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SummitTIMES

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ON TOP OF THE NEWS

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Holi greetings from CM

GANGTOK, 28 MAR [IPR]: Chief Minister Prem Singh Tamang has extended warm Holi greetings to the people of Sikkim.

In his message, he states that the festival of colours is a celebration of friendship, brotherhood and reunion, thus inspiring people to celebrate the occasion unitedly by disregarding resentments, bitterness and

discrimination.

The Chief Minister has wished for a fun and enjoyable Holi filled with sweet memories and joyous moments and appealed to the people to keep safe and celebrate duly adhering to the COVID-19 protocols. He has also extended prayers for better and brighter days for Sikkim and her people.

BJP and RSS workers clash with Police in UP, 3 cops suspended

MATHURA, 28 MAR [PTI]: Three police officials were suspended and another shifted on Sunday, a day after a fight broke out here between some policemen and youth, said to be BJP and RSS workers, officials said.

The fight took place after some policemen allegedly misbehaved with an RSS Zila Pracharak, Manoj Kumar, when he was taking a bath in the Yamuna river during the Kumbh fair in Vrindavan, they said.

Soon after the incident, a video surfaced on social media purportedly showing some youth entering into an altercation with two or three policemen and one of them hitting a policeman on his back with a helmet.

A police spokesperson said while inspector, Kotwali, Anuj Kumar has been sent to the police lines, Kumbh area (VIP ghat) police outpost incharge, inspector PK Upadhyay as well as constables Anil and Gautam have been suspended.

A letter has also been written to authorities concerned for action against two home guards,

the police spokesperson said.

Following the incident on Saturday, local BJP activists staged a dharna in protest the alleged misbehaviour of the policemen.

The local Congress leaders and workers had also accused the BJP and RSS activists of attacking policemen, including the area SHO, and demanded action against them.

On Sunday, former leader of the Congress Legislature Party in Uttar Pradesh, Pradeep Mathur said the party will stage a protest if the administration remains a silent spectator to the incident.

"To protect the democratic norms, Congress would state a dharna if the administration remains a silent spectator and no action is taken against the alleged BJP/RSS activists who assaulted the police," Mathur said at a press conference in the presence of senior party leaders of the district.

RLD state vice president Kunvar Narendra Singh had also demanded action against the those involved in the incident.

Interschool Jr Olympics begins to power the Olympic Movement

**SAGAR CHHETRI
GANGTOK, 28 MAR:**

The 1st Inter School State Junior Olympics Games & State Level Chief Minister's One Mile Run 2021 was inaugurated by Chief Minister PS Tamang at a grand opening ceremony held here at Paljor Stadium on Sunday.

A total of 1,110 participants including escorts and officials are participating in this five-day long event being organized by the Department of Sports & Youth Affairs.

The opening ceremony started with the flag hoisting by the CM followed by a torch relay by athletes and oath-taking ceremony for athletes, officials and judges. The opening ceremony included a march past by participating athletes and Zumba mass drill and cultural presentations by students.

The CM has also flagged-off the 1st State



Level Chief Minister One Mile Run 2021 at Paljor Stadium for U-14 boys and girls. The children followed the route from Paljor Stadium to Tamang Gumpa and back to the starting point.

Satish Rai from Gyalshing BAC stood first in U-14 boys followed

by Maniraj Lohar from Gyalshing BAC on second position and Rupesh Subba from Chumbung BAC on third position.

Likewise, Phurba Doma Tamang from Soreng BAC, Subana Gurung from Namthang BAC and Gayatri Chettri from Hee-Martam BAC

stood on the first, second and third positions respectively.

Earlier, in his welcome address, Secretary to the Sports & Youth Affairs Department, Raju Basnet informed that the new government has given top priority to sports.

He added that the

State government has been working on infrastructure development in sports and many incomplete projects were on the verge of completion.

He mentioned that lots of sports activities have been underway at different levels across the State to provide better

platforms and exposure to talented sportspersons in different corners of the State. He also thanked the government to enhancing the reservation for sportspersons to 5% in the government jobs.

The Secretary informed that the Chief Minister One Mile Run was a unique initiative started on the directions of the CM to promote club culture in rural Sikkim.

Director, Sports & Youth Affairs Department, Doma Tshering, mentioned that the department organized the Junior Olympics from the block-level and then at district-level and finally at the state-level to promote the Olympic movement at the grassroot level.

She added that the event aims to provide exposure and platforms to talented sportspersons at the grassroots level and then promote them to higher levels.

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Only one more case even as 72,815 vaccine doses administered thus far

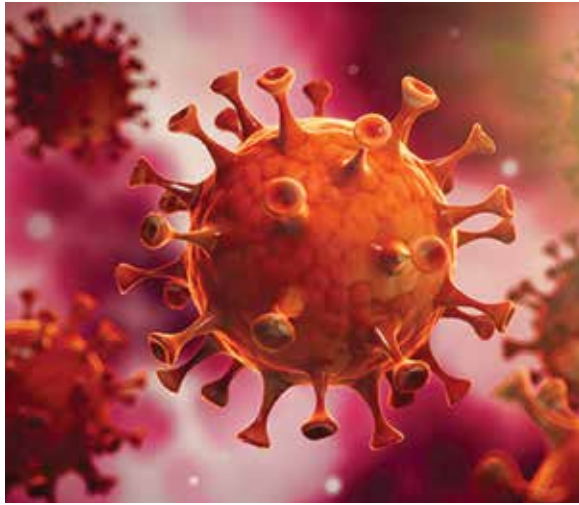
**SUMMIT REPORT
GANGTOK, 28 MAR:**

Sikkim reported only one new case of novel coronavirus in the last 24 hours offering some reprieve to nerves frayed by the impression created by night curfews and enthusiastic police watch of Covid protocols.

And even this one new case is not of a local resident but an army personnel stationed here. He has been referred outside the State as per the COVID protocol of the Indian Army, it is informed.

Sikkim's tally of confirmed cases of COVID-19 now stands at 6,227.

Meanwhile, the number of active cases of coronavirus reduced to 44 with the discharge



of seven persons from the isolation facilities yesterday. The number of so recovered cases of COVID-19 in Sikkim has accordingly further improved to 5,951.

In his daily health bulletin on Sunday, Health

Department State IEC Officer, Sonam Gyaltsen Bhutia, informed that the solitary case reported in the last 24 hours was picked up from the testing of 129 samples on Saturday.

He added that another

primary contact of the tourist who had tested positive for COVID-19 a few days back, has tested negative. He added that samples of other contacts will be tested after a few days to factor in the virus' incubation period.

Mr Bhutia informed that no vaccination drive for COVID-19 was carried out on Saturday and Sunday.

While providing details of the vaccination carried out so far in Sikkim, he informed that a total of 72,815 people have been vaccinated so far. Of these, 60,536 have received the first dose thus far while 12,279 persons have completed their vaccination schedule.

Sikkim among seven states given performance incentive grant from Jal Shakti Ministry

**SUMMIT REPORT
GANGTOK, 28 MAR:**

The Jal Shakti Ministry has approved Rs 465 crore as a performance incentive grant for seven states including Sikkim on 27 March, a press communique from the Chief Minister's Office informs.

These states qualified for the incentive grant for 2020-21 under Jal Jeevan Mission - Har Ghar Jal to provide assured tap water supply to every rural home by 2024, the release adds.

This was the first time that five states from the north-east qualified for performance incentive grants.

These states have been successful in swift-

ly implementing JJM despite several geographical issues, the release claims further, adding that the criteria for the grants included physical and financial progress, the functionality of piped water supply schemes and the capacity to utilise the fund.

Union Minister Gajendra Singh Shekhawat approved the amount.

The Chief Minister hailed it as a proud moment for the state and urged all to continue with the same spirit and achieve all the goals in the coming days. He also expressed gratitude towards all individuals involved in initiating the Mission in the state.

Over 4 cr old vehicles on Indian roads, Karnataka tops list at 70 lakh

NEW DELHI, MAR 28 (PTI): Over four crore vehicles older than 15 years are plying on roads pan-India and fall under the ambit of green tax, with Karnataka occupying the top slot with more than 70 lakh such vehicles. The Ministry of Road Transport and Highways has digitised the data of such vehicles throughout the country, excluding Andhra Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Telangana and Lakshadweep as their records were not available.

A proposal to levy green tax has already been sent to the states.

More than four crore vehicles have been found to be older than 15 years, including over two crore which are more than 20 years old, as per the data.

The digitised vehicle records are as per the centralised Vahan database that excludes "Andhra Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Telangana, and Lakshadweep", the ministry said. Uttar Pradesh occupies the second spot with 56.54 lakh vehicles, of which 24.55 lakh are older than 20 years. The capital Delhi is at the third place

in terms of old and polluting vehicles at 49.93 lakh, of which 35.11 lakh are older than 20 years. The digitisation of vehicle numbers revealed that Kerala has 34.64 lakh such vehicles, followed by 33.43 lakh in Tamil Nadu, 25.38 lakh in Punjab and 22.69 lakh in West Bengal.

Maharashtra, Odisha, Gujarat, Rajasthan and Haryana have these vehicles in the range of 17.58 lakh and 12.29 lakh.

The number of such vehicles ranges between 1 lakh and 5.44 lakh for Jharkhand, Uttarakhand, Chhattisgarh, Himachal Pradesh, Puducherry, Assam, Bihar, Goa, Tripura and the union territories of Dadra-Nagar Haveli and Daman and Diu.

Rest of the states have such old and polluting vehicles below one lakh each, as per the central data.

The government plans to impose a green tax on old vehicles soon in a bid protect the environment and curb pollution.

Vehicles like strong hybrids, electric vehicles and those running on alternate fuels like CNG, ethanol and LPG will be



exempted. The revenue collected through the green tax will be utilised for tackling pollution, as per the ministry. Road Transport and Highways Minister Nitin Gadkari in January this year had approved a proposal to levy a 'green tax' on old vehicles which are polluting the environment.

The proposal has been sent to the states for consultation before it is formally notified. Green tax is imposed by a few states/UTs at different rates at present.

Under the scheme, transport vehicles

older than eight years could be charged green tax at the time of renewal of fitness certificate at the rate of 10 to 25 per cent of road tax.

Personal vehicles will be charged green tax at the time of renewal of registration certification after 15 years; public transport vehicles, such as city buses, will be levied lower green tax; while higher green tax (50 per cent of road tax) is proposed for vehicles being registered in highly polluted cities. Differential tax will also be

charged depending on fuel (petrol/ diesel) and the type of vehicle. Apart from strong hybrids, electric vehicles and alternate fuels like CNG, ethanol, LPG etc, vehicles used in farming, such as tractors, harvestors and tillers, will be exempted from the tax.

According to the ministry, the revenue collected from the green tax will be kept in a separate account and will be used for tackling pollution.

The states will be required to set up state-of-the-art facilities for emission monitoring. Listing the benefits of the green tax, Gadkari had said it will dissuade people from using vehicles which damage the environment and motivate them to switch to newer, less polluting vehicles.

The government earlier this month unveiled the finer details of the vehicle scrapping policy that provides that about 5 per cent rebate on new cars would be offered to buyers on scrapping of old vehicles.

Gadkari has termed it a "win-win" policy that will help improve fuel efficiency and reduce pollution.

COVID-19:
Daily deaths over 300 for first time this year, 62,714 new cases

NEW DELHI, MAR 28 (PTI): India saw 62,714 new coronavirus infections in a day, the highest single day rise so far this year, taking the nationwide COVID-19 tally to 1,19,71,624, while the daily deaths crossed the 300-mark for the first time in 2021, according to the Union Health Ministry data updated on Sunday.

Registering a steady increase for the 18th day in row, active cases have increased to 4,86,310 comprising 4.06 per cent of the total infections. The recovery rate has further dropped to 94.58 per cent, the data stated.

The 62,714 new cases were reported in a span of 24 hours, the highest since October 16, 2020, while the death toll increased to 1,61,552 with 312 daily new fatalities, the highest in around three months, the data updated at 8 am showed.

The daily death toll of 312 is the highest since December 25, 2020 when 336 new deaths were reported.

As many as 63,371 new infections were recorded in a span of 24 hours on October 16.

The number of people who have recuperated from the disease surged to 1,13,23,762, while the case fatality rate stood at 71.35 per cent, the data stated.??

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 760 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.

According to the ICMR, 24,09,50,842 samples have been tested up to March 27 with 11,81,289 samples being tested on Saturday.

The 312 new fatalities include 166 from Maharashtra, 45 from Punjab, 14 from Kerala, 13 from Chhattisgarh, and 10 from Delhi.

A total of 161552 deaths have been reported so far in the country including 54073 from Maharashtra, 12659 from Tamil Nadu, 12492 from Karnataka, 10997 from Delhi, 10322 from West Bengal, 8783 from Uttar Pradesh and 7203 from Andhra Pradesh and 6621 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.

Yangang farmers introduced to cooperative movement

GANGTOK, 28 MAR [IPR]: An awareness programme for farmers on cooperative societies was organized by Sikkim State Cooperative Union [SICUN] at the Yangang BAC conference hall on 27 March.

The programme was sponsored by APEX Cooperatives of Sikkim and had Yangang MLA, Raj Kumari Thapa, as chief guest accompanied by SICUN Chairman LP Kafley, Chief Executive Officer Karma Gelay Bhutia, Assistant Manager SIMFED, Deo Raj Limboo, Field Inspector Sikkim Milk Union, Mepon Lepcha, President Yangang MPCs, Deo Kumar Rai, President Lingmoo MPCs Anil Kumar Nepal.

In her address, the chief guest mentioned that the participation of the younger generation



in cooperative movement was crucial as it was also a way to make them self-reliant. She also thanked SICUN for organising the programme in a fruitful manner.

The SICUN chairperson highlighted the func-

tions and objectives of SICUN to strengthen the cooperative movement in Sikkim and appealed for active participation of the members to make cooperatives more productive.

SICUN Board of Di-

rector member, DK Rai, presented the welcome address in which he highlighted the aim of the programme to increase awareness regarding cooperative societies.

Cooperative Educators of SICUN briefed the

meet about the benefits of cooperative societies and their management.

The programme also included an interactive session between the farmers and the concerned representatives of the apex cooperatives.

SKM's Garib Jan Kalyan Prakostha delivers spectacles to Yuksam-Tashiding residents

PRITAM LAMA GYALSHING, 28 MAR:

Sikkim Krantikari Morcha's Jan Kalyan Prakostha delivered spectacles sponsored by the Chief Minister to eye patients in need who were prescribed the same at a free medical check-up camp during the 3-day Yuksam-Tashiding tour of the CM.

Today, on the first day, around 100 people from Yuksam and Khecheopalri received the spectacles at their respective villages.

SKM Garib Jan Kalyan Prakostha's chief coordinator Manoj Lama informs, "We have started distributing the



spectacles to those patients who attended the medical check-up camp during the Chief Minister's visit. These glasses have been sponsored by Chief Minister Prem Singh Tamang. Next, we will cover Rinchenpong constituency."

Additional Political Secretary to the Chief Minister, Madhusudan Sharma, Garib Jan Kalyan Prakostha West District medical advisor Dipesh Bhandari, and West District Chalak Convenor Dawa Tamang were part of the team today.

Farmers burn copies of farm laws to mark 'Holika Dahan' day before Holi



NEW DELHI, 28 MAR [NDTV]: On protest against the centre's new agricultural laws, farmers camping on the outskirts of Delhi and in Punjab burnt copies of the centre's new farm laws during 'Holika Dahan' - a ritual observed a day before the festival of Holi, farmers groups said on Sunday.

The protesting farmers celebrated Holi at the borders of the capital and maintained that their agitation will continue till the farm laws are repealed and a separate law on minimum support price is enacted, the famers' umbrella body Samyukta Kisan Morcha said in a statement.

The Samyukta Kisan Morcha also said that it will observe "FCI Bachao Diwas" on April 5, adding that offices of

the Food Corporation of India (FCI) will be picketed from 11 am to 5 pm across the country.

"The government has made several attempts to end the minimum support price (MSP) and public distribution system (PDS) indirectly. The FCI's budget has also been reduced over the last few years. Recently, the FCI also changed the rules for procurement of crops," the statement said.

In Punjab too farmers burnt copies of the three contentious central farm laws at many places in on Sunday to mark Holika Dahan, when bonfires are lit on Holi eve symbolising the victory of good over evil.

Bharti Kisan Union (Ekta Ugrhana) general secretary Sukhdev Singh Kokrikalan said the pro-

testing farmers set the copies of three farm legislations on fire at 42 places in 16 districts of the state.

Thousands of farmers, mainly from Punjab, Haryana and western Uttar Pradesh, have been camping at Singhu, Tikri and Ghazipur border of Delhi with their main demand of complete repeal of the three farm laws and a legal guarantee for the minimum support price on their crops.

So far, there have been 11 rounds of talks between the protesting unions and government, but the deadlock has continued as both sides have stuck to their stand.

In January, the government had offered to suspend the farm laws for 12-18 months, which was rejected by the farmer unions.

Suicide attack rocks Indonesia church, several wounded

Djakarta, 28 Mar [al-Jazeera]: Two suicide bombers detonated explosives outside a Catholic church in the Indonesian city of Makassar, wounding fourteen people on the first day of the Easter Holy Week, the country's national police said.

The explosion took place on Sunday at a time the congregation was inside the church on the island of Sulawesi, police said, just as the mass was ending.

Fourteen people were hurt in the blast, national police spokesman Argo Yuwono said. The two suspects were the only fatalities.

Local police had previously said the bomber had acted alone.

Father Wilhelmus Tulak, a priest who was leading mass at the time of the explosion, told Indonesian media the church's security guards suspected two motorists who wanted to enter the church. One of them detonated his explosives and died near the gate after being confronted by guards.

He said the explosion occurred at about 10:30am (03:30 GMT) and that none of the worshippers was killed.

Security camera footage showed a blast that blew flame, smoke and debris into the middle of the road.

Makassar Mayor Danny Pomanto said the blast could have caused far more casualties if it had taken place at the church's main gate instead of a side entrance.

Police did not say who

might be responsible for the apparent attack and there was no immediate claim of responsibility.

Police blamed the ISIL-inspired Jamaah Ansharut Daulah (JAD) group for suicide attacks in 2018 on churches and a police post in the city of Surabaya that killed more than 30 people.

Boy Rafli Amar, the head of the country's National Counterterrorism Agency, described Sunday's attack as an act of "terrorism".

Makassar, Sulawesi's biggest city, reflects the religious makeup of Indonesia, the world's largest Muslim-majority country with a substantial Christian minority and followers of other religions.

"Whatever the motive is, this act isn't justified by any religion because it harms not just one person but others, too," Yaquut Cholil Qoumas, Indonesia's religious affairs minister, said in a statement.

Gomar Gultom, head of the Indonesian Council of Churches, described the attack as a "cruel incident" as Christians were celebrating Palm Sunday, and urged people to remain calm and trust the authorities.

Indonesia's deadliest attack took place on the tourist island of Bali in 2002, when bombers killed 202 people, most of them foreign tourists.

In subsequent years, security forces in Indonesia scored some major successes in tackling armed groups but, more recently, there has been a resurgence of violence.

Cop faces double whammy while probing drunken-driving

HYDERABAD, MAR 28 (PTI): An Assistant Sub-Inspector of Police (ASI) was seriously injured when a taxi hit him at Nizampet here while he was probing into a case of drunken-driving, police said on Sunday.

The ASI had reached the spot after getting information that two people -- a Home Guard and a woman - were injured after they were knocked down by an alleged drunken car driver in another incident, they said.

Both the incidents happened on the intervening night of Saturday and Sunday when a police team was involved in checking drunken-driving, they said.

According to a senior police official, the team asked a man driving a car to stop it while approaching the checking point.

But, the person took the vehicle in reverse, tried to flee and in the process hit the Home Guard and the woman on the road. Then, the driver came to a halt after ramming into a signboard, he said.

Police took the car driver to the local police station for a breathalyser test when it was confirmed that he was driving under the influence of alcohol.

Meanwhile, the ASI, after having been alerted, visited the scene when the taxi driver hit him. But this driver was not drunk, the official said, adding that the ASI was hospitalised in a critical condition.

The car driver who was drunk and the taxi driver who was not were taken into custody, he further said.

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Interschool Jr...

She informed that a total of 15,726 students had participated in the block-level events across the State and then 3,777 students competed in the district-level.

She added that the CM One Mile Run was launched on 26 December and that 15,753 children had participated at the block-level and 360 runners in the district-level.

The sports events commenced next in and around the capital.

Khel Gaon at Reshithang will host athletic events, while archery will be held at the Archery Field at Tathangchen and boxing, badminton, football, karate, taekwondo and badminton at different venues in the Paljor Stadium complex.

Minister for Sports & Youth Affairs Department, KN Lepcha was present as the guest of honour among other dignitaries.

HAVE A STORY TO SHARE?

email us: news@summittimes.com



Neighbourhood Youth Parl at Rubdi-Karek

RANGPO, 23 MAR: A Neighbourhood Youth Parliament was held at Rubdi Karek community hall by Nehru Yuva Kendra, Namchi, in collaboration with Amardeep Club of Rubdi Karek today. The programme had MB ["Stephen"] Subba, Panchayat Vice President, as a guest speaker accompanied by Som Bahadur Rai, the president of Amardeep Club, and Anita Rai, a former National Youth Volunteer of NYK as special guests. Members of Lakshya Children's Club of Karek, the Red Ribbon Club and SAATHI members of Kabrey Secondary School and other students in the area actively participated in the neighbourhood youth Parliament and shared their opinions on the role of youth in the society, problems facing society and responsibilities of the civil society. [from SANJAY AGARWAL]

Programme Officer Oliver T. Pongen, and Army personnel posted in the border areas. The chief guest =thanked the Army for their dedication and commitment to guarding the frontiers in such harsh weather conditions and expressed her happiness on being invited to spend a few hours with them and thanked them for their support in making the programme a success. She informed that

Delhi zoo to bring 3 more tigers for breeding purposes; ostrich, chinkara to be added

GAURAV SAINI
NEW DELHI, MAR 28 (PTI): The Delhi zoo may soon get three tigers from Chennai and Nagpur for "breeding purposes" under an animal exchange programme, officials have said.

Zoo Director Ramesh Pandey said they plan to bring a pair of tigers from the Gorewada zoo in Nagpur, while another male tiger is likely to be brought from Chennai.

A Royal Bengal tiger was brought to the zoo from Kanpur for breeding proposes in November last year.

The Delhi zoo is a participant in the "Conservation Breeding Programme" of the Royal Bengal Tiger.

According to the Central Zoo Authority, the Conservation Breeding Programme is the science of conserving a species by preventing an imminent population collapse in the wild due to a large number of eliminative pressures such as habitat loss, habitat fragmentation, industrialisation, poaching, illegal trade and climate change.

At present, the Delhi zoo has seven tigers, including five white tigers, Pandey said.

"A pair of sloth bears from the Nagpur facility is also on the cards," he added.

A pair each of ostriches and chinkara (Indian gazelle) will be brought from Chandigarh this

month, Pandey said, adding that the number of animal species in the zoo is likely to increase to 93 before it is reopened for the public on April 1 after remaining closed for over a year due to the coronavirus and bird-flu outbreaks.

The Delhi zoo has not had a chinkara since July 2019.

Chennai may also provide a male ostrich and a grey heron to the Delhi zoo, Pandey said.

"A proposal has been submitted to the Central Zoo Authority (CZA) to bring five species from the Visakhapatnam zoo, including star tortoise, dhole (wild dogs) and iguana," the director said, adding that the target is to increase the number of species to 100 by the end of financial year 2021-22.

At present, the Delhi zoo has 88 species of animals, up from 83 in March last year.

The zoo administration is also in the process of bringing bar-headed goose and godwit from Rohtak. Recently, the Delhi zoo got a male sloth bear from Bilaspur, Chhattisgarh and a pair of striped hyenas.

Pandey said once the zoo reopens, around 2,000 visitors will be allowed per day in two shifts of four hours each.

The entry tickets will have to be booked online as there will be no ticket counter, he added.

BJP expels 7 leaders for contesting as independent candidates in Assam

GUWAHATI, 28 MAR (PTI): The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in Assam said that it has expelled seven leaders from the primary membership of the party for six years for contesting as independent candidates in the assembly election after being denied tickets.

"The state party president Ranjeet Kumar Dass has expelled the seven persons for six years with immediate effect for contesting as independents against the party's nominated candidates," Assam BJP general secretary Rajdeep Roy said. Earlier on March 18,

the Assam BJP had expelled 15 leaders, including former deputy speaker Dilip Kumar Paul, from the party for six years for joining the assembly poll fray as Independents after being denied tickets.

The BJP is contesting in 92 of the 126 assembly constituencies, leaving the rest to its allies - the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) and United People's Party Liberal (UPPL).

The first phase of the Assam assembly election was held on Saturday. The state will have polling in two more phases on April 1 and 6.

Border personnel treated to cultural show at Sherathang and Kupup



GANGTOK, 28 MAR [IPR]: A two-day Border Area Cultural Programme was organised at Sherathang and Kupup in East Sikkim on 27 and 28 March by the North East Zonal Cultural Centre in coordination with the Culture Department.

The programme had Advisor, Culture Department, Bhim Kumari Sharma, as chief guest accompanied by Army Officers, officials of Culture Department, NEZCC

Programme Officer Oliver T. Pongen, and Army personnel posted in the border areas. The chief guest =thanked the Army for their dedication and commitment to guarding the frontiers in such harsh weather conditions and expressed her happiness on being invited to spend a few hours with them and thanked them for their support in making the programme a success. She informed that

such programmes impart knowledge about folk dances of other states and help in spreading awareness about them among the general public and also gives an opportunity to the talented folk artists to showcase their talents.

Cultural troupes from states like Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh, Rajasthan, Hariyana etc along with the local artists from Sikkim performed at the gathering.

2 candidates take out joint rally in Gangtok

SUMMIT REPORT
GANGTOK, 28 MAR: On the last day of the municipal election campaign, candidate for Lower MG Marg, Ashok Kumar Prasad, and candidate from Arithang-II, Raju Tamang, took out a joint rally in the capital on Sunday.

The joint effort made for a grand display and the rally, which started from Denzong Cinema, covered Lal Bazaar, MG Marg, Tharo Line and Sisa Golai, then entered Arithang.

Speaking to media persons during the rally, Ashok Kumar Prasad stated that the rally was not a demonstration of strength but an expression of love and belief of



the people.

He expressed confidence about receiving the full support of the people of the ward on 31 March, the day of polling.

While strongly refuting and condemning rumors of having the support of the Sikkim Krantikari Morcha, he explained that his opposition has already accepted defeat and were now resorting

to false allegations on not being able to digest their loss.

Likewise, Arithang-II candidate, Raju Tamang also expressed confidence about winning and claimed to have the support of 80% of the people of his ward.

He urged the people not to waste their votes and elect the right candidate to reach their voice to the right place.

Block-level cricket tourney at Sumbuk



SUMBUK, 28 MAR: A two-day Block Level Cricket Tournament got underway at Sumbuk SSS playground today, organised by Sumbuk Alpine Cricket Club in collaboration with NYK-Namchi and Kanchanjyoti Youth Club of Sumbuk.

There are 10 teams in the fray and Hamro Ekta Sadam, Sumbuk Alpine Cricket Club, Ujan VI & Goam SAG cleared the first and second round matches and will meet in the semi-final on Monday.

[from SUYOG PRADHAN]

Train, temples attacked as Bangladesh clashes spread after PM Modi visit

DHAKA, 28 MAR [REUTERS]: Hundreds of members of a hardline Islamist group attacked Hindu temples and a train in eastern Bangladesh on Sunday, the police and a local journalist said, as violence spread across the country in the wake of a visit by Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

Local police and doctors have said at least 11 protesters have been killed since Friday in clashes with police during demonstrations organised by Islamist groups against PM Modi's visit. Violence has raged on since PM Modi's departure as anger has swelled over the deaths.

PM Modi arrived in Dhaka on Friday to mark the 50th anniversary of Bangladesh's nationhood, and he left on Saturday after gifting Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina some 12 lakh COVID-19 vaccine shots.

The protesters accuse PM Modi of discriminatory policies against Muslims in India.

On Friday, dozens of people were injured in the densely-populated capital Dhaka as police

fired tear gas and rubber bullets at protesters.

Thousands of protesters marched down streets across Bangladesh on Sunday.

Supporters with the Hefazat-e-Islam group attacked a train in the eastern district of Brahmanbaria, resulting in 10 people being injured, a police official said.

"They attacked the train and damaged its engine room and almost all the coaches," the official told Reuters, declining to be named as he was not authorised to speak to the media.

Several government offices, including the land office and a government-sponsored music academy, were set on fire and several Hindu temples were also attacked, said Javed Rahim, a journalist in Brahmanbaria town.

"We are in extreme fear and feeling really helpless," Rahim told Reuters by telephone, adding: "Even the press club was attacked, leaving many injured, including the press club president."

One protester, who sustained an injury during Saturday's clash

in Brahmanbaria, died on Sunday, a doctor said.

Islamist demonstrators also set alight two buses in the western district of Rajshahi on Sunday, while hundreds of protesters clashed with police in several places, pelting them with stones, three police sources in three districts said.

Protesters used electric poles, timber and sand bags to block roads and police retaliated with rubber bullets and tear gas, leaving dozens injured in Narayanganj, just outside the capital, Dhaka, one police official said.

Protesters also vandalised and burned several buses in Dhaka as they blocked many roads, a police official said.

The protests have flared into wider demonstrations against police killings, and the Hefazat-e-Islam enforced a nationwide strike on Sunday.

"Police opened fire on our peaceful supporters," Hefazat-e-Islam's organising secretary Azizul Haque told a rally. "We will not let the blood of our brothers go in vain."

Prepare for lockdown, Covid rules not being followed: Uddhav Thackeray

NEW DELHI, 23 MAR [NDTV]: Amid a massive surge in coronavirus cases in Maharashtra, Chief Minister Uddhav Thackeray on Sunday asked officials to prepare a plan to impose a lockdown, saying people were not following safety rules.

The decision was taken at a meeting attended by Mr Thackeray, Health Minister Rajesh Tope, Chief Secretary Sitaram Kunte, doctors of the COVID-19 task force and other officials, an official statement said.

At the meeting, officials and members of the task force expressed concerns over the rising number of cases. The upward trend of cases may also lead to a rise in Covid-related deaths in the state, the officials of the task force said.

The Chief Minister said the state may also face a healthcare crisis and see a shortage of infrastructure for treating COVID-19 patients.

Officials have been instructed to stop the general public from visiting government offices and the state secretariat - Mantralaya.

Health Minister Rajesh Tope said since people are not following the rules, the administration is forced to move towards a lockdown.

At present, of the 3.75 lakh isolation beds, 1.07 lakh are occupied in the state and the rest are filling up rapidly, Principal Secretary (Health) Dr Pradeep Vyaas said.

Of the 60,349 oxygen beds, 12,701 are already occupied, he said, adding, 1,881 ventilators of the available 9,030 have patients of coronavirus.

There might be a shortfall in the health care infrastructure in the state, Dr Vyaas warned given the sharp surge in the state.

A night curfew will be enforced starting today as the state struggles with its biggest surge in coronavirus infections

since the beginning of the pandemic. Shopping malls will remain shut from 8 pm to 7 am.

The state has been reporting the highest number of coronavirus cases over the last few days. On Saturday, state capital Mumbai reported 6,123 new COVID-19 cases, its single-highest surge in 24 hours since the beginning of the pandemic, along with 12 deaths. The new cases took the city's overall caseload to 3,91,751 and the death count to 11,641.

Maharashtra logged 35,726 new COVID-19 cases on Saturday, taking the total number of cases to 26,73,461 in the state, as per the health bulletin.

Cases have surged across several states in since late February, following a near-full reopening of the economy and flouting of safety measures such as the wearing of face masks and social distancing, health officials said.

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Audit Uncovers, but who cares?

The Legislature should leverage CAG Reports to make the Executive more accountable

The Report of the Comptroller and Auditor General of India is tabled every year, and even though the scale of misappropriations and irregularities recorded in this document vary from year to year, it always makes for some interesting reading. The auditors do a remarkable job of combing through accounts and projects of the State Government and put out impressively professional records every year. Of course, a lot of the findings are embarrassing and the occasional one is shocking, but this is clearly an undertaking which is aimed to deliver much more than just entertainment. The Report is the culmination of a yearlong exercise of auditors trawling records and crosschecking claims through site-visits and following up paper trails. What does this achieve in the end? A tabling on the last day of an Assembly session and only the rare, if ever, discussion in the Assembly. There might be an occasional report in newspapers of the more “interesting” findings, but that’s about it. This is not the fate originally envisaged for these documents. In fact, the CAG Reports would have served their purpose if they delivered shock-therapy to restart the system of accountability within government departments.

Readers, the few who might have read reports drawn from the CAG Report in this newspaper, would have wondered why such shocking episodes - like government departments spending nearly 12% of the State’s entire annual budget on the last day of the financial year - do not cause even embarrassed blushes, leave aside suspensions or show-cause notices which even attending picnics can sometimes attract in Sikkim? Well, simply put, because nothing really comes of these audit reports.

There is something known as the Public Accounts Committee made up of MLAs whose job it is to study the CAG Report, deliberate on the deficiencies and irregularities flagged in it, and, acting on the advice of the Accountant General, hold hearing, summon officials and recommend action after fixing responsibility. It does not help that Sikkim invariably ends up with either clean sweeps or alliances of convenience because the PAC then ends up being staffed with treasury bench or treasury-leaning legislators. It would be a bit too much to expect this committee to come down too heavily on its own government’s slip-ups so departments tend to get away without so much as even a light rap on the knuckles at worst. Also, like the courts of the country, the PAC too is wading through a huge backlog.

The most recent PAC recommendations, it appears, are for CAG findings from years as far back as even 2012-13. As per the 2019 CAG Report, in 25 per cent cases, the concerned departments had not submitted explanatory notes on the paragraphs/ Performance Audits included in the Audit Report pertaining to the year 2012-13. When it comes to 2016-17, none of the CAG comments had received the required explanations from the departments. The immediacy highlighted in the CAG Reports gets dulled because of such delay and corrective measures can even become obsolete if they arrive so late. The Legislative arm of government should step up its game because by doing so, it will wrest back the essence of its watchdog role. The PAC reports and recommendations, after all, are the principal medium by which the Legislature enforces financial accountability of the Executives.

The Finance Department has issued standing orders to all departments to furnish explanatory notes on the paragraphs and performance audits within one month of the issue of Audit Reports. Delays, despite Departmental Audit and Accounts Committees, headed by the respective Heads of Departments, having been in place since November 2010, are inexcusable. Their specific job is to “monitor the response and corrective action on findings reported in the IRs issued by the Accountant General (audit)”. What are IRs? Initial audit observations are usually communicated to the Departments through what are known as Inspection Reports (IRs) with only the more serious irregularities getting included in the CAG Report. There is also a State Audit and Accounts Committee to oversee the working of the DAAC. Neither appears to be doing anything remotely effective towards establishing fiscal prudence or accountability, which is why it is important for the PAC to crack the whip harder because even when it makes specific recommendations. It does not help that the PAC does not always speak in a stern enough tone. In March 2017, for instance, the PAC directed the Department to “ponder upon Audit observations and initiate remedial actions subject to practicality.” Such a direction leaves the door open for an excuse to weasel through. Left to the CAG office alone, and the embarrassment runs off the back of government departments like water off the proverbial duck, unless, of course, PAC cracks a stronger whip.

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

COVID-19 stress toll is a family affair: 4 ways to support mothers’ mental health

NICOLE RACINE, ERIN HETHERINGTON, SHERI MADIGAN & SUZANNE TOUGH
theconversation

As we pass the one-year anniversary of COVID-19 being declared a global pandemic, its impact on the mental health and well-being of children is undeniable. Indeed, news headlines on whether “the kids are alright” have frequently surfaced, bringing to light the immense challenges for kids, and their families, as they cope with ongoing changes during COVID-19, including online schooling and social distancing from friends.

While the lives and routines of children and youth have certainly been turned upside down over the last year, it is increasingly clear that the mental health impact of the pandemic is a family affair. Parents have lost child care, taken on home-school responsibilities, shifted to working from home and suffered from several additional stressors, such as job loss and changes in employment.

These COVID-19-related challenges have been especially hard on mothers, who are most likely to shoulder the burden of increased home-schooling and household demands. Our research team sought to find out if these stressors are linked to elevated rates of maternal mental health difficulties during the pandemic.

PARENT MENTAL HEALTH DURING COVID-19

Early reports during the pandemic pointed towards elevated rates of depression and anxiety, especially for mothers. What wasn’t known was whether these rates truly demonstrated a shift in mothers’ anxiety and depression symptoms, compared to how they were doing before the pandemic. To find answers to this question, we used data from mothers who have been taking part in long-term research, and compared their pandemic mental health to previous periods.

Over the past 12 years, the All Our Families Study has been following nearly 3,000 Canadian mothers and their children to better understand their health and well-being. Mothers were recruited into the study when they were pregnant, and their children are now nine to 11 years old.

In a recent study, we showed that between May and July of 2020, mothers in our study reported higher rates of depression and anxiety than they reported previously. Specifically, rates of depressive symptoms increased to 35 per cent during COVID-19 from 19 per cent before the pandemic, and rates of anxiety symptoms also jumped to 31 per cent from 18 per cent.

MATERNAL MENTAL HEALTH DIFFICULTIES ARE INCREASING

Increases in maternal mental health difficulties are not experienced uniformly by all mothers. In our study we saw especially high increases in mental health difficulties for mothers who reported losing their job or family income.

We also saw higher increases in anxiety and depression in mothers who had difficulty accessing child care, and who reported that they were struggling with balancing home-schooling with work responsibilities, regardless of income.

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted inequalities that were deeply entrenched before the pandemic even happened. Specifically, women are more likely to be precariously employed, earn less income and take on the majority of household tasks and child care responsibilities. These gaps are even larger for low-income women and women of colour. A sustainable recovery plan following the pandemic needs to consider how families, but especially mothers, can be better supported in order to ensure optimal mental health for children and youth.

STRATEGIES THAT PROMOTE FAMILY WELL-BEING

It is clear that the strain of the pandemic is taking a toll on mothers’ mental health. This is concerning because we know that when mothers ar-



en’t doing well, their children are often struggling too. To ensure mothers are alright — knowing this will help their children be alright too — they need access to resources and support to help get through this difficult time.

Decades of research have shown that the well-being of mothers is critical for children and youth to flourish, which suggests maternal mental health and well-being should be a priority for COVID-19 pandemic recovery efforts. We’ve identified four important ingredients for a successful pandemic recovery for mothers and families.

1. Mental health supports for mothers

Maternal mental health was a national concern before the pandemic and our data demonstrate that there has been nearly a two-fold increase in depressive and anxiety symptoms in women with children under the age of 12.

Increased availability of mental health services that are easily and widely accessible are needed. An increase in uptake of tele-mental health services (mental health support that is provided online or by phone) has the potential to provide mothers with the opportunity to obtain mental health support while reducing barriers that often limit accessibility, such as location or time.

2. Ongoing support for family incomes

A major stressor that was associated with increases in mental health symptoms in our study

was the loss or disruption of family income as a result of the pandemic.

Research has shown that maternal employment was hit harder during the pandemic than paternal employment. Recovery plans that include the support and provision of resources during a time of crisis will be critical in curtailing mental health difficulties that could ensue within families.

3. Shared responsibilities for home-schooling, child care and household tasks

Our findings showed that mothers who were having difficulties balancing multiple roles had higher rates of depression and anxiety. Although fathers have increased their participation in unpaid labour over the course of the pandemic, including child care and domestic tasks, there remains a deficit in these contributions between mothers and fathers.

As COVID-19 rages on, it is critical for policy-makers to invest in universal supports for child care and out-of-school care, and focus on providing flexible leave policies that allow both mothers and fathers to adequately care for and home-school their children.

4. Stable, safe, and affordable child care and schooling for children

Mothers in our study reported on their mental health at the outset of the pandemic, when schools and daycares were closed. The pandemic has highlighted that both our economy and the mental health and well-being of those who participate in it are dependent on high quality care and education for children.

Our study underscores that there is a devastating impact on families when child care and schooling are unavailable. To the extent possible, these services need to remain open for parents and children alike.

THE PANDEMIC’S ONGOING TOLL ON FAMILIES

One year on, the COVID-19 pandemic continues to affect the well-being of families. The toll this has taken on mothers in terms of loss of jobs and increased child care and schooling responsibilities has had a marked effect on mental health.

Many traditional support networks have changed from in-person to virtual, due to physical distancing requirements. This can result in a loss of access to practical help. Support from friends, family and community are essential, but so is institutional support.

In times of crisis, families need access to stable supports including financial assistance and predictable child care and schooling. When caregivers are well supported, the whole family benefits.

[Nicole Racine is Postdoctoral Research Fellow, Psychology, University of Calgary; Erin Hetherington is Postdoctoral fellow, Epidemiology, McGill University; Sheri Madigan is Associate Professor, Canada Research Chair in Determinants of Child Development, Owerko Centre at the Alberta Children’s Hospital Research Institute, University of Calgary; Suzanne Tough is Professor, Cumming School of Medicine, Max Bell Burns Policy Fellow, University of Calgary]

Africa’s 2 elephant species are both endangered, due to poaching and habitat loss

GEORGE WITTEMYER
theconversation.com

Humans have been over-exploiting African elephants for centuries. More than 2,000 years ago, the Roman Empire’s demand for ivory led to the extinction of genetically distinct elephant populations in northern Africa. But in recent times, population increases among southern African elephants and declines across the rest of the continent have made it hard to clearly assess how threatened the species is overall.

I serve on a team of scientists that recently reviewed African elephants’ status for the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN). We compiled data from over 400 sites across Africa, spanning 50 years of conservation efforts – and our results were grim.

The number of African savanna elephants – the largest subspecies of elephants – has declined by 60% since 1990. And forest elephants, which the IUCN is treating as a separate species for the first time, have declined in number by over 86%. Based on our assessment, the IUCN has changed its listing from “vulnerable” for all African elephants to “endangered” for savanna elephants and “critically endangered” for forest elephants.

TWO SPECIES

By separating savanna and forest elephants into independent assessments, our report reveals the critical state of the more elusive forest elephants, which was obscured in

previous reviews that lumped all of Africa’s elephants together. Scientific evidence for separating the species has been building over the past two decades, and many taxonomists felt this recognition was long overdue.

Increased research on forest elephants highlights the dramatic declines these secretive giants are undergoing. Studies also show that they are among the slowest-reproducing mammals on the planet. This means that even if they receive adequate protection, their recovery will take decades.

GLOBAL THREATS, GLOBAL SOLUTIONS

Scientists believe that elephant populations across Africa actually increased during the early 20th century, when nations were entrenched in global wars and consumption of ivory and other luxury items declined. After World War II, however, conspicuous consumption surged. Over-hunting for ivory drove severe declines in the number of elephants in the 1970s and 1980s.

Thanks to interconnected global trade networks, along with porous and unregulated borders in many parts of Africa, rising ivory demand in one part of the world quickly translates into higher black market ivory prices in Africa. And these higher prices lead to poaching.

Removing elephants from an area can pave the way for converting forests and grasslands to agriculture. This cycle has led to the depletion of much of African elephants’ historic range.

Habitat loss also brings elephants and humans closer together, leading to more human-elephant conflict. Such clashes lead to the direct loss of elephants. They also are a burden for local communities that can erode their interest in and support for conservation.

While the scale of decline in Africa’s elephant populations is overwhelming, there are many examples of successful conservation efforts across the continent. The KAZA (Kavango-Zambezi) Transfrontier Conservation effort, anchored by Botswana, holds the largest contiguous elephant population on the continent, and that population has experienced strong growth over the past 50 years. This success reflects government collaboration across borders and work with local communities.

Joint international efforts to reduce the illegal ivory trade are raising awareness of the problems with ivory consumption. China banned domestic ivory trade in 2017, and concurrently ivory poaching across many elephant populations in Africa declined – including in the largest populations in Tanzania and Kenya, which were under severe pressure less than 10 years ago. The core population of forest elephants in Gabon, which declined by 80% between 2004 and 2014, has stabilized with increased government investment and reduced poaching pressure.

Innovative work with communities in countries such as Namibia and Kenya to enhance people’s live-

lihoods by developing wildlife-supported economies has led to the protection of enormous tracts of lands as conservation areas. And researchers and conservationists are working to find solutions to conflicts between human activities and elephant needs that can be applied across Africa.

By highlighting the precarious state of Africa’s two elephant species, my colleagues and I hope that this Red List Assessment can help motivate African countries with elephant populations and the international community to invest in measures that support elephant conservation.

Elephants provide much more than just aesthetic benefits. Recent studies show forest elephants also play an important role in fighting climate change by enhancing carbon storage in central African forests, among the most important carbon reserves on the planet. The elephants disperse seeds and thin out young trees as they forage, which makes room for larger trees to thrive.

Elephants also are a linchpin of the wildlife-based economy across Africa. And elephants, in compliment with fire, are considered to be ecosystem engineers that structure the balance between trees and grass on Africa’s savannas. Along with many other conservation experts, I see reversing their decline as a global imperative that requires concerted global support.

[the writer is Associate professor of Fish, Wildlife and Conservation Biology, Colorado State University]

Bangladesh requests India to play "strong role" in early repatriation of Rohingyas

DHAKA, 28 MAR [PTI]: Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina on Saturday requested India, as a member of the UN Security Council, to play a "strong role" in the early repatriation of the displaced Rohingyas back to Myanmar during her talks with her Indian counterpart Narendra Modi.

According to a Joint Statement issued on the occasion of Prime Minister Modi's visit, the issue of the 1.1 million forcibly-displaced persons from the Rakhine State of Myanmar featured during the talks between the two leaders.

Both the prime ministers reiterated the importance of their safe, speedy and sustainable return to their homeland for the greater security of the region, it said.

Prime Minister Hasina requested India, as a member of the United Nations Security Council, to play a strong role



in the early repatriation of the displaced Rohingyas back to Myanmar, the statement said, adding that India assured its continued support on the issue. India is currently a non-permanent member of the UNSC.

"Prime Minister Modi expressed appreciation at the generosity of Bangladesh in sheltering and

providing humanitarian assistance to the 1.1 million forcibly displaced persons from the Rakhine State of Myanmar," the Joint Statement said.

According to Bangladesh Prime Minister's Press Secretary Ihsanul Karim, Prime Minister Hasina said the return of these people in the quickest possible time was

needed since the lingering of the crisis could create grounds for their involvement in terrorist activities and drug trading.

"Sooner is the better," Karim quoted her as saying. In response, Prime Minister Modi told Ms Hasina that his country wants a sustainable return of the refugees in a sustainable manner.

Nearly one million Rohingya Muslims fled a crackdown by the Myanmar military in 2017 in Rakhine state and are living in camps in Cox's Bazar in Bangladesh.

Myanmar has faced international pressure to allow Rohingyas to return to Rakhine and grant them citizenship rights.

"Question is not if I want to remain in power..": Assam Chief Minister

GUWAHATI, 28 MAR [PTI]: A day after the first phase of assembly elections in Assam, Chief Minister Sarbananda Sonowal today asserted that the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) will be re-elected to form the government in the state. Mr Sonowal, who was among the key candidate in the first phase, said that his government has "earned the trust of people" with its development-centric policies and by ensuring peace in the state.

"When we started five years back, we faced challenges like ensuring good governance and making Assam free from corruption, extremists and illegal migrants. We did good work and earned the trust of people. Prime Minister Narendra Modi paid a lot of attention. People have now gained trust in us. If BJP is there, there is safety, there is development, there is peace - the people have come to realise this," Mr Sonowal told NDTV.

When asked about the candidate for the Chief Minister's post in



Assam, he said, "Question is not whether Sonowal wants to remain in power. Question is BJP has done great work. We want the party to get elected again. PM Modi's blessings are for all of us. All ministers have helped us."

Mr Sonowal also reiterated that, if voted to power, his government would bring an error-free National Register of Citizens (NRC) and ensure that no "illegal migrant" is staying in the state. "NRC that has been published is full of defects, many illegal migrants are named. People of Assam want a rectified NRC. We will ensure no infiltrators' names feature in corrected NRC," he said.

There is greater focus towards the northeast under the Narendra Modi

government, he said. "We have 48-km patch with the help of technology from Israel. Now, there's no news of influx and the border is completely sealed with physical barriers," he added.

Commenting on the Congress-AIUDF alliance, Mr Sonowal said: "The alliance is not united. People don't trust them. Congress did a poor job. They can't earn trust."

Chief Minister Sonowal was the biggest name on the ballot in the first phase of state polls yesterday. Mr Sonowal is defending his Majuli seat - a reserved constituency - from the Congress' Rajib Lochan Pegu - a three-time former MLA from this seat. Assam reported a turnout of 76.9 per cent.

One new COVID-19 case in Andamans; tally at 5,044

PORT BLAIR, MAR 28 (PTI): The COVID-19 caseload in Andaman and Nicobar Islands rose to 5,044 as one more person has tested positive for the disease in the Union Territory, a health department official said on Sunday.

The fresh case was detected during contact tracing, he said.

The death toll remained at 62 as no new fatality due to the infection was reported in the last 24 hours.

One person was cured of the disease during the period, taking the total number of recoveries in the archipelago to 4,975, the official said. The Union Territory now has seven active cases.

Despite a steady inflow of tourists into Andaman and Nicobar Islands, the overall COVID-19 situation in the archipelago is under control, he said.

According to the official, the local administration has been strict to ensure that health safety

protocols are followed to contain the spread of the disease.

People arriving here by flights or reaching by ships from Kolkata or Chennai are mandatorily required to show a negative coronavirus report before the authorities allow them to enter the islands.

The tourism industry, which was severely hit due to the COVID-19 pandemic, has started witnessing an inflow of 700-800 travellers daily as all the major tourist destinations in the islands have been opened, he said.

Altogether, 12,561 health professionals and frontline workers have been inoculated till Saturday, and 4,597 people above 45 years of age have received the vaccine shots, the official said.

The Andaman and Nicobar administration has so far conducted 3,14,309 sample tests for COVID-19, and the positivity rate stands at 1.60 per cent, he added.

Migrant workers from Nepal start returning home as India reports rise in Covid-19 cases



ARJUN SHAH KATHMANDU, 28 MAR [KATHMANDUPOST]: The flow of Nepali people returning home through Gauriphanta border point has doubled in recent days.

"Until a week ago, around 400 to 500 people entered Nepal through Gauriphanta on a daily basis. In the last week, the number has doubled to 1,000 people per day," said Kunwar.

Thousands of migrant workers from several districts of Sudurpaschim Province have started returning home from New Delhi, Mumbai, Gujarat and Chennai, among other Indian cities, fearing another outbreak of coronavirus.

Dil Bahadur Rokaya, a resident of Bajhang who arrived at Gauriphanta from Gujarat on Wednesday, said that he decided to return home, as there was fear of yet another outbreak in his place of work.

"I returned from Gujarat since the number of Covid-19 cases is increasing there. Many other villagers are also preparing to return home," said Rokaya. "We don't want to get caught in the middle of yet another outbreak in a foreign country."

Health authorities said that preparations

are underway to manage isolation wards and quarantine facilities for returnees.

"We have instructed all the health units to stay on high alert. Efforts are on to manage isolation wards and quarantine facilities," said Dr Gunaraj Awasthi, chief at the provincial health directorate.

"There are a total of 2,106 quarantine beds in 71 different places of Sudurpaschim Province," he said.

Meanwhile, the Kailali District Administration Office on Wednesday issued a nine-point directive to contain a possible outbreak of Covid-19. The district administration imposed a ban on assembling in huge numbers and organising feasts, festivals, rallies and fairs, among others.

"Strong action will be taken in case one is found violating the directives," said Chief District Officer Khagendra Prasad Rijal.

According to the data available at the Provincial Health Directorate, there are 166 active cases of Covid-19 in Sudurpaschim Province. A total of 14,087 people have tested positive for the virus in the province so far with 56 deaths.

Meth Tablets Worth Over ₹ 12 Crore Seized In Mizoram, 1 Arrested

KOLASIB, 28 MAR: Assam Rifles and Mizoram Police on Friday arrested a man for allegedly peddling drugs and recovered 2,41,900 illegal Methamphetamine tablets worth over ₹ 12 crore from

his possession. The security forces arrested the accused on March 26 from Kawnpui Vengthar area of Kolasib district of the state.

"Assam Rifles jointly with Mizoram Police, apprehended a drug

peddler from Kawnpui Vengthar (Kolasib district) on 26 Mar recovering 2,41,900 Nos of Methamphetamine tablets worth approx. ₹ 12.09 Crores," Assam Rifles tweeted on Sunday.

Nepal through to final after goalless draw against Bangladesh

KATHMANDU, 28 MAR [KATHMANDUPOST]: Hosts Nepal played a 0-0 stalemate against Bangladesh in the final group match of the Three Nations Cup at the Dasharath Stadium on Saturday to set up the title decider against the same South Asian opponents.

Bangladesh, who had already booked final spot after a 1-0 win over Kyrgyzstan U-23, topped the group with four points after a win and a draw. Nepal secured two points, one more than the central Asian country, to finish runners up.

Both the finalists, however, made it to the final without scoring a single goal on their own as Bangladesh had defeated Kyrgyz age group team on the back of an own goal. Hosts Nepal came up with the same starting XI they played against the Kyrgyz youth team, giving official international debut to three players including midfielders Tridev Gurung and Sanjog Rai, and he also introduced defender Nishan Khadka as substitute in the second half.

Nepal created nearly half a dozen scoring chances but repeated their problem in the attacking department and went goalless in the eighth match in a row including the game against Kyrgyzstan. They had last scored against Chinese Taipei in September 2019 during an away match of the World Cup and Asian Cup joint qualifiers.

"We have had problems in attacking third for a long time," attributed Nepal's coach Bal Gopal Maharjan. "I hope we will break the goal drought in the final."

He, however, was satisfied with his team's performance. "The boys played as per the match plan as we came into the match setting an ambition of not

losing points and we are finally through to the final." Nepal's vice captain and man-of-the-match Rohit Chand said they should be happy to have secured a place in the final. Not only the home team, but their South Asian opponents were also exposed in the finishing lineup. Though they came up with a much better and organised performance in comparison to their last outing against Kyrgyzstan, they never looked dangerous at the opposition's post.

"Both sides have problems in the scoring department and it has been a long time that we have problems scoring. It will be nice to score in the final," Bangladesh's British coach James Day said. "It was a tight competition."

The Briton, who used 22 players from the 23-member squad, said: "We achieved our goal to give exposure to maximum players and prepare for three matches [World Cup Qualifiers in June]." Home team forward Anjan Bista wasted a golden scoring opportunity in the 21st minute after his free header from the area in Tridev Gurung's perfect cross sailed above the bar. In the 24th, Gurung tapped wide from close range in a short pass set by forward Avishek Rijal.

Five minutes before the break Bangladesh skipper Jamal Bhuyan's 30-yard freekick sailed above the crossbar.

Winger Sunil Bal and midfielder Bishal Rai came as second half replacements of Ravi Shankar Paswan and Sanjog Rai. In the 59th, forward Bista ended up applying a feeble shot from the area in Bal's pass providing an easy opportunity for Bangladesh goalie Md Sahidul Alam to grab it. In the 65th, Avishek Bista headed wide from the edge of the six-yard box in Ranjit Dhimall cross.

Case filed after UP cops blame rats for missing cartons of seized liquor

ETAH, 28 MAR [PTI]: A probe has been launched into a claim by officials of a local police station in Etah, Uttar Pradesh, that rats were behind the disappearance of a large number of seized cartons of illicit liquor from a strongroom.

A senior police officer said over 1,400 cartons of liquor have gone missing from the Kotwali Dehat police station in Etah and a case has been registered against Station House Officer Indreshpal Singh and clerk Rishal Singh. However, a general diary at the police station mentions that 239 cartons have been damaged by rats, which the senior police officer said seems to be fishy and unacceptable.

Superintendent of Police, Etah, Udai Shankar Singh on Sunday confirmed the development and said that a probe is on in this regard. He, however, refused to elaborate further. A senior

police official of the district said: "A week ago, it came to light that around 1,450 cartons of illicit liquor seized are missing from Kotwali Dehat police station."

When asked whether some cartons have been damaged by rats, the police officer said: "The general diary of the police does mention that 239 cartons were damaged by rodents. However, this is not acceptable, and it seems that the matter is fishy. It has been probably done to cover the goof-up."

A case has been registered against SHO Indreshpal Singh and clerk Rishal Singh. Both of them had not turned up to provide an explanation for the incident despite summons issued in their names, he said. Meanwhile, Vikas Kumar, a police officer from Aligarh who is probing the case, said: "Efforts are on to ascertain as to where the seized liquor has gone."

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Maidan Market: Indian sporting goods market fighting for survival

ANNESHA GHOSH

KOLKATA, INDIA – A fresh consignment of sports replica jerseys arrives at a stall in Maidan Market, one of the largest sporting goods bazaars in India that is located in the heart of the eastern Indian city of Kolkata.

Mohammed Nadim, who has been working at the stall for more than 23 years, pulls out a plastic stool from underneath a rack stashed with low-priced football jerseys and begins examining the consignment.

“Uhssee, theek-e ache (80, the count is fine),” he mutters in a mix of Hindi and Bangla before handing the load-bearer the counterpart of a signed receipt.

The shipment consists of 10 replica jerseys of each of the eight teams taking part in the Indian Premier League (IPL), the biggest Twenty20 domestic league in the world.

The 2021 edition of the IPL begins next month and Kolkata, the capital of West Bengal, is one of the six host cities.

Nadim says the stall would typically order 10 times that number ahead of the tournament every year.

That was in pre-pandemic times. Now, he adds, it is unlikely his store would order a refill in the lead-up to this year’s competition.

“Due to the pandemic, we still have stock left over from last year,” Nadim told Al Jazeera.

“We are replenishing them minimally given there’s been a slight increase in business across the market of late. But stocking up in bulk right now is beyond our means because the virus has brutally slashed our earnings.”

Set up in 1954 for cloth merchants and artisans who migrated to the western part of divided Bengal following the partition of India in 1947, the market, officially christened Dr Bidhan Chandra Roy Market, gradually evolved into an arterial sports-merchandise hub in the country.

Housing 449 stalls – 80 percent of which only sell sports items – the bazaar, nestled a stone’s throw away from the iconic Eden Gardens cricket stadium in the vicinity of the Maidan, has been witness to several epochal shifts integral to Kolkata’s identity.

The market ships most of its goods – raw materials and finished products – from northern Indian cities and the months-long suspension of trains hampered supply and demand.



As stall owners remained indoors, a further misfortune struck the market.

Against the backdrop of the pandemic and the exodus of migrant workers the lockdown triggered, Kolkata also bore the brunt of the catastrophic Cyclone Amphan, which made landfall on the coastlines of eastern India and Bangladesh last May.

“So bad was the waterlogging in this area after the storm that the local police let us open our shops for a day so we could save our goods,” recounts Sumojit Pradhan, who runs his father’s store.

“Cricket bats and shoes worth over 50,000 rupees (\$690) were damaged in our shop alone,” Pradhan told Al Jazeera.

Last November, Nadim bemoaned how the pandemic had brought the market to its knees.

“So terrible was the nosedive in our sales that I’m drowning in debt,” Nadim said at the time.

“I’ve made my kids drop out of school and, if someone in the family falls ill, I don’t have enough money to be able to afford a doctor.”

A year on from the lockdown, more patrons are frequenting the market and it has returned to its usual 9.30am-8.30pm business hours, ditching the six-hour window it stuck to for several months after reopening.

“I’ve been printing around 120 jerseys a day since January,” said Sunny, who runs a vinyl-printing desk at Maidan Market.

“It’s been about 40 per cent of the daily orders I used to get before the pandemic. Things could be better or worse in the coming months. For now, I’m just relieved

I’m earning an income again,” Sunny told Al Jazeera.

Kolkata’s booming mall culture had slowly been eating into Maidan Market’s business.

With the pandemic prompting a dip in spending on non-essential products, and an accelerated shift to online shopping, a lack of a digital presence is also hurting the stall owners.

“The loss incurred in the past 12 months ... we may not be able to recover from it even in five years’ time,” Sheikh Nazimuddin, joint secretary of the stallholders’ association at the market, told Al Jazeera.

“And such is the nature of in-demand items like cricket bats, helmets and guards, customers hardly prefer buying them online. That’s why this market never previously felt the need to have a digital presence.”

Since the onset of the coronavirus outbreak, Pradhan, 24, has been among a few traders at Maidan Market who have funnelled time and effort into either creating or increasing the online presence of their brick-and-mortar businesses.

From having their stores listed on Google, to displaying select samples of in-store stock on Facebook and Instagram pages and taking orders on WhatsApp, the pandemic, Pradhan admitted, has forced a “major rethink” of customer engagement approaches.

The changes in consumer patterns notwithstanding, several long-time loyalists of Maidan Market believe the enduring charms of the bazaar will help the sellers

weather the ongoing adversity.

“Maidan Market is a great leveller. Players of every social and financial standing gravitate towards that place,” said Jhulan Goswami, Indian women’s team cricketer who learned her craft at Kolkata’s Vivekananda Park.

“The affordability, variety, and year-round availability of its products are its USPs. E-commerce sites are no match when it comes to these attributes,” Goswami told Al Jazeera.

Manoj Tiwary, the Bengal and Indian men’s cricketer who has also played in the IPL, agreed.

“Ever since I visited the market for the first time as a 15-year-old, I’ve witnessed first-hand the kinship every young athlete who comes here develops with the market, starting with the buying of equipment,” Tiwary, now 35, told Al Jazeera.

“That relationship is then nurtured by the goodwill of the shopkeepers who go to great lengths to help you pick what’s best for you.”

For the first two months after the market reopened last June, sellers with stockpiles of fitness equipment made good money while the others struggled to keep their heads above water.

“With gyms shut and outdoor activities prohibited, dumbbells, resistance bands and weight plates sold like hot cakes,” Pradhan recalled. “Flag vendors, printers, jerseys sellers and bat dealers were starved of an income.”

For sellers like the Islam brothers, Rafique and Nurul, who operate the oldest trophy store in the market, hardly any

business came by until December.

“Offices, academies and schools were closed. Who would buy trophies or medals if no sports events take place?” said Rafique, 64, who was one among the first stallholders to test positive for COVID-19 after the reopening of the market.

“It was only after a few local clubs began organising small sports and social events, say, to felicitate front-line workers, did we notice a slight uptick in sales in December and January,” he said.

With most sports coaching academies across the city and local tournaments under the Cricket Association of Bengal having resumed by late February, several old-timers and first-time buyers have since been making their way to Maidan Market.

“The ongoing vaccination drive has lifted the common man’s spirits,” said Somenath Das, while helping his 14-year-old daughter try on a new pair of cricket shoes.

“We took whatever safety precautions we could and came to this market. Growing up, I used to buy all my football gear from here. Now, it’s my daughter’s turn.”

But an air of resignation hangs over the market as a new nationwide surge in COVID cases unfolded in recent weeks, reaching record highs.

Many stallholders fear that the gains made by Maidan Market since the start of this year in restoring a semblance of normalcy to the way it conducts business might be ruined by the second wave of the coronavirus outbreak.

Most admit that apart from relatively better psychological preparedness, they have little to no measures in place to counter the economic costs of a potential resuspension of all business if infections spiral out of control as they did a year ago.

Most stall owners are hoping for a smooth IPL in April and May to lift sales.

“With the IPL moving to the UAE last year because of the COVID crisis in India, the on-ground excitement around it died, meaning practically no business for us,” Nadim said.

“But even if the next tournament is held entirely behind closed doors, the return of top-flight cricket to the Eden Gardens could create enough buzz for fans and owners of malls, restaurants to buy merchandise from us.

“Ummeed par duniya kayam hain (Hope is what keeps people alive),” he added, as an afterthought.

Ajay Ratna joins Delhi Capitals as assistant coach



NEW DELHI, MAR 28 (PTI): IPL franchise Delhi Capitals on Sunday announced it has appointed former India wicket-keeper Ajay Ratna as the team’s assistant coach ahead of the lucrative league’s 14th edition.

Delhi Capitals finished runners-up in the last edition, losing to Mumbai Indians in the final. The upcoming edition of the IPL starts on April 9.

On his appointment, Ratna said, “This is a very exciting team to work with, abundant with talent. I can’t wait to meet the team and contribute to its success. I am grateful to the Delhi Capitals management for giving me this wonderful opportunity.”

Ratna, who will work under Australian great Ricky Ponting, was welcomed to the DC team by its chief executive officer Vinod Bisht.

“His experience, as player and coach will be invaluable, as we look to take the franchise from strength to strength. We

are excited to have him on board, and wish him all the very best for the upcoming season.”

The 39-year-old Ratna recently coached the Assam state team in the Syed Mushtaq Ali Tournament and the Vijay Hazare Trophy.

He has coached the Punjab state team in the past too, and has worked as a fielding and wicket-keeping coach with the Indian women’s team during camps.

However, this will be his first stint with an IPL franchise.

Ratna made history in 2002 when he became the youngest wicket-keeper (aged 20) to score a Test hundred, and the second Indian wicket-keeper to score a century overseas. Ratna, who is currently employed by ONGC as manager of corporate communications, played six Tests and 12 ODIs for India.

He joins the Delhi Capitals coaching staff of Ponting, Mohammad Kaif, Pravin Amre and James Hopes.

Pandemic forced us to borrow money to pay staff, players: Cricket West Indies President

LONDON, MAR 28 (PTI): Cricket West Indies President Ricky Skeritt, who is aiming to be re-elected after a two-year term, has revealed that the COVID-19 pandemic forced them to borrow money to pay players and staff wages but the board’s debt has reduced to a third in his tenure.

Skeritt will be fighting for reelection against Guyana Cricket Board secretary Anand Sanasie.

Talking about the state of CWI finances, Skeritt said they have improved significantly since he took over.

“The biggest problem we were facing is that all of our future cash was spoken for before we even got it. We were living on borrowed future income. So, we had close to USD 20 million in institutional debt. And we were borrowing to pay back lenders.

“It was all smoke and mirrors. And that’s understandable on short-term strategies when there are difficult times



for cash flow. But it had become endemic,” Skeritt told ‘ESPNCricinfo’.

The CWI boss went on to say that the board had to borrow to pay staff which received a 50 per cent pay cut in the wake of the pandemic.

“So we’ve been having to tighten belts, focus on cash rather than on profit and loss and get rid of any sort of unnecessary costs. And we’ve

cut our debt down by at least a third now after less than two years.

“And, with some difficulty, we have improved our ability to meet our obligations, we just could not meet most of our obligations (previously).

“We were borrowing money to pay wages. We did that for the first year that I was in office. Right up until the early summer last year we were literally

having to borrow to just pay players and staff,” he said. The West Indies team was first to tour amid the pandemic, flying to England for a Test series in July last year.

On the impact of the health crisis on the game, Skeritt added: “The pandemic made everything more devastating. But it also gave us an opportunity and an excuse to focus on what we really

needed to focus on...getting all stakeholders to understand that it would take sacrifices from all of us, including a 50 per cent pay cut for everybody. “The pandemic forced us to do more with even less. And I think that, in the final analysis, we’re going to come out of the pandemic more informed and better aware of what’s needed going forward.

Shooting WC: Indian women claim team gold medal in trap

NEW DELHI, MAR 28 (PTI): The Indian trio of Shreyasi Singh, Rajeshwari Kumari and Manisha Keer claimed the gold medal in the women’s trap team final after blanking Kazakhstan 6-0 on the last competition day of the ISSF shooting World Cup here on Sunday.

In the gold medal match, the team fielded by the host nation did not break a sweat as it romped to a crushing win over Kazakhstan’s Sarsenkul Rysbekova, Aizhan Dosmagambetova and Mariya Dmitriyenko, tak-

ing the number of gold won by India to 14 in the tournament.

The Indian shooters, especially the experienced Shreyasi and Manisha, missed very few shots in the final and proved to be too good for their opponents.

Commonwealth Games gold-medallist Shreyasi, Rajeshwari and Manisha scored 321 in the qualification rounds held at the Dr Karni Singh Shooting Range on Thursday. Kazakhstan’s Rysbekova, Dosmagam-

betova and Dmitriyenko shot a total of 308.

On Saturday, the pair of Shreyasi and Kynan Chenai missed out on a podium finish as they settled for the fourth place in the trap mixed team final of the prestigious tournament.

Thanks to the country’s dominant showing for a major part of the tournament, India continued to lead the standings with 14 gold, nine silver and six bronze for a total of 29 podium finishes.

India settle for silver in 25m rapid fire team event

NEW DELHI, MAR 28 (PTI): India’s Vijayveer Sidhu, Gurpreet Singh and Adarsh Singh looked off colour and settled for the silver medal in the men’s 25m rapid fire pistol team event of the ISSF shooting World Cup here on Sunday.

The USA’s Keith Sanderson, Jack Hobson Leverett III, and Henry Turner Leverett won the gold medal with a 10-2 victory over the home team on the last competition day of the tournament.

In Qualification 2, the Indian trio of Gurpreet, Vijayveer and Adarsh was second with a total score of 552, with the three shooting 184, 178, and 190 respectively.

The American team of Keith, Jack and Henry topped this stage with an aggregate of 571. While the visiting team shot a total of 868 in the qualification, the Indians managed 857 at the Dr Karni Singh Shooting Range.

Thanks to the country’s dominant showing for a major part of the tournament, India continued to lead the standings with 13 gold, nine silver and six bronze for a total of 28 podium finishes. The 18-year-old Vijayveer won the individual silver medal in the rapid fire event on Friday. On Saturday, he teamed up with Tejaswani to win the gold medal in the 25m rapid fire pistol mixed team event.

Hundreds protest against Denmark's virus law, "Corona Passports"

COPENHAGEN, 28 MAR [AFP]: Hundreds gathered in central Copenhagen on Saturday to protest against a controversial virus law and Denmark's plan to create so called "corona passports".

Marching through the streets, the crowd of mostly younger people, lit fireworks during a march which an AFP correspondent at the scene described as mostly peaceful.

Police told the Ekstra-bladet newspaper that some 600 people had gathered and one person was arrested for throwing firecrackers towards police officers.

Organised by Danish anti-restriction group "Men in Black," the main issue for the protesters was a new provision to the penal code that calls for a doubled sentence for a crime that "has a background in or is connected to the Covid-19 epidemic".

The first severe application of that law happened in mid-March, when a Danish court convicted a 30-year-old woman for statements and actions that contributed to a "gross disturbance of public order as well as the use of violence against police," at a January protest -- organised by the same group.

Her one-year prison sentence was converted to two years. The Saturday march stopped outside the prison where she is being held, with cries of "Free Nanna" outside the building which was heavily guarded by police vans.

The demonstrators, most dressed in all black, shouted "Freedom for Denmark" and "Mette Ciao" -- a reference to Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen -- as they made their way to a square in front of Copenhagen's city hall.

In addition to the doubling of sentences the protesters also object to the creation of "corona passports" -- a smartphone app which will be used to certify that someone has received a Covid-19 vaccine, tested negative within the last 72 hours or has recently recovered from Covid-19, conferring immunity to the disease.

Denmark's government has said the "corona passports" are a crucial part of the country's plan to reopen, but critics argue they will create a division in society.

The Scandinavian country has been under a partial lockdown since late December.

Primary schools reopened in February and secondary school students are due to return to classrooms in early April.

Most shops were allowed to reopen earlier this month. However some businesses, including hairdressers, bars and restaurants, remain closed.

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The UK professor, a fake Russian spy and the undercover Syria sting

PETER BEAUMONT & EMMA GRAHAM-HARRISON

LONDON, 28 MAR [THEGUARDIAN]: A more sceptical academic than Paul McKeigue might perhaps have wondered if the emails flooding into his inbox from "Ivan", a purported Russian spy, were too good to be true.

Ivan appeared to share many of McKeigue's own personal obsessions, particularly his desire to discredit investigators who compile evidence of war crimes committed in Syria. And he claimed access to both ready cash and secret intelligence.

The Edinburgh genetics professor -- who devotes large quantities of his private time to pursuing fringe theories claiming that attacks on civilians are staged to smear the government of Bashar al-Assad -- dived eagerly into his new correspondence.

Over three months he filled hundreds of pages with speculation, including accusing journalists, researchers and diplomats of working as conduits for western intelligence agencies. He revealed the identity of a confidential source, and shared information she gave him.

But McKeigue was not writing to a Russian spy, or even a man called Ivan. The email account was controlled by a group of staff at one of the organisations he hoped to discredit, who say they went undercover because of concerns over the tactics McKeigue and his allies were prepared to deploy in an effort to defend the Syrian government and its Russian allies.

"We never thought it would go this far. He accepted the communication immediately without doing any checks," said Nerma Jelacic, a former Observer journalist who now works at the Commission for International Justice and Accountability (CIJA) and played a key role in the sting.

"In the end there were about 500 pages of email correspondence from 1 December until March," she says, in her first full account of the action.



The CIJA collects documentary evidence from Syria so that war criminals can be held legally responsible for atrocities. Its work has already been used in a landmark trial in Germany, the first time Syrian officials have faced charges of state-sponsored torture.

It has also apparently riled McKeigue, who is preparing a report on the group with ideological allies, and was searching for information that could discredit the CIJA.

"We knew they were turning their attention to us," said Jelacic. "In part we wanted to see what security risk they might pose to people working for us in terms of what they might reveal."

They were stunned by both his willingness to engage with a purported Russian agent, and the information he shared.

Among the most damaging claims McKeigue made was that a Russian diplomat at the Geneva embassy, first secretary Sergey Krutskikh, was corresponding with fellow members of the "Working Group on

Syria, Propaganda and Media" on encrypted systems. This is an alliance of far-left academics and researchers who claim western journalists, NGOs and others act on behalf of the CIA and MI6 to undermine the Syrian government, including faking evidence of civilian deaths and chemical attacks.

It includes the controversial Bristol University professor David Miller, who has been accused of antisemitism by his own students, a claim he denies, and the blogger Vanessa Beeley, who has frequently visited Syria on government-sponsored trips.

Group members have questioned the veracity of chemical weapons attacks in Syria and claimed Russia was framed for the poisoning of Sergei Skripal in Salisbury in 2018.

They were also part of a year-long public campaign against the White Helmets, a civilian rescue organisation that enraged pro-Syrian and Russian factions by recording atrocities as they tried to save lives, then sharing the footage.

The organisation's founder, James Le Mesurier, fell to his death

in an apparent suicide in 2019 amid the intense public pressure, which included smears not just on the group's work, but its finances and his personal life. The CIJA feared it might face a similar onslaught.

"Why did we do it? We'd watched what had happened to James Le Mesurier," Jelacic said. "We knew they would not just go after the organisation but the leader, Bill Wiley, and they would say: 'He's a spy. He's corrupt.'"

Over the course of the correspondence McKeigue fished for personal information about both Wiley and CIJA finances, after questions were raised about its accounting by the European Anti-fraud Office, Olaf. None of this has any bearing on the credibility of the archive it has collected, and the CIJA defends its financial management.

"From what you now know about Wiley," he asked Ivan in one email, "do you think it's possible he has some kind of drugs problem (like cocaine)? This is just wild speculation on my part, but it might explain

some of his irrational and unpredictable behaviour." For Jelacic, who fled the former Yugoslavia as a teenager with her family during the war, the attempts by McKeigue and the Working Group to cast doubt on what is happening in Syria bring back memories of campaigns by the far left to deny genocide in Bosnia.

"What's different is that it's a level of disinformation not seen before. What's worrying is that it's tolerated," she said.

"Even in mainstream academic circles this disinformation and denial is being misrepresented as freedom of expression and speech... We have a moral duty to stand up to revision and denial."

McKeigue told the Observer that the sting had been a "clever deception operation", and he might have used more "guarded language" had he known the exchanges would be made public. Asked about claims of contact with a Russian diplomat, he declined to comment directly, except to hint he might have exaggerated in some exchanges.

"The people on the other end of this sting managed to get me to reveal information provided by others that was not intended to be shared, along with other information that may have been embellished," he said. "This was a failure on my part for which I accept responsibility and have apologised to those concerned."

The professor has also denied doing anything wrong or illegal, saying that he kept an open mind about who he was communicating with.

In its own statement Edinburgh University told the Observer: "The actions referred to in media reports were undertaken in Paul McKeigue's capacity as a private citizen, not as an employee of the university. We respect the rights of staff to have interests unrelated to their roles within the institution. However, if we receive complaints about anyone's conduct which we consider damages our reputation, then we will consider whether an investigation is required and take appropriate action."

Myanmar forces kill scores in deadliest day since coup

YANGON, MAR 28 (AP)

As Myanmar's military celebrated the annual Armed Forces Day holiday with a parade Saturday in the country's capital, soldiers and police elsewhere killed scores of people while suppressing protests in the deadliest bloodletting since last month's coup.

The online news site Myanmar Now reported late Saturday that the death toll had reached 114. A count issued by an independent researcher in Yangon who has been compiling near-real time death tolls put the total at 107, spread over more than two dozen cities and towns. That's more than the previous high on March 14, which ranged from 74 to 90.

The killings quickly drew international condemnation, including a joint statement from the defense chiefs of 12 countries. A professional military follows international standards for conduct and is responsible for protecting not harming the people it serves, it said. We urge the Myanmar Armed Forces to cease violence and work to restore respect and credibility with the people of Myanmar that it has lost through its actions.

The European Union's delegation to Myanmar said that the 76th Myanmar Armed Forces Day will stay engraved as a day of terror



and dishonor. The killing of unarmed civilians, including children, are indefensible acts, it added.

US Ambassador Thomas Vajda in a statement said security forces are murdering unarmed civilians. These are not the actions of a professional military or police force, he wrote. Myanmar's people have spoken clearly: they do not want to live under military rule.

The death toll in Myanmar has been steadily rising as authorities grow more forceful in suppressing opposition to the Feb. 1 coup that ousted the elected government of Aung San Suu Kyi. The coup reversed years of progress toward democracy after five decades of military rule.

Figures collected by the Yangon researcher, who asked not to be named for his security, have generally tallied with the counts issued

at the end of each day by the Assistance Association of Political Prisoners, which documents deaths and arrests and is widely seen as a definitive source. The Associated Press is unable to independently confirm the death tolls.

Up through Friday, the association had verified 328 deaths in the post-coup crackdown.

Junta chief Senior Gen. Min Aung Hlaing did not directly refer to the protest movement when he gave his nationally televised Armed Forces Day speech before thousands of soldiers in Naypyitaw. He referred only to terrorism which can be harmful to state tranquility and social security, and called it unacceptable.

This year's event was seen as a flashpoint for violence, with demonstrators threatening to double down on their public opposition to the coup with more and bigger demonstrations. The

protesters refer to the holiday by its original name, Resistance Day, which marks the beginning of a revolt against Japanese occupation in World War 2.

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

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

Hazardous sandstorm blankets Beijing, Second in two weeks

BEIJING, 28 MAR [REUTERS]:

The Chinese capital Beijing woke on Sunday morning shrouded in thick dust carrying extremely high levels of hazardous particles, as a second sandstorm in two weeks hit the city due to winds from drought-hit Mongolia and northwestern China.

Visibility in the city was reduced, with the tops of some skyscrapers obscured by the sandstorm, and pedestrians were forced to cover their eyes as gusts of dust swept through the streets. Beijing's official air quality index reached a maximum

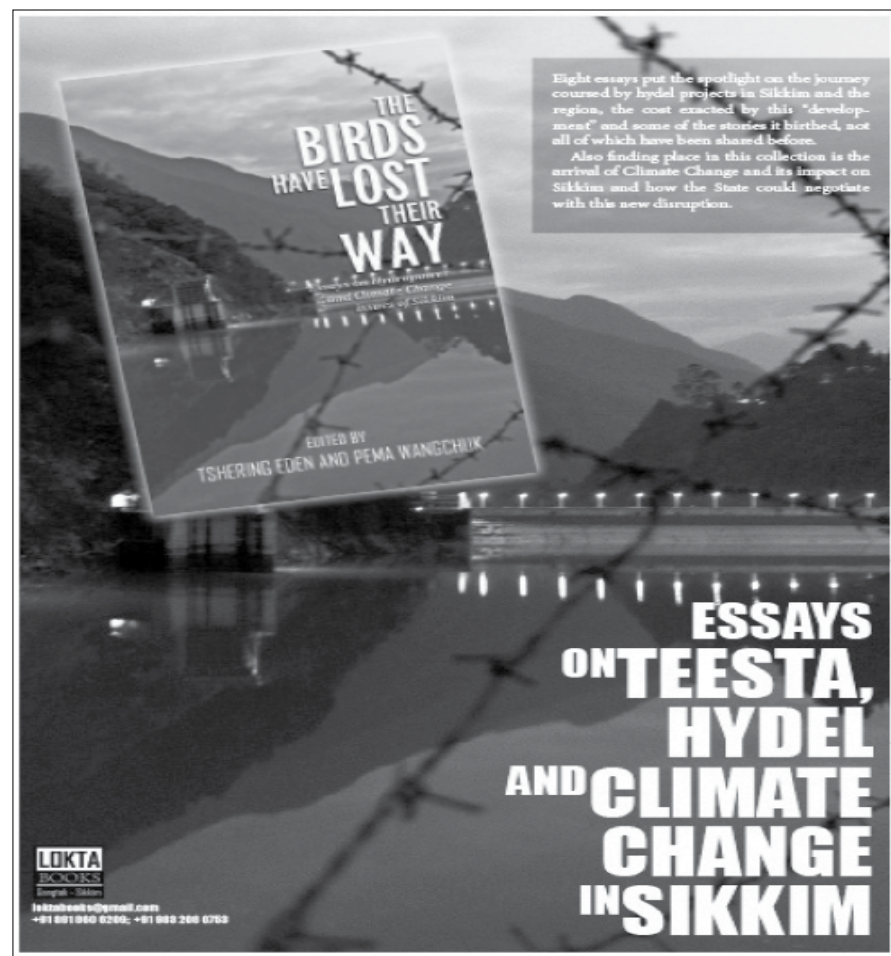
level of 500 on Sunday morning, with floating particles known as PM10 surpassing 2,000 micrograms per cubic metre in some districts.

Readings of smaller PM2.5 particles were above 300 micrograms per cubic metre, far higher than China's standard of 35 micrograms. PM2.5 particles are especially harmful because they are very tiny and can enter the bloodstream, while PM10 is a larger particle that can enter the lungs.

The China Meteorological Administration issued a yellow alert on Friday,

warning that a sandstorm was spreading from Mongolia into northern Chinese provinces including Inner Mongolia, Shanxi, Liaoning and Hebei, which surrounds Beijing.

The meteorological office said the recent sandstorms to hit Beijing originated from Mongolia, where relatively warmer temperature this spring and reduced rain resulted in larger areas of bare earth, creating favorable conditions for sandstorms. Beijing might face more sandstorms in April due to the unfavorable weather this year, the meteorological office said.





DADDY'S GIRL! Model Sofia Richie steps out in L.A. wearing a long yellow coat and a vintage T-shirt featuring her dad Lionel Richie's face.

Bad Girls Club star Deshayla Harris killed in Virginia Beach shootings



Bad Girls Club alum Deshayla Harris died in one of the three separate shootings that occurred in the Virginia Beach resort area on March 26, E! News can confirm. She was 28.

According to a press release from the Virginia Beach police department, Harris was a bystander at the second shooting incident. She is reported to have died at the scene.

Per authorities, they are working to determine if the three shootings were related and if there are any additional suspects. They all occurred Friday night. A second victim, 25-year-old Donovan Lynch, died in the third shooting of the night. There were no fatalities at the first shooting, however, several people were injured.

At this time, law enforcement has charged

and arrested three individuals from the first shooting—22-year-old Ahmon Jahree Adams of Chesapeake, Va., 18-year-old Nyquez Tyron Baker of Virginia Beach, Va. and 20-year-old Devon Maurice Dorsey Jr. of Virginia Beach. They've each been charged with seven counts of felonious assault, use of a firearm in commission of a felony and reckless handling of a firearm.

It's unclear if the police department has arrested suspects in the other incidents.

Thus far, the three shootings do not appear related, however, all occurred Friday night. A second victim, 25-year-old Donovan Lynch, died in the third shooting of the night. There were no fatalities at the first shooting, however, several people were injured.

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

Tip: You know what you have to do!

Cancer:

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

Tip: Take charge of your reality.

Leo:

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

Tip: Take charge of your reality.

Virgo:

When we suppress anger, sadness or any kind of

Who we are in reality gets lost in playing characters: Abhishek Bachchan

Actor Abhishek Bachchan says it would be difficult for him to evaluate the kind of person he is, considering how mixed it is with the characters he has played.

Giving the example of his latest film "The Big Bull", Bachchan, known for his roles in films such as "Bunty Aur Babli", "Yuva", "Guru", "Bluffmaster" and "Dhoom", said for him, it's not important whether he resembles his role or not. Asked whether he looks for relatability in his roles, Bachchan told PTI, "It is very difficult to say for an actor because who we are in reality gets lost because we are busy playing so many characters, you don't get the time to sit down and evaluate what kind of a person you actually are."

The 45-year-old actor said he identified with the aspirational nature of the character in the film, which maps the rise and fall of a stock broker with dreams of becoming India's richest man.

"All of us are very aspirational in life, we want to achieve, we want to fulfill our dreams and Hemant Shah (his role) is no different.

"His determination, his doggedness to achieve what he wants to achieve, are unique to him. I don't think it is important whether I am like that or not. I think it is important that I am convinced that Hemant should be like that," he added. Directed by Kookie Gulati and produced by Ajay Devgn, the film is inspired by events from the late '80s and early '90s that shook the country's financial sector. The actor said Gulati and Arjun Dhawan, who has written the film, have peppered the script with a lot of realism in "how a person would deal with"

a journey that begins from a small chawl in Mumbai and leads him to one of the biggest high rises in the city.

Hemant Shah is a character, who has stars in his eyes, he has big dreams for himself and how he is very determined and focused about how to achieve it. But he has his



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and that is something that I found interesting, he added. There were reports that the film is inspired from the life of stockbroker Harshad Mehta, who is infamous for his role in the 1992 securities scam.

But Bachchan said his Hemant Shah is fictional with the team taking inspira-

tion from certain real-life incidents and people. "To say that he is based on one just particular person I think will be erroneous," he said. Bachchan, however, has seen the Hansal Mehta-directed and Pratik Gandhi-starrer Scam 1992: The Harshad Mehta Story, and thoroughly enjoyed it. "It was a wonderful show, a great achievement by the entire team. The show had great writing, wonderful group of actors, every department excelled and I really enjoyed watching it. It is nice to see good work being done," he said.

The most fun aspect of shooting the film for Bachchan was to indulge in the '80s and '90s nostalgia as "Big Bull" is set in that era.

"The thing that I was most excited about was that I got to drink Gold Spot again. It was my favourite drink as a kid and I was so happy that they managed to get Gold Spot. I was also excited to travel in those cars, dress in that style. It was nice the way the era was recreated," Bachchan said.

The film will release on Disney+ Hotstar VIP on April 8, bypassing a theatrical outing due to the coronavirus pandemic.

"The Big Bull" also features Ileana D'Cruz, Nikita Dutta, Soham Shah, Ram Kapoor, Supriya Pathak and Saurabh Shukla. The movie is produced by Devgn and Anand Pandit with Kumar Mangat Pathak and Vikrant Sharma attached as co-producers.

Sara Ali Khan Wraps Atrangi Re With A Heartwarming Note For Akshay Kumar And Dhanush

Akshay Kumar, Sara Ali Khan and Dhanush concluded shooting for the final schedule of Atrangi Re on Saturday. The actress wrapped the film with a heartwarming note for her co-stars and director Aanand L Rai.

Sara shared a couple of pictures of herself, Dhanush, Akshay Kumar and Aanand L Rai from the sets of the film on her Instagram profile.

She wrote: "That's a film wrap... Ek saal baad... Thank you so much Aanand L Rai sir for giving me this role, this film and this opportunity. But more than that thank you for your unconditional love, unwavering support, the best India dar-

shan, delicious khana, early morning sunrise drives to location, sufi ginger water evenings, and the most memorable year with the best team.

"Dhanush, thank you for always being helpful, motivating and inspiring. Couldn't have asked for a better partner in this journey and yes thank you for introducing me to your amazing music and mouth-watering varieties of South Indian food (even though we could've avoided that indulgence during shoots. And thank you so much Akshay sir for bringing so much love, laughter, energy and positivity on our set and sorry for stalking you for photos in all our costumes sir," she added.

Radhika Apte to play spy in 'Mrs Undercover'

MUMBAI, MAR 28 (PTI): Actor Radhika Apte has come on board to play a spy in her forthcoming film "Mrs Undercover", the makers announced on Sunday.

Abir Sengupta, who directed Kiara Advani-starrer "Indoo Ki Jawani", has turned producer with the film. "Mrs Undercover" marks the directorial debut of writer-director Anushree Mehta. The film also stars actor Sumeet Vyas.

The makers revealed the film's teaser poster, which aims to indicate the "interesting dichotomous combination of an Indian housewife holding a gun".

Apte said when Mehta approached her with the film's script, she was surprised with its "novelty", which has now translated to the film's poster. "When I saw this first look, it was that same excitement I

felt and it was not only as someone who is a part of the film but also as a member of the audience. "I think we all wanted to show the essence of the film through this first poster and I must say that we have captured it well. Now, I am waiting to see what the audience has to say about this special film of ours," the 35-year-old actor said in a statement.

Mehta said it was "surreal" to share the first look of the film with the audience.

"The title, the poster, the imagery is a long-thought process to make people excited. I am so glad that I found an actor like Radhika Apte to play the titular character," the debutante director said. Presented by B4U Motion Pictures and Jaadugar Films & Knight Sky Movies, "Mrs Undercover" is produced by Ishan Saksena, Sengupta, Sunil Shah, and Varun Bajaj.

Sonakshi Sinha wraps up 'Fallen' shoot

Sonakshi Sinha on Sunday said she has finished shooting for her upcoming Amazon Prime Video series tentatively titled "Fallen" and thanked the show's cast and crew, including director Reema Kagti, for the experience. Sinha resumed shooting for the series, which marks her digital debut, in December 2020 here. The team, also featuring actors Vijay Varma and Gulshan Devaiah, later moved to Rajasthan for their schedule.

Backed by Excel Entertainment and filmmaker Zoya Akhtar and Kagti's production house Tiger Baby, "Fallen" also has Ruchika Oberoi attached as director.

Taking to Instagram, Sinha penned a long note as her portions for the series came to an end.

The 33-year-old actor, who plays a cop on the show, thanked the makers for giving her the character of Anjali Bhaati.

"As it comes to an end I don't even know where to begin! What a journey 'Fallen' (that's what we're calling it for now, wait for the actual name) has been. Leaving this set with such amazing memories, new friends, bike riding skills and a heart full of happiness! "Thank you @reemakagti1 and @zoieakhtar for giving me Anjali Bhaati. I can't tell you how long I've waited for her. I can safely say this has been the best schedule ever for me because of this amazing team," Sinha wrote.

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

Tip: Find a balance between doing and non-doing.

Taurus:

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

Tip: Take the rose-tinted glasses off.

Gemini:

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

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

Tip: Cleanse and purge. Recognise that which has served its purpose in your existence.

Libra:

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

Tip: When in doubt, dance.

Scorpio:

As things get turbulent around you, you may find yourself playing the role of jester (which is new for you!). Keep

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

Tip: Channel your inner jester.

Sagittarius:

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

Tip: Challenges have a special place and purpose in our life, Sagittarius.

Capricorn:

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

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

Tip: Active listening is the need of the hour.

Aquarius:

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

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

Pisces:

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

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