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SummitTIMES

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ON TOP OF THE NEWS

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India records 38,792 fresh Covid cases, 624 deaths

NEW DELHI, JULY 14 (PTI): India recorded 38,792 new coronavirus cases, taking the infection tally to 3,09,46,074, while the death toll reached 4,11,408 with 624 more fatalities, according to the Union Health Ministry's data updated on Wednesday.

The active cases have declined to 4,29,946 and comprise 1.39 per cent of the total infections, while the national COVID-19 recovery rate stands at 97.28 per cent, the data updated at 8 am showed.

A decrease of 2,832 cases has been recorded in the active COVID-19 caseload in a span of 24 hours.

Also, 19,15,501 tests were conducted on Tuesday, taking the total cumulative tests conducted so far for detection of COVID-19 in the country to 43,59,73,639, while the daily positivity rate was recorded at 2.10 per cent. It has been less than three per cent for 23 consecutive days, the ministry said. The weekly positivity rate stands at 2.25 per cent, according to the Health Ministry.

The number of people who have recuperated from the disease surged to 3,01,04,720, while the case fatality rate has increased to 1.33 per cent, the data stated.

Cumulative vaccine doses administered so far has reached 38.76 crore under the nationwide vaccination drive.

India's COVID-19 tally had crossed the 20 lakh-mark on August 7, 30 lakh on August 23, 40 lakh on September 5 and 50 lakh on September 16.

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

India crossed the grim milestone of two crore on May 4 and three crore on June 23.

The 624 new fatalities include 196 deaths from Maharashtra and 124 from Kerala.

A total of 4,11,408 deaths have been reported so far in the country, including 1,26,220 from Maharashtra, 35,944 from Karnataka, 33,502 from Tamil Nadu, 25,020 from Delhi, 22,704 from Uttar Pradesh, 17,944 from West Bengal and 16,199 from Punjab. The Health Ministry stressed that more than 70 per cent of the deaths occurred due to comorbidities.

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

If you don't want us to do politics, don't ask us for votes: SUSA reps

SAGAR CHETTRI

GANGTOK, 14 JUL:

Former and present office-bearers of Sikkim University Students' Association [SUSA] once again demanded that Arun Limboo and four expelled students of Gyalshing Government College were given justice. They said that students will continue to pursue this demand collectively.

Addressing a press conference here this afternoon, former president SUSA, Mahesh Rai mentioned that 33 students of Namchi Government College were suspended in 2012 for attending a political meeting chaired by Chief Minister, PS Tamang who was in opposition at the time.

It was alright to have students attend a political meeting but students demanding proper campus are now being expelled, he pointed out.

Mr Rai went on to contend that instead of thanking Arun Limboo for highlighting social



issues, the ruling party's functionaries attacked him.

"I have a question for the state government and political parties. Calling students to a political meeting is not politics, but students asking for their rights is politics?" Mr Rai said.

He added that if political parties do not want students to do politics then parties should also stop asking votes from students during elections.

While mentioning that SKM observes 14 July every year as Students' Rights

Day, he said that there is no meaning to this day when students are suffering injustice and struggling for their rights in Sikkim.

He further said that Student's Rights Day is a meaningless celebration and it is

just an occasion for the party in power to give speeches and count their achievements.

Officiating president SUSA, Reshab Subba said that the attack on a student, Arun Limboo was very unfortunate. He further urged the police

to do thorough investigation into the matter.

Former general secretary, Nishant Chettri mentioned that the government has a wrong perception that students will not react and sit silently when their fellow students are expelled and suppressed. He added that students are speaking up only via social media due to the present COVID situation but they may take serious steps in the near future.

Responding to media queries, former president SUSA said, "We want to take everyone's consensus on this matter to create an environment for students where they can not only request but be able to demand their rights."

He added that students and their representatives will pursue this matter collectively and constructively. He also urged everyone not to give any political color to the movement.

No Covid deaths for second consecutive day in Sikkim

SUMMIT REPORT

GANGTOK, 14 JULY:

Sikkim recorded no Covid deaths for the second consecutive day today and this should come as some welcome respite for residents here.

In the meantime, 169 new cases of novel coronavirus recorded in the last 24 hours were one less than the 170 people who recovered from Covid and were discharged from home and facility isolation over the same 24 hour period.

Sikkim's count of confirmed cases of COVID-19 now stands at 22,792, while the number of recovered cases stands at 19,937. Only 103 of the 2,279 active cases of Covid in Sikkim are nurs-

ing symptoms severe enough to require hospitalization while the rest are either asymptomatic or with only mild symptoms and are recovering at home or facility isolation.

The State's daily test positivity rate also remained typically erratic and clocked in at 18.2% today with the 169 cases getting picked up from 927 samples screened for Covid yesterday.

Today's count was 28.3% a day earlier and this can perhaps be explained to the overall numbers being low in the State and getting spiked every time a cluster tests positive together. Yesterday for instance, 30% of the new cases were from one lo-

cation alone – 68 monks from a monastery in East Sikkim were among the 226 cases reported yesterday.

As per the Daily Report of COVID-19 in Sikkim released by the Integrated Disease Surveillance Programme of the Health Department at 8AM Wednesday, of the 169 new cases, 84 cases were registered in East District, 51 in West District, 33 in South District and one in North District.

While 101 of the new cases were detected in RT-PCR testing of 693 samples, 68 more tested positive in rapid antigen testing of 288 samples.

There were only 14 new hospitalizations today.

Dearness Allowance for central government employees hiked to 28% from July 1

NEW DELHI, 14 JUL (PTI):

The government has hiked the dearness allowance (DA) for central government employees and dearness relief (DR) to pensioners to 28 per cent from 17 per cent with effect from July 1. The announcement comes as a major relief for central government employees and pensioners as both Dearness allowance and dearness relief was put on hold last year in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic.

"The government has decided to increase the dearness allowance to central government employees and dearness relief to pensioners with effect from 01.07.2021 to 28 per cent, representing an increase of 11



per cent over the existing rate of 17 per cent of the basic pay / pension," the government said in a press release.

The decision is expected to cost the government approximately 34,400 crore and impact around 48,34,000 central government employees and 65,26,000 pensioners, Anurag Thakur, the

minister of sports, youth affairs and minister of information and broadcasting said in a press briefing while making the announcement.

Dearness allowance is paid by the government to its employees and dearness relief is given to the central government pensioners to compensate them for ris-

ing cost of living due to inflation.

NDTV had reported earlier, quoting sources that the cabinet was likely to clear dearness allowance at its meeting today so as to give a financial boost to the central government employees and pensioners ahead of the forthcoming festival season.

Darj Dist Hospital to have Oxygen Plant by end-July



SMRITA KHAWAS
DARJEELING, 14 JUL:

The district hospital at Darjeeling will have an oxygen plant installed in it by end-July.

DMOH, Darjeeling Dist Hospital, Dr Shubhashish Chanda, informed today that the memorandum for construction of a Pressure Swing Absorption oxygen plant was submitted in the month of May, and the collective initiative of

ED Health, Gorkhaland Territorial Administration, and the DMOH ensured that construction began last Friday.

"We are thankful to the government for this oxygen plant. Once this facility is operational, the people of Darjeeling will not face any problems regarding oxygen supplies and the plant will be able to attend to 60-70 patients at a time," Dr Chanda said. Keshavraj Pokhrel,

spokesperson, Gorkha Janmukti Morcha (Binoy faction), in turn said, "We are very happy because the construction of the PSA oxygen plant has begun and we also want to thank the government for such a kind gesture. A similar plant is being installed in Kalimpong as well and we want to request the government to install an oxygen plant at the Tribeni Covid Hospital as well."

SC agrees to examine fresh plea challenging sedition law

NEW DELHI, JUL 14 (PTI):

The Supreme Court Thursday agreed to examine a fresh plea by a former army officer challenging the Constitutionality of the sedition law on the ground that it causes "chilling effect" on speech and is an unreasonable restriction on free expression, a fundamental right. A bench comprising Chief Justice N V Ramana, A S Bopanna and Hrishikesh Roy directed the petitioner to serve a copy of the plea to the Attorney General K K Venugopal.

The plea, filed by Ma-

jor-General S G Vombatkere (Retd) submitted that Section 124-A of the Indian Penal Code, which deals with the offence of sedition, is wholly unconstitutional and should be unequivocally and unambiguously struck down".

The petitioner contends that a statute criminalising expression based on unconstitutionally vague definitions of 'disaffection towards Government' etc. is an unreasonable restriction on the fundamental right to free expression guaranteed under Article 19(1)(a) and causes con-

stitutionally impermissible 'Chilling Effect' on speech", the plea said.

The petition said there is need to take into account the "march of the times and the development of the law" before dealing with Section 124-A.

Earlier, a separate bench of the top court had sought response from the Centre on a plea challenging the Constitutionality of sedition law, filed by two journalists -- Kishorechandra Wangkhemcha and Kanhaiya Lal Shukla -- working in Manipur and Chhattisgarh respectively.

PIB organises virtual workshop on Digital Media Ethics Code

GANGTOK, 14 JUL [PIB]: Grievance redressal mechanism is the core of the Digital Media Ethics Code-2021 and has been framed as a citizen centric regulation for the benefit of the common man, said Vikram Sahay, Joint Secretary, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting. He was addressing a virtual workshop today with the representatives of media persons, academicians and the students of Journalism from the North eastern States, Odisha and West Bengal. The Workshop was organised by Press Information Bureau, Guwahati.

Highlighting the key features of the rules related to Digital News Publishers and OTT Platforms of Digital Media Ethics Code-2021, Sahay said that its framing was very much necessary due to the large number of grievances, representations from elected representatives, Supreme Court and High Court cases and also opinions in media. The aim was



also to create an institutional mechanism for grievance redressal as the government is receiving large number of such grievances and this new code will ensure a proper grievance redressal system, he said.

Addressing the concerns of the digital media publishers with regard to adhering to the Code of Ethics, Sahay said that the code of ethics are identically the same norms which are presently applicable to traditional media and also instead of joining the ex-

isting national regulatory bodies, they can come together to make new self-regulatory bodies.

Talking about the registration process of digital media, Sahay said that no registration is needed for online news portals. However, furnishing of basic information regarding the publisher in prescribed form is mandatory in order to have the required database with the government.

Sahay said that digital media publishers are

expected to adhere to the Code of Ethics, furnish information to the ministry in requisite format as early as possible, and constitute self-regulating body.

SN Pradhan Additional Director General, North east Zone welcomed the gathering and highlighted the salient features of the Digital Media Ethics Code-2021. Without depriving the common mass from the benefits of the Digital media platforms, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting has formulated

these ethics code just to guide the fast emerging media platforms, he said. Rajinder Chaudhry, Additional director General (Odisha Region) extended the vote of thanks and gave the closing remarks. Chaudhry said that the grievance redressal mechanism will highly benefit the common people.

Around 300 participants representing Online Media, OTT platforms, Academicians, Journalism Students, media persons of the states of North east, Odisha and West Bengal and the officials of Ministry of Information and Broadcasting attended the virtual interaction. In the Question-answer session issues ranging from curbing of fake news, authenticity of content, censorship for social media contents were discussed in the Workshop.

Hiramoni Das, Field Exhibition Officer and Gopajit Das, Media and Communication Officer, Guwahati moderated the workshop.

MS Taekwondo Academy shines in Int'l Virtual C'ship



SUMMIT REPORT

GANGTOK, 14 JUL:

After delivering outstanding performances in a recent national-level virtual taekwondo championship, Gangtok-based MS Taekwondo Academy has now added another feather in its cap in an international-level championship.

A team of MS Taekwondo Academy has clinched 7 gold medals and 1 silver medal in the

International Virtual Taekwondo Championship held on 06 July, results of which were announced recently.

The academy has been performing well under its chief instructor and coach, Sabina Sundas [4th Dan black belt] and Sagar Sundas [2nd Dan black belt].

Anil Balmiki in senior, Sanskar Subba in sub-junior, Tenzin Dadul Bhutia in sub-junior and Min-

gma Bhutia in sub-junior bagged a gold medal each in In Speed Kicking boys' event, while in Speed Kicking girls, Tshering-Diki Tamang in cadet, Yanchen Sherpa in sub-junior and Jyoc Kuensel Tenzing in sub-junior also clinched gold medals.

Likewise in the Poomsae girls' event, Tenzing Keezom Bhutia won a silver medal in the cadet category.

India's Microfinance sector hit as defaults surge in COVID-19

NEW DELHI, 14 JUL [REUTERS]: Small loan specialists in India that typically cater to people without bank accounts are facing a jump in pandemic-related defaults that could force some of them out of business, industry experts warn.

Loans overdue by 30 days are expected to reach 14-16 per cent of all so-called microfinance loans in the immediate aftermath of the second COVID-19 wave sweeping India, said Krishnan Sitaraman, senior director at credit rating agency CRISIL.

That's higher than 6-7 per cent in March, before the second wave took hold, and also above the 11.7 per cent reached in March 2017 after India's demonetisation drive - an attempt to boost digital transactions and crack down on undeclared money that also hit microfinance lenders hard. "Older loans that were taken in 2019 or early 2020 are at a higher risk of defaults and they form about 60-65 per cent of the loan book for lenders," said Harsh Shrivastava, former head of the Microfinance Institutions Network, an association representing the sector in India.

Rahul Johri, chair of Vector Finance, a microfinance firm that provides loans to small enterprises, said many support measures brought in by the government had only helped larger institutions, while smaller players had struggled.

"It has become an existence issue for several small and mid-sized microfinance institutions as business has been severely impacted and collections are down," said Johri.

Loan collection ef-

iciency across the total loan pool has fallen to about 70 per cent from a peak of nearly 95 per cent in March, analysts say, indicating a potential build up in stress.

The gross loan portfolio of India's microfinance lenders stood at \$35 billion as of March 31, according to CRISIL.

Despite the short-term challenges, some remain bullish on the sector and expect it to bounce back if an anticipated third wave of COVID-19 infections in India is not so severe.

"About 55 per cent of the market is still untapped which means there is huge market opportunity ... so things will look up soon," said Johri. But for now, many smaller microfinance firms are struggling.

Such companies, typically with loan books of less than 5 billion rupees (\$67 million), have also seen their cost of funds rise by 100-150 basis points as banks and companies have become less willing to lend to them, said one industry executive, speaking on condition of anonymity.

Some microfinance firms have had to scale back capital raising plans due to tepid interest from investors, said the heads of two firms that have been looking to raise funds.

As smaller players falter, some have stopped paying salaries, or incentives to employees in recent months, they added, asking not to be identified due to the sensitivity of the matter.

"We are now only getting basic salaries, incentives have completely stopped in the last few months as collections are down," said a collection agent at one microfinance lender in eastern India.

West Bengal has more girl students than boys in schools: Survey

Kolkata, 14 Jul [PTI]: Girl students enrolled from pre-primary to Class 12 in West Bengal schools have outnumbered boys, according to a central government survey. The dropout rate among girls is also lower than the boys in the state, the study released by the Unified District Information System for Education Plus said.

Over 1.87 crore students enrolled from pre-primary to Class 12 in the 2019-20 academic session in West Bengal schools, and there were 2.32 lakh more girls, it said. The number of girls in the academic session was 94,89,902, and that of boys was 92,57,890 in the state schools, according to the study released on Tuesday.

An official of the syllabus committee formed by the state school education department said: "The implementation of

Kanyashree project in the last few years and sustained campaigns by the state and central governments for girls' education in rural areas have contributed to the success."

The importance given to girls' education by families in Bengal across social strata and campaigns against child marriage have helped achieve this, he said on Wednesday. The survey said the total enrolment in 2019-20 from primary to higher secondary level in the country was over 25.09 crore, a rise by more than 26 lakh over the previous year.

"Countrywide enrolment of boys was 13.01 crore, while that of girls was 12.08 crore. 'At all the levels above primary, the school enrolment has increased, showing an improvement in the ability of the system to retain more and more children,"

the survey said.

The study, conducted in the pre-COVID-19 period, indicated that the dropout among boys was 14.1 per cent, and that of girls was 13.6 per cent in West Bengal. In the upper primary section, between Class 5 and Class 7, the dropout rate in the state was nil, while the national average was 2.6 per cent.

In general, the availability of infrastructure in schools across the country has improved in 2019-20 as compared to the previous year. Some of these are - availability of electricity connection in 83.4 per cent of schools in 2019-20 as compared to 76.7 per cent in 2018-19, the study said. Computers were available in 38.5 per cent of schools in the academic year under review, and internet access in 22.3 per cent of educational institutes, it added.

Refused discussion on China, Rahul Gandhi walks out of defence panel meet

NEW DELHI, 14 JUL [NDTV]: Congress MP Rahul Gandhi and some of his parliamentary colleagues walked out of a Defence Committee meeting after they were not allowed to discuss border issues with China, sources have said.

The meeting was scheduled at 3 pm today, they said. A request by Mr Gandhi and the Congress MPs to discuss the border row with China was denied, after which he walked out of the Defence Committee meeting, followed by his party MPs.

In the parliament strategy meet chaired by Congress chief Sonia Gandhi, the Congress has decided to raise the border issue with China in the coming monsoon session of parliament.

Leader of Opposition in the Rajya Sabha Mallikarjun Kharge has been



asked to coordinate with allies on floor management and strategy inside parliament, sources have said. The Congress wants to raise fuel price hike issue, inflation, vaccine shortage, unemployment and the Rafale deal controversy, apart from border issues with China, during the monsoon session.

Mr Gandhi has long been criticising the government alleging India has "ceded" territory to China. Indian and Chinese soldiers had clashed in eastern Ladakh's Galwan Valley in June last year.

After a nine-month standoff, the militaries of India and China in February this year reached an agreement on disengagement in the north and south banks of Pangong lake that mandates both sides to cease forward deployment of troops in a "phased, coordinated and verifiable" manner.

India has not "conceded" any territory to China by firming up an agreement on the disengagement process in Pangong Tso in eastern Ladakh, the government had said in February.

Mamata meets Dhankhar amid tense ties



KOLKATA, JUL 14 (PTI): Amid the ongoing tussle between Raj Bhawan and the state government, West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee and Governor Jagdeep Dhankhar Wednesday held an hour-long meeting and discussed various issues related to the state.

Dhankhar said in a tweet the meeting was held without the presence of aides.

"Hon'ble Chief Minister @MamataOfficial called on Hon'ble Governor Shri Jagdeep Dhankhar at Raj Bhavan today.

The two had an hour-long interaction without aides," he tweeted.

According to sources,

the two discussed the resolution passed by the state assembly seeking creation of a legislative council.

The West Bengal assembly had passed a resolution last week supporting an ad hoc committee report that favoured creation of a legislative council despite strident opposition by the BJP.

"A lot of issues related to the state were discussed in the meeting, which was held in a very cordial atmosphere," an official said.

The meeting came amid growing animosity between Dhankhar and Banerjee, who recently said she has thrice written to the Centre de-

manding the governor's recall.

The faceoff between Dhankhar and Banerjee intensified last month when the chief minister accused the governor of being a "corrupted man" and claimed he was named in the Jain Hawala case. Dhankhar remonstrated, accusing her of propagating "lies and misinformation".

Dhankhar and the Banerjee government have been at loggerheads ever since he assumed office over a year ago. The governor has often expressed concern over the law and order situation, including the violence that followed the assembly polls held earlier this year.

Centre asks states not to file cases under scrapped Section 66A of IT Act

NEW DELHI, 14 JUL [NDTV]: Cases cannot be registered under the defunct Section 66A of the Information Technology Act, the Centre told states and Union Territories today. The police should be asked to stop filing such cases and any case under the scrapped law should be immediately withdrawn, the home ministry said in an order this evening.

Section 66A-- a controversial law that allowed the police to arrest people for posting "offensive" content online -- was scrapped by the Supreme Court in a landmark judgment of March 2015.

In a recent hearing, the court expressed shock when it heard that

more than 1,000 cases had been filed under it.

"It is shocking. We will issue notice," a three-member bench of Justices R Nariman, KM Joseph and BR Gavai said. "Amazing. What is going on is terrible," Justice Nariman had added. The judges had also said strict action will be taken against officials who used the law.

The top court had struck down the contentious law in 2015 in a bid to maintain the constitutional right to freedom of speech online. Describing the law as "vague in its entirety," the judges had said it encroaches upon "the public's right to know."

The law, however, was defended from both

sides of the political divide, with parties saying it would help curb the spread of malicious content online.

The use of the law by the police in various states had continued.

The non-profit petitioner People Union for Civil Liberties or PUC, which had flagged the case in top court again, said after the law was scrapped, 381 cases were filed under it in Maharashtra, 291 in Jharkhand, 245 in Uttar Pradesh and 192 in Rajasthan.

Other states to register Sec 66A cases after it was struck down are Andhra Pradesh (38), Assam (59), Delhi, (28), Karnataka (14), Telangana (15), Tamil Nadu (7) and Bengal (37).

Shantinagar Gaon Sudhar Samiti celebrates Bhanu Jayanti

**SUMMIT REPORT
GANGTOK, 14 JUL:**

Shantinagar Gaon Sudhar Samiti celebrated the 207th Bhanu Jayanti today in a short program following Covid-19 safety protocols.

The highlight of the program was Ramayan Path, poetry, and some musical presentations. Head Lama, Karma Thujee Monastery, Shantinagar, Lopen Karma Tshering, was the chief guest on the occasion, a press release informs.

Other distinguished guests included Advisor SGSS, Sarat Lama, senior-most member of the Samiti, Deo Kumari Pradhan along with BB Tamang, RK Pradhan, Anu Hangma Subba, and others.

The program started with two-minute silence for two departed members of the Samiti;



thereafter khadas were offered to the guests. President, SGSS, Krishna Chettri, gave the welcome speech.

Anita Sewa read few pages of the Nepali Ramayan while Ayushman

Chettri recited a poem. Amisha Bishwakarma and Smaridhi Sharma sang Nepali songs, while Nuresa Begum performed a dance number. Amisha Bishwakarma also sang a Telugu song on the occasion.

Student of class XI, Rinchen Sherpa was awarded with a cheque of Rs.5000 as a Meritorious Educational Grant (an initiative started last year by the SGSS).

The chief guest in his

short address appreciated the efforts of SGSS and for inviting him on this auspicious occasion. He spoke about the role of Bhanu Jayanti in the development of the Nepali language.

Attack on Assam cops will be retaliated: Himanta Biswa Sarma on encounters

GUWAHATI, 14 JUL [PTI]: Justifying the series of encounters that have taken place in Assam in the last two months, Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma on Wednesday asserted that attacks on the police will be "retaliated" and "extreme steps" as per the law will be taken to stop such criminals.

Replying to a Zero Hour discussion on narcotic drugs initiated by AGP MLA Prodiip Hazarika, Mr Sarma said that one person has been killed and seven others have been injured for their alleged involvement in drug rackets since he assumed power on May 10.

"Any attack on the police will be retaliated. The Assam Police cannot be a mute spectator when their service revolvers are snatched or culprits try to flee," he said.

Mr Sarma said that the government has announced a zero-tolerance policy towards narcotic drugs and as long as he is in power, "this will go on".

Congress MLAs Sherman Ali Ahmed and Rakibul Hussain raised the issue of a rising number of encounters, and said that police, as per the law, can open fire below the waist to stop an accused.

Responding to this, the chief minister said, "My clear order is -- don't break the law. Do everything under the law and take extreme steps to stop such criminals."

He informed the House that the Assam Police has registered 1,021 cases related to the drug trade and arrested 1,897 people in the last two months. Besides, nearly 28 kg of heroin worth ₹ 50 crore, 12,883 kg of ganja, 41 kg of opium, 78,000 bottles of cough syrup, 13.66 lakh tablets of psychotropic substances, 3 kg of morphine, 15,000 FICN, and ₹ 1.8 crore in cash have been seized during this period, he said.

"The seized drugs may be just around 20 per cent of what is available in the market. When

we are trying so hard to cleanse the state, there is an ongoing attempt to label our police force as trigger-happy and inhuman. There is a huge drug market in Assam and never were such actions taken earlier," he said.

The chief minister claimed that some insurgent groups are involved in the drug network, but the ULFA(I) is not a part of this, and on the contrary, they "helped the police to capture peddlers" on many occasions.

"All the northeastern states are trying to have a coordinated approach to deal with the drug menace. Recently, the Manipur Police had arrested a kingpin of the rhino poaching network in their state," Mr Sarma said.

Since May, at least 15 suspected militants and criminals have been shot dead and dozens of others, including rape accused and suspected cattle smugglers, injured in Assam after they allegedly tried to escape from custody.

Mr Sarma had on July 5 said that shooting at criminals "should be the pattern" if they attempt to escape from custody or try to snatch guns from the police to fire at them. Taking suo moto cognisance, the Assam Human Rights Commission (AHRM) has asked the state government to institute an enquiry into the circumstances that led to the deaths and injuries in police encounters in the last two months.

Earlier, a Delhi-based lawyer from Assam, Arif Jwadder, had filed a complaint with the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) against the Assam Police over the series of encounters that have taken place since Mr Sarma assumed charge.

Elaborating on the drug market in Assam and Northeast, the chief minister informed the assembly that earlier he thought that the narcotic substances enter the region from South Asia and pass through it to the rest of India.

Google Maps Rolls Out Real-Time Bus Information Service for Delhi users

NEW DELHI, 14 JUL [NDTV]: Google Maps has rolled out a new real-time bus service information feature for users in Delhi.

It will enable users to know exactly when the next bus will be arriving at the bus stop, enabling them to plan their commute better. Google has teamed up with Delhi Transport Ministry, Delhi Integrated Multi-Modal Transit System (DIMTS), Indraprastha Institute of Information Technology (IIIT) Delhi, and Lepton Software to integrate this useful real-time public bus service feature for Delhi users in Google Maps.

The tech giant says that this feature will not only offer information about which bus to catch to get from one destination to the other, but also when the next bus is actually arriving at the stop where the user is waiting. The feature will also give an estimation of how long the trip is going to

take and whether the bus is delayed or on time.

In addition, Google Transit will automatically update the times in line with the new conditions. Arrival times based on real-time information available are marked in green or red on Google Maps.

This feature is essentially aimed reducing the hassle of waiting for public transport users. It lets you better plan your departure and may prove to be a big boon in easing the stress of commuting. To use the real-time bus service information feature, open Google Maps on Android or iOS handsets. Enter the destination and tap the 'Go' icon. Enter the source and destination locations and tap the 'transit' (the little tram) icon to view times, bus numbers, routes, and real-time arrival information highlighted in green or red.

Tapping a recommended route lets you

view more information on the route's stops. Tap the bus stop to see a listing of all arriving buses, where relevant real-time information is depicted by the green or red beacon. Google Maps also offer access real-time bus information by searching for a particular bus stop, tapping its name and its listed bus numbers. Users will be able to see a listing of all buses arriving, with the location-enabled buses displaying their real-time ETA.

Google says that the real-time bus information feature is also available in Hindi. It can be changed in Google Maps settings or within the device language settings. Detailing on plans to expand to other cities, Google says that it is working with public transport services in other cities to enable real-time transit information will announce these as and when they become available.

Europe releases blueprint to ban sale of new petrol-driven cars from 2035

BRUSSELS, 14 JUL [AFP]: The EU went into battle on Wednesday to secure a path to its bold pledge of carbon neutrality by 2050, triggering an epic political clash over electric cars and fuel prices that could last for years.

The mammoth plan was unveiled by the European Commission and is intended to transform the bloc's economy from fossil fuel dependency to a world of net-zero emissions.

Brussels also hopes to establish Europe as the unquestioned leader on meeting the goals of the Paris climate accord.

"Europe is now the very first continent that presents a comprehensive architecture to meet our climate ambitions," EU Commission chief Ursula von der Leyen told reporters in Brussels.

"We have the goal, but now we present the roadmap to how we are going to get there," she added.

The myriad proposals include an effective ban on the sale of new petrol-driven cars from 2035, one of the boldest moves against gas-guzzlers ever, and one that has already raised concerns in Paris and Berlin.

The proposals were announced by the European Commission's environment supremo Vice President Frans Timmermans.

At the heart of the legislative package is the ambition to breathe new life into the EU's flawed Emissions Trading

System (ETS), the world's biggest carbon market, where industry pays for the right to pollute.

The laws will now snake their way through the EU's legislative system amid high-stakes horse-trading in the European Parliament and among the bloc's 27 member states, egged on by industry lobbyists and green activists.

"Each state will have to defend its interests because their situations are very different in terms of industry, geography, energy supply and investment capacity," said a senior EU diplomat.

"Member states will see the ambition, see the effort needed to realise it and must decide if there are no insurmountable problems," the diplomat said.

The jockeying has already begun, with powerful interests fighting hard to win special treatment -- or extra time -- before the constraints of a greener Europe come into force.

Environmentalists swiftly denounced the laws as not going far enough -- with the European Environmental Bureau decrying a plan that was "unfit and unfair" to fight climate change effectively.

One major fear is resistance from the motoring public in a continent-wide replay of the "yellow vests" protests that erupted in France when the government imposed a new fuel tax in the name of defending the environment.

Saveetha Dental College offers MSc program in Molecular Medicine

**SUMMIT REPORT
GANGTOK, 14 JUL:**

Saveetha Dental College offers MSc program in Molecular Medicine - First of its kind in Tamil Nadu - Graduates in life sciences, allied health sciences, pharmacy, medical technology, molecular medicine, engineering (biological sciences), medicine and dentistry gets newer scope.

Centre of Molecular Medicine and Diagnostics (COMMAND), Saveetha Dental College and Hospitals, Saveetha Institute of Medical and Technical Sciences (SI-MATS) is offering a two-year MSc program in Molecular Medicine, which is only one of its kind in Tamil Nadu. Saveetha Dental College and Hospitals has been ranked as one of the top five Dental colleges in the country by NIRF, Ministry of Education, Govt of India.

This course in Molecular Medicine is an inter-disciplinary program with emphasis of twelve months dissertation/research work. This program expands upon the scientific and medical knowledge acquired in bachelor programs and explores in-depth the molecular aspects of medicine. The goal of this program is to train students thoroughly in an area of application of molecular medicine. The program enables students to engage in independent and creative research at the crossroads of medicine and basic science. Also provides a platform for comprehensive, theoretical and hands-on practical training in our state-of-the-art facility. Our advanced facilities include labs for cell culture, immunophenotyping, flow cytometry, molecular biology, proteomics, ad-

vanced material science and tissue engineering. The lab is equipped with advanced facilities which include 12 colour flow cytometer, RT-PCR, ELISA plate reader, scanning electron microscope, Transmission electron microscope, 3D Printer, microtome and Fourier Transform Infrared Spectroscopy.

Career opportunities include Industry (biotechnology, pharmaceutical and biomedical technology, production and quality control, basic research and development, publishing etc.), Government agencies (forensic laboratories, public health departments, regulatory authorities), Places of academic research (universities and large research institutions in India and abroad) and Private diagnostic laboratories (molecular diagnostics and analysis).

Infosys has highest revenue in decade, pandemic drives gains

NEW DELHI, 14 JUL [NDTV]: The country's second largest software services company - Infosys on Wednesday reported that its net profit in quarter ended June 2021 rose 23 per cent annually to ₹ 5,195 crore from ₹ 4,233 crore during the same quarter last year on the back of large deal wins. On a sequential basis, Infosys profit registered growth of 2.34 per cent.

The company's revenue also went up by 6 per cent on quarter on quarter basis and stood at ₹ 27,896 crore for the period ending June 30, 2021.

The software services provider's revenue growth in constant currency terms came in at 4.8 per cent on a sequential basis.

During the quarter, Infosys closed large deals worth \$2.6 billion. Op-

erating margin for the quarter was robust at 23.7 per cent, with Free Cash Flows growing by 18.5 per cent year on year.

Infosys raised revenue guidance for current financial year to 14-16 per cent and margin guidance was retained at 22-24 per cent.

"Driven by the dedication of our employees and the trust of our clients, we grew at the fastest pace in the first quarter in a decade, at 16.9 per cent year-on-year and 4.8 per cent quarter-on-quarter in constant currency. I am proud of our employees, who as 'One Infosys' demonstrate resilience and commitment in delivering for our clients. This gives us confidence to increase our revenue growth guidance to 14%-16%", said Salil


Parekh, CEO and MD of Infosys.

"As Infosys completes forty remarkable years, its continuing success and global impact are a testament to the vision of the founders and all the leaders who have shaped the company," he added.

"We remain confident of delivering on the margin guidance, underpinned by our comprehensive cost



optimization program, despite increasing cost headwinds arising largely from compensation review, talent acquisition and retention", said Infosys' Chief Financial Officer Nilanjan Roy, while commenting on the first quarter results of the company.

Infosys shares ended 2 per cent higher at ₹ 1,577 ahead of June quarter earnings.



What is Novel Coronavirus - nCoV?

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

<p>Symptoms of nCoV</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Fever ● Difficulty in breathing ● Dry Cough ● Severe acute respiratory syndrome ● Pneumonia - like symptoms 	<p>Precautions to Prevent nCoV</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Wash your hands often with soap. ● Use an alcohol based hand sanitizer ● Observe good personal hygiene. ● Avoid touching your face with unwashed hands. ● Avoid contact with people with possible symptoms. ● Avoid contact with animals and consumption of undercooked meats. ● Avoid travel to nCoV affected places. ● Wear a mask if you have respiratory syndrome, and cover your mouth while coughing or sneezing.
<p>Treatment</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Treatment is symptomatic and supportive, based on the patient's clinical condition. ● No vaccinations available as of now. ● Visit Doctor in case symptoms detected. 	
 	
<p>DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH & FAMILY WELFARE GOVERNMENT OF SIKKIM</p>	

If you seek help, you may call :

- Toll free no. 104
- District surveillance Officer
- EAST : 7029372100
- WEST : 9593297809
- NORTH : 9641957468
- SOUTH : 7407691463
- New STNM
- AMS : 9434711402

Instigate Involvement to Move Things Along

...because people are not echo-chambers

The region is embarrassingly pliant despite its claims to be otherwise. Diktats run without challenge and obviously dimwitted blunderings accepted without question as examples of strong and decisive leadership. In 1775, a full sixty years before Darjeeling passed from Sikkim into the hands of the East India Company, Samuel Johnson, the British man of letters and political thinker, famously said, “Patriotism is the last resort of scoundrels”. Of course, he was not belittling patriotism, just indicting false patriotism, a dodge that seems to have held superficial pride in good stead for close to two and a half centuries now, replacing patriotism with false nationalism or ethnic and cultural chauvinism. Invoke this call, and everything falls in line. Sikkim routinely does this with Article 371F, Old Laws and local protection, Darjeeling reverts to it with Gorkhaland and West Bengal and its latest favorite acronym PPS.

Each one of these issues strikes a strong emotional chord with the target audience, and when emotions come into the mix, rationality gets pushed aside. This does not mean that the issues mentioned in themselves are trivial, but by demanding unquestioning abidance to every call fired from the shoulders of these issues reduces them to the status of props, and the people into followers. This militates against every aspect of democracy which requires consensus to be earned, not dictated, where differences of opinion are respected, not browbeaten into submission or mocked into oblivion and where people are encouraged to build social contracts, not erect walls. But one sees too much of fixated positions being taken, with people being pulled into a vortex of division.

Irrespective of how the leaders will want to spin it, fact remains that in these parts people have not been reacting enough, they have been following directions and falling in line. Unfortunately, obedience is not involvement, and democracy requires involvement, and genuine involvement is a commitment born from discussion and debate.

How much of that have we seen in these parts?

But that is not how things should remain. Apart from being unhealthy for democracy and its people, it is also undesirable for issues of importance to be only superficially addressed and deeper involvements not explored. For that to happen, democracy needs to be more vigorously institutionalized. Democracy requires its citizens to remain involved, critical and demanding. Extracting an emotional response which brings them to the streets or withdrawn into cliques for short bursts of protesting is the easy part, to convince them when the emotions have abated and the realities of living returned, that they are free and empowered with equal rights, is where the challenge begins.

Mindsets groomed on feudal control cannot be shaken away just with the knowledge that democracy is available. That takes a sustained process of confidence-building, encouragement, even hand-holding and nurturing.

It is also not enough to just tell the people that they are free and then expect them to start behaving like free and responsible citizens. In fact, people should be egged to dissent and disagree because these reactions have been in very short supply of late even though these are emotional contributions necessary for a democracy to evolve. Politics and politicking in the region has reinforced supremacy of the leaders over the people, and if real participatory democracy is to be institutionalized from the grassroots upwards, people need to be proactively instigated to challenge, argue and demand. That will make them realize they have a voice and a role beyond raising slogans and participating in rallies. Then, the people will also become involved and be free with support and become pragmatic participants of the decision-making process. Then, maybe, the issues which have been flogged without resolution will receive the plans and processes which will push them out of the rut.

People are not echo-chambers for leaders, they have enough hanger-ons for that; people need to be more than passive recipients of information and orders for their issues and movements to stay the course and stay true.

WRITE US:

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



Globally, most COVID deaths are in the vaccinated – here’s why that shouldn’t alarm you

CHRISTIAN YATES
theconversation.com

More vaccinated people are dying of COVID than unvaccinated people, according to a recent report from Public Health England (PHE). The report shows that 163 of the 257 people (63.4%) who died within 28 days of a positive COVID test between February 1 and June 21, had received at least one dose of the vaccine. At first glance, this may seem alarming, but it is exactly as would be expected.

Here’s a simple thought experiment: imagine everyone is now fully vaccinated with COVID vaccines – which are excellent but can’t save all lives. Some people who get infected with COVID will still die. All of these people will be fully vaccinated – 100%. That doesn’t mean vaccines aren’t effective at reducing death.

The risk of dying from COVID doubles roughly every seven years older a patient is. The 35-year difference between a 35-year-old and a 70-year-old means the risk of death between the two patients has doubled five times – equivalently it has increased by a factor of 32. An unvaccinated 70-year-old might be 32 times more likely to die of COVID than an unvaccinated 35-year-old. This dramatic variation of the risk profile with age means that even excellent vaccines don’t reduce the risk of death for older people to below the risk for some younger demographics.

PHE data suggests that being double vaccinated reduces the risk of being hospitalised with the now-dominant delta variant by around 96%. Even conservatively assuming the vaccines are no more

effective at preventing death than hospitalisation (actually they are likely to be more effective at preventing death) this means the risk of death for double vaccinated people has been cut to less than one-twentieth of the value for unvaccinated people with the same underlying risk profile.

However, the 20-fold decrease in risk afforded by the vaccine isn’t enough to offset the 32-fold increase in underlying risk of death of an 70-year-old over a 35-year-old. Given the same risk of infection, we would still expect to see more double-vaccinated 70-year-olds die from COVID than unvaccinated 35-year-olds. There are caveats to that simple calculation. The risk of infection is not the same for all age groups. Currently, infections are highest in the youngest and lower in older age groups.

THINK OF IT AS BALL-BEARING RAIN

One way to imagine the risk is as a rain of differently sized ball bearings falling from the sky, where the ball bearings are the people that get infected with COVID. For simplicity’s sake, let’s assume there are roughly equal numbers of ball bearings in each age group. In each age category, there is also a variation in the size of the balls. The balls representing the older groups are smaller, representing a higher risk of death.

Now imagine there’s a sieve that catches many of the balls. Most people who get COVID will not die (most balls get caught in the sieve). But some of the smaller balls fall through. The older you are, the more likely you are to fall through the holes. The balls that make it through the first sieve are hugely skewed towards older age ranges, represented by the smaller ball bearings. Before COVID vaccines came along, the people that fell through the holes represented

the people who would die of COVID. The risk was massively skewed towards older people.

Vaccination provides a second sieve underneath the first, to prevent people from dying. This time, because we haven’t vaccinated everyone, it’s the holes in the sieve that are of different sizes. For older people who’ve had both doses, the holes are smaller, so many ball-bearings are stopped. The vaccines will save many of those who would previously have died.

For younger people the holes in the vaccine sieve are currently bigger as they are less likely to have received both doses and so more likely to fall through the sieve.

If all the filtering were just done by the second sieve (with no skew in risk of death by age, represented by the first sieve), then we might expect younger unvaccinated people to account for a larger proportion of the deaths. But it isn’t. The first sieve is so hugely biased towards older people that even with vaccination, more of them slip through the second sieve than the younger unvaccinated people. Given the UK’s vaccination strategy (vaccinate older, more vulnerable people first), you would expect high proportions of the people who die from COVID to have been vaccinated. And that is exactly what we see in the data.

The fact that more vaccinated people are dying than unvaccinated people does nothing to undermine vaccine safety or effectiveness. In fact, it’s exactly what we’d expect from the excellent vaccines, which have already saved tens of thousands of lives.

[the writer is Senior Lecturer in Mathematical Biology, University of Bath]

Targeted ads isolate and divide us even when they’re not political – new research

SILVIA MILANO, BRENT MITTELSTADT & SANDRA WACHTER
theconversation.com

Five years since the Brexit vote and three since the Cambridge Analytica scandal, we’re now familiar with the role that targeted political advertising can play in fomenting polarisation. It was revealed in 2018 that Cambridge Analytica had used data harvested from 87 million Facebook profiles, without users’ consent, to help Donald Trump’s 2016 election campaign target key voters with on-line adverts.

In the years since, we’ve learned how these kinds of targeted adverts can create political filter bubbles and echo chambers, suspected of dividing people and increasing the circulation of harmful disinformation.

But the vast majority of the ads exchanged online are commercial, not political. Commercial targeted advertising is the primary source of revenue in the internet economy, but we know little about how it affects us. We know our personal data is collected to support targeted advertising in a way that violates our privacy. But aside from privacy considerations, how else might targeting be harming us – and how could these harms be prevented?

These questions motivated our recent research. We found that online targeted advertising also divides and isolates us by preventing us from collectively flagging ads we object to. We do this in the physical world (perhaps when we see an advert at a bus stop or train station) by alerting regulators to harmful content. But online consumers are isolated because the information they see is limited to what is targeted at them.

Until we address this flaw, preventing targeted adverts from isolating us from the feedback of others, regulators won’t be able to protect us from online adverts that could cause us harm.

Due to the sheer volume of ads exchanged online, human supervisors cannot vet each campaign. So increasingly, machine learning algorithms screen the content of ads, predicting the likelihood that they may be harmful or fail to conform to standards. But these predictions can be biased, and they typically only ban the clearest violations. Among the many ads that pass these controls, a significant portion still contain potentially harmful content.

Traditionally, advertising standards authorities have taken a reactive approach to regulating advertising, relying upon consumer complaints. Take the 2015 case of Protein World’s “Beach Body” campaign, which was displayed across the London Underground on billboards featuring a bikini-clad model next to the words: “Are you beach body ready?” Many commuters complained, saying that it promoted harmful stereotypes. Shortly after, the ad was banned and a public probe into socially responsible advertising was launched.

REGULATING ADVERTS

The Protein World case illustrates how regulators work. Because they respond to consumer complaints, the regulator is open to considering how adverts conflict with perceived social norms. As social norms evolve over time, this helps regulators keep up with what the public considers to be harmful.

Consumers complained about the ad because they felt it promoted and normalised a harmful message. But it was reported that only 378 commuters raised complaints with the regulator, of the hundreds of thousands likely to have seen them. This raises the question: what about all the others? If the campaign had taken place online, people wouldn’t have seen posters defaced by disgruntled commuters and they may not have been prompted to question its message.

What’s more, if the ad could have been targeted to just the subset of

consumers most receptive to its message, they might not have raised any complaints. As a result, the harmful message would have gone unchallenged, missing an opportunity for the regulator to update their guidelines in keeping with current social norms.

Sometimes ads are harmful in a specific context, as when ads for high-fat-content foods are targeted to children, or when gambling ads target those who suffer from a gambling addiction. Targeted ads can also harm by omission. This is the case, for example, if ads for shoes crowd out job ads or public health announcements that someone might find more useful or even vital.

These cases can be described as contextual harms: they’re not tied to specific content, but rather depend on the context in which the ad is presented to the consumer.

Machine learning algorithms are bad at identifying contextual harms. On the contrary, the way targeting works actually amplifies them. Several audits, for example, have uncovered how Facebook has allowed discriminatory targeting that worsens socioeconomic inequalities.

DIGGING DEEPER

The root cause of all these issues can be traced to the fact that consumers have a very isolated experience online. We call this a state of “epistemic fragmentation”, where the information available to each individual is limited to what is targeted at them, without the opportunity to compare with others in a shared space like the London Underground.

Because of personalised targeting, each of us sees different ads. This makes us more vulnerable. Ads can play on our personal vulnerabilities, or they can withhold opportunities from us that we never knew existed. Because we don’t know what other users are seeing, our ability to look out for other vulnerable people is also limited.

Currently, regulators are adopt-

ing a combination of two strategies to address these challenges. First, we see an increasing focus on educating consumers to give them “control” over how they’re targeted. Second, there’s a push towards monitoring ad campaigns proactively, automating screening mechanisms before ads are published online. Both of these strategies are too limited.

Instead, we should focus on restoring the role of consumers as active participants in the regulation of online advertising. This could be achieved by blunting the precision of targeting categories, by instituting targeting quotas, or by banning targeting altogether. This would ensure that at least a portion of online ads are seen by more diverse consumers, in a shared context where objections to them can be raised and shared.

In the wake of the Cambridge Analytica scandal, efforts were made by The Electoral Commission to prise open the hidden world of targeted political ads in the run up to the UK’s 2019 election. Some broadcasters asked their audience to send in targeted ads on their social media feeds, in order to share them with a wider audience. Campaign groups and academics were able to analyse targeting campaigns in greater detail, exposing where ads could be harmful or untrue.

These strategies could also be used for commercial targeted advertising, which would break the epistemic fragmentation that currently prevents us from collectively responding to harmful adverts. Our research shows it’s not just political targeting that produces harms – commercial targeting requires our attention too.

[Silvia Milano is Postdoctoral Researcher in AI Ethics, University of Oxford; Brent Mittelstadt is Research Fellow in Data Ethics, University of Oxford; Sandra Wachter is Associate Professor and Senior Research Fellow, Oxford Internet Institute, University of Oxford]

Nepal Army havaldar convicted in death of man inside Chitwan park

RAMESH KUMAR PAUDEL, KATHMANDU, 14 JUL [KATHMANDUPOST]: The Chitwan District Court has convicted a Nepal Army (NA) officer in connection with the death of 24-year-old Raj Kumar Chepang.

Chepang of Rapti Municipality-2 had been detained and thrashed for trespassing in the Chitwan National Park in July last year.

A single bench of judge Gayatri Prasad Regmi on Monday sentenced army sergeant Chiran Kumar Budha to nine months imprisonment for his involvement in Chepang's death.

According to registrar and information officer at the court Ishwar Acharya, the convict has also been fined Rs 9,000. "The court's verdict also orders Budha to provide Rs 200,000 to the family of the victim," said Acharya.

On July 16, 2020, Raj Kumar and six of his friends, including two women, had been detained by an Army patrol inside the park. They had gone to collect ghongi, a species of snail considered a delicacy, in the Jyudi river inside the



park. The group was released on the same day. But Raj Kumar was taken ill after he was released and died on July 22 of what is believed to be injuries inflicted by the Army personnel, according to his family.

Budha, who was deployed at Liglig Post of the Nepal Army's Batuk Dal Battalion at the Chitwan National Park when the incident took place, was arrested on September 20 following a complaint at the District Police Office by Bishnulal

Chepang, Raj Kumar's father. On July 24, Bishnulal had filed a complaint at the District Police Office in Chitwan demanding legal action against those involved in assaulting his son. On September 10, Bishnulal filed another complaint at the police office mentioning the names of those involved in the incident.

The Chitwan police had arrested Budha 10 days after receiving the second complaint, when the investigation officers received post mortem,

viscera and blood test reports of the deceased. The post mortem of the deceased was conducted at the TU Teaching Hospital in Kathmandu.

Budha, a resident of Geruwa in Bardiya district, was released from Bharatpur Prison on Monday after completing his nine-month jail term. According to Kamal Prasad Kafle, chief at Bharatpur Prison, the prison administration freed Budha upon completion of the sentence.

Raj Kumar's family

had initially refused to receive the body, suspecting foul play by government authorities in investigating the death. They had received the body after a written agreement was drafted on July 31 to provide Rs 1million compensation to Raj Kumar's family and take legal action against the guilty. As per the agreement, the park had agreed to provide Rs 700,000 and the Rapti Municipal Office Rs 300,000 to the bereaved family.

Bengal eases Covid curbs as cases dip, metro rail to run on weekdays

NEW DELHI, 14 JUL [NDTV]: West Bengal today announced a further easing of Covid restrictions while it extended the ongoing lockdown till July 30 as experts warn of an impending third wave of the pandemic. The state had on June 28 extended the Covid-induced lockdown till July 15 to control the spread of the devastating second wave of the virus.

As part of the new relaxations, metro rail will be allowed to operate on weekdays at 50% capacity, an official order said. However, local train services will continue to remain suspended with the exception of special trains for government officials and staff.

Publis buses, taxis, autorickshaws will be allowed to run at 50% ca-

capacity. Intrastate buses have been permitted to operate at 50% capacity with fully vaccinated staff. Offices - private and government - will be allowed to function with 50% of their staff.

Gymnasiums and beauty parlours can now operate with 50 percent strength from 11 am to 6 pm. Vegetable markets can remain open from 6 am to 12 pm.

Banks will be allowed to remain open from 10 am to 3 pm.

On Tuesday, Bengal reported 863 new cases of coronavirus in 24 hours with 17 deaths. The state has so far recorded 15,13,877 Covid cases with 17,944 deaths. The positivity rate on Tuesday stood at 1.84 percent, according to official data.

Finance minister tables four Bills in Assam assembly

GUWAHATI, JUL 14 (PTI): Four Bills related to Agricultural Income Tax, Value Added Tax, taxation on specified lands and electricity duty were tabled in the Assam assembly by Finance Minister Ajanta Neog on Wednesday.

She introduced the Assam Agricultural Income Tax (Amendment) Bill, 2021 seeking to amend the Act to increase the fine amount for late filing of return for enforcing compliance.

The minister also introduced The Assam Value Added Tax (Amendment) Bill, 2021 which proposes to amend the Act of 2003 by inserting a new sub-section to provide an option of issuance of e-voice with digital signatures by the dealers. She also tabled The Assam Taxation (On Specified Lands) (Amendment) Bill, 2021

which seeks to insert a new section in the Act of 1990 for applicability of the provisions of Assam VAT Act, 2003 under the Specified Lands Act for its proper administration. The Bill also seeks to insert a new section for automation of business processes and to empower the Commissioner of Taxes, Assam, to issue instructions with prior approval of the government on e-filing and e-payments, Neog pointed out.

The finance minister also tabled The Assam Electricity Duty (Amendment) Bill, 2021 which seeks to amend the Act of 1964 to insert a new section for automation of the business process and to empower the Commissioner of Taxes, to issue instructions, with prior approval of the government, on the procedure of e-filing of returns and e-payments.

3 new COVID-19 cases push Andamans tally to 7,496

Port Blair, Jul 14 (PTI): Three new COVID-19 cases pushed the tally in the union territory of Andaman and Nicobar Islands to 7,496, a health department official said on Wednesday.

Two cases were detected during contact tracing and one was airport arrival, the official said.

Passengers arriving by flight have to undergo mandatory RT-PCR test before they are allowed entry into the islands, he said.

The COVID-19 death toll in the archipelago remained at 129 as no fresh fatality due to the contagion was reported in the last 24 hours, the official said.

The union territory now has nine active CO-

VID-19 cases and all the patients are in the South Andaman district while the other two districts - North and Middle Andaman and Nicobar - are now COVID-19 free.

Three more patients recovered from COVID-19 in the last 24 hours, taking the total number of recoveries to 7,358, he said.

The Andaman and Nicobar administration has so far tested 4,21,108 samples for COVID-19 and the cumulative test positivity rate is 1.78 per cent, the official added.

A total of 2,38,578 people have been inoculated so far, of which 1,67,978 people have received the first dose of COVID-19 vaccine and 70,600 people have received the second dose of

the vaccine, he said, adding that the union territory has a total population of 4 lakh people.

Meanwhile, Health secretary R N Sharma on Tuesday said the union territory administration has received 22,200 doses of COVID-19 vaccines. Out of this, about 5,000 vaccine doses will be sent to North and Middle Andaman district and 2,000 doses to Nicobar district.

Inoculation of people against the disease is being carried out smoothly, he said.

The health secretary said the administration is taking all necessary steps to contain the spread of the disease and people are requested to follow COVID appropriate behaviour.

"Waiting for 3rd wave?" Trinamool taunts election body over bypolls "delay"

KOLKATA, 14 JUL [PTI]: Voicing displeasure over the "delay" in holding elections to seven West Bengal assembly seats, crucial for Mamata Banerjee's uninterrupted continuance as the Chief Minister, the Trinamool said that a party delegation will meet the Election Commission on July 15 to press for it.

Sukhendu Shekhar Ray, a senior leader of the state's ruling party, also taunted the poll panel, wondering whether it was "waiting for a third Covid wave" to conduct the elections.

Maintaining that the pandemic has eased considerably, Ray said the situation was conducive for holding the polls.

Bypolls are to be held for five vacant seats, and fresh elections to two others where polling was countermanded following the death of candidates.

The by-elections are of critical importance to Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee, who lost the assembly poll to BJP's Suvendu Adhikari in Nandigram.

The Constitution allows a person to occupy a ministerial position only up to six months without getting elected to a state legislature or the two Houses of Parliament. It mandates that a minister who is not a member of legislature for six consecutive months shall cease to occupy the position at the expiration of that period.

Mamata Banerjee needs to get elected to the assembly by November 4 to continue as the Chief Minister.

"We will be meeting EC officials tomorrow (Thursday) in Delhi with the demand to hold pending elections and byelections to seven assembly segments. The assembly elections were held in eight phases when COVID was at an all-time high."

But now the COVID situation has

improved a lot.

"The EC is delaying the by-elections. Is it waiting for the third wave? We want the by-polls to be conducted as early as possible," Mr Ray, TMC chief whip in the Rajya Sabha, had said.

Dinhata and Santipur assembly seats fell vacant after BJP leaders Nisith Pramanik and Jagannath Sarkar resigned as MLAs and chose to retain their membership of Parliament.

Mr Pramanik was inducted into the Modi government during its recent expansion.

Mamata Banerjee's pocket borough of Bhawanipore fell vacant after state minister Sovandeb Chattopadhyay resigned to facilitate her election from the seat. The TMC had fielded Mr Chattopadhyay from Bhawanipore after the party chief decided to take on her former protege Suvendu Adhikari in Nandigram.

By-elections to Khardah and Gosaba seats in North and South 24 Parganas respectively are to be held after the death of TMC's Kajal Sinha and Jayanta Naskar due to Covid-19.

Elections to Samserganj and Janpur seats in Murshidabad had been countermanded following the death of candidates and later postponed indefinitely as COVID-19 raged across the state during the second wave.

Currently, Mamata Banerjee and state Finance Minister Amit Mitra are the two non-legislators in the ministry.

Mr Mitra has expressed his desire to step down due to ill-health, but Ms Banerjee needs to win a byelection to enter the state assembly.

The TMC had come back to power in May for a third consecutive term bagging 213 seats in the 294-member assembly.

Jharkhand records single COVID-19 fatality; 40 new cases

RANCHI, JUL 14 (PTI): Jharkhand recorded a single COVID-19 fatality and 40 new cases during the last 24 hours, a health department bulletin said on Wednesday.

The single death in the state during the last 24 hours was recorded from Bokaro district which pushed the death toll to 5,120.

No new COVID-19 case was reported from Chatra, Deoghar, Dumka, Garhwa, Giridih, Godda, Jamtara, Khunti, Latehar, Lohardaga, Pakur, Saraikela and Simdega districts.

The 40 new COVID-19 cases pushed the tally to 3,46,411, the bulletin said. Of the new cases, seven each were reported from Ranchi and Bokaro, followed by four each from Dhanbad,



East Singhbhum, Gumla and West Singhbhum and three cases each from Palamu and Ramgarh district.

Jharkhand now has 347 active COVID-19 cases, it said.

A total of 3,40,944 patients have recovered from COVID-19 including 70 during the last 24 hours, the bulletin said.

However, the mortality rate in the state re-

mained at 1.47 per cent, higher than the national average of 1.30 per cent.

The COVID-19 recovery rate in the state has improved to 98.42 per cent, better than the national average of 97.30 per cent.

Altogether, 1,06,35,714 samples have been tested for COVID-19 in Jharkhand, including 58,266 since Tuesday, it added.

Decomposed body of man found in Kolkata house, wife living with it

KOLKATA, 14 JUL [PTI]: In a rerun of the 2015 Robinson Street skeleton case in Kolkata, a woman and her daughter were found living with the decomposed corpse of her 78-year-old husband in the northern part of the city, police said on Wednesday.

The incident came to light after stench began emanating from their house in Bagbazar area. After their neighbours alerted the police, the law enforcers conducted a check late on Tuesday night, only to find the two women living with the decomposed corpse of 78-year-old Digvijay Ghosh, an officer of Shyampukur police station said.

"The man must have died at least a month-and-half ago. The body has been fully decomposed, exposing the skeleton," he said, adding that Ghosh was ill.

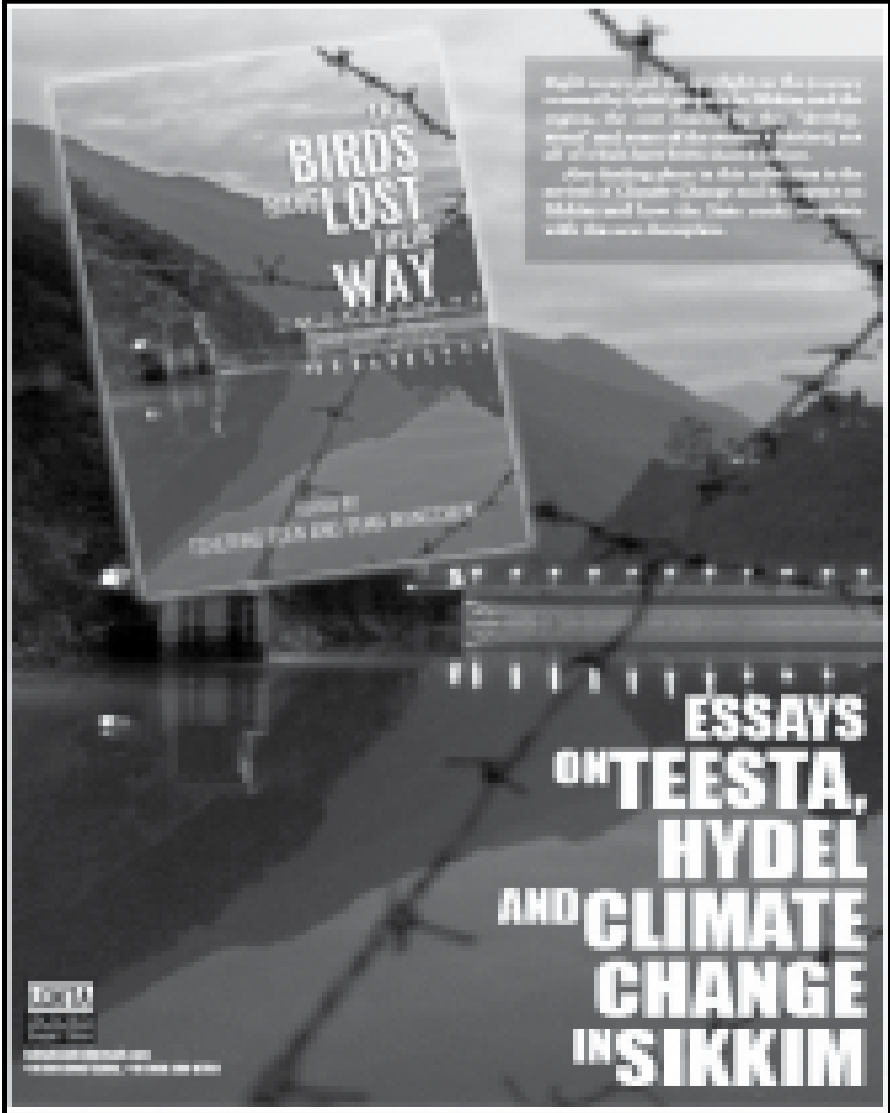


"The cause of the death is not yet clear. We have sent the body for post-mortem examination. We are questioning the wife and daughter," the officer said, adding they are also trying to ascertain whether the two women were depressed.

The two women, who initially resisted police's attempt to enter the house, were found leading a normal life, having food and doing all daily chores in the same room where the body was lying on the bed. "The doors and windows were shut and nobody was allowed to enter

the house. The daughter was not living with her husband and was staying in her maternal house for the last couple of years. We are investigating the incident," he said.

The incident brought back memories of the Robinson Street case, in which software engineer Partha De had spent six months with the skeletons of his sister Debjani De and two pet dogs. Police stumbled upon the case while investigating the death of his father Arabinda De, who had set himself on fire on June 10, 2015.



Flooding across parts of Europe after heavy rainfall

BERLIN, JUL 14 (AP): Storms caused heavy flooding across parts of western and central Europe overnight, with one man missing after being swept away by a raging stream in eastern Germany.

Firefighters resumed their search for the man in Joehstadt, in Saxony state, on Wednesday morning. German news agency dpa reported that he had been trying to secure his property from rising waters when he disappeared.

Hof county near the eastern border with the Czech Republic issued a disaster alert late Tuesday as basements filled with water, trees were uprooted and some areas lost power overnight. Germany's DWD weather service said the region saw 80 liters (more than 21 gallons) of rain per square meter in the space of 12 hours.

In Hagen, firefighters had to rescue several drivers whose vehicles had become stuck in a flooded underpass. Videos on social media showed streets in the western city knee-deep in water and others buried by landslides.

Residents in the nearby town of Erkrath were warned not to shower or use their washers as the sewage system was overloaded by rain.

The neighboring Netherlands and Belgium were also hit by flooding.

Water authorities in the southern Dutch province of Limburg warned that the heavy rainfall will turn streams into dangerously fast-flowing torrents and urged the public to stay away from them.

Boat owners were advised to steer clear of the Maas river due to strong currents and debris being washed downstream.

Dutch media showed people being rescued Tuesday from a historic mill that was partially submerged under floodwaters estimated at 1.5 meters (5 feet) deep.

Swollen rivers are expected to overflow into their floodplains later in the week. It is unusual for the rivers to overflow in the summer. It more often happens in the spring when rivers such as the Rhine and the Maas rise due to melting snow in European hills and mountains.

In Switzerland, authorities raised the flood warning for Lake Lucerne to the highest level and banned all shipping.

DWD meteorologists predicted further extreme storms in the western and central parts of Germany through Thursday, with peak rainfall possibly reaching 200 liters per square meter.

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Of Olympic medals and their evolution

NEW DELHI, JUL 14 (PTI): From olive wreaths to recycled metals sourced from old cell phones and electronics, the reward for winning at the Olympics, the most sought-after achievement in an athlete's life, has come a long way, much like the Games itself.

Made of recycled electronic devices and pebble-like in appearance, the medals in the upcoming Tokyo Games will measure 8.5 centimeters in diameter, featuring the flying image of Nike, the Greek goddess of victory.

But, unlike previous years, these will be produced from gold, silver and bronze (in this case, copper and zinc) that has been stripped from over 79,000 tons of used cell phones and other small electronic devices donated by the Japanese population.

During the ancient Olympic Games, athletes who emerged victorious were awarded 'Kotinos' or olive wreaths, which were considered a sacred prize in Greece, representing the highest honour.

In 1896, the long-lost tradition of ancient Greece, the Olympic Games was reborn in Athens.

With the rebirth, new practices made way for older ones and thus the custom of awarding medals began -- silver for the winners while the runners-up received a copper or bronze medal.

On the front of the medal was Zeus, father of the gods and in whose honour the Games were held, holding



Nike, while the reverse side showed the Acropolis.

It wasn't until eight years later in the 1904 St. Louis Games, where the now standard gold, silver, and bronze medals, were first used.

The metals represent the first three ages of man in Greek mythology: the Golden Age -- when men lived among the gods, the Silver Age -- where youth lasted a hundred years, and the Bronze Age, or the age of heroes.

Over the next century, the coveted awards would vary in shape, size, weight, composition, and in the image they

carried.

In 1923, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) launched a competition for sculptors to design the medals for the Summer Games.

The Italian artist Giuseppe Cassioli's design was chosen as the winner in 1928.

The obverse of the medal was embossed with Nike holding a palm in her left hand and the crown for the winner in the right, with a depiction of the Colosseum in the background and the reverse featured a crowd of people carrying a triumphant athlete. This design continued

for a considerable time.

While host cities were allowed to rework the reverse of the medal starting from the 1972 Munich Games, the obverse only changed during the 2004 Athens Olympics.

A new depiction of Nike, flying into the 1896 Panathenaic Stadium to bestow victory on the strongest, highest and fastest, replaced the older one.

Until 1960, winners had medals pinned to them but the Rome Olympics had the necklace-like design allowing the athletes to wear the prized possession around

their necks thanks to a chain.

Four years later, the chain made way for coloured ribbons.

Interestingly, the gold medals are not made of the yellow metal entirely. The 1912 Stockholm Games was the last time an Olympic medal was made entirely out of the metal. Now, they are just plated with it.

As per the IOC guidelines, a gold medal must contain a minimum of 6 grams of gold. In reality, silver forms the bulk of the medal.

China, which hosted the 2008 Beijing Olympics, for the

first time, introduced medals made of a material other than metal -- jade.

Representing honour and virtue in traditional Chinese culture, the coveted gemstone was inlaid into the back of each medal.

At a time when environmental consciousness was on the rise, the 2016 Rio Games scripted history by becoming the most sustainable edition in Olympic history.

The organisers opted for more usage of recycled material.

Not only were the medals made of 30 per cent recycled material but the ribbons they were attached to were made of 50 per cent recycled plastic bottles while the gold was mercury-free.

Following in Rio's footsteps, the Tokyo Games' organisers have opted for medals made of recycled electronic devices, including discarded laptops and smartphones phone, a proposal that won the "Everyone's Medal" campaign launched by the Tokyo 2020 organising committee in 2017.

"I never dreamed that the design I submitted, only as a memorial to this lifetime event, would be actually selected," winner of the design, Junichi Kawanishi, had told media when the medals were launched.

"With their shining rings, I hope the medals will be seen as paying tribute to the athletes' efforts, reflecting their glory and symbolising friendship.

Tested and tracked ! Olympic visitors set for Tokyo 2020

TOKYO, JUL 14 (AP): As pandemic continues, Japan is welcoming accredited visitors to Tokyo for the delayed summer Olympic Games which opens on July 23.

Athletes and journalists from around the world will be arriving under a massive security effort during the month of games.

After arrival at Haneda Airport, Olympic visitors are requested to install smart phone apps and activate GPS for tracking their whereabouts while in Japan.

Most importantly, everyone has to take a coronavirus test and get a negative result before entering Tokyo.

Olympics participants includ-

ing journalists are required to download an online check-in and health report App (OCHA) onto their smartphone, where visitors input daily health status.

Saliva testing kits are provided and all visitors are required to test for the first three days and thereafter once in every four days till the end of their stay.

The restrictions also include a ban on using public transportation, going to restaurants or tourist spots or even simply take a walk for their first 14 days in the country.

Athletes will be tested daily for coronavirus. They'll also be isolated in the bubble-like athletes' vil-

lage and are expected to stay there, or in a similarly locked-down bubbles at venues or training sites.

If anyone is infected, officials will use GPS to look at movement logs and do contact tracing back to their entry into Japan.

The IOC and local Tokyo organisers have published so-called 'Playbooks' to spell out rules for entry into Japan for Olympics and Paralympics athletes from 205 nations and territories and the travelling media.

At Tokyo Big Sight, the largest exhibition centre in capital Tokyo, serves as 2020 Olympics main press centre and international broadcasting centre.

My idea as a leader is to keep everyone together, happy: Dhawan

COLOMBO, JUL 14 (PTI): Handed captaincy for the Sri Lanka tour, ShikharDhawan's idea of leadership is all about keeping the flock together and in a good state of mind.

The left-handed opener was given the reins of the team after ViratKohli and other key players were sent to England for the WTC Final against New Zealand and the five-Test series against the hosts.

Sri Lanka's limited overs tour, comprising of three ODIs and as many T20s, will begin on July 18 in Colombo.

"It is a big achievement for me that I have become the captain of the Indian side. As a leader, my idea is to keep everyone together and happy that is the most important thing," Dhawan said on Star Sports show 'Follow the Blues'.

"We have got a lovely bunch of boys, great sup-



port staff, and we have worked earlier as well."

Dhawan says he shares a good chemistry with legendary Rahul Dravid, who is the head coach for the series.

"I have a good relation with Rahul Bhai. When I started playing Ranji Trophy, I played against him, and I have known him since then. When I went to play India A match, I was the captain, and he was the coach, so there was interaction.

"When he became the director of NCA, we used to go there for around

20 days, so we had a lot of interaction, and now we have good chemistry. And now that we have the chance to play six matches together, so it will be great fun, and I think we all sync nicely," he said.

The selectors have picked many uncapped players, including the likes of RuturajGaikwad and ChetanSakariya, and Dhawan wants the youngsters to enjoy their journey.

"Happy to get the youngsters in the team and see their

dreams come true. It's a big thing that these youngsters have come from their respective home towns with certain dreams, and their dreams are getting fulfilled.

"And now, they should enjoy the journey which landed them in team India, and they should know the value of their strength and how to improve it," he said.

Dhawan said that both the seniors and youngsters from the squad will learn from each other.

"There are seniors in the team, so the youngsters will learn from them, and we will get to learn from the youngsters. Whenever I meet the youngsters they often have new ways of thinking, and I try to learn things which will help us," Dhawan signed off.

Fitness is Indian hockey team's biggest asset, can break medal drought in Tokyo: Dhanraj Pillay



NEW DELHI, JUL 14 (PTI): An Olympic medal

missing from his own cupboard, Indian hockey great DhanrajPillay believes the supremely fit team going for the upcoming Tokyo Games has what it takes to finish on the podium and end the medal drought which his generation of players could not.

Pillay, who represented India in four consecutive Olympics from 1992 to 2004, said fitness is the key asset of the Manpreet Singh-led side going into the Summer Games that begins on July 23 in Tokyo.

"I am very confident they will do it this time. They have been doing well in the last 5 years. Fitness is their biggest asset. In those days, we didn't have the kind of support system they have now," the 52-year-old Pillay was quoted as

saying in Hockey India's Flashback Series.

"This team has done wonders, won hearts of millions of fans with their recent performances, particularly at the Champions Trophy (in 2016 and 2018) and the World League Finals (2015 and 2017). I know they can do it this time," he added.

Unable to meet the team personally because of the strict COVID-19 protocols, Pillay has sent letter to Manpreet and women's skipper Rani Rampal, wishing both the teams good luck and success in Tokyo.

"Since I am also in Bangalore, I would have loved to meet them in person but due to protocols, I did not. I sent them a letter wishing them the very best and I wanted to convey to them that they should be careful about their diet when they are

in the Olympic village.

"I wanted to convey to them that they should enjoy the best part of their athletic life by being calm and relaxed," he said.

"To both men and women's team, I want to say, don't think about the podium finish. Go match-by-match and stick together as one unit right until the last day, the last match of the tournament."

Pillay advised both the Tokyo-bound teams not to think too far ahead.

"I think the mistake we did at every Olympic Games was that we went with the mind set of aiming for the final instead of taking it match-by-match.

"Though we had the best teams each time, things did not materialise for us to finish on the podium," he signed off.

Mamata wishes gymnast PranatiNayak success in Tokyo Olympics

KOLKATA, JUL 14 (PTI): West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee on Wednesday wished gymnast PranatiNayak success in the upcoming Tokyo Olympics.

Pranati, the only gymnast representing the country in this year's Olympics, is from Pingla in West Bengal's in Pas-

chimMedinipur district. "Heartiest congratulations to our very own PranatiNayak, who is the only gymnast representing India at #Olympics2021!", the chief minister tweeted.

"Pranati hails from a small town in Medinipur. Owing to her hard work, she has

already won many accolades and I am confident of her success this time as well," she added.

The 26-year-old Pranati, daughter of a bus conductor, is the second Indian woman gymnast after DipaKarmakar to qualify for the Olympic Games.

France cautiously celebrates Bastille Day, clouded by virus

PARIS (AP): Bastille Day is back, sort of.

France celebrated its national holiday Wednesday with thousands of troops marching in a Paris parade, warplanes roaring overhead and traditional parties around the country, after last year's events were scaled back because of virus fears.

This year those fears are still lurking, but the government decided to go ahead with the parade on the Champs-Elysees anyway, as part of a broader effort to return to pre-pandemic activity.

The number of onlookers was limited, and they were restricted to a small section of the parade. In addition, each person attending had to show a special pass proving they have been fully vaccinated, had recently recovered from the virus or a had negative virus test. Similar restrictions will be in place for those gathering to watch an elaborate fireworks show at the Eiffel Tower on Wednesday evening.

Spectators converged on Paris from around France, glad to be able to see the show in person even if frustrated with the restrictions and long lines for virus security checks.

"I came especially for my son who is marching today,"



said Gaelle Henry from the northern city of Lille. "It's nice to be able to get out a little bit and finally get some fresh air and think that all the people are here, and that we are getting back to normal a little bit."

Masks were ubiquitous among the smaller-than-usual crowds along the avenue, and de rigueur for the dignitaries watching the show under a red-white-and-blue awning emulating the French flag. The marching soldiers were unmasked — the French military said they have all been fully vaccinated or freshly tested for

the virus. Some cheers rose up as President Emmanuel Macron rode atop a military reconnaissance vehicle along the cobblestoned Champs-Elysees, past restaurants, luxury boutiques and movie theaters that were shuttered for much of the pandemic. The clatter of hundreds of horseshoes accompanied military music as uniformed guards on horseback escorted the president.

Organizers of this year's event dubbed it an "optimistic Bastille Day" aimed at "winning the future" and "celebrating a France standing together

behind the tricolor (flag) to emerge from the pandemic." While that optimism was widely felt in France a few weeks ago, clouds have returned to the national mood as the delta variant fuels new infections and prompted Macron to announce new vaccine rules this week.

Leading the parade were members of a French-driven European force fighting extremists in Mali and the surrounding Sahel region. Macron announced last week that France is pulling at least 2,000 troops from the region because

of evolving threats, and focusing more efforts on the multinational Takuba force instead.

Among others honored at the parade were military medics who have shuttled vaccines to France's overseas territories, treated virus patients or otherwise helped fight the pandemic.

A total of 73 warplanes, medical helicopters and other aircraft traversed the skies over the Paris region.

"This moment of conviviality, of reunion, on the eve of our National Day, is first and foremost for us the opportunity to address our brothers in arms and their families, and give them a message of gratitude," Macron said in a speech to the French military on Tuesday.

Last year's parade was canceled and replaced by a static ceremony honoring health care workers who died fighting COVID-19.

France has lost more than 111,000 lives to the pandemic, and the government is pushing hard to get more people vaccinated to fight resurgent infections driven by the delta variant.

Bastille Day marks the storming of the Bastille prison in eastern Paris on July 14, 1789, commemorated as the birth of the French Revolution.

UN: Migrant deaths on sea routes to Europe more than double

BARCELONA, JUL 14 (AP): The number of migrants and refugees who died while attempting to reach Europe on dangerous sea crossings more than doubled so far this year compared to the first six months of 2020, the U.N. migration agency said Wednesday in a new report.

At least 1,146 people perished between January and June, according to the International Organization for Migration. The number of people attempting to cross the Mediterranean to Europe increased by 58%, the IOM report said.

The Central Mediterranean route between Libya and Italy was the deadliest, claiming 741 lives. Next was the stretch of the Atlantic Ocean between West Africa and Spain's Canary Islands, where at least 250 people died, the agency said. At least 149 people also died on the Western Mediterranean route to Spain, as well as at least six on the Eastern Mediterranean route to Greece. The IOM says the actual number of deaths on sea routes to Europe may be far higher as many shipwrecks go unreported and others are hard to verify.

Human rights organizations have warned that the absence of government search and rescue vessels, particularly in the Central Mediterranean, would make migrant crossings more dangerous, as European governments increasingly rely on and support North African countries with fewer resources to handle search and rescue operations.

Tunisia increased such operations by 90% in the first six months

of 2021, while Libyan authorities intercepted and returned more than 15,000 men, women and children to the war-torn country, three times more people than in the same period last year, the IOM report said.

Meanwhile, Italian authorities increasingly targeted charity rescue ships that have worked over the years to fill the void left by European governments, routinely detaining the vessels operated by nongovernmental organizations for months, sometimes years.

While many factors contributed to this year's higher death toll, including an increase in the number of flimsy boats attempting sea crossings, the absence of proactive, European, state-led search and rescue operations in international waters combined with restrictions on NGOs was among the main factors, IOM spokesperson Safa-Msehli said. These people cannot be abandoned in such a dangerous journey, Msehli told The Associated Press.

Italy detained nine NGO-operated ships so far this year, according to Matteo Villa, a research fellow for the independent think tank ISPI, who tracks data and statistics on migration.

Mediterranean countries such as Italy, Malta, Spain and Greece have repeatedly asked other European countries for help caring for the people who are rescued and brought to their shores. Last year, when pandemic restrictions made it hard to move between countries, the number of refugees and migrants arriving in Europe by sea dropped to its lowest level since 2015.

Iran's president warns weapons-grade enrichment possible



TEHRAN, JUL 14 (AP): Iran's outgoing president on Wednesday warned his country could enrich uranium at weapons-grade levels of 90% if it chose, though it still wanted to save its tattered nuclear deal with world powers.

President Hassan Rouhani's comments, carried by the state-run IRNA news agency, came as he also criticised Iran's wider theocracy for not allowing his government to reach a deal soon to restore the 2015 atomic accord.

Rouhani's powers have waned as the public soured on his government amid an economy suffering under U.S. sanctions. But his remarks signal Iran could take a more belligerent approach with the West as hard-line President-elect Ebrahim Raisi is due to take office next month.

Speaking in a Cabinet meeting, Rouhani made the 90% remark, a rare moment for him to suggest Tehran could take that approach.

Even if one day there is a need for 90% enrichment for a reactor, we do not have any problem and we are able, Rouhani said, according to IRNA.

"We can do anything in the peaceful path."

The 2015 nuclear deal, which saw Iran gain relief from those crushing sanctions, limited Tehran's program to enriching only up to 3.67% enough to power a civilian nuclear reactor. It now enriches a small amount of uranium up to 60%, a short step from weapons-grade levels.

Rouhani also complained that hard-liners outside of his relatively moderate government blocked its efforts to reach a deal in Vienna. For months, negotiators have been trying to find a way for Iran to return to the limits of the deal and for the U.S. to rejoin the accord from which then-President Donald Trump earlier unilaterally withdrew.

A new round of Vienna negotiations has yet to be scheduled.

Rouhani said he hoped Raisi's administration "will be able to finish the job."

There is no difference if the current or next administration will be successful, but we are very sorry that nearly six month of opportunity has been lost," he said.

Nepal gets new PM sans political stability; confidence vote to decide govt's tenure

KATHMANDU, JUL 14 (PTI): The appointment of SherBahadur Deuba as Nepal's Prime Minister for a record fifth time after the Supreme Court's intervention does not seem to provide the much sought-after political stability in the country as he will have to go for a floor test in Parliament within 30 days.

Even if the 75-year-old veteran politician and Nepali Congress (NC) president, who has only 61 seats in the 275-member House of Representatives, somehow wins the confidence vote, fresh elections will have to be conducted in 18 months, The Kathmandu Post newspaper reported.

If he loses the floor test, the country will go to polls in six months, it said.

The House of Representatives -- the lower house of Nepal's Parliament -- has completed more than three-and-a-half years of its five-year tenure.

In its order to appoint Deuba as prime minister, the Supreme Court on Monday said that he should complete the process of getting the vote of confidence as per Article 76 (6) of the Constitution, the report said.

According to Article 76 (6), he will have to go for a floor test in Parliament within 30 days of appointment, it said.

The result of the vote of trust will decide the fate of the Deubagovernment, the newspaper quoted Bipin Adhikari, former dean at Kathmandu University School of Law, as saying.

Deuba, notwithstanding his 61 seats in the House, had staked claim to form the government with the support of lawmakers from four other parties -- the Communist Party of Nepal (Mao-



ist Centre), the Madhav Kumar Nepal faction of the Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist Leninist), the Upendra Yadav faction of the Janata Samajbadi Party and Rastriya Janamorchha.

Altogether, 149 members of the House of Representatives supported him, including 26 from the Madhav Nepal faction of the UML.

If the 26 UML dissidents continue to support him, Deuba's tenure will last for one-and-a-half-years when general elections are to be held. If not, fresh elections have to be called within six months, as per Article 76(7) of the Constitution, the report said.

Leaders of the UML, meanwhile, say it is unlikely that they will support Deuba.

The UML will be a united party by then (by the time of the vote of trust). It will make a decision where to stand and we will follow that, Gokarna Bista, a UML secretary close to Madhav Nepal, told the newspaper.

During a meeting with other leaders of the parties that supported Deuba following the Supreme Court verdict on

Monday evening, Madhav Nepal said he might not remain in the alliance now on, it said.

That will leave Deuba with the support of just 123 lawmakers -- 61 from the Nepali Congress, 49 from the Maoist Centre, 12 from the Upendra Yadav faction of Janata Samajbadi Party and one from Rastriya Janamorchha.

Deuba needs 136 votes as there are only 271 members in the House presently, the report said.

In Deuba's probable favour, there is a legal loophole for the Madhav Nepal faction of the UML to support him and yet not be expelled from the party. In its verdict on Monday, the Supreme Court said that party whip is not applicable in the case of supporting a prime minister to be appointed on the basis of Article 76 (5).

According to senior advocate Govinda Bhandi, the verdict means that the party cannot take action against its lawmakers for supporting Deuba in the vote of confidence as well.

Whatever the legal interpretation of the Su-

preme Court verdict, the NC leaders are confident that the Madhav Nepal faction will continue to support them, the report said.

Earlier, outgoing Prime Minister Oli accused the apex court of "deliberately" passing the verdict in favour of the Opposition parties.

Oli, 69, claimed the majority of people still supported him but he was leaving just to implement the apex court's order. He said the government was successful as it expedited development works across the country and made efforts to control the Covid-19 crisis.

Oli said he would like to see the country go to the general elections as soon as possible, hoping his CPN-UML would emerge victorious again. Using his party's election symbol of the sun as a pun, Oli said clouds could hide the sun for a time being but it would soon rise again.

Deuba has previously served as Nepal's Prime Minister four times from June 2017-February 2018, June 2004-February 2005, July 2001-October 2002 and September 1995-March 1997.





SUPER CHIC! The actress, Megan Fox puts on an eye-catching display in a grey dress and red lips as she made her way to Jimmy Kimmel Live.

Aamir Khan productions denies 'Laal Singh Chaddha' crew littered Ladakh set

MUMBAI, JUL 14 (PTI): Superstar Aamir Khan's production house on Tuesday dismissed claims that the crew of its upcoming movie, "Laal Singh Chaddha", polluted a shooting location in Ladakh. Khan is currently filming for the AdvaitChandan-directorial in the union territory.

Last week, a Twitter user shared video clips from Wakha village, Ladakh, alleging that the crew of the 56-year-old actor's film had shot a sequence at the place but left without cleaning the area afterwards.

The video showed used water bottles scattered across the location, which the user claimed was the filming area.

In a statement posted on the official Twitter handle of Aamir Khan Productions, the team denied the allegation and wrote that the filming locations are open to be verified by the authorities.

"We believe that there are some rumours/allegations about our location not being kept clean. We strongly deny such claims. Our location is always open to relevant local authorities to carry out checks anytime that

they like," the note read. In the statement, the production house stressed that its team follows "strict protocols" for cleanliness in and around the shooting spaces.

"We have a team which makes sure that the location is kept trash-free at all times. At the end of the day there is a re-check of the entire location. "At the end of the entire



schedule, we make sure that when we leave a location we leave it as clean, or cleaner than we found it," the statement read.

Also starring Kareena Kapoor Khan, Mona Singh and Naga Chaitanya, "Laal Singh Chaddha" is the official Hindi remake of Tom Hanks' 1994 blockbuster "Forrest Gump".

experiencing right now is nothing short of magical. You are learning the importance of giving and receiving in equal measure and allowing others to show up for you in a holistic manner. Remember, restoring balance within is the secret to restoring balance without.

Tip: Allow others to show up for you in a holistic manner.

Cancer:

The earthly realm or wheel of samsara, as told by the Buddhists texts, is synonymous with pain and suffering. To be human is to sign up for experiences that may not always be pleasant in nature. But, what does one do when they are faced with karmic debts of the highest order? Choosing the path of least resistance may be the only way forward. Remember, you do not have to do this alone. You have a supportive spirit team that's working with you in each moment. Surrender and allow yourself to lean on them.

Tip: Choose the path of least resistance, Cancer.

Leo:

Leo, the cards are urging you to find a balance between the amount of time you spend indoors and the amount of time you spend outdoors. Mother Nature wants to see more of you so she can nurse you back to health. Engaging in physical activities such as sports, yoga or tai chi is a good way to do so. Alternatively, you can take a bottle of green juice and your favourite book to the park this evening, and breathe in some of that good juju.

Refused major stuff in Hollywood as I wasn't ready to shift base to LA: Shilpa Shetty

MUMBAI, JUL 14 (PTI): During her 14 year-long sabbatical from Hindi films, actor ShilpaShettyKundra says she was approached to star in a major Hollywood project, which she turned down because she was unwilling to change gears "so drastically".

Shilpa's last full-fledged Bollywood film was in 2007, with filmmaker AnuragBasu's "Life in a Metro" and the Dharmendra-starrer "Apne". The same year, she also emerged as the winner of the British reality TV series "Celebrity Big Brother" season five, which made her a global figure.

Though her Hindi film appearances became few and far between -- with cameos in films like "Om Shanti Om" and "Dostana" -- the actor said she kept getting "really good parts", including an offer from Hollywood.

Shilpa, who has been more active on television as a judge on dance reality shows like "NachBaliye" and presently "Super Dancer", said refusing the project from Los Angeles wasn't a particularly hard decision as settling down in the US was not her "cup of tea".

"My son was extremely upset with me because I was offered some major stuff even in Hollywood, but I said no to it. To just shift base from Mumbai and settle in Los Angeles is really not my cup of tea," the 46-year-old actor told PTI in an interview.

Shilpa is married to businessman Raj Kundra and they have two children, son Viaan (nine) and daughter Samisha (one).

Though the actor views it as a "great

opportunity lost", she is content working in the Hindi film industry for now, and would switch to the other side if she gets an opportunity after her kids are of a certain age.

"I'm clear about what I want. I love



doing work here. It's a great opportunity lost, but I'm so happy with whatever I have. I'd be so unhappy to just leave my family and shift gears so drastically.

"It's too much to give and I don't think I was ready for that. Maybe once my kids are 15, then I would (consider) if I still look this way!" she added.

Shilpa is set to return to the silver screen with her latest comedy feature, "Hungama 2". Directed by Priyadarshan, the film is scheduled to be released on Disney+ Hotstar on July 23.

Having made her debut at the age of 17 with the 1993 Abbas-Mustan thriller "Baazigar", the actor said it was a conscious decision to cut down on work.

"I had reached a saturation point,

which happens to a lot of artistes. After 'Life in a Metro' and 'Apne', people started offering me the same kind of roles. They were not really interesting and I stayed away and took that sabbatical," she said.

What also pushed her towards taking a break was her personal life.

Shilpa said she was excited to start a new phase of her life in the late 2000s and had decided she won't work for some time when she has children.

"Soon after, I had Viaan. I had decided when I would have my first child, I would dedicate all my time to the baby. I was told the first seven years of a child is extremely important, they are highly impressionable. So I made that time. My family was, is and will continue to be my first priority."

The actor, whose film credits include "Dhadkan", "PhirMilenge" and "Dus", said she now has carefully designed shooting schedules.

AyushmannKhurrana-starrer 'Doctor G' begins production

MUMBAI, JUL 14 (PTI): Actor AyushmannKhurrana's upcoming campus comedy-drama "Doctor G" went on floors in Bhopal on Wednesday, the makers said.

Directed by Anubhuti-Kashyap, the film also stars RakulPreet Singh and Shefali Shah, both playing doctors.

The official Instagram handle of the production house Junglee Pictures shared a picture of a clapboard to mark the first day on the set.

"Looks like a busy schedule for #DoctorG! Film goes on floors today," the caption read.

Khurrana, who also fea-

tures in the film as a doctor, will be in Bhopal for over a month-long schedule. "Doctor G" is written by SumitSaxena, Vishal Wagh, Saurabh Bharat along with Kashyap.

Apart from "Doctor G", Khurrana will also be seen in AbhishekKapoor's love story "Chandigarh KareAashiqui" and AnubhavSinha's action-thriller "Anek". Singh, meanwhile, also has the Ajay Devgn directorial "Mayday" and Indra Kumar's comedy "Thank God" on her plate.

Shah's upcoming project include "Darlings", featuring Alia Bhatt and Vijay Varma, and the Hotstar web series "Human".

Rajesh Tailang regains access to Instagram account

MUMBAI, JUL 14 (PTI): Actor Rajesh Tailang on Wednesday said he has regained control over his Instagram account, a day after it was hacked. On Tuesday, Tailang had informed his fans that someone had hacked into his account and was sending suspicious links to his followers.

"I think someone has hacked my account. Please ignore messages and don't open any links. Thanks," he had posted. The actor, best known for featuring in critically-acclaimed shows

like "Delhi Crime", "Mirzapur" and "Bandish Bandits", posted another update, informing his fans that the account was in his control. "Instagram account is in my control," the actor wrote, sharing a picture of himself with the caption, "What did you gain after hacking my account?"

Tailang was recently seen in director UmeshBist's comedy drama "Paggilait", co-starring SanyaMalhotra, AshutoshRana, Shruti Sharma and Ra-ghubirYadav.

DiaMirza, VaibhavRekhi announce birth of first child

MUMBAI, JUL 14 (PTI): Actor DiaMirza and her businessman-husband VaibhavRekhi on Wednesday said they welcomed their first child, a baby boy, in May.

The baby, named AvyaanAzaadRekhi, was born prematurely on May 14 and is currently being cared for in a neonatal intensive care unit (ICU), they said.

Mirza shared a moving post about the birth of their son on Instagram.

"Our heartbeat, our son AvyaanAzaadRekhi was born on May 14th. Having arrived early, our little miracle has since then been cared for by tireless nurses and doctors in the Neonatal ICU.

"A sudden appendectomy during my pregnancy and a subsequent and very severe bacterial infection could have led to sepsis and proven to be life threatening," she wrote.

The 39-year-old actor, known for films like "RehnaaHai Terre Dil Mein" and "Sanju", said she was grateful for the timely care and intervention by their doctor that ensured "the safe birth of our baby via an emergency C-section".

Mirza said the couple is learning the meaning of par-

enthood from their newborn.

"And to not be afraid, and so we humbly take the lead from his resilience and courage. We do not have enough words to thank all those who continue to help us live this story of hope and faith and create a safe, healing, nurturing space for Avyaan and I."

She said the baby will be home soon, as his grandparents and elder sister Samaira, Rekhi's daughter from his first wife, yoga coach Sunaina, are "waiting to hold him in their arms".

"To our well-wishers and fans, I just want to say - your concern has always meant a lot to me and if it was possible to share this news before, we would have.

"Thank you all for all the love, light, faith and prayers. We extend them back to everyone who is struggling to hold on to hope right now or is praying for a loved one. We see you, we hear you and together, we will get past this time," Mirza concluded the note.

The couple tied the knot on February 15 in a private ceremony, which was attended by family and close friends.

Mirza was earlier married to film producer SahilSangha.

Aries:

This is a time of downloading ideas and inspiration, Aries—in HD, may we add. Given that you are an action-oriented sign, you will have no trouble setting things into motion. What's important for the development of this project, though, is to find a balance between the yin and yang forces within. So, make time to traverse to subtle realms through your mind's eye and stay open to receiving some of that cosmic intelligence. You were born to make it big, beautiful, and now is the time to take a step in the right direction.

Tip: This is a time of downloading ideas and inspiration.

Taurus:

Your life is a potpourri of colours, Taurus. You are blessed in more ways than you can count—and it's not just material wealth that we're talking about. What you're being called to do today is to be grateful for this harvest, and share it with those around you from a place of fullness. Remember, every intention you put into the Universe will come back to you manifold.

Tip: Sharing your harvest will make the fruits of your labour sweeter.

Gemini:

Gemini, there was a time you tried to heal or fix everything. There was a time you tried to play the role of the 'parent' in each of your relationships. But, what you are

Tip: Mother Nature wants to nurse you back to health.

Virgo:

Research and study are important themes for you at this moment. You are embracing the student life and honouring the information that is coming through myriad sources. Alternatively, you could actively be looking at courses that support your growth and help you move to the next level. Don't waste too much time going back and forth on your decisions, though. Make a choice that feels in alignment. Know that if you ask for a sign, you will always receive it, Virgo.

Tip: Research and study are important themes at this moment.

Libra:

Your patron goddess Venus, who is associated with love, beauty, art, fertility and sensuality is blessing you with her presence today, Libra. So, open yourself to the cornucopia of abundance and desire that's pouring in and know that you deserve every bit of the blessings you are attracting at this moment. Do you know what will make the harvest sweeter, though? Sharing it with those you love. PS: Make your soul tribe a part of this celebration today.

Tip: Open yourself to the cornucopia of abundance and desire that's pouring in.

Scorpio:

Birth and fertility are important themes for you right now, both physically and energetically. While some of you

are holding space for new ideas to come in, others are actively calling in the energy of a child into their lives. Remember not to carry your past disappointments into the present. Things didn't work out for you in a certain manner at that point for a reason. But, with divine intervention, all of that is about to change now.

Tip: Some of you could be thinking about having children.

Sagittarius:

'Be positive' is a great affirmation to tell yourself, but it may not serve you in any way given where you are right now. There is only one way to deal with this storm, Sagittarius, and it requires you to feel your feelings in their entirety. That's the only way to liberate yourself from their grip today. The good thing is, you do not have to do this alone. You have so much energetic support available to you from the other side. So, allow yourself to lean on your guides.

Tip: Don't be afraid of venturing into the shadows.

Capricorn:

Life in the earthly realm is a delicate balance between doing and being, being and doing. Periods of creating must be followed by periods of resting, and periods of resting must be followed by periods of creating. Where you are right now is the realm that lies in-between. That mysterious place where ideas begin to take form and inspiration strikes unexpectedly. Think of yourself as an empty caul-

dron, waiting to receive this divine outpour.

Tip: You're in that mysterious place where ideas begin to take form.

Aquarius:

It's a magical, magical day in the Aquarius HQ. You feel like you are one with the Universe and that the Universe is dancing the dance of life with you. This is also a wonderful day to love and be loved, to allow your heart to expand with love and to watch all the rough edges chip away. You were meant to find each other in this lifetime for a reason. So, honour this connection in a manner that you feel called to, beautiful.

Tip: When they're 'the one', you just know it.

Pisces:

We tend to think of physical and emotional wellness as two separate things. However, the mind, body, and soul are deeply connected. In other words, when we replace our negative thought patterns with positive ones, our body reflects this change. When we work on our sacred vessel, the way we think and feel about ourselves undergoes a transformation. So, pay attention to the needs of your body. Nurture yourself in a manner that you feel called to today. What if we said that self-care is the secret to inner peace and happiness?

Tip: Nurture yourself in a manner that you feel called to today.