from the Poland star in the Bundesliga since Neuer in 2013, when Lewandowski was playing for Borussia Dortmund.

It was a rare miss for Lewandowski, who scored his previous 11 penalties, and scored in his last nine league games. Lewandowski already has 24 goals in the Bundesliga this season.

Fortunately for the visitors, Coman broke the deadlock in the 21st when Niklas Stark’s attempted block looped



the ball over Jarstein and in off the underside of the crossbar.

Hertha coach P l D rdai gave a wry smile on the sideline. Both sides had further chances as the snow continued to fall. Hertha defender Jordan Torunarigha had to go off with a hip injury before the break.

Serbian winger Radonjic came on in the 63rd and promptly wasted a good chance. He was foiled by Neuer late on but made a good

impression on his debut.

Khedira came on in the 81st to make his Bundesliga comeback after 10 seasons away with Real Madrid and Juventus. The former Germany midfielder’s only notable contribution was a booking for arguing with a linesman.

“I know that I need training sessions, that I need playing time and that I won’t come here and play 90 minutes from the start. The

coach decides,” Khedira said. He hadn’t played at all since last June.

“It’s a nice feeling to be needed again,” he said.

Kickoff was brought forward by half an hour to facilitate Bayern’s departure for Qatar, where it has a Club World Cup semifinal against Egyptian champion Al Ahly on Monday.

“We wanted to go to Qatar with a victory,” Bayern coach Hansi Flick said. “Now it’ll be a nice flight.

Glazer resistance to protests at Man U has faded fans’ fight

MANCHESTER, FEB 6 (AP): Protests against his family’s ownership of Manchester United have long bemused Joel Glazer.

“I get that some fans don’t like us,” he said. “To hate us when the club has been so successful, it’s extraordinary.”

The co-owner’s bewilderment over vitriol came after seeing Old Trafford packed at a game in 2010 with green-and-gold scarves being waved by fans who, in a show of dissent, adopted the club’s colors from its 1878 formation.

The insight into ownership’s thinking was revealed in a book by a former staff member, necessary by the lack of any public comment by the Glazer family.

The silence has highlighted the lack of any attempt to heal the rift. The Glazers have staunchly maintained a distance from supporters, who have not mounted any sustained fight to oust them.

Contrast, then, the Glazers’ passion and joy last month after seeing the family’s other sports team the Tampa Bay Buccaneers win at Green Bay to advance to a Super Bowl matchup against the Kansas City Chiefs this weekend.

The family doesn’t talk to fans or media in England, let alone Manchester, in the manner similar to the way they explain their decisions at the Bucs, often at length.

“We’ve known from the beginning they’re awful news for the club,” said Manchester United season ticket holder Scott Patterson, who runs the Republik of Mancunia website.

“Showing no interest in communicating with the fans makes things worse.”

This could be the Glazers’ most successful year on both sides of the Atlantic since 2003, when the Buccaneers last won the Super Bowl and United won the English Premier League. United is mounting its best title challenge since winning its record 20th English league trophy in 2013.

Just don’t expect to see any public celebrations in England featuring the six siblings of the late Malcolm Glazer who control United.

Joe Glazer stated the family has a policy of a “reluctance to engage” in a parting message to his media adviser Tehsin Nayani, whose publication of exchanges with his boss in a 2015 book, “The Glazer Gatekeeper,” showed internal discussions about the tumult and loathing of the family’s ownership.

Despite a public offering of Manchester United on the New York Stock Exchange in 2012, the Glazers remain in control approaching the 16th anniversary of their takeover. The valuation of the club has risen to around USD 3 billion, ending hopes of a fan takeover.

In 2005, the Glazers arrived to effigies being burned in the streets

outside Old Trafford. A club with no debt before the takeover has been paying the price of the leveraged takeover ever since, with payments on interest, debt and dividends to the Glazers costing United more than 1 billion pounds (1.5 billion).

“The thing that’s protected Manchester United against any trouble is the commercial nature of their machine which is very similar to what they have been able to deliver in Tampa,” said Rob Wilson, who lectures at Sheffield Hallam University in northern England.

United’s revenue has swelled from 166.4 million pounds (USD 300 million) in the year before the takeover in 2005 to a record 627.1 million pounds (USD 783 million) in 2018-19 before the pandemic.

United did not need the Glazers in 2005 to transform a team longing to win the championship again, as was seen with the arrival of Roman Abramovich at Chelsea in 2003, Sheik Mansour’s Abu Dhabi buyout of Manchester City in 2008, and with fellow American sports tycoons from the Boston Red Sox at Liverpool in 2010.

United had won the Premier League eight times in 13 years before the Glazers arrived, a return to dominance engineered by manager Alex Ferguson. He would win the league another five times and the Champions League again before retiring in 2013 despite austerity in the transfer market.

Replacing Ferguson after 26 years in charge has proved trickier than imagined for a team on its fourth manager since 2013. The only Premier League title parades these days in Manchester are staged by neighbor City, which collected the trophy for the first time only in 2012.

While Ferguson contested four Champions League finals and won two, United hasn’t advanced further than the quarterfinals since then. And that’s despite the type of lavish spending Ferguson never received, with more than 1 billion pounds splurged on players in eight years. “Every year that passes, the genius of Ferguson’s ability to remain competitive is emphasized,” Patterson said.

Patterson was particularly troubled by Ed Glazer donating hundreds of thousands of dollars to support both of Donald Trump’s presidential election campaigns. On the same day in 2019 that Glazer hosted a fundraiser for Trump who has been denounced for racist tweets United was demanding action from social media companies against racist abuse sent to midfielder Paul Pogba.

“Sections of the fanbase have been passive during periods of success,” Patterson said of the Glazers. “But they’re poison.”

Turkish president takes action at protest-rocked university

ISTANBUL (AP): Turkey's president has ordered the establishment of two new departments in the country's most prestigious university, which has been rocked by weeks of protests.

President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's decision, published in the Official Gazette Saturday, says law and communications faculties are to be launched in Bogazici University.

Critics say the establishment of new departments would allow the presidentially appointed rector to staff them with government loyalists. Student groups involved in the protests tweeted against the new decision, saying it was an "occupation" attempt against academic freedoms.

For weeks, students and faculty have led mostly peaceful protests against the new rector, Melih Bulu, who has links to Erdogan's ruling party. They are calling for Bulu's resignation and for the university to be allowed to elect its own president.

Police have detained hundreds of demonstrators at the university and in solidarity protests elsewhere, some taken away following raids of their homes. Most were later released.

Top government officials have said terrorist groups are provoking the protests, and Erdogan has called the protesting students terrorists.

Officials from the United States, the United Nations and the European Union have criticized Turkey's handling of the protests as well as a series of homophobic comments that were made by Erdogan and other officials while denouncing the demonstrations.

Coronavirus cases at US homes for elderly and infirm

BIRMINGHAM (US), FEB 6 (AP): Coronavirus cases have dropped at US nursing homes and other long-term care facilities over the past few weeks, offering a glimmer of hope that health officials attribute to the start of vaccinations, an easing of the post-holiday surge and better prevention, among other reasons.

More than 153,000 residents of the country's nursing homes and assisted living centers have died of COVID-19, accounting for 36 per cent of the US pandemic death toll, according to the COVID Tracking Project. Many of the roughly 2 million people who live at such facilities remain cut off from loved ones because of the risk of infection. The virus still kills thousands of them weekly.

The overall trend for long-term care residents is improving, though, with fewer new cases recorded and fewer facilities reporting outbreaks. Coupled with better figures for the country overall, it's cause for optimism even if it's too early to declare victory.

We definitely think there's hope and there's light at the end of the tunnel, said Marty Wright, who heads a nursing home trade group in West Virginia.

Nursing homes have been a priority since vaccinations began in mid-December, and the federal government says 1.5 million long-term care residents have already received at least an initial dose.

Researchers and industry leaders say they are seeing marked improvements after months in which some nursing homes lost dozens of residents to the disease and had to keep others in semi-



isolation for protection. Some 2,000 nursing homes are now virus-free, or about 13 per cent nationally, according to an industry group, and many are dealing with far fewer cases than before.

In West Virginia, where about 30 per cent of the state's roughly 2,080 COVID-19 deaths occurred at long-term care centers, fewer outbreaks are happening and fewer residents are requiring hospitalization, said Wright, chief executive of the West Virginia Health Care Association. Pennsylvania-based Genesis HealthCare, which operates more than 325 nursing homes, assisted-living facilities or senior living communities in 24 states, has seen similar improvements, said spokeswoman Lori Mayer.

The American Health Care Association and National Center for Assisted Living, an industry trade organisation, said Thursday that data from about 800 nursing homes where initial vaccine doses were administered in late December offered

promising results. Cases among residents fell by 48 per cent at homes where immunizations had occurred, compared to a 21 per cent decline at non-vaccinated facilities nearby. Meanwhile, cases among employees dropped by 33 per cent at vaccinated homes, compared to 18 per cent at non-vaccinated facilities.

After reaching a high of almost 73,600 new weekly cases in long-term care facilities nationwide in mid-December, the number was down 31 per cent by late January, to about 50,000 new cases per week, an Associated Press analysis found. Still, the most recent weekly count is 18 per cent higher than the seven-day period that ended on Thanksgiving, when numbers started climbing.

The weekly count of new deaths remains stubbornly high, with a record 7,042 recorded during the seven-day span that ended Jan. 14 and only a slight decline since. By comparison, for the seven days that ended on Thanksgiving, 3,181 deaths were recorded. More encouragingly,

the COVID Tracking Project found that only 251 facilities reported new outbreaks recently, compared to 1,410 in early January.

Dr. David Gifford, chief medical officer for the national association, said the numbers show signs for hope since they indicate vaccines might decrease the spread of COVID-19, a finding not shown in trials.

If verified with additional data, this could expedite the reopening of long-term care facilities to visitors, which is vital to residents' health and wellbeing, he said in a statement.

The ability to visit left Mark Badger and his 91-year-old father Billy, who is in an Anchorage, Alaska, nursing home, in tears. It was the first face-to-face visit in a year. Mark Badger's mother had died at the home a year ago.

This is a period when he really needs us, Mark Badger said. He's been lonely.

Experts caution that only some of the improvement can be linked to vaccines.

Studies from Israel show it takes a patient

about 12 days for the first of the two-dose Pfizer or Moderna vaccines to provide meaningful protection, said Roni Rosenfeld, a computational epidemiologist who heads the Machine Learning Department at Carnegie Mellon University. Despite all the long-term care facility residents and workers who have received at least one dose of vaccine, those doses haven't had enough time to work for most people, he said this week.

The vaccine likely contributed, but very, very little, said Rosenfeld.

Health officials say other factors are likely playing a larger role, including an ebb in the post-holiday surge, an ever-larger number of people who are immune because they've had the disease, behavioral changes and more abundant protective gear. And they caution that there are still threats lurking, including more contagious strains of the virus and a reluctance by many nursing home workers to get vaccinated.

Myanmar junta blocks internet access as coup protests expand

YANGON, MYANMAR (AP): Myanmar's new military authorities appeared to have cut most access to the Internet on Saturday as they faced a rising tide of protest over their coup that toppled Aung San Suu Kyi's elected civilian government.

Numerous internet users noted a slow disappearance of services, especially from mobile service providers, that accelerated sharply late Saturday morning. Broadband connection also later failed, while there were mixed reports on whether landline telephone service was still working.

Netblocks, a London-based service that tracks internet disruptions and shutdowns, said Saturday afternoon that "a near-total internet shutdown is now in effect" in Myanmar, with connectivity falling to just 16% of normal levels.

The broad outage followed Friday's government order to block Twitter and Instagram that said some people were trying to use the platforms to spread what it deemed fake news. Facebook had already been blocked earlier in the week — though not completely effectively.

The communication blockages are a stark reminder of the progress Myanmar is in danger of losing after Monday's coup plunged the nation back under direct military rule after a nearly decade-long move toward greater openness and democracy. During Myanmar's previous five decades of military rule, the country was internationally isolated and communication with the outside world strictly controlled.

Suu Kyi's five years as leader since 2015 had been Myanmar's most democratic period despite the military

retaining broad powers over the government, the continued use of repressive colonial-era laws and the persecution of minority Rohingya Muslims.

The blockages are also adding greater urgency to efforts to resist the coup, with Saturday seeing some of the largest street protests against the takeover. In what appeared to be the main one, about 1,000 protesters — factory workers and students prominent among them — marched Saturday morning down a main street in Yangon, the country's biggest city, and were met by more than 100 police in riot gear.

Members of the crowd shouted "Military dictatorship should fall" and "Down with dictatorship." They marched with their hands in the air, formed into three-fingered salutes, a symbol of defiance adopted from protesters in neighboring Thailand, who borrowed the gesture from the "Hunger Games" movie franchise.

The demonstration ended peacefully with no clashes reported. It dispersed around the time communications were cut, and it was unclear if the marchers later regrouped.

Telenor Myanmar, a major mobile operator, confirmed it had received Friday's order to block Twitter and Instagram. In a statement, Twitter said it was "deeply concerned" about the order and vowed to "advocate to end destructive government-led shutdowns."

"It undermines the public conversation and the rights of people to make their voices heard," its spokesperson said.

Since the coup, social media platforms have been major sources of independent news as well as organizing tools for protests.

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For the fourth night Friday, those opposed to the coup and the arrests of activists and politicians that have accompanied gathered at windows and on balconies around Yangon to make a cacophony of noise in protest.

Earlier Friday, nearly 300 elected lawmakers from Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy party declared themselves as the sole legitimate representatives of the people and asked for international recognition as the country's government.

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NICE SHOES! Actress Sarah Jessica Parker kicked up her heels on a couch in her downtown store in New York City.

Lilly Singh to star in animated LGBTQ short film



LOS ANGELES, FEB 6 (PTI): Late night show host and YouTube star Lilly Singh is set to play a princess who discovers pride in her identity in an upcoming animated musical short film for the digital children's content network, Pocket.watch.

According to Variety, the film titled "Lilly Singh's Proud Princess" is currently in pre-production.

Pocket.watch is a new network funded

by actor Robert Downey Jr., producer Jon Landau, and William Morris Endeavor Entertainment chief Chris Jacquemin.

She's an amazing talent and represents an example of the diverse points of view we are bringing to our audience. The film will speak to LGBTQ identity issues for kids. Lilly will be an eloquent and articulate spokesperson for that," Pocket.watch chief content officer Albie Hecht said.

Singh announced two years ago on social media that she is bisexual.

Female... Coloured... Bisexual. Throughout my life these have proven to be obstacles from time to time. But now I'm fully embracing them as my superpowers, she wrote at the time, referencing her Superwoman! online handle.

No premiere date has been set for "Lilly Singh's Proud Princess".

Lil Yachty to develop heist movie based on card game UNO

LOS ANGELES, FEB 6 (PTI): Rapper Lil Yachty is developing a live-action adaptation of Uno in collaboration with Mattel, the card game's owner.

The live-action heist comedy will be produced by Yachty along with the toy manufacture's movie production company, Mattel Films.

According to Variety, the movie will be set in the underground hip-hop scene of Atlanta - the 23-year-old rapper's native city.

Marcy Kelly has penned the screenplay, and Yachty is being eyed for the lead role.

"I'm so excited to be part of this film with Mattel. I played Uno as a kid and still do today, so to spin that into a movie based on the Atlanta hip hop scene I came out of is

really special. It hits close to home for me," the musician said in a statement.

Quality Control's Kevin Coach K Lee, Pierre P Thomas and Brian Sher are also on board as producers.

Robbie Brenner is executive producing the film for Mattel Films.

"Uno is a game that transcends generations and cultures and we look forward to partnering with Lil Yachty, as well as with Coach, P, and Brian Sher, to transform the classic Uno game into a comedic action adventure," Brenner said.

Prior to Uno, various Mattel products and toys, including American Girl, Barbie, Barney, Hot Wheels and Magic 8 Ball have been at the centre of feature films.

Fox Business cancels 'Lou Dobbs Tonight' after a decade

LOS ANGELES (AP): Fox Business Network's "Lou Dobbs Tonight," whose host has trumpeted unfounded assertions of voter fraud in the 2020 election, has been canceled.

In a statement Friday, Fox News Media said the move was part of routine programming alterations that it had foreshadowed in an announcement last fall.

Fox News Media "regularly considers programming changes and plans have been in place to launch new formats as appropriate post-election, including on Fox Business — this is part of those planned changes," the company said.

Whether the cancellation ends Dobbs' career with Fox Business wasn't addressed, and the company had no further comment. The former CNN host started his show at the channel in March 2011, and it became among the most-watched business news channel programs. The statement appeared to distance the cancellation from a multibillion-dollar defamation lawsuit filed Thursday against Fox and three of its hosts, including Dobbs, by the election technology company Smartmatic. In a previous statement, Fox News said it



would "vigorously defend against this meritless lawsuit in court."

The replacement for "Lou Dobbs Tonight" will be announced soon, Fox News said. The show last aired on Friday, with a guest host sitting in for Dobbs, who had no immediate statement.

An interim show, "Fox Business Tonight," will air starting 5 p.m. Eastern Monday with rotating hosts Jackie DeAngelis and David Asman and repeat at 7 p.m. EST.

In December, Smartmatic sent a

letter threatening legal action to Fox and two other networks, Newsmax and One America News Network, also popular with supporters of former President Donald Trump.

That month, Fox aired pre-taped segments in which a voting technology expert said he hadn't seen any evidence that Smartmatic software was used to alter vote counts. The segments aired on Dobbs' program and on Fox News Channel shows with Maria Bartiromo and Jeanine Pirro.

Michelle Williams cast as Peggy Lee in Todd Haynes-directed biopic

LOS ANGELES, FEB 6 (PTI): Actor Michelle Williams is set to play music icon Peggy Lee in biopic Fever from director Todd Haynes.

According to Variety, MGM Studios is in talks to back the project.

Doug Wright is writing the screenplay.

Singer Billie Eilish's Darkroom label is also in early discussions to come aboard the film as executive producers.

Marc Platt, Reese Witherspoon, and Pamela Koffler and Christine Vachon of Killer Films' are producing.

"Fever" had been in development at Fox since 2000 and almost went into production with Witherspoon in the lead role.

The project was put on hold after Nora Ephron, who penned the original draft, passed away in 2012.

Lee was best known for her cover of the Little Willie John song Fever, topped with her own additional lyrics.

She recorded the song in 1958 and soon became a national sensation.

The singer was nominated for best supporting actress



Oscar for her performance in 1955's Pete Kelly's Blues and played several roles in the 1955 Disney animated feature Lady and the Tramp.

Lee's singing and acting career spanned into the 1990s. She passed away in 2002 at the age of 81.

Penelope Cruz to star in Pedro Almodovar's 'Madres paralelas'

LOS ANGELES, FEB 6 (PTI): Actor Penelope Cruz has joined Oscar-winning filmmaker Pedro Almodovar's upcoming directorial venture "Madres paralelas" ("Parallel Mothers").

Actors Aitana Sanchez-Gijon, Israel Elejalde, Milena Smit Julieta Serrano and Rossy de Palma are also part of the film's cast.

According to Variety, the movie is set to start production by the end of March in Spain.

The top Spanish Auteur is also producing the project through his El Deseo banner.

With 'Parallel Mothers' I return to the female universe, to motherhood, to family. I speak of the importance of ancestors and descendants. The inevitable presence of memory. There are many mothers in my filmography, the ones that are part of this story are



very different," Almodovar said in a statement.

The filmmaker said as a storyteller imperfect mothers "inspire" him the most and he is looking forward to start the work on the film.

"As a storyteller, imperfect mothers inspire me most at this time. Penelope

Cruz, Aitana Sanchez Gijon and the young Milena Smit will play the three mothers in the film, accompanied by Israel Elejalde in the main male character. I also have the collaboration of my beloved Julieta Serrano and Rossy de Palma. 'Parallel Mothers' will be an intense drama. Or so I hope, he said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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