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SummitTIMES

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ON TOP OF THE NEWS

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CM's greetings on Labour Day

GANGTOK, 30 APR [IPR]: On the occasion of Labour Day, the Chief Minister, Prem Singh Tamang extends his warm greetings to the working-class people of Sikkim.

Labour Day also known as International Workers' Day or May Day, is a celebration of labourers and the working classes across the globe.

In his message, the Chief Minister salutes the determination and hard work of countless workers who play a significant role in the progress of the State. It is through their laborious effort and resolute courage that the lives of the public are made convenient, he stated.

Terming the day as an occasion to commemorate the hard work, dedication, and sacrifice of all workers, the Chief Minister stated that the State government is committed to safeguarding the rights of the workers and labourers and formulated policies for the welfare of the working class.

Further, he states that the Sikkim Krantikari Morcha has been celebrating the day as 'Majdoor Samman Diwas' since 2013 and added that it could not be celebrated grandly due to the COVID protocols. The Chief Minister affirmed that the State government is looking to increase the employment prospects for the locals in tandem with various in house companies. He added that the health institutions dedicated to labourers in different parts of the state will be upgraded in the coming days.

The Chief Minister advises the working-class people to lend their support to take Sikkim towards the path of progress and prosperity. He also expresses his appreciation for all those whose work calls for devotion to the welfare of others.

He wishes that the "laws and policies about the welfare of the working class should be enacted all times".

Similarly, He wishes all the working people of Sikkim a peaceful and happy celebration and appeals to everyone to follow the COVID guidelines, wear a mask and only venture out in case of emergencies.

With record 205 new cases, Sikkim's active Covid count swells to 1,432

**SUMMIT REPORT
GANGTOK, 30 APR:**

Sikkim broke its record of daily cases for a third straight today when 205 fresh cases of novel coronavirus were reported in the last 24 hours. This is also the first time that the number of daily cases has broken the 200-mark in Sikkim. On 28 April, when Sikkim recorded 151 new cases, it had broken the record of 148 set on 14 August, 2020. On 29 April, a new record was set with 170 cases, and today it is 205. The State also saw another Covid-related fatality in the State and the number of lives lost to Covid now stands at 147.

East District alone registered 183 new cases, followed by 10 fresh cases in North District,



08 in West District and 04 in South Sikkim.

While the case positivity rate offers reason to pause, there is also the reassurance that daily hospitalisations remain low despite the high numbers. Today for instance, only 11 more Covid patients were admitted into hospitals. There are

currently 117 Covid patients admitted in hospitals in the State. Of these, 10 patients are currently admitted in the ICU facility of STNM hospital and three in the ICU facility of the Central Referral Hospital, Tadong.

The number of active cases of coronavirus also crossed the 1,400-mark today and now stands at

1,432.

The 205 new cases were detected following testing of 818 samples on Thursday; of which 172 were picked up in RT-PCR testing of 657 samples and 33 in rapid antigen testing of 154 samples.

The one death of the day was reported from Central Referral Hospital,

Tadong, where a Covid ward was recently set up.

Sikkim's tally of confirmed cases has increased to 7,952. Meanwhile, 19 more persons were discharged from home isolation today to further improve the number of recovered cases of COVID-19 in Sikkim to 6,195.

Bengal announces partial lockdown, home delivery of essentials allowed

KOLKATA, 30 APR

[NDTV]: The West Bengal government has announced a partial shutdown in the state amid the massive surge in coronavirus cases. While shopping complexes, beauty parlours, cinema halls, sports facilities and spas will remain shut, markets will be allowed to function for only five hours every day - 7-10 am and 3-5 pm.

Restaurants, bars, gyms and swimming pools will remain shut, the state government said, adding home deliveries and other online services will be permitted.

All social, cultural, entertainment and academic gatherings have been banned.

Pharmacies, shops selling medical equipment and grocery shops



are exempted from the partial lockdown.

Counting for the eight-phased Assembly elections will take place on May 2. The state government has said all anti-Covid rules will have to be followed at the counting centres.

The daily surge of

coronavirus reached a new high in Bengal on Thursday, with the state logging highest-ever 17,403 fresh cases.

The number of fatalities was also the highest, with 89 deaths recorded in a day. The positivity rate has climbed from 6.79 per cent ten days

ago to 7.81 per cent.

The unprecedented coronavirus surge hit the state amid mega election rallies addressed by the top BJP and Trinamool leaders.

India on Friday reported highest-ever 3,498 deaths in 24 hours amid the more dangerous

second wave of coronavirus infections. The country also logged 3,86,442 Covid cases, which is the biggest spike since the start of the pandemic.

India has been recording more than 3 lakh daily coronavirus cases for several days. The massive caseloads across the country have triggered severe shortages of hospital beds, medicines and life-saving oxygen.

The Madras High Court last week pulled up the Election Commission for not being able to enforce anti-Covid rules during election rallies.

The Election Commission has said candidates will have to carry either Covid-negative test reports or vaccination (both doses) certificates to enter counting centres on Sunday.

How India's vaccine drive crumbled and left a country in chaos

NEW DELHI, 30 APR [NDTV]: When India launched its Covid-19 vaccination drive in mid-January, the chances of success looked high: It could produce more shots than any country in the world and had decades of experience inoculating pregnant women and babies in rural areas. "Our preparation has been such that vaccine is fast reaching every corner of the country," Prime Minister Narendra Modi said on January 22. "On the world's biggest need today, we are completely self-reliant. Not just that, India is also helping out many countries with vaccines."

Just over three months later, that initial promise has evaporated and the government's plans are in disarray. India has fully vaccinated less than 2% of its 1.3 billion-strong population, inoculation centers across the country say they're running short of doses and exports have all but stopped. Rather than building protection, the South Asian nation is setting daily records for new infec-

tions as a second wave overwhelms hospitals and crematoriums.

PM Modi's response has been to abruptly shift strategy on vaccines and supplies. Initially the federal government negotiated prices with manufacturers, distributed them to states and restricted them to priority groups like the elderly and health-care workers. Starting May 1, everyone over 18 is eligible for a vaccine while state governments and private hospitals can purchase doses directly from manufacturers for people from 18 to 45 years -- triggering a desperate free-for-all rush to secure shots from an already strapped market.

His government says the new rules make "pricing, procurement, eligibility and administration of vaccines open and flexible." Health experts and officials in opposition-controlled states say the plan passes the buck to regional governments rather than addressing the pandemic directly. Widening the rollout of shots

is also questionable when India is running low on stocks, with developers like Serum Institute of India saying the US has been hoarding ingredients and new supplies could potentially be months away.

"No Discussion"

"There was no discussion with state governments before asking states to procure vaccines on their own," said TS Singh Deo, the health minister of Chhattisgarh state. "As a state we will have to buy vaccines from the open market, severely denting our finances."

Given India's growing strategic importance, its wave of infections risks not only the fledgling recovery in Asia's third-largest economy, but attempts to tamp down Covid-19 and recuperate globally. The nation is now the main hotspot of the pandemic, despite being home to the world's largest vaccine manufacturer.

"The vaccination program really should be a big focus," said Raina

MacIntyre, a professor of biosecurity at the University of New South Wales in Sydney. "Getting people vaccinated will also reduce the selective pressure for emergence of new strains."

While it's easy to pinpoint now, the Modi government missed chances to concentrate on supporting vaccine production and scale up its decrepit health system. An over-reliance on an app-based technology made it hard for its poor and rural citizens to sign up, and PM Modi's plan didn't utilise India's million-strong army of trained health workers -- the Accredited Social Health Activists, or ASHAs -- to reach its vast rural hinterland, a strategy that made its polio vaccination such a success.

Warning Signs

Instead, government officials focused on making a show of India's ability to help the world.

On January 28, when PM Modi

told the World Economic Forum's virtual Davos Summit that India would assist other countries with vaccines, the daily case tally was 18,885 that day -- compared to 379,257 on Thursday. By then, Serum and other vaccine developers were already warning about shortages and pointing the finger at the US. India slowed vaccine exports and expanded domestic inoculations to those 45 and over.

While the immunization plans of countries around the world took a hit, life in India was going on pretty much as normal. Millions of pilgrims took a dip in the holy Ganges River in the religious festival Kumbh Mela, while political parties held mass rallies in five state elections.

Less than six weeks later, Health Minister Harsh Vardhan said "we are in the end game of the Covid-19 pandemic in India." Even on March 30, when cases were again on the rise, Mr Vardhan insisted "the situation is under control."

CM launches two IT projects - e-Office and SGSP



GANGTOK, 30 APR (IPR):

Chief Minister Prem Singh Tamang launched the e-Office and Sikkim Government Services Portal (SGSP) developed by the Information Technology Department, Government of Sikkim, at Samman Bhawan, today.

The two IT projects are aimed at creating paperless administration and increasing overall efficiency in governance. The programme had the presence of Minister, Rural Development Department, Sonam Lama, Additional Chief Secretary, Education Department, G.P. Upadhyaya, Principal Secretary, RDD, C.S. Rao, Secretary, Home (Protocol), S.K. Pradhan, Secretary, CMO, Tenzen Kizom, and officials from NIC and other departments.

Additional Director, IT Department, Sonam Tashi Wangdi made a power point presentation to explain the new initiatives of the Department. He said that e-Office is a step towards digital administration, aimed at enhancing transparency, increasing accountability, ensuring data security and integrity, bringing about transformation in work culture and ethics, encouraging work from home culture, and putting a check on missing files. He informed that the Department of IT has completely transformed itself into an IT-enabled Department. He further informed that the East District Collectorate has made a huge progress in this area. He informed that the e-Office initiative will be implemented phase-wise, and will gradually cover the entire State. He also highlighted the ongoing initiatives and future plans of the Department.

Mr Wangdi also explained about the other innovative project launched by the Chief Minister, titled the Sikkim Government Services Portal (SGSP). The portal has a unique feature of Single Sign On (SSO) which allows the user to avail any e-services offered by the Government of Sikkim with a single login credential. At present, there are e-services which are implemented by the various departments for the user to access those e-services they require to register in all the portals which in turn generates separate login credentials for the individual user. Subsequently, the user has to remember the credentials for all the e-service portal. With the SSO technology, the user has to register only once and access any e-services of the Government. It also allows the user to track all the applications submitted to the various department from a single portal. At present, 13 e-services are being offered through this portal and efforts are being made to integrate the e-district services with this portal.

The Chief Minister in his address congratulated the Department of IT for accomplishing the two important projects aimed at enhancing transparency and accountability in the administration. He stressed on the importance of IT in present times and urged the Department to continue with the same zeal. He said that the Government is in the process of extending IT enabled services to the Sub Divisions through better connectivity.

While pointing out the problem of files missing from various Departments, he stated that the practice of hand-to-hand movement of files should stop immediately, and added that proper official procedure should be followed. The Chief Minister in his address urged the Officials of IT Department to gear up for the "Government at the Doorstep" programme envisaged by the Government.

Earlier, Officials of the IT Department and East District Collectorate were felicitated by the Chief Minister as an acknowledgment for their exemplary work towards the implementation of e-Office Project in the State.

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Atlas of 2,500+ springs in Sikkim released

GANGTOK, 30 APR [IPR]: Chief Minister Prem Singh Tamang launched the Sikkim Springs Portal www.sikkim-springs.gov.in and released the Sikkim Springs Atlas, Village Water Security Plan (VWSP) and a book on Dhara Vikas in the presence of Minister, Rural Development Department, Sonam Lama, at Samman Bhawan today.

The programme had the presence of Additional Chief Secretary, Education Department, GP Upadhyaya, Secretaries from line departments, officers from NIC and senior officers from IT Department.

The Rural Development Department has been implementing Climate Change Adaptation Project under National Adaptation Fund for Climate Change (NAFCC) of Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEFCC) through NABARD which is the National Implementing Agency.

This in one of the 23 projects sanctioned by the MoEFCC throughout

the country.

The three-year project has been able to address key concerns in water sectors for 76 Gram Panchayat falling under 13 blocks of South and West Districts.

The project was implemented in convergence with MG-NREGA, and all wage components under the project were funded through MG-NREGA while the material, planning and research component was funded under NAFCC.

A detail assessment and planning exercise through Village Water Security Plan (VWSP) has been completed along with mapping of more than 2500 springs.

Dhara Vikas work or the Artificial recharge of springs, revival of dried-up lakes and geo-hydrology study to under the ground covering more than 500 hectares has also been taken up under the project.

A total of 1380 number of 10,000 litre Individual Household Water storage tank, 109 no of Community Reserve

tanks. Total of 2598 hectares of horticulture development and 2500 hectare of fodder plantation have been completed. The Project is in its closing phase with a one year no cost extension granted due to COVID-19 pandemic.

The website was developed by Rural Development Department in coordination with the Centre for Development of Advanced Computing (CDAC), Pune.

More than 2500 springs of Sikkim have been mapped in the website and Mobile Android application called “Sikkim DharaSuchana” have also been developed by CDAC Pune for Sikkim which is linked to the portal. All details of the springs, data entry, mapping now can be done remotely using a mobile device through this mobile application and this can be sent to the server/portal. Also, for 74 drought prone Gram Panchayats falling South and West District, a comprehensive Village Water

Security Plans has been prepared. The plan attempts to look at the Climate Change Vulnerability in water sector for the Gram Panchayat, water budgeting and a strategy to address the same. A details Water Resource Map of each Gram Panchayat Ward has also been prepared and digitized which shows the water distribution pattern from source to the household level, type of water connection (permanent/temporary), water storage facilities, vulnerable household who do not have access to any of such facilities. These maps have been developed into a Village Atlas for easy reference to address the problem in the near future.

The reviving of the drying up lakes, springs has been the focus area under the project, a total of 500 hectares of DharaVikas / artificial recharge work have been taken up under Kaluk, Soreng, Sumbuk, Namthang, Namchi and Gyalshing Block. Hill top dried up lakes are being

revived through these initiatives.

Chief Minister during the launching programme stressed on the need to take up more water conservation work in the rural area. Ensuring rural water security is the most important mandate that Rural Development must pursue. He also lauded the department for initiating work in the Climate Change area and further directed that this should be just the beginning and work should be carried out consistently.

Earlier, the welcome address was delivered by Principal Secretary, Rural Development Department, C.S. Rao, wherein, he gave the brief outline of the Climate Change initiatives. This was followed by a detailed presentation by Special Secretary cum Project Director, RDD, Sarika Pradhan.

The Department has expressed gratitude to Chief Minister and Minister, Rural Development Department for guiding and supporting the project.

Darj locks down



SMRITA KHAWAS

DARJEELING, 30 APR:

Shop owners in Darjeeling decided to shut down their shops today from 5 pm onwards as cases of Covid-19 rose all over the country. The shop owners said that they are taking this step

to help break the chain of COVID-19.

Meanwhile, the West Bengal government took out orders later in the day shutting down all shopping malls, restaurants, bars, cinema halls, beauty parlours, spa, etc. As per the guidelines,

markets will be open from 7-10 am and 3-5 pm. Restrictions have also been put on religious gatherings.

West Bengal Council of Higher Secondary Education also cancelled the annual examination of Class 11.

Nagar Panchayat sanitizes Mangan



WANGCHUK BHUTIA

MANGAN, 30 APR:

In the wake of the second wave of COVID-19, the Mangan NagarPanchayat (MNP) headed by its Municipal Executive Officer (MEO), Tempo Tashi

Bhutia today took up large-scale disinfection programme to control COVID-19 within the jurisdiction of Mangan Nagar Panchayat with the help of Sikkim fire & emergency service

and Traffic Police Mangan.

Public places like Mangan Bazaar, Vegetable Market, Banks, Pentok area, Chandey dumping site and surroundings were sanitized and disinfected.

SKM Govt responsible for COVID spread, alleges SDF Student Wing

SUMMIT REPORT

GANGTOK, 30 APR:

Sikkim Democratic Front Student Wing has condemned the organizing of a Cyclothon today in Gangtok and alleged that holding such an event when the second wave of Covid-19 is spreading rapidly in Sikkim is irresponsible.

In a press release issued today, the SDF student wing has said that

it is the responsibility of the state government to protect its people but instead the virus is spreading rapidly due to the negligence and irresponsibility of the Chief Minister, Ministers, legislators and administration.

“Ministers, legislators and officials who participated in the Dandi March in Gujarat recently have openly contributed to the spread of Corona in Sikkim.

Not only that, only a few weeks ago, the Golay government had openly welcomed Corona by organizing a fish melaat MG Marg in the capital Gangtok. Such irresponsible actions of the state government have endangered the lives of the people of Sikkim,” the release alleges.

It further said that it was clear that the SKM government, which was

in a hurry to give the message of vaccination, did not have any effective plan and solution to deal with the pandemic.

While the police are challaning people and collecting fine of Rs 300 for not wearing masks properly, during the cyclothon today SKM leaders could be seen with their masks down as well and the police did nothing, the release alleges.

“This has exposed the chaos of the SKM government. We want to tell the police administration that the law should be applied equally to every citizen of the state,” the release adds.

SDF has further stated that the funds used for organizing the rally during the pandemic should have been used to protect the lives of the Sikkimese people.

CR&CS.

A final-year student in the Department of Computer Science and Engineering, RitikaKatragedda secured the highest pay package. She expressed her joy, saying, “Though we were the first graduating batch of SRMAP, the outstanding experience in the past four years in academics and placement training made us so confident that we cracked the long hiring process with ease”.

Vice-Chancellor, Prof VS Rao, SRM University-AP, opined, “Our university is the flag-bearer when it comes to inculcating quality, value and excellence among the students in order to make them an asset to the society. The maiden batch placement programme was bound to be a success as it was not a job hunting for our students, rather, finding opportunities to contribute to the society, putting into use their intellect and innovative ideas”.

SRM Univ-AP celebrates success in maiden batch placement

SUMMIT REPORT

GANGTOK, 30 APR:

SRM University-AP bid farewell to the maiden batch of students, 92% of whom have been placed successfully, a press release informs.

About 500 companies visited SRM campuses during the placement drive, including Amazon, Adobe, Infosys, HealthRx, Bank of America, Standard Chartered and many more who have offered exhilarating opportunities.

Students of the founding batch have received one or more job offers in reputed companies with the highest CTC of ₹29.5 LPA an average salary of ₹6.2 LPA, and over 57% offers were Super Dream and Dream offers. The Campus Placement drive is still on and best efforts are put in to ensure that all the students are placed.

Founder and President, Dr P Sathyanarayanan established this university



with a vision of providing quality education to the students who will not only be able to secure a position of their choice but also add value to society. It has been an incredible journey so far, and the students made the university proud with their excellence in academics and extra-curricular activities.

“Acknowledging the needs of the hour, SRM University-AP is dedicated to devising strategies to mould students to become global leaders,”

said Dr Sathyanarayanan.

The university took it as a challenge to find the best job offers for its deserving students. The Department of Corporate Relations and Career Services (CR&CS) was deeply involved in providing students with the best training and placement opportunities. SRM University-AP believes that every student is filled with numerous possibilities, and they can scale greater heights if their potentials are explored

wisely. The students of the maiden batch proved the vision.

“We always bring the best to our students when it comes to their training and personality development. The thoughtfully crafted training sessions, in close coordination with industry and corporate experts, rigorous aptitude tests, mock interview rounds help students to excel in the interviews and placement rounds”, informed Assistant Director, MS Vivekanandan,

Tripura sounds alert after 3 Covid strains found in State

AGARTALA, 30 APR [PTI]:

The Tripura government has sounded an alert after the double mutant strain of coronavirus and those of Britain and African variants were found in the state, officials said on Friday. The state government has decided to hold full-fledged virus tests for passengers entering the state via airways, trains and roadways and quarantine the infected among them, the officials said.

Immediately after the receipt of the test results

of outsiders by the state government, Tripura health secretary JK Sinha held a virtual meeting on Thursday with district magistrates, superintendent of police and the chief medical officers of all the eight districts and asked them to take all precautions and strictly maintain the COVID-19 norms, officials said.

Director of Health, Radha Debbarma and professor of microbiology of Agartala Government Medical College, Tapan Majumder said, 19 samples collected from coro-

na virus infected persons were sent outside Tripura for advanced virological tests. Of them 17 samples were found to be infected with the highly infectious and deadly virus strains of COVID-19.

Of the 17 infectious samples, 11 were found infected with the double mutant variety that devastated Maharashtra, five were of British strain origin and one strain of African origin. So people should strictly adhere to all covid norms for safety, Majumder told reporters on Friday.

Siddhartha Shiva

Jaiswal, director of state National Health Mission said that in the second wave, people aged between 20 and 40 years are the most affected by coronavirus in Tripura.

Of the 665 people who tested positive for coronavirus till April 23, a total 50.79 per cent of them were between the ages of 20 and 40 and were infected with the deadly disease, he said.

Mr Jaiswal said that children below 10 years are also being infected by the virus but people in their sixties are relative-

ly protected from corona infection.

A total of 8.39 lakh people of the state have taken the first dose of COVID-19 vaccine, which is 24 per cent of the state's population and is much higher than the national average of only six per cent.

Meanwhile, at least 166 more people tested positive for COVID-19 in Tripura on Friday pushing the tally in the state to 35169, a health department official said.

The death count remained at 393 as no one died due to the infection.

BJP Sikkim greets workers on Labour Day

SUMMIT REPORT

GANGTOK, 30 APR:

On the occasion of World Labour Day, the BharatiyaJanata Party, Sikkim Unit, has expressed its heartfelt best wishes to the working

class employed in various units of the State.

A press release issued by BJP Sikkim MazdoorMorcha chairman, KinleyGyaltsen Bhutia states that World Labour Day is a day to give voice

to the rights and entitlements of workers, and the BharatiyaJanata Party has always been highly committed to the welfare of the workers, evaluating their hard work with utmost respect.

Legal luminary Soli Sorabjee passes away

NEW DELHI, APR 30 (PTI):

Distinguished jurist and former Attorney General Soli Sorabjee, who appeared in several historic cases like Kesavananda Bharti and S R Bommai, passed away due to COVID-19 at a hospital here on Friday.

The 91-year-old is survived by wife, a daughter and two sons.

A recipient of the Padma Vibhushan, the second highest civilian award of the country, the renowned human rights lawyer served as the Attorney General for India from 1989-90 and then from 1998-2004 during the tenure of V P Singh and Atal Bihari Vajpayee respectively.

President Ram Nath Kovind, Vice President Venkaiah Naidu and Prime Minister Narendra Modi were among a host of leaders who condoled the passing away of the eminent jurist.

The prime minister described him as an outstanding lawyer who was at the forefront of helping the poor and downtrodden through law.

Chief Justice of India (CJI) N V Ramana also condoled the demise of Sorabjee.

I am deeply saddened to learn about the passing of Shri Soli Jehangir

Sorabjee, former Attorney General of India. In his nearly 68 year long association with the judicial world, he made immeasurable contribution in enriching the global jurisprudence of Human Rights and Fundamental Right, he said.

Considered one of the best Constitutional law experts, Sorabjee wrote several books on laws and justice, press censorship and the Emergency, and vehemently fought against human and fundamental rights violations.

One of his recent court battles pertaining to fundamental right violations was the Shreya Singhal case in which the Supreme Court in 2015 agreed to his submissions and struck down a provision in the Information Technology Act relating to restrictions on online freedom of speech and expression.

The top court held that section 66A was unconstitutional as being violative of freedom of speech guaranteed under the Constitution, the point put forth by Sorabjee,

Considered close to Vajpayee, Sorabjee had led India's fight in the International Court of Justice (ICJ) when Pakistan

sought compensation from India for downing of their naval patrol aircraft Atlantic in 1999 just after the Kargil war.

The ICJ at the Hague ruled in India's favour after taking note of submissions of Sorabjee and dismissed Pakistan's claim for compensation, saying it had no jurisdiction over the matter.

He also appeared and worked for the Citizen's Justice Committee which represented anti-Sikh riots victims.

Born in a Parsi family in 1930, Sorabjee enrolled at the bar in 1953 and was designated senior advocate by the Bombay High Court in 1971.

Sorabjee appeared in many important cases including the Kesavananda Bharati matter on basic structure doctrine and the S R Bommai matter relating to invocation of President's rule in states among others.

He was appointed by the United Nation's as a Special Rapporteur for Nigeria in 1997 to report on the human rights situation in that country and later became a member and the Chairman of the UN-Sub Commission on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights, from 1998 to 2004.

More than 3k vaccine jabs administered

**SUMMIT REPORT
GANGTOK, 30 APR:**

A total of 3,148 Covid-19 vaccine jabs were administered at 55 vaccination sites across the State on Friday, information as of 6PM on the Cowin website informs.

There were 57 vaccination sites in Sikkim

a day earlier and today, Central Referral Hospital halted vaccination after having used up its allotted consignment. Vaccinations will continue there once stocks arrive or fresh directions are issued by the State Government, it is informed.

Interestingly, also

today, the highest number of vaccinations were carried out in West district where a total of 1,332 jabs were administered. East district, which usually leads in these numbers since it is also the most populous district, recorded 1,047 vaccinations. For South and North

districts, the numbers were 621 and 148 respectively.

Thus far, Sikkim has administered 2,03,965 doses of Covishield. While 1,61,083 people have received only the first dose thus far, 42,882 people have completed their vaccine schedule of two shots.

Sikkim women cricketers take part in webinar with Team India player

**SUMMIT REPORT
GANGTOK, 30 APR:**

Jemimah Rodrigues, an India Cricketer and member of Senior Women's Team of India participated in a webinar today which was organised by Sikkim Cricket Association for Women's team of Sikkim.

Jemimah has played 16 one day internationals and 43 Twenty20 Internationals for India and is one of the regular members of Indian Women's team. During her one-hour



webinar she shared her experience with our players and said that "dreams do come true", all we

need to do is work hard to make a dream come reality. All the players attending the webinar felt

honoured, motivated and thanked SICA for conducting such programs for women players.

Apollo, Max hospitals confirm rollout of vaccine Saturday for 18+

NEW DELHI, 30 APR [NDTV]: Private hospital chains Apollo and Max will start Covid shots for people across the country between 18 and 44 from tomorrow, when vaccinations are opened to all adults.

Several states have said they cannot launch vaccinations for 18-plus people on Saturday as planned as they do not have vaccine stocks.

"The vaccination program will begin with limited quantities and will be ramped up in the weeks ahead. Apollo Hospitals will also be organizing special camps for corporates," said the Apollo group in a statement. Apollo says it will use Covishield shots.

Max hospitals also said they are getting ready to roll out vaccines for 18 years and above starting tomorrow.

In the latest phase of the nationwide inoculation drive that started in January, states and private companies can buy doses directly from manufacturers. Vaccine-makers will sell 50 per cent of their doses to the state government and private companies at higher rates while providing the rest to the Centre at existing rates.

Many states have complained about the differential pricing and say they have been told by the manufacturers that stocks will arrive later.

The companies say

they will prioritise the Centre, which will continue vaccinating those above 45.

Effectively, many among the younger beneficiaries may need to wait for now.

Private hospitals have to buy vaccines at up to ₹ 1,200 per dose.

Serum announced a price of ₹ 400 rupees for states and ₹ 600 for private hospitals, Bharat Biotech set the prices at ₹ 600 and ₹ 1,200 a dose.

This is the highest price across the world for Covishield - the Indian name for the vaccine developed by Oxford-AstraZeneca.

Both companies later slashed the prices for

state governments.

Apollo said the vaccines would be administered to those who have registered on the CoWIN app and have made an appointment for the vaccine jab at Apollo Hospitals.

"The second wave has come like a tsunami with an exponential rise in the number of cases. The second wave of infections has seen younger patients getting affected and vaccinating everyone above the age of 18 will help in stopping the relentless rise in COVID cases and bring a COVID-free future closer to reality," said Shobana Kamineni, Executive Vice Chairperson, Apollo Hospitals Group.

CM flags off Hamro Varta Cyclothon on Covid awareness

**SUMMIT REPORT
GANGTOK, 30 APR:**

Chief Minister PS Tamang appealed to the people of Sikkim to exercise regularly and follow all COVID-19 protocols. He said that regular exercise and sports make a person stronger and fitter and thus better adapted to fight infections and Coronavirus.

The CM was speaking at the flagging-off ceremony of an awareness cyclothon, 'Ride Against COVID-19' held here at Ridge Park on Friday morning. The 40-KM cycling event from Gangtok to Rangpo was organised by a local media house, Hamro Varta Television to create mass awareness among people on COVID-19 and its prevention.

In his address, the CM asserted that the State



government and Health Department are fully prepared to fight this second wave of COVID-19 in the State. He urged the people to always wear masks and not to come out of home unnecessarily and to strictly follow all guidelines and protocols

of COVID-19.

The Cyclothon was participated by around 25 cyclists, including Lok Sabha MP, Indra Hang Subba, Political Secretary to the CM, Jacob Khaling, Secretary to the CM, SD Dhakal, Additional Political Secretary to

the CM [East], Tshering Wangchuk Lepcha and former Mayor Shakti Singh Chaudhary. During the event, awareness on COVID-19 and its prevention was carried out by distributing leaflets and mic-ing along the route of the cyclothon.

Rotary Club of Uttarayon supports frontline workers



**SUMMIT REPORT
GANGTOK, 30 APR:**

Rotary Club of Uttarayon Believers Siliguri under Rotary International 3240 distributed PPE-kits, masks, sanitizers and snacks to frontline workers and other families residing in the area today.

Covid cases may peak next week in India, says Government advisor

NEW DELHI, 30 APR [REUTERS]: India's coronavirus cases may peak between May 3 and 5, according to a mathematical model of a team of scientists advising the government, a few days earlier than a previous estimate as the virus has spread faster than expected. The country has reported more than 3 lakh new infections daily for nine consecutive days, hitting another global record of 3.86 lakh today.

The surge has led to

a public health crisis in the country, forcing the government to seek oxygen, medicines and other essentials from countries around the world.

"Our belief is that by next week, the daily new cases nationwide would have peaked," M Vidyasagar, head of a government-appointed group of scientists modelling the trajectory of infections, told Reuters.

The group previously told senior government officials in a presentation on April 2 that cases would peak between May

5 and 10, said Mr Vidyasagar.

"We said (at that presentation) that it was not a matter of putting up some structures that would come up in July or August, because by then the wave will have ended," he said.

"Try to figure out how we're going to fight the fight for the next four to six weeks, that was the message. Don't waste a lot of time putting up long-term solutions because

your problem is right now," he said.

"India's first wave of the pandemic peaked in mid-September with 97,894 cases. The country is now reporting more than three times as many infections daily, taking the total number of cases to 18.8 million with 2,08,000 deaths. The real number of infections is believed to be 50 times more," said Mr Vidyasagar, as many people who contract the disease show no symptoms.

India extends ban on international flights till May-end

NEW DELHI, 30 APR [NDTV]: Amid an aggressive sweep of the second coronavirus wave, the Director General of Civil Aviation on Friday further extended the suspension of scheduled international flights till May 31. The earlier deadline for flights suspension was to end today.

"However, international scheduled flights may be allowed on selected routes by the competent authority on a case to case basis," the DGCA said in a circular.

The restriction shall not apply to international all-cargo operations and flights specifically approved by the aviation regulator, it added.

Scheduled international passenger services have been suspended in India since March 23 last year due to the coronavirus pandemic. But special international flights have been operating under the Vande Bharat Mission



since May last year, and under bilateral "air bubble" arrangements with selected countries since July.

Earlier this week, Australia announced a temporary ban on direct passenger flights from India as New Delhi battles a calamitous rise in coronavirus infections.

It follows similar moves by countries including Canada, the United Arab Emirates and Britain to halt or restrict flights in response to the spiralling Covid crisis in

India.

This morning, the country saw another record spike with 3.86 lakh Covid cases, taking the caseload to 1.87 crore. International support has started arriving with the United States, the United Kingdom and several other countries sending Covid emergency supplies.

The huge spike in infections has precipitated restrictive measures, night curfews in certain states. Prime Minister Narendra Modi, in an

address to the nation this month, urged state governments to use lockdowns as an absolute "last resort". The country has crossed the grim milestone of 2,00,000 Covid deaths.

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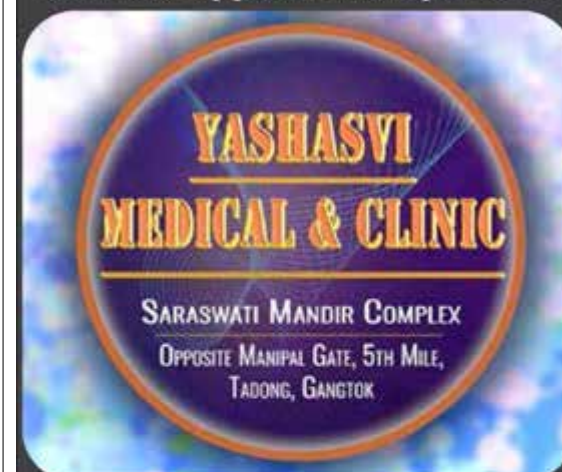
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Remain Inquisitive, Stay Informed

Without that there can be no real involvement

Advertisement spots on television are not expected to be profound, but sometimes the more entertaining ones can also be very illuminating. One such is the animated entertainer of some years ago that tries to sell Mentos with its wonderful spin on how humans came to rule the world. If it does not screen anymore, and if you happen to belong to a generation which missed the original run, try YouTube, this gem is surely available there. As for the TV spot, it is all about allowing the brain to light up, experimenting and progressing – changing, evolving and growing up. Regressive attitudes and closed minds are signs of a society in decay and the first signs manifest with withering inquisitiveness. Once a society starts growing indifferent to information [without which there is no grist for inquisitiveness], it ceases to be dynamic, without which there can be no growth. Stop growing, stop exercising the muscle that flexes ideas and atrophy sets in, and then everything tosses into a downward spiral. It goes without saying that it is inquisitiveness that led mankind out of the caves and into the world of microchips; developed language from monosyllables and clicks & clucks to discourses and epics and communication from shouted greetings to mobile phones and its emojis. It is curiosity, not necessarily necessity, which triggers inventions and changes mindsets. An inquiring mind strengthens democracy, reinforces accountability and substantiates public opinion. Stop being inquisitive, give up asking questions and its back to the stone age when everything happened because it was destined to or dictated by the biggest bully in the cave and no one was wiser.

Turn the mirror on Sikkim, or the neighbouring hills and plains. Whys and wherefores do not infiltrate conversations here which are invariably just litanies of complaints which end up with the most common words on everyone's vocabulary, "Ke Garne, Yestai Ho." A finality in dejection. And therein sits the root of most of the problems, from denials to dejections to corruption to poor human resource development/ deployment. The inquisitiveness is gone, replaced by defeatism, an acceptance of fate and absence of the energy to launch inquisitions. Examples proliferate all around... look around... notice. Someone takes a decision and while everyone nags, and some even wonder, no one demands an explanation.... All this because inquisitiveness and the interest to stay informed remain under-developed.

There could be two reasons for this, one, that the people have given up hope of getting answers, and the second, the people believe they know the reasons. Both are dangerous signs. People cannot give up their inquisitiveness, not in a democracy where it is not only their right to ask questions, but also their responsibility. As for the belief that they know the answers, this is even more dangerous because the belief is not an informed one, it is inferred and it is in situations like these that rumours and canards gain credence, doubts and suspicions proliferate and chauvinism dominates.

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India COVID Crisis: Four Reasons it Will Derail the World Economy

UMA S KAMBHAMPATI
THECONVERSATION.COM

The second wave of the pandemic has struck India with a devastating impact. With over 300,000 new cases and 3,000 deaths across the country each day at present, the total number of deaths has just passed the 200,000 mark – that's about one in 16 of all COVID deaths across the world. It is also evident that the India statistics are significant underestimates.

The virulence of the second wave in India seems to be related to a confluence of factors: government complacency, driven by poor data collection and being in denial about the reality of the data; a new variant with a hockey-stick shaped growth curve; and some very large and unregulated religious and political events.

It is clear that there is now a humanitarian crisis of significant proportions. India is a country of 1.4 billion people and makes up a sixth of the world's population. Here are some ways in which it is also going to affect the world economy:

1. A LOST YEAR FOR INDIA?

India is itself the fifth largest economy in the world and contributes significantly to world economic growth. With relatively high growth rates (of between 4% and 8%) and its large size, it has a significant impact on the world economy.

Even in early 2020, before the pandemic took hold, the IMF had cited India's indifferent output as the main reason for sluggish world growth figures in 2018 and 2019. The IMF downgraded its 2020 forecast to 5.8% partly because it expected more of the same from the subcontinent. Now it looks as if world growth for 2020 was down by around 4%, with India down 10%.

Everyone has been expecting a great rebound in 2021 from both India and the world, but that now looks seriously doubtful. For instance, Sonal Varma, India chief economist at the investment group Nomura, predicts that India's GDP will shrink around 1.5% in the current quarter. Coupled with significant pandemic-related problems also in Brazil and South Africa, we might expect the impact on world growth to be considerable – even before taking any knock-on effects into account.



2. INTERNATIONAL RESTRICTIONS

In terms of knock-on effects, the scale of the crisis in India is likely to mean that international restrictions remain in place for longer than hoped. In the words of Soumya Swaminathan, the chief scientist of the World Health Organization (WHO): "The virus doesn't respect borders, or nationalities, or age, or sex or religion." As others have asked rhetorically, can a country of this size be isolated?

On a recent flight from New Delhi to Hong Kong, for instance, 52 passengers tested positive for COVID. We also know that the Indian variant is already in the UK (while some of India's second wave, notably in the Punjab, has been caused by the UK variant).

Preventing this spread from India requires strict quarantines and travel restrictions. This is bad news for airlines, airports and the businesses that depend on them, so this too will have a large dampening effect on global economic growth.

3. PHARMA PROBLEMS

The pharmaceutical industry in India is the third largest in the world in terms of volume and 11th largest in terms of value. It contributes 3.5% of the total drugs and medicines exported globally and about 20% of the global exports of

generic drugs. If these exports are in doubt, there will be all sorts of consequences for healthcare around the world, which will again feed through to global growth.

Above all, in the current situation, India produces 70% of the world's vaccines. Serum Institute of India (SII) has been given the rights to produce the AstraZeneca vaccine for 64 low-income countries in the WHO's Covax programme, as well as 5 million doses destined for the UK.

The crisis in India has already meant that these exports of the vaccine have been postponed or called off, leaving many countries vulnerable to fresh waves of the virus and probably delaying their efforts to return to business as usual. If India is unable to provide vaccine supplies to the rest of the world, we can expect spillover effects in the form of recurrent lockdowns, increased need for social-distancing measures, and a significant decrease in economic activity.

4. SERVICES NOT RENDERED

India provides back-office staff for many activities in western Europe and the US, especially in the health and financial sectors. With these services now in jeopardy, the US Chamber of Commerce, for one, is concerned that the Indian economy could create "a drag for the global

economy".

For the UK, too, trade links with India are especially important in the aftermath of Brexit. This is demonstrated by Prime Minister Boris Johnson's two attempts to visit in 2021 – both cancelled at the last minute because of the pandemic.

Given all these issues, and the humanitarian crisis unfolding, it has become imperative for the world to act quickly to help India – whether such help is requested or not. We are seeing signs of this coming through, albeit after a short delay, from the UK (oxygen concentrators, ventilators); the US (vaccine raw materials, drugs, rapid tests and ventilators); and Germany (oxygen and medical aid).

Whatever is provided is likely to be a drop in the ocean of India's requirements, but at least it demonstrates a recognition that we are in this together. The Indian government may have been ineffective in the current crisis, but failing to recognise how it will affect the world would amount to an equivalent level of complacency. If the leading powers fail to do everything they can to help out, India's crisis will become a world crisis in short order, not only for health but also for the economy.

[the writer is Professor of Economics; Head of School, University of Reading]

India's crisis deepens, but vaccine sharing is yet to materialise

ROB REDDICK

THECONVERSATION.COM

India's deadly second wave is continuing to worsen, with daily new cases consistently exceeding 300,000 and deaths now having surpassed 3,000 a day. Hospitals are running out of intensive care beds and many are critically short of oxygen for treating patients.

Alarming, a lack of high-quality real-time data means that we don't actually have a clear picture of just how bad the situation currently is, writes Michael Head, Senior Research Fellow in Global Health at the University of Southampton. The proportion of people in India returning a positive result when tested is 18% – nearly double the World Health Organization's target threshold of 10%. This suggests a large number of positive cases are going unrecorded, meaning the outbreak is actually larger than the numbers suggest.

It is, as Michael says, an unfolding humanitarian crisis. It's also highly worrying for the rest of the world. This surge in cases could well stand in the way of ramping up protection using vaccines. India is the world's largest vaccine producer, creating doses not just for itself but for other countries too – including the UK. It also provides doses for Covax, the initiative set up to distribute vaccines equitably around the world. But when domestic infections started to surge last month, India blocked most of its vaccine exports – and there's no indication of when these might resume.

Rapidly rising case numbers have also given the B1617 variant – which was first discovered in India – the chance to spread. It's now been found in 17 countries. Although yet to be confirmed, there are concerns that the mutations it carries may make it less susceptible to the effect of vaccines. The sheer volume of new cases in India also raises the risk that other, troublesome variants



might emerge down the line, as mutations are generated by chance when the virus replicates.

As India faces this crisis, countries around the world are donating supplies and money. However, donations of vaccines to India have been less forthcoming, despite calls for countries with high vaccination rates to share their supplies. Foreign Office minister Nigel Adams has said the UK will only do so when it has a surplus of vaccines. The US has pledged to send 60 million AstraZeneca doses overseas, but in the future, "as they become available".

India is far from the only country that would benefit from this sort of sharing. After a great start, Ghana's vaccine programme has fallen off the pace, writes Nana Kofi Quakyi, Research Fellow at New York University. To a large extent, this is a direct effect of India's second wave. The African Union and Covax are two of Ghana's main vaccine suppliers, and both receive their doses from the Serum Institute of India. Restriction of its exports has caused Ghana's supplies to dwindle.

South Africa's COVID-19 vaccine programme also looks bleak, says Veronica Ueckermann, Adjunct Professor at the University of Pretoria. At its

current vaccination pace, it will take over a decade to reach herd immunity. Again, this is largely down to access – South Africa has struggled to get doses – though there have been problems with the vaccines it has procured, too.

Use of the AstraZeneca vaccine was halted when data suggested it was less effective against the dominant variant in the South Africa, B1351. Rollout of the Johnson & Johnson vaccine was also paused while blood clot risks were investigated, though with the US clearing the vaccine for use, South Africa has now restarted the rollout by giving it to health workers.

But even with restrictions lifted and India's exports potentially flowing again in the future, developing countries will still be left short of what they need. One solution, suggest Etienne Billede de Villemeur, Bruno Versavel and Vianney Dequiedt, would be to get vaccine manufacturers to offer "voluntary licenses" for key parts of their products, so that developing countries can make their own vaccines for a low price. However, so far the pool of COVID-19 technologies licensed in this way remains empty.

[the writer is Commissioning Editor, COVID-19]

Kathmandu's daily wage earners are worried about survival during lockdown

ANUP OJHA

KATHMANDU, 30 APR [KATHMANDUPOST]: With the Capital going into a 15-day of lockdown starting Thursday, Rajkumar Nepali on Wednesday bought 10 kg of rice, 3 kg of pulse, 3kg of beaten rice and two packets of cooking oil in preparation to confine himself at home during the lockdown. "Everyone in my locality is buying necessary items fearing a shortage, so I did the same," said Nepali, 31, who lives in a squatter settlement at Chadani tole in Sinamangal, Kathmandu.

Nepali is semi-literate and works as a mason. He has been living at the squatter settlement for the past one decade. He said he was jobless for about seven months last year due to the pandemic and remembers the period as the most difficult period of his life.

"You know shopkeepers don't trust squatters like me easily so they are reluctant to sell goods on credit," said Nepali. His job is not a regular one. "I have yet to receive Rs 20,000 in wages from a houseowner. Now after buying these items, I am broke," said Nepali, a father of two sons aged 6 and 10.

He said he had to spend Rs 10,000 last month to treat his son Raju for a broken elbow. "The government gave three days for people to return to their home districts but I can't go because our



family doesn't own much land and even that is barren," said Nepali, who left his village Makaibari-4, Dolakha, in 2011.

By Wednesday tens of thousands of people have already left the capital for their home districts after the government announced the prohibitory orders. But squatters like Nepali, who don't have much or anything at all back in their home villages have nowhere to go.

According to the Metropolitan

Traffic Police Division, Kathmandu, in the four days up to Wednesday over 200,000 people have left the Valley. "The number was very high on Wednesday and police found it difficult to manage the crowds at bus parks," said Superintendent of Police Shyam Krishan Adhikari, also spokesperson of the Division.

"If I had enough land for sustenance, I would have never come to Kathmandu. I left the village because life was very difficult but now since this pandemic started

life is not easy here either." He is worried about feeding his two children and wife Ujali.

Like, Nepali, Sabita Ghimire, 29, a mother of two children aged 4 and 10, says she is worried about her day-to-day survival. She used to work at Thuleko Mo:Mo fast food at Bakhudole, Lalitpur, but following the announcement of the lockdown, the eatery is closed and she has lost her job. Ghimire, who is from Musikot Municipality-4 of Gulmi, also works part-

time as cleaner at two houses in the Bakhundole area, but after the Covid cases spiked, she is worried that she might lose these jobs as well, the pandemic has made people fearful of outsiders.

Based on Cabinet's Monday decision, restaurants, public transportation, shopping malls, assemblies, seminars including any other places that see gatherings of people are all closed for 15 days, and officials say the Covid lockdown could be extended further as the Kathmandu Valley accounts for over 60 percent of the total infections in the country.

Ghimire's husband works as a security guard at a corporate house but he has told her that he has already sensed that the job won't last long due to the pandemic. The family lives in Bakhundole in a rented room for which they pay Rs 5,000 per month. Their monthly expenses total around Rs 25,000. Now jobless in the expensive city, she is more worried about the present than the future.

"What if we or the kids catch Covid? When we don't have enough savings to sustain ourselves, how will we pay for our treatment?" Ghimire said with a sigh of resignation.

Ghimire's family couldn't claim the food relief distributed by the City during last year's lockdown because they demanded the ward

office's recommendation, which the family didn't have as they were "outsiders".

Just like Ghimire, Nepali is worried about the well-being of his children. "Last year, due to the grace of god, nothing happened to my family, but I have heard that the new variant of Covid-19 is especially dangerous for children," said Nepali. "Since we live in a squatter settlement and share taps and toilets, we are more vulnerable to the virus."

Chadani Tole in Sinamangal, where Nepali's family lives, has over two dozen squatter families living in tin-roof shacks. The squatter settlements in Sinamangal's Ward-19 and Ward-31 have around 700 families and most of them work in the informal sectors.

According to the Nepal Landless Democratic Union Party, there are around 29,000 squatter families in the Kathmandu Valley, and many families will have to suffer if the government extends the 15-day lockdown further.

When the Post contacted Deputy Mayor of Kathmandu Metropolitan City Hari Prabha Khadgi if her office has any plans to provide food relief to the people like Nepali and Ghimire, she said they don't have any such immediate plans. "But if the lockdown extends to over a month, then the City will make a decision about food relief," said Khadgi.

Armed Forces get emergency financial powers to fight nation's Covid crisis

NEW DELHI, 30 APR

[PTI]: India's armed forces were today granted emergency financial powers to augment their efforts in the battle against COVID-19, the second wave of which has brought devastation to the country in the past few weeks. These new powers will help them operate facilities, procure equipment and resources, and perform any required urgent tasks.

They will establish and operate hospitals, quarantine facilities, and to undertake procurement of Covid-specific equipment without the usual clearances.

Making the announcement, Defence Minister Rajnath Singh today tweeted: "To empower the Armed Forces and speed up their efforts in the nationwide fight against COVID 19 situation, Raksha Mantri Shri @rajnathsingh invoked special provisions and granted Emergency Financial Powers to the Armed Forces today."

"Under these...Corps Commanders/Area Commanders have been delegated powers upto ₹ 50 lakh per case and Divi-



sion Commanders/Sub Area Commanders and equivalents have been delegated powers upto ₹ 20 lakh per case," a Defence Ministry statement said today.

"These powers have been devolved initially for a period of three months from 1st May to 31st July 2021. These are in addition to the emergency powers delegated to the Medical Officers of the Armed Forces last

week," it said.

Such powers were sanctioned last year, too, and helped the Armed Forces tackle the first wave effectively.

The latest move comes days after Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) General Bipin Rawat told Prime Minister Narendra Modi that all medical personnel who retired from the armed forces in the past two years will be recalled and deployed at

Covid facilities near their homes.

General Rawat also said that oxygen cylinders available with the military will be diverted to the hospitals that desperately need the live-saving gas which is now in shortage across the country.

Over 3.86 lakh more people were infected by COVID-19 yesterday hitting a new high, even as the country also record-

ed 3,498 deaths. These numbers come amid a huge international aid operation launched by many countries to help India.

The country's health infrastructure is facing a collapse, aided by a severe shortages of hospital beds, medicines, and oxygen. In Delhi alone, several big and small hospitals have been sending out SOS, seeking help.

of the pandemic.

India has been recording more than 3 lakh daily coronavirus cases for several days. The massive caseloads across the country have triggered shortages of hospital beds, medicines and life-saving oxygen.

In several cities, reports of people dying because of lack of oxygen and medical care have emerged.

Bihar currently has 1,00,822 active coronavirus cases. The government's official death count figure is 2,480.

Mizoram reports 140 new COVID-19 cases, 2 more deaths

AIZAWL, APR 30 (PTI):

Mizoram's COVID-19 tally rose to 6,019 on Friday as 140 more people tested positive for the virus while two new fatalities pushed the death toll to 15, an official said.

Two men aged 82 and 47 succumbed to the infection at the Zoram Medical College on Friday morning, the official said.

Three policemen, who have returned from West Bengal after election duty, were among the newly infected people, the official said.

Besides, 13 Border Security Force (BSF) jawans, who have travel history, three frontline workers and 12 children have tested positive for COVID-19, he said.

The official said that at least 2,937 samples were tested in the last 24 hours and 4.76 per cent of them came out positive for



COVID-19.

Of the 140 fresh cases, Aizawl district reported the highest cases at 100, followed by Serchhip (18), Kolasib (12), Lunglei (7) and Lunglei district (3) cases, he said.

Seventy-one patients have travel history while the rest 69 were found to have locally contracted the infection, the official said.

Mizoram currently has 1,122 active

COVID-19 cases, while 4,882 people have recovered from the virus.

The COVID-19 recovery rate in the state now is 81.11 per cent, he said.

Meanwhile, state Immunisation officer Dr Lalzawmi said that 2,01,043 people, including 50,910 senior citizens have been administered the first dose of COVID-19 vaccine and 45,435 of them have received both the doses.

Bihar Chief Secretary dies due to Covid complications

PATNA, 30 APR [NDTV]:

Bihar chief secretary Arun Kumar Singh on Friday died because of Covid complications. The senior Indian Administrative Service (IAS) officer was undergoing treatment for the disease at a hospital in state capital Patna.

Chief Minister Nitish Kumar, who received the news during a cabinet meeting, condoled his death, an official statement said. He said the officer was an efficient administrator and his death was an irreparable

loss to the administrative service.

Mr Kumar has announced that the officer will be cremated with full state honours.

Mr Singh, a 1985-batch officer, had been appointed the chief secretary of Bihar in February this year, days after the Janata Dal United formed a government in alliance with the BJP in Bihar.

He had replaced senior IAS officer Deepak Kumar.

India on Friday reported highest-ever



3,498 deaths in the last 24 hours amid the more dangerous second wave of coronavirus infec-

tions. The country also logged 3,86,442 Covid cases, which is the biggest spike since the start

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Durant scores 42, Nets torch depleted Pacers 130-113

INDIANAPOLIS (AP): Brooklyn Nets coach Steve Nash realizes that sometimes there's no need to overthink situations, especially when working with great players such as Kevin Durant. Nash let Durant do his thing on Thursday night, and the superstar responded with a season-high 42 points as the Nets glided to a 130-113 victory over the depleted Indiana Pacers.

"What can I say? I have the luxury of coaching Kevin Durant," Nash said. "You stick him in the game and good things happen."

Durant scored 22 points in the third quarter as the Nets stretched their lead to 21 points.

The All-Star forward took particular pleasure in drawing the attention of extra defenders, which opened up the offense for teammates. Durant finished with 10 assists. He was plenty efficient when he took his own shots, connecting on 16 of 24 in his eighth start since being sidelined for nearly two months with a hamstring injury.

"I want to create that double team," Durant said. "But when I have scoring opportunities, I like to take advantage as well."

It was his third game of 30 points or more since his return, which was also interrupted for



three games by a thigh injury.

"It makes it easy for me when he's scoring points," said Nets reserve forward Alize Johnson, who had 20 points and 21 rebounds. "It's fun to watch."

Johnson was drafted by the Pacers in 2018, but didn't have a job as recently as last month.

"The energy was there from the moment I walked into the building," Johnson said. "I was ready to go out there and prove that I belong."

"Incredible stat

line," Nash said of Johnson. "He played with energy and brings it never night."

Playing without Kyrie Irving and James Harden, the Nets built a double-digit lead by the second quarter and were never seriously threatened.

The Nets are 29-8 since Feb. 10, best in the league, and have clinched a playoff spot.

Caris LeVert scored 12 of his 36 points in the first quarter for the Pacers, but the Nets still led 35-28 after one behind Jeff Green's 12 points in the period. Brooklyn's

advantage reached 66-52 by halftime.

Edmond Sumner added 16 points and Doug McDermott scored 15 for the Pacers, who lost point guard Malcolm Brogdon in the second quarter with a sore hamstring.

"It's definitely tough," LeVert said. "As I continue to say, this has been a weird year. We've just got to continue to fight. We fought hard. (But) we definitely dug ourselves a huge hole."

The Pacers dropped to 11-19 at home. At 29-33, they're on track for

their second losing season since 2011.

TIP-INS

Nets: Irving (groin) has missed 17 games. Harden (hamstring) last played on April 5.

Pacers: Brogdon missed all five shots and had only one point. ... Already without its injured front court including All-Star forward Domantas Sabonis (back), Indiana finished with only one regular starter.

UP NEXT

Nets: Host Portland on Friday night. Pacers: At Oklahoma City on Saturday night.

Inbee Park tied for lead at LPGA event in Singapore



SINGAPORE (AP): Hee Young Park birdied her final hole Friday to move into a tie for the lead with Inbee Park at the HSBC Women's World Championship at Sentosa Golf Club.

Hee Young Park (68) and No. 2-ranked Inbee Park (69) had two-round totals of 11-under 133 at the LPGA event.

Inbee Park said she felt relieved after a birdie on the seventh hole.

"It was a little betrayal of my putter today," Inbee Park said. "Misread a few putts, but I still feel like I fought pretty well, especially the front nine."

Hee Young Park said she and Inbee have been friends since their early school days.

"We actually graduated in the same middle school back in Korea, so I've known her really long time, probably almost 20 years now," Hee

Young Park said. "A lot of personal talk a little bit out there. It makes little fun to play golf."

Another South Korean player, Hyo Joo Kim, was two strokes behind in a tie for third with Lin Xiyu of China. Lin birdied her last hole to also finish with a 68.

Former Women's PGA champion Hannah Green shot 66 — tied for the low round of the day — and now has 14 consecutive rounds under par. The Australian, who shot 71 on Thursday, was one of only three players who shot in the 60s all four rounds in Los Angeles last week.

"I think I managed to hit more fairways ... and a lot of greens today which is nice, but I gave myself a lot more opportunities and was able to capitalize on them," Green said. "Rolled the putter real-

ly well."

Green is in a group tied for seventh, four strokes behind. That group includes Lydia Ko (68) and Women's British Open champion Sophia Popov (70).

ANA Inspiration winner Patty Tavatanakit shot her second consecutive 70 and was seven behind. The 21-year-old Thai, who played college golf at UCLA, won the first major championship of the year in her rookie season on tour.

No. 1-ranked Jin Young Ko (76) was 3 over after two rounds, 14 strokes behind.

There is limited spectator access to the course because of the pandemic. Singapore has had only 30 deaths attributed to COVID-19 and most of the current virus cases are those who have arrived from overseas and are in quarantine.

More than 400 days between home matches for A-League team



SYDNEY (AP): It's been a long time between home matches for the A-League's Wellington Phoenix: more than 400 days in fact. The coronavirus-forced drought will soon end.

The A-League announced Friday that the Phoenix, vying for a play-off spot, will play a home game in the New Zealand capital of Wellington on May 22 against Western United. That will be followed on May 30 by the Phoenix' last regular-season match of the season in Auckland against the Perth Glory.

That's 433 days since the Phoenix played at Wellington's Sky Stadium on March 15, 2020, when they beat the Melbourne Victory 3-0 during the 2019-20 season. The competition was halted because of the pandemic after that match and the Phoenix squad later had to relocate to Australia.

Fans will be allowed to both games in New Zealand in May, and officials are hoping that 15,000 might attend each match. The league stressed that the matches are subject to no further outbreaks

of COVID-19 that could affect the current travel "bubble" that allows quarantine-free travel between New Zealand and Australia.

The Phoenix are in eighth spot, just two points outside the top six which qualify for the playoffs.

Because of the coronavirus restrictions and a ban at the time on travel between New Zealand and Australia, the Phoenix set up a "home-away-from-home" in Wollongong south of Sydney on Nov. 1 of last year for the 2020-21 season. They have played 10 home games in Wollongong and another in Newcastle north of Sydney.

It has meant being away from families and friends since then. A-League Commissioner Greg O'Rourke said the competition owed some thanks to all those involved.

"Being away for so long hasn't been easy for the players and staff by any stretch of the imagination, and it's credit to them that Wellington are firmly in the mix to finish in the top six," O'Rourke said.

"Because of the travel restrictions imposed by the government in light of the coronavirus pandemic, having Wellington based on Australian soil was the only way we could play this season. The fact they have done so without complaints, and just as importantly have played some great football along the way, is testament to (coach) Ufuk Talay and his players."

They're not the only professional sports team from New Zealand forced to re-base in Australia during the pandemic.

The National Rugby League's New Zealand Warriors played five months based in Australia last year. The National Basketball League's New Zealand Breakers also had an extended stay in Australia, basing themselves in Hobart, Tasmania in order to play the season.

The pandemic and travel ban also forced Super Rugby to hold separate Australian and New Zealand competitions, although teams from both countries will play each other in a joint trans-Tasman tournament beginning in mid-May.

Sumo wrestler dies month after falling on head during bout



TOKYO (AP): A Japanese sumo wrestler has died a month after falling on his head during a bout in a case that has raised questions about the sport's response to medical emergencies.

Hibikiryu, 28, died of acute respiratory failure on Wednesday, the Japan Sumo Association said.

The wrestler, whose real name was Mitsuki Amano, was thrown by his opponent during a bout at a tournament on March 26. Video of the bout showed he fell

hard on his head and lay face down for several minutes while sumo officials watched and waited for paramedics to arrive.

On a stretcher, the wrestler was conscious and told sumo officials that he felt his lower body was paralyzed, but his condition had been improving at the hospital, Nikkan Sports newspaper reported.

The Japan Sumo Association said Friday that it was unknown whether Hibikiryu's

death was related to his injury. It said details of the injury, including whether he suffered paralysis, could not be released. There was no immediate comment from his family.

There were no medical experts standing by to give him first-aid treatment, according to Japanese media reports. Wrestlers are customarily expected to get up by themselves, while medical experts are at the tournament site but

not standing by near the ringside.

Sumo officials are discussing ways to improve emergency medical response, including how to handle concussions, in future bouts, the association said.

The ancient Japanese sport, which originally was part of a Shinto religious ritual, has faced calls for reforms, including of its medical response and its ban on women entering the ring, which is considered sacred.

In 2018, the association came under fire after demanding a nurse and other women leave the ring, which they had entered to give first aid to an official who had collapsed.

Hibikiryu debuted in 2011 and rose as high as 24th in the 200-member sandanme-class, the fourth highest of sumo's six ranks.

Another young, lower-tier sumo wrestler, Shobushi, died last May at age 28 after contracting the coronavirus.

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Brazil backs away from the virus brink, but remains at risk

RIO DE JANEIRO (AP):

For most of this month, intensive care units across Brazil were at or near capacity amid a crush of COVID-19 patients, and sedatives needed to intubate patients dwindled. The nation's biggest cemetery had so many corpses to bury that gravediggers worked hours past sundown.

But Brazil has stepped back from the edge — at least for now — as burial and hospital services no longer face collapse. It has ceased to be the virus' global epicenter, as its death toll ebbed and was overtaken by India's surge. Experts warn, however, that the situation remains precarious, and caution is warranted.

The number of states with ICU capacity above 90% has slipped to 10, from 17 a month ago, according to data from the state-run Fiocruz medical research institute. And nighttime burials at Vila Formosa and three other cemeteries in Sao Paulo were suspended Thursday, after two weeks of declining deaths.

That comes as cold comfort in a country where some 2,400 people died every day over the past week, more than triple the number in the U.S. Brazil surpassed the grim milestone of 400,000 confirmed deaths on Thursday — a number considered by experts to be a significant undercount, in part because many cases were overlooked, especially early in the pandemic. The seven-day average has retreated from more than 3,100 deaths in mid-April, but Fiocruz warned in a bulletin Wednesday that it may plateau — and at an even higher level than it did last year.

"Our goal now is to make the numbers keep



going down instead of stabilizing. That's the most crucial thing," said Pedro Hallal, an epidemiologist and coordinator of Brazil's largest COVID-19 testing program. "It's good that they're going down, but let's not assume that this will be the last wave. There is hope that it will be the last wave, because of the vaccine, but that needs to be confirmed."

Given the slow vaccine rollout, there are millions more Brazilians vulnerable to infection, Hallal added, and the threshold scientists believe is needed to stop uncontrolled spread — 70% or higher of the population with immunity through vaccination or past infection — remains distant.

Brazil's death toll of 401,186 is the world's second-highest, with the majority recorded in just the last four months as a more contagious variant swept the nation. In the thick of the Southern Hemisphere's summer, crowds gathered and people boarded public transport in droves as mayors and governors relaxed the restrictions on activity that Brazil's President Jair Bolsonaro fervently opposes.

Some mayors and governors tightened such measures over the last month, helping to revert

the surge of infections, Fiocruz said. However, they have begun reopening again amid the early, encouraging data.

Valter Gomes, a 33-year-old textile worker in central Sao Paulo, has noted more people riding trains and reopening shops.

"Often the pandemic gets worse because a lot of people who have the opportunity to stay home don't. They go out instead," he said. "If everyone contributed, I don't think there would be such a big crisis of having to stop work, having these lockdowns."

Researchers at Imperial College London this week said Brazil's transmission rate has reached its lowest rate in months.

But the rate remains high, said Domingos Alves, an epidemiologist tracking COVID-19 data, and he argues it's too soon to roll back restrictions. Brazil risks repeating the errors of European countries that have seen third surges, because the country's decline in infections isn't yet sustained, he said.

"The situation in all Brazilian states requires adoption of more drastic measures to contain the virus," said Alves, an adjunct professor of social medicine at the

University of Sao Paulo. "The number of cases is very high and we aren't doing anything to contain the virus."

Brazil's number of confirmed cases is widely believed to be an undercount, and the virus is also gaining ground among its neighbors. The ICUs in Argentina's capital, Buenos Aires, have been pushed to critical levels. Peru, Venezuela, Uruguay and Colombia have seen cases jump in recent weeks. Health experts have cited the circulation of variants, including a strain believed to have originated in Brazil's Amazon, as a contributing factor.

"It's no surprise that many countries in our region have tightened public health measures by extending curfews, limiting re-openings and imposing new stay-at-home orders," said Carissa Etienne, director of the Pan American Health Organization. "These decisions are never easy, but based on how infections are surging, this is exactly what needs to happen."

Such recommendations remain anathema to Bolsonaro; last weekend he called lockdown measures "absurd" and suggested he could order the army into the streets

to restore order.

The president has consistently downplayed the disease and dispensed false hope by touting unproven drugs, which critics say only added to the nation's death toll. This week the Senate began an investigation into the government's alleged failures in managing the pandemic.

The troubled response has been reflected in health minister turnover; the fourth man to occupy the post during the pandemic, Dr. Marcelo Queiroga, took over last month. He has spoken of the need to boost vaccine supply, personally consults with scientists and has so far displayed the autonomy to promote mask use and social distancing. That marks a shift from his predecessor, an active-duty general who made explicit his deference to Bolsonaro's wishes on health policy.

Queiroga told reporters this week that the decrease in hospitalizations has eased demand for oxygen and sedatives for intubation. Stopgap donations from big businesses and the governments of Canada and Spain also shored up supply. The Health Ministry is also preparing a tender for the acquisition of more sedatives.

The minister has stopped short of embracing public health experts' calls for lockdowns and restrictions on activity, and hasn't ruled out use of drugs that rigorous testing has shown to be ineffective. But he is showing recognition that Brazil isn't yet free and clear.

"We are still in a very serious moment of the pandemic," Queiroga said. "Deaths are falling, but there are still a very high number." — AP videojournalist Tatiana Polastri contributed from Sao Paulo

Pentagon preparing for Taliban attacks during US withdrawal

WASHINGTON (AP): The Pentagon is preparing for possible Taliban attacks on U.S. and coalition forces as they withdraw from Afghanistan, a prospect that complicates the outlook for winding down America's longest war.

May 1 was the date all U.S. and other foreign forces were to have departed Afghanistan under a February 2020 deal between the Taliban and the Trump administration. As part of that agreement, the Taliban halted attacks on U.S. troops, and none has been killed since then. But the Taliban said it will consider the United States to be in violation of the agreement for missing the deadline for full withdrawal. Their representatives have been vague about whether they intend to attack starting May 1.

President Joe Biden's decision to proceed with a final but delayed withdrawal adds a new element of security risk as the remaining 2,500 to 3,500 American troops, along with about 7,000 coalition troops and thousands of contractors, begin departing. Biden has said all will be gone by Sept. 11, the date of the 2001 terrorist attacks that prompted the U.S. to invade Afghanistan in the first place.

"We have to assume that this drawdown will be opposed," Pentagon press secretary John Kirby said Tuesday in explaining why Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin decided to keep an aircraft carrier in the Middle East and to move at least four B-52 bombers and portions of an Army Ranger task force to the region as a precaution.

"It would be irresponsible for us not to assume that this drawdown and forces drawing down — both American and from our NATO allies — could be attacked by the Taliban,"

Kirby added.

Gen. Mark Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, told reporters traveling with him Thursday that the pullout is "complex and not without risk."

The military typically plans for worst-case scenarios to try to avoid being caught by surprise. The withdrawal from Afghanistan involves ground and air movements of troops, supplies and equipment that could be vulnerable to attack. For security reasons, withdrawal details are not being made public, but the White House and several defense officials confirmed Thursday that the drawdown has begun. Defense officials, speaking on condition of anonymity to discuss sensitive movements, said that in recent days some troops — described as "dozens" — and military equipment have left the country.

The State Department also is taking precautions. On Tuesday, it instructed all embassy personnel in Kabul to depart unless their jobs require them to be in Afghanistan. The order went well beyond the usual curtailment of staffers for security and safety reasons.

Even the most seasoned American analysts of the Afghan conflict are unsure what to expect of the Taliban. Bruce Riedel, a Middle East analyst at the Brookings Institution and former CIA analyst, wrote this week that it's unclear whether the insurgents will attempt to disrupt the withdrawal, but he says they may escalate the war.

Seth Jones, a counterterrorism and Afghanistan expert as director of the international security program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, said the Pentagon is wise to prepare

for attacks, although he thinks the Taliban is likely to show restraint.

"They just want us to go," he said in an interview. "And anything that starts to complicate that at least runs the risk of backfiring." Among other things, killing Americans could prompt the Biden administration to rethink the withdrawal, which already is highly unpopular among many Republicans.

The possibility of resuming conflict with the Taliban is one of several uncertain aspects of the U.S. withdrawal — beyond the key question of whether the pullout will lead to the collapse of the Afghan government. The U.S. intends to continue counterterrorism operations, as needed, against al-Qaida and potentially other extremist groups in Afghanistan, but it's not yet clear where those forces will be positioned. Also unclear is the extent to which American and coalition forces will continue to provide air and other military support for Afghan security forces during and after the withdrawal.

Gen. Frank McKenzie, who as head of U.S. Central Command is responsible for U.S. military operations in Afghanistan, has said little publicly about the likelihood of facing Taliban resistance.

"I would advise the Taliban that we will be well prepared to defend ourselves throughout the withdrawal process," he said at a Pentagon press conference last week.

The extent to which the Taliban continue attacking Afghan government forces during the U.S. withdrawal also is a Pentagon concern. Milley said Wednesday that Afghan security forces form "an outer layer" of security for American and coalition forces.

Growth in Burkina Faso gold mining fuels human trafficking

SECACO, BURKINA FASO (AP) —

For months, human traffickers beat and drugged Blessing, hauling the 27-year-old from one gold mine encampment to the next, where each night she was forced to sleep with dozens of men for less than \$2 a person.

The madam who lured Blessing to the landlocked West African nation of Burkina Faso with promises of a hair salon job, threatened to kill her if she tried to run away.

"Nobody comes to your rescue," said Blessing, wiping tears from her cheeks during a recent interview.

In December 2019, while the madam was away, Blessing finally got the courage to escape. With the help of local residents, she and six other women left the encampment and walked to safety, ultimately ending up in a United Nations transit center for migrants in the capital city of Ouagadougou.

Blessing's experience in the gold mining encampments is not unique. As part of a months-

long investigation into sex trafficking and the gold mining industry, The Associated Press met with nearly 20 Nigerian women who said they had been brought to Burkina Faso under false pretenses, then forced into prostitution. Some of the women, who like Blessing spoke on condition of anonymity out of fear for their safety, said they knew hundreds of others with similar stories. To protect their safety, AP is identifying the women by the names they used for sex work.

The AP verified the women's stories through interviews with aid workers, lawyers, police, local anti-trafficking activists, health workers, a trafficker, and members of the Nigerian community in several towns throughout Burkina Faso.

People with knowledge of the trafficking say most of the women come from Nigeria's Edo state, where promises of jobs in shops or salons in Burkina Faso sounded like a good way to support their families. Once

here, they were sent to work off debts in squalid conditions at or near small-scale gold mines.

While both Burkina Faso and Nigeria have signed the U.N. Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime, neither has finalized a joint plan on how to combat trafficking.

Burkina Faso's security sector, already struggling to stem a violent jihadist insurgency, is undertrained and ill-equipped to disrupt the expansive network of recruiters, traffickers, and pimps. As a result, the country not only struggles with trafficking within its borders but has also been identified as a transfer point for trafficking women into other countries, according to reports from the US State Department.

One man arrested and detained by local authorities for trying to traffic three women across the Burkina Faso border into neighboring Mali told the AP he didn't consider it human trafficking because he said the women

knew they'd be working as prostitutes.

"I feel somehow bad because it's not a good job for them to do. They say it's just a voluntary decision," said the 48-year-old car parts salesman from Nigeria, who spoke on condition of anonymity because he feared retaliation.

He told the AP that he had bought the women for \$270 each in Benin and was planning to sell them for more than twice that to a Nigerian madam in Mali. He'd done the same with two other women back in 2019.

Burkina Faso is likely to be downgraded in this year's Trafficking in Persons Report, an annual report issued by the U.S. State Department, according to two people familiar with the discussions who were not authorized to speak on the record. Generally, countries are downgraded if they haven't made significant steps to curb trafficking. Downgraded countries could also risk US economic and diplomatic penalties.

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PIONEER IN THE NEWS

Disneyland opening highlights California's COVID turnaround

ANAHEIM, CALIF. (AP): Four months ago, America's most populous state was struggling to combat a surge in coronavirus hospitalizations that packed patients into outdoor tents and killed hundreds of people each day.

On Friday, Disneyland, California's world-famous theme park, will reopen to visitors after an unprecedented 13-month closure in what tourism officials hope is a sign of the state's rebound from the pandemic. For now, the park is allowing only in-state visitors and operating at limited capacity.

"It has such a symbolic nature to really quantifying that we're finally rolling out of COVID," said Caroline Beteta, president and CEO of the state tourism agency Visit California.

The news comes as California boasts the country's lowest rate of confirmed coronavirus infections and more than half of the population eligible for vaccination has received at least one dose of the shots. It's a dramatic turnaround from December, when hospitals across the state were running out of ICU beds and treating patients at overflow locations.

Now, children are returning to school, shops and restaurants are expanding busi-

ness, and Gov. Gavin Newsom set June 15 as a target date to further reopen the economy, albeit with some health-related restrictions.

Theme parks were among the last businesses allowed to reopen in California, and Universal Studios and others have already thrown open the gates. That's a contrast to states with fewer restrictions such as Florida, where Disney World's Magic Kingdom resort has been up and running, though at lower-than-usual capacity, since last July.

Another major U.S. amusement park, Ohio's Cedar Point, opened last summer and will do so again for the upcoming season — only this time, it won't require masks on rides or outdoors where crowds can be avoided.

While California continues to "strongly discourage" anyone from visiting the state as tourists, the travel industry is banking on pent-up demand from its own 40 million residents for a comeback. An advertising campaign encourages Californians to travel within the state, mirroring a pitch made after the terror attacks of Sept. 11, 2001.

"We're back to that playbook," Beteta said. "It was very successful for us then, and we're hoping it will be for us now."

Disneyland is a major economic en-



gine in California, drawing nearly 19 million in attendance the year before the coronavirus struck, according to the Themed Entertainment Association. It and other such attractions were shuttered in March 2020 as Newsom imposed the nation's first statewide shutdown order.

The park and neighboring Disney California Adventure will reopen with a capacity that is currently capped at 25%

under state health rules. Reservations are required, hugs and handshakes with Mickey and other characters are off limits, and the famous parades and fireworks shows have been shelved to limit crowding.

California currently allows state residents and fully vaccinated out-of-state visitors to attend theme parks. The state could open its economy more fully on June 15 provided vaccine supply is sufficient and hospitalizations remain stable and

low.

But in a state with so many people shut in for so long, even in-state tourism could be a huge boost. Plus, Disney's California parks have long had a loyal local fan base while its Florida locations rely more heavily on international tourists, said Carissa Baker, assistant professor of theme park and attraction management at University of Central Florida's Rosen College of Hospitality Management.

'Plus-size' boy band in China seeks to inspire fans

BEIJING (AP): Gathered in a practice room, five generously proportioned young men in baggy black sweaters are patting their bellies and wagging their arms. Bearded with double chins, they shout "Hoo-Ha!" in time to upbeat African drums. The choreography is for the new song "Good Belly," by Produce Pandas. DING, Cass, Husky, Otter and Mr. 17 weigh an average of 100 kilograms (220 pounds) and proudly call themselves "the first plus-sized boy band in China."

That's a radical departure from the industry standard seen in South Korea — an super groups such as BTS, whose lanky young members are sometimes referred to in China as "little fresh meat." Yet, it seems to be working for Produce Pandas, who rose to fame after making it about halfway through "Youth with You," an idol talent competition hosted by iQiyi, one of the largest video platforms in China.

On the show, mentors and audience voters pick nine finalists, either individuals or group members, to come together to form a new band.

"The five of us may not have the standard look and shape of a boy band but we hope to use the term 'plus-sized band' to break the aesthetic stereotypes," Cass said in an interview.

The five, two of whom formerly sang in bars, are also unusual for their relatively advanced ages in an industry that worships youth and stamina. Most of their fellow contes-



tants on "Youth with You" began South Korean-style training while in their teens.

While Produce Pandas excited audiences and sparked discussion about how a pop idol should look, some taunting also appeared online.

Users of China's Weibo microblog seized on the Chinese word for panda, a homonym of which appears in the Chinese name for the Japanese horror movie "Ring," suggesting that watching them dance was similarly frightening.

Mr. 17, the band's main dancer, was the oldest contestant in the competition at age 31. He had been discovered on Douyin, the Chinese version of TikTok, where he posted clips of himself dancing in pajamas or while holding a bowl of rice.

He nicknamed himself "17" after his favorite age. The former petroleum company worker said he doesn't feel old, but admits that after

rehearsals, "I felt my energy was emptied."

The five were solicited from over 300 hopefuls by Beijing-based DMDF Entertainment, which wanted to build a band that would be rotund and approachable as well as inspiring.

Husky, who worked in IT, thought he would fit in perfectly because he has been chubby since primary school and has failed repeatedly to lose weight.

"I often work out one day then take a rest for the next three days, so the result is clear that I gained some weight instead," he said. The point is "stay in shape (and) not to lose weight, but to lose fat."

Echoing Husky, Cass said the upside to being on such a team is that they don't need to abstain when it comes to food.

"We don't mind eating like a horse. I feel sorry for the 'little fresh meat' bands whose members must follow a diet to stay slim. I feel great

whenever they look on enviously as we dig in!"

Team leader DING quit plus-sized modeling when he heard about auditioning for an "XXL" boy band, saying, "I feel this is probably the closest I can get to being on a magazine cover."

The five are now working on a new album, with songs including "Pursue Your Dreams."

"Saddle up on the horse and pursue your dreams. Don't idle your time away," the lyrics go.

Vocalist Otter, who has idolized the South Korean boy band Super Junior since he was 7, never thought he could be in a band that lives and performs together, and more importantly, encourages ordinary folk.

"I hope people will feel encouraged when watching our performance," he said. They can think, "If Produce Pandas can make a breakthrough and perform on a bigger stage, then 'why can't I?'"



BEACH BABE! The dancer and actress, Julianne Hough looks fab in a white swimsuit while vacationing in Tulum, Mexico.

ARIES:

There are periods of doing and periods of being, and they're both just as important, Aries. What you're experiencing right now is the latter. So, slow down. Come back to the present instead of oscillating between the past and the future. Trust that you will have some of the most profound revelations in moments of silence.

Taurus:

It's now or never, Taurus. If you don't break away at this point, you may be stuck in the given situation for a long time. So, take a stance—for yourself more than anything. You have what it takes to break the pattern. Remember, it's not going to be easy. There will be withdrawal symptoms. But, once you get past the initial phase, it's going to be an upward spiral.

GEMINI:

Everybody is entitled to their opinion, just like you're entitled to yours. Do you really want to go on an ego trip trying to prove your point, though? Word for the wise: take a step back from the drama. Retreat into that space of silence within yourself. You will soon be able to understand why your peace of mind is more important than winning any argument.

CANCER:

At any point of time, you have two options: to stay

where you are, or to choose the path of expansion. Growth is on the cards, Cancer, and it requires you to say yes to the unknown. Don't shy away from taking that first step. There are many, many adventures that await you on this journey. Remember, the mysterious forces have your back.

LEO:

Who says your dreams are too big or that what you're trying to achieve is way out of your reach? Beware of buying into the illusion created by your three dimensional reality. Now is not the time to repeat that old story. The cards are reminding you that there is a parallel reality available to you, where you can create the life you desire for yourself. Be mindful of the choices you make today and ensure they're in line with that big vision.

VIRGO:

This decision is yours and yours alone. Nobody on the outside can put themselves in your shoes and decide what needs to be done here. So, go into that space of silence. Tune into your inner Oracle. Trust what's coming through from the unseen realms without letting your logical mind get in the way. Those who practice divination may feel inspired to turn to their tools for guidance.

LIBRA:

We all have an idea of what love should look and feel

like. We all have an idea of what our ideal partner should be like. But what you're inviting into your reality is far better than all of your wildest dreams put together. So breathe out your inhibitions and breathe in the love. It's time to make space for magic, Libra. It's time to make space for what you truly deserve.

SCORPIO:

That the past year has been hard for those who have their own businesses is not news to you, Scorpio. But, that doesn't mean it's all downhill from here. There is a new and exciting opportunity on the cards for you this week, and it requires you to play your cards strategically. Word for the wise: do what it takes to make it yours.

SAGITTARIUS:

You've got love knocking on your door, Sagittarius, and it is not in any way being discreet. Open your heart and allow. Allow, allow, allow. Allow yourself to receive what has always been yours. Trust that connection is just as magical as you imagine it is. Yes, we know it's not always easy for you to let your vulnerable side show. Challenge yourself to embrace the virtue of openness nonetheless, and know that it will change your life forever.

CAPRICORN:

They call you when they need something, pretend to be close to you when it serves their fancy, and disappear as soon as you call upon them for help. This friendship had the word 'toxic' written all over it from the get-go. The cards are urging you to stop playing nice and recognise the relationships that are not serving you. It's time to protect your space fiercely and prioritise the most important person in your life—aaka you!

AQUARIUS:

Service is coming up as a big theme for you right now, and requires you to adopt selflessness as a virtue. That does not mean you have to change the course of your life or give up on what you have created. It simply means that it's time to expand your work in a way that includes and uplifts other people. Remember your soul's mission, Aquarius. You were sent here to inspire a major change in the collective.

PISCES:

Reality check, Pisces: you are only living a percentage of your potential. There is so much you're yet to explore within yourself. The cards are urging you to stop playing small, take a deep dive and own the gifts that were given to you at birth. For some of you, this may be a time of stepping into a bigger role. Let 'lead by example' become your mantra, wild one.