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NEW ISRAELI GOVERNMENT**

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SummitTIMES

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ON TOP OF THE NEWS

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Active cases go past 2K in Sikkim; 4 deaths take Covid toll to 155

**SAGAR CHHETRI
GANGTOK, 05 MAY:**

The number of active cases of novel coronavirus in Sikkim crossed the 2000-mark for the first time today with the detection of 221 new cases in the past 24 hours. Also in some sombre news, Sikkim lost four more lives to Covid-19 in the same 24 hours. The last time Sikkim lost four lives to the virus in a day was on 28 November last year.

There are currently, 2,050 active SarsCOV2 cases in the State. Of these, 178 are in convalescing in hospitals across the State at present and 1,731 are under home isolation.

Today, 198 more people were sent to home isolation while 20 Covid patients were hospitalised - 18 at STNM Hospital which is now attending to 120 Covid patients and two at CRH which now has 49 patients in its Covid ward. There are also nine Covid patients currently admitted at Mangan District Hospital.

There are also 13 patients currently in the two ICU facilities in Sikkim - nine at STNM Hospital and four at CRH-Tadong.

Of the 221 new cases, 171 were reported from East District, 24 from West District, 24 from South District and two from North District.

In the meanwhile, Sikkim recorded four more COVID-19 related deaths taking the state's death toll to 155. While three of the deaths were reported from STNM Hospital, one was at Central Referral Hospital, Tadong. With this, Sikkim has already lost six lives to Covid this week - one death each on Monday and Tuesday and now these four.

The 221 new cases were detected from the testing of 801 samples - 172 returning positive in RT-PCR testing of 680 samples and 49 more COVID-positive results in rapid antigen testing of 112 samples.

Sikkim's tally of confirmed cases



since the virus broke out has increased to 8,919. The number of recovered cases has also increased to 6,515 with the

discharge of 89 persons from home isolation after completing their isolation period.

2,195 more vaccinated in Sikkim

**SUMMIT REPORT
GANGTOK, 05 MAY:**

A total of 2,195 people received vaccine jabs at the 63 vaccination sites opened across Sikkim today.

With this, the state has now administered 2,12,688 vaccine doses - 1,63,194 dose-1 and 49,494 dose-2.

Data posted on the CoWIN website also brings the welcome news that vaccination has resumed in North Sikkim where 198 Covishield jabs were given today. North Sikkim had seen no vaccinations for the past two days. Thus far, 14,101 vaccine doses have been given in North Sikkim.

In East Sikkim, 1,206 vaccine doses were administered today, taking the total number of vaccine doses administered here to 1,01,414.

In West Sikkim, 692 people received the vaccine today and in South, only 99.

Thus far, 52,737 vaccine doses have been given in South Sikkim and 44,436 in West district.

In Sikkim's vaccine journey thus far, more men have received the vaccine - 87,847 thus far, with women trailing substantially with only 75,326 vaccine doses having gone to them.

When its comes to age, the 45-60 age-group dominates the chart with 89,444 doses having gone to this segment while the above 60-year-olds, for whom vaccination started first when opened to the general population, having received 53,631 doses.

Teesta Urja official becomes North Sikkim's first Covid fatality



**WANGCHUK BHUTIA
MANGAN, 05 MAY:**

A 45 year old male employed with Teesta Urja became North Sikkim's first Covid casualty when he passed away at Mangan District Hospital this morning.

Sources inform that he was rushed to the hospital from the Teesta Urja dam-site at Chungthang in an unconscious state and passed away in the hospital.

Rapid Antigen Testing after his death revealed him to be positive for Covid-19 and was cremated as per Covid protocol by Mangan Nagar Panchayat, it is informed.

Hailing from Andhra Pradesh, he is informed to have been employed as General Manager at the dam-site.

Taxes on Covid-related drugs, equipment are unacceptable

NEW DELHI, 05 MAY [NDTV]:

Indian and global medical experts are shocked at the Indian government making money off the sick and dying. Every expert consulted for this report said this has to stop.

A family that buys an imported oxygen concentrator still has to pay the government 12 per cent in taxes called IGST. Till May 1, this tax was 28 per cent. The reduction was announced as a relief measure.

Why 12 per cent? Why not zero tax at a time like this?

People who use these oxygen machines are covid patients and yet the government is actually asking them to pay taxes so that it helps government revenue. With oxygen concentrators, people may, with doctors' advice, be able to avoid hospitalization. Shouldn't a measure like this be rewarded or incentivized instead of being taxed?

Extracting revenue from ordinary people for the government budget is even more widespread -

the government is taxing people who buy Covid-related medical drugs like Remdesivir and others, as well as taxing the supplements and medical grade oxygen for oxygen cylinders, with a tax as high as 12 per cent.

Global experts question why is it necessary for India to make money out of this terrible crisis - when the people of India are on their knees.

Families all across our country are going through terrible suffering and pain; many are losing all their life savings trying to save their loved ones. Insurance companies don't cover those who are going through hugely expensive tests and Covid care at home.

At this time, the medical world is shocked to see what they call the government "profiteering" in the midst the grief and anguish that ordinary people of India are going through.

The widespread demand is that taxes must be immediately reduced to zero on all kinds of medical equipment used for Covid.

Lockdown-like restrictions in Sikkim till May 16, borders to be sealed

GANGTOK, 05 MAY [PTI]: Lockdown-like restrictions were imposed in Sikkim till May 16 amid a surge in COVID-19 cases, as per an official order issued on Wednesday.

The restrictions, which include the imposition of prohibitory orders under Section 144 of the CRPC which disallows any assembly of more than four people, will come into effect

on Thursday, it said.

Rangpo, Melli and Ramam borders will be sealed and all travel across these border points stopped for the next ten days. Inter-district travel has also been restricted, it added.

Army, police, medical emergency vehicles and vehicles carrying essential commodities have been exempted from the

purview of the partial lockdown.

All public gatherings such as weddings will not be allowed during the period. Special permits for funerals and other emergencies will be provided by the respective Block Development Officers and SDMs, the order said.

All business establishments throughout the state will be allowed

to remain open from 10 am to 4 pm and will remain completely shut on Saturdays and Sundays.

Pharmacies, shops selling essential commodities and milk outlets will be allowed to remain open.

Curfew will be imposed from 5 pm to 9 am, as per the order.

All government offices will also remain closed till May 16, it said.

Mental health issues on the rise amid pandemic and restrictions

SHUVAM DHUNGANA

KATHMANDU, 05 MAY [KATHMANDUPOST]:

Rajesh was excited to meet his friends when his college started in-person classes after months of lockdown last year. However, restrictions imposed by the government following the surge of Covid-19 cases across the country has forced the 22-year-old undergraduate student to stay at home again.

"I spend my days surfing the internet on my phone. However, I am already fed up," said Rajesh, who wished to be identified by only his first name. "I am scared of seeing social media posts. I have recently read news that there are no hospital beds available for Covid-19 patients and many people are dying in lack of treatment."

The second wave of Covid-19 has turned out to be more virulent and lethal, infecting more people and taking more lives.

According to the Ministry of Health and Population, Nepal in the last 24 hours reported 7,587 new coronavirus infections, the highest number recorded on a single day since the pandemic began. During this period, 55 lost their lives to the virus, the highest death toll in one day.

There have been 351,005 cases so far with 59,798 active cases, and the death toll stands at 3,417.

Besides causing financial and physical problems, the second wave of the pandemic has also affected people mentally, creating panic among people, especially the youth.

"I can't sleep properly thinking about my future. This Covid-19 has

delayed my second year BSW [bachelor of social work] exam once again. I have already lost one year and I don't want to lose another," said Rajesh. "I don't think the situation will become normal anytime soon and thinking about it gives me anxiety."

With the number of cases rising each day in the country, many people are having difficulty finding hospital beds, plasma and oxygen for the treatment of Covid-19 patients. People have turned to social media to get support and many are receiving the help too.

However, for others witnessing such a scenario all over their social media feeds has triggered their mental health.

"The uncertainty about their present and future, restricted to stay at home, seeing panic posts on social media and fear about new variants is all exacerbating mental illness," Dr Prabhakar Pokharel, a consultant psychiatrist, told the Post. "The second wave could be more severe for mental health because it came suddenly when everything seemed to be returning to normal."

When the government announced that the country's health system is unable to cope as coronavirus infections continue to soar, people panicked more which led to more stress, fear, anxiety and other mental health related problems, Pokharel added.

According to the World Health Organisation's Nepal office, the prevalence of mental disorders, such as depression and anxiety, is expected to rise with the soaring number of cases every day in Ne-

pal.

"Certain groups such as persons with existing mental health conditions and psychosocial disabilities were more vulnerable to acquiring Covid-19 and stress and needed continuous care. Moreover, not everyone had access to mental health services when they required it," states its report.

The World Health Organisation, Country Office for Nepal, has been assisting the Ministry of Health and Population in developing a Covid-19 Mental Health & Psychological Support intervention framework to draw adequate attention to mental health and psychosocial support services in the national emergency response and to continue delivering essential mental health services, according to the report.

Mental Hospital in Patan has been receiving calls from patients having problems like stress, anxiety and not being able to sleep as their close ones are infected, according to the Hospital.

"Social support is the key-share and keep talking to people," said Dr Basudev Karki, a psychiatrist at the hospital. "One needs to keep a healthy lifestyle, have regular sleep, exercise, do yoga, read, listen to music and take multiple breaks." The only way to manage stress in these times is to focus on living in the present, he added.

For Anita Dhital of Kathmandu, who has just finished her undergraduate studies and was looking forward to internship opportunities, the restrictions have come hard.

...turn Pg2

In some places, police excesses are rightfully frowned upon

PUNJAB COP SUSPENDED FOR KICKING STREET VENDOR'S VEGETABLE BASKET

CHANDIGARH, 05 MAY [PTI]: A Station House Officer in Punjab was suspended on Wednesday after a video showing him kicking a vegetable basket of a street vendor went viral on the social media.

SHO (City) Phagwara, Navdeep Singh was seen kicking the basket of a vegetable vendor in the video, prompting the police authorities to take action against him.

"Absolutely shameful and unacceptable. I have suspended SHO Phagwara. Such misbehaviour will not be tolerated at any cost and those who indulge in it will have to face serious consequences," Director General of Police Dinkar Gupta said in a tweet.

Police said Singh was seen damaging the property of a street side vegetable vendor.

Kapurthala Senior Superintendent of Police, Kanwardeep Kaur, said as a member of a disciplined force, such behaviour is against service rules and is unwarranted.

The behaviour of the officer has brought a bad name to the entire force, she said.

Taking strict action against the officer, he has been immediately placed under suspension. A departmental enquiry has been initiated against him, she said.

The officers of Kapurthala Police have contributed from their salaries for providing compensation to the vegetable vendor.

The Punjab government had ordered the closure of all shops not selling essential commodities till May 15.

Shops dealing in medicines and essential items such as milk, bread, vegetables, fruits, dairy and poultry products, meat and mobile repairing are allowed to operate.

Mamata sworn-in as Bengal CM for 3rd time, takes oath in Bengali



KOLKATA, MAY 5 (PTI):

TMC supremo Mamata Banerjee was Wednesday sworn-in as the chief minister of West Bengal for the third consecutive term after a massive win in the state assembly elections.

Governor Jagdeep Dhankhar administered her the oath of office and secrecy at a low-key ceremony at Raj Bhawan held amid the raging COVID pandemic.

Banerjee took the oath in Bengali language.

Apart from senior TMC leaders like Partha Chatterjee and Subrata Mukherjee, poll strategist Prashant Kishor, who played a key role in TMC's victory, and Banerjee MP nephew Abhishek Banerjee were present.

Banerjee has said her first priority after resuming office will be to tackle the COVID-19 situation.

Petrol, diesel price up 2nd day in row

NEW DELHI, MAY 5 (PTI): Petrol and diesel prices were raised for the second day in a row on Wednesday as state-owned fuel retailers resumed daily rate revision after a more than two-week long hiatus during assembly elections in states like West Bengal.

Petrol price was increased by 19 paise per litre and diesel by 21 paise a litre, according to a price notification of state-owned fuel retailers.

Petrol in the national capital now costs Rs 90.74 a litre and diesel comes for Rs 81.12 per litre.

Rates have been increased across the country and vary from state to state depending on the local incidence of taxation (VAT).

Oil companies had on Tuesday resumed daily price revision in line with cost after ending an 18-day hiatus. Prices were on Tuesday hiked by 15 paise per litre for petrol and 18 paise on diesel.

In two days, more than half of the 67 paise a litre reduction in petrol and 74 paise per litre cut in diesel prices effected between March 24 and April 15, has been wiped

out.

Oil companies, who have in recent months resorted to unexplained freeze in rate revision, had hit a pause button after cutting prices marginally on April 15. This coincided with electioneering hitting peak to elect new governments in five states including West Bengal.

No sooner had voting ended, oil companies indicated an impending increase in retail prices in view of firming trend in international oil markets.

Despite the concerns about rising COVID-19 cases in India denting

demand, crude oil prices in the international market have risen primarily on account of strong US demand recovery and a weak dollar.

Prices have been on a continuous uptrend since April 27, an industry official said adding crude oil price hit USD 65 per barrel mark.

It is expected that the crude oil prices in the international market will remain firm in the near future, exerting upward pressure, he said.

State-owned fuel retailers, IOC, BPCL and HPCL, who are supposed to revise rates daily based on input cost, had

raised petrol price by Rs 21.58 per litre and diesel by Rs 19.18 a litre since the government raised excise duty in March last year.

Central and state taxes make up for 60 per cent of the retail selling price of petrol and over 54 per cent of diesel. The union government levies Rs 32.90 per litre of excise duty on petrol and Rs 31.80 on diesel.

In Mumbai, the petrol price was hiked to Rs 97.12 a litre on Wednesday from Rs 96.95, while diesel rates were increased to Rs 88.19 from Rs 87.981, the price notification showed.

920 deaths in Maharashtra, highest ever in a day; 57,640 new cases

MUMBAI, 05 MAY [NDTV]: Maharashtra on Wednesday reported a record 920 new deaths from COVID-19 and more than 57,000 new cases even as authorities said some of the worst affected districts in the state showed a declining trend in infections.

Capital Mumbai reported 3,879 new cases and 77 deaths while Pune logged 9,084 cases and 93 deaths.

The state currently has 6.41 lakh active cases.

According to officials, of the 920 deaths reported on Wednesday, 414 took place in the last 48 hours and 219 in the last week. The other 287 deaths are from the period before last week.

The figures come on a day when the Supreme Court praised Maharashtra's handling of the second wave of infections, recommending that the centre take notes from the "Mumbai model" to try and ensure oxygen supplies to Delhi. It also refused to stop the High Court from monitoring the oxygen situation.

Maharashtra Health Minister Rajesh Tope on Tuesday evening had said that 15 districts in the state - the worst-affected state with around 6.6 lakh active cases - are showing a decline in coronavirus caseloads.

The districts reporting a drop in cases are Mumbai, Aurangabad, Thane, Nashik, Raigad, Nagpur, Latur, Amravati,

Nanded, Dhule, Bhandara, Nandurbar, Osmanabad, Chandrapur and Gondia.

However, after a dip for two consecutive days, Mumbai's daily infections rose by over 1,300, while daily fatalities went up by 15. The day before the financial capital of the country had witnessed 2,554 cases and 62 deaths.

Less than 30,000 coronavirus tests had been conducted every day in the last three days, while 35,377 swab samples were tested in the last 24 hours.

Mumbai had reported the highest 11,163 COVID-19 cases in a day on April 4, after which the cases began to decline.

United Airlines starts online fundraising campaign for Covid Relief in India

NEW DELHI, 05 MAY [PTI]: The US-based United Airlines Wednesday said it has started an online fundraising campaign for Indians affected by the second wave of coronavirus pandemic.

"Customers can donate to the airline's relief partners: Airlink, Americares, Global Giving Foundation and World Central Kitchen," the airline said statement.

"United is offering up to 5 million bonus miles to encourage MileagePlus members to support this effort and will

match each donation up to a total of USD 40,000 in cash donations," it added.

MileagePlus is customer loyalty program of United Airlines where passengers can earn and use miles (points).

India has been badly hit by the second wave of the coronavirus infection as hospitals in several states are reeling under a severe shortage of oxygen, drugs, equipment and beds.

In addition to its fundraising efforts, United will also continue to leverage its cargo operations to transport

greatly needed medical equipment to the region, the airline's statement said.

Between April 28 and May 2, United operated 20 flights, transporting more than 300,000 pounds of medical supplies to India, it mentioned.

A record 3,780 fresh Covid-19 fatalities were registered in a single day in India taking the death count to 2,26,188, while 3,82,315 new coronavirus infections were recorded, according to the Union Health Ministry data updated on Wednesday.

With the fresh cases, the total tally of Covid-19 cases in the country climbed to 2,06,65,148.

IP BAJPAI

NEW DELHI, 05 MAY [NDTV]: Should the BJP begin to panic now on account of the panchayat election results in Uttar Pradesh? Has the Covid bug finally bitten the voters in India's most-populous state, a state that accounts for 80 Lok Sabha seats and will vote for its next government 10 months from now? Or are opposition parties and their supporters clutching at straws?

The seeming defeat of the BJP in these elections has been described by some in the party as a problem of many rebels in the fray who will return to the mother-ship. For those who are headlining this result, is too much being made of basically rural elections where many local issues, personalities and unorthodox techniques of 'vote-getting' determine the winner?

Candidates in these zila panchayat elections don't officially get a party symbol on the ballot paper, but parties do indicate who their candidate is, support her campaign and push for her win. But, as the results below show, it is Independents and others that have come away as the big winners with 40% of the seats.

That said, the table



below shows the BJP trailing the Samajwadi Party (SP) quite significantly across the state by over 200 seats. If we add all the opposition parties together, that would take them to close to 50% of all the seats contested. That is a lot in a state where the BJP swept the last assembly election in 2017 with 40% of the vote and 321 of a possible 403 seats.

The BJP is probably right: that with its money power, political patronage and allure to rebel candidates, it may be able to muster majorities in many zila parishads. But it is highly embarrassing and significant that in key districts which are the constituencies of the Prime Minister and

the Chief Minister, the party has done poorly and independents may not be able to help them take power.

In fact, Varanasi is the only pit stop the PM made during his West Bengal campaign to check how covid was being handled. The answer from voters seems to be "not very well". The BJP only got 7 out of 40 seats. In Gorakhpur, Adityanath's home constituency, no party is ahead, but to be neck and neck with SP doesn't say much for home turf.

More importantly, in the 2017 election, the BJP swept the rural areas of Agra, Kanpur, Allahabad, Lucknow and Meerut - so the setback in the same rural areas is a prob-

lem. They could take heart in the fact that they lost Varanasi Zila in 2016 as well. But at that time, the SP, as the then ruling party, was accused of using the official machinery to win the Zila elections. It is unlikely that the BJP did not use its own and the state's machinery this time, which makes the results even worse.

So is it Covid that has pushed people to vote against the BJP? Just like in Bengal, it is difficult to correlate, but even there, the votes cast for Mamata Banerjee's Trinamool saw a big upswing in the last two phases as Covid cases grew. The Left-Congress votes seem to have en masse moved to the Trinamool, but it is difficult

to conclude that it was just Covid that pushed the voters to punish the BJP for the centre's Covid management and support Mamata.

And yet, for the BJP to be blasé and say that in these local elections, it's rebels who have defeated their candidates and that they will reconcile with the party would be ignoring the reality on the ground. Reported cases running at 30,000+ for more than a week, and a collapsing infrastructure, is not helping their cause. The BJP will need to work on rebuilding people's confidence in their ability to deliver.

That said, let's not forget that the Modi and the BJP have the ability to do it. They did it after demonetization, sweeping Uttar Pradesh in 2017 even though everyone was predicting a fallout. At that time, they sold it as an attack on the rich. In 2019, they leveraged the Balakot surgical strike. The agenda and selling points of Hindutva, direct transfers, and a well-oiled machine isn't going to give up that quickly. UP isn't Bengal, it is the heart of their majority, and they will push very hard to keep it that way. And the divided opposition does them a giant favour.

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Mental health issues...

"I am having difficulty dealing with my emotions," said Dhital, 22. "I now sometimes completely lose my appetite. Neither can I sleep properly."

For Dhital, fears of contracting the novel coronavirus and lack of medical facilities to get treatment in the event of getting infected has compounded her mental state.

"This really triggers me. What if me and my family contracted the virus, there would be no hospital beds and oxygen in government hospitals while the private hospital will charge a huge amount after being admitted," she added. "I used to go out to meet my friends, or go to relatives' homes. All that has stopped and I started feeling being caged."

Mental health related problem has been a challenge for Nepal even before the Covid-19 pandemic with thousands of people committing suicide every year.

According to a 2015 report of the World Health Organisation, Nepal ranked 126th by suicide rate globally and records an estimated 6,840 suicides annually—8.2 suicides per 100,000 people.

More and more suicide deaths are being reported across the country every year, according to police data. A total of 5,124 people committed suicide in the fiscal year 2016-17. The number rose to 5,317 in 2017-18 and to 5,785 in 2018-19.

According to the data provided by Nepal Police, during the lockdown period last year a total of 2, 218 people committed suicide.

The government though has not refrained from using the term "lockdown", the prohibitory orders that have been in place are going to be made stricter, at least in Kathmandu Valley, starting Thursday. According to chief district officers of Kathmandu, Bhaktapur and Lalitpur, shops that were allowed to operate between 5pm to 7pm will remain shut. People can buy their daily essentials only in the morning until 9am.

The stricter provisions are being implemented to break the chain of virus transmission. This, however, will mean, people will be spending even more hours at home.

Experts suggest people should try to engage themselves in some creative fields rather than spending much time on social media.

"Rather than being panicked, people should take proper precautions and not look at social media sites much," said Pokharel, the consultant psychiatrist, "as social media is often filled with negative news which spreads rapidly and causes panic and stress among people."

HERE IS WHAT DOCTORS SUGGEST

- Avoid focusing on statistics that serve no purpose for the common man. All one needs to do is focus on their own self which means the same old stringent measures of wearing a mask and staying indoors.
- Follow a disciplined routine. Discipline helps the brain to focus on the task at hand and not stray away into unnecessary negative thoughts.
- Pursue a creative activity.
- Exercise releases endorphins which are natural painkillers. It also gives a sense of accomplishment while keeping us physically fit and improving immunity.
- Adequate sleep and sleep-wake patterns allow for the balance of neurochemicals to be restored so the emotional exhaustion and burnout is low.
- Healthy diet is always important to improve physical and psychological stress tolerance.
- Connect with family and friends.

Nepal inaugurates hydro power plant rebuilt with Indian assistance

KATHMANDU, 05 MAY: The newly rehabilitated small hydro power plant at Chandannath Municipality in Nepal's Jumla district was virtually inaugurated on Wednesday, said the Indian embassy in Kathmandu. The small hydro power plant was built with Indian financial assistance of Nepali Rs.26.39 million.

"Newly rehabilitated Small Hydro Power Plant at Chandannath Municipality in Jumla District, built with Government of India's financial assistance of NRs 26.39 million, was virtually inaugurated by Karun Bansal, First Secretary (DP&R) of the Embassy of India, Kathmandu; District Co-ordination Committee, Jumla and Nepal Electricity Authority, Jumla," the release from the Indian Embassy stated.

The Small Hydro Power Plant at Chandannath Municipality in Jumla District was built in 1983 by Nepal Electricity Authority with power production capacity of 200 KW. The Power Plant was damaged due to natural calamity.


"At the request of user committee, local people

& DCC, Jumla, the Government of India extended financial support for the rehabilitation of Small Hydro Power Plant in Jumla District," the release stated.

The Government of India grant, under "Nepal-Bharat Development Cooperation", was utilized for construction of Reservoir Tank and Rehabilitation of Small Hydro Power Plant. The Power Plant would benefit approximately 20,000 people of Chandannath Municipality in Jumla District.

"India has already completed 450 HICDPs in Nepal, of which 10 are in Province 6, including 2 in Jumla District. 4 Government of India funded projects are under various stages of completion/implementation in Province-6. In addition to above, the Embassy of India has gifted 5 ambulances to various health posts, NGO in Jumla District," the release said.

"This Small hydro power plant would contribute to meet the needs of region where there is no major technological development and they are able to improve the population's quality of life," it added.



ANTHYESTI KRIYA (AARGHU)

The 21 days Anthyesti Kriya of Late Shri Prem Kumar Gurung S/o Late Shri B.B. Gurung, who left for his heavenly abode on 24th of April, 2021 (Saturday) falls on 15th of May, 2021 (Saturday).


All relatives, friends and well wishers are requested to join the bereaved family in offering prayers for the departed soul at their Ancestral Home, Nalam, Namthang, South Sikkim while keeping in mind the prescribed CoVid-19 protocols.

The family members also express gratitude to all those who stood by them during the time of bereavement.

RSVP

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Bookies employed cleaner to do ‘pitch-siding’ during 1 game in Delhi, says BCCI ACU Chief

NEW DELHI, 05 MAY [PTI]: The recently-suspended IPL witnessed potential corruptors plugging an accredited cleaner at Delhi's Feroz Shah Kotla ground for doing "pitch-siding" which helps ball-to-ball betting, BCCI Anti-Corruption Unit chief Shabbir Hussain Shekhamad Khandawala has revealed. The new modus operandi was observed during one of the IPL games at New Delhi where a designated cleaner was using the time lag between actual match action and live TV coverage to help in ball-by ball betting, which is also known as court-siding or pitch siding. Pitch-siding is the practice of transmitting information from sporting events for the purpose of gambling, or directly placing bets.

"One of my ACU officers caught a person and handed over the details to Delhi Police. While that partic-

ular offender managed to flee leaving behind his two mobile phones, ACU lodged a complaint with the Delhi Police," Hussain, a former DG of Gujarat Police, told PTI on Wednesday.

"We are thankful to Delhi Police that in a separate incident they caught two other persons from the Kotla on ACU tip-off."

The Delhi Police arrested two people with fake accreditation cards during the IPL match between Rajasthan Royals and SunRisers Hyderabad on May 2.

"So on two separate days, these people managed to get access to Kotla. The one who fled came in the garb of a cleaner. However, we have all his details as he was employed for the tournament. His Aadhar Card details have been handed over to Delhi Police," Hussain said.

"I am confident that he will be caught in a day or two. He is

a small fry working for a couple of hundred or some thousand bucks may be," the ACU supremo said.

But he did agree that lower-rung staff might be used by a bigger syndicate since, because of COVID-19, there is no access to hotels given the bio-secure measures.

"...as situations and circumstances change, so does the modus operandi of crime. But we are up for it," Hussain said.

So how did cleaning staff come under the ACU radar?

"He was standing (inside Feroz Shah Kotla premises) in a secluded area all by himself and so one of our officers approached and asked him 'What are you doing here?'"

"He said: 'Main apne girlfriend se baat kar raha hoon. (I am talking to my girlfriend).'"

"My officer then asked him to dial the number he was talking to and then asked him to hand over the phones. Just

when he was going through the contents of his phone, the guy fled from the spot," Hussain revealed but did not divulge during which match the incident.

What was more interesting was that he was wearing the IPL accreditation card which all the class IV staff are given during the tournament from bus drivers, to cleaners, porters etc.

"It was one of the evening matches in Delhi. He was wearing an I-card. Also what raised suspicion was he had two mobiles," he said.

"The information he may be supplying could be to someone more influential among bookmakers and so we needed to inform the Delhi Police. Delhi Police has responded positively and thus next instance two people were arrested."

Hussain also confirmed that the ACU didn't receive any complaint of corrupt ap-

proaches being made to players or support staff involved in IPL during the 29 games that were held.

"Obviously with bio bubble and no crowd around, it certainly becomes a bit easier to manage as there is no physical proximity of (face to face meeting with players) questionable characters. When there is crowd, it becomes difficult to check anyone and everyone," Hussain said.

He also said that during the Mumbai leg, the hotel in which SunRisers Hyderabad team was staying had three people with questionable past record and whose names were there in ACU database. However, they couldn't come in contact of the players.

"The moment we had information, we got in touch with Mumbai Police. The Police Commissioner of Mumbai took immediate cognisance and the Mumbai Police got hold of those three," he added.

Provide free vaccine for all in time-bound manner: Mamata Banerjee to PM

KOLKATA, 05 MAY [PTI]: Shortly after taking oath as the chief minister of West Bengal for the third consecutive term, Mamata Banerjee on Wednesday wrote to Prime Minister Narendra Modi, urging him to facilitate free vaccines for all in a "transparent and time-bound manner".

Ms Banerjee, in her letter, also expressed concern over the dearth of oxygen cylinder in West Bengal, and stressed that the current health system "will have to be strengthened".

"Considering the severity of the matter in its entirety, I would like to request you to kindly look into free vaccination as universal immunisation for all in a transparent and time-bound manner (sic)," she said.

"At present, vaccine availability is too inadequate...and the central government's direction to extend vaccination up to 18 years makes it unrealistic. So supply of vaccines is the core issue that needs to be addressed now," she said.

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Philipose Mar Chrysostom, India's longest serving Bishop dies at 103

THIRUVANANTHAPURAM, 05 MAY [NDTV]: Reverend Dr Philipose Mar Chrysostom, one of India's well-known religious leaders and the oldest serving Bishop died on Wednesday. Philipose Mar Chrysostom died due to age-related ailments, a church spokesman said. He was 103.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi took to Twitter and paid rich tribute to Reverend Dr Philipose Mar Chrysostom. "Sadened by the demise of His Grace The Most Rev. Dr. Philipose Mar Chrysostom Mar Thoma Valiya Metropolitan. He will be remembered



for his rich theological knowledge and many efforts to remove human suffering. Condolences to the members of the Malankara Mar Thoma Syrian Church," PM Modi tweeted.

An outstanding religious leader and a humanitarian, Reverend Dr Philipose Mar

Chrysostom, was awarded the Padma Bhushan by President Ram Nath Kovind in 2018. Well-known Malayalam filmmaker, Blessy has made a documentary on the life and vision of the Bishop - '100 years of Mar Chrysostom.'

"He will be fond-

ly remembered for his kindness and warmth that touched one and all," tweeted Vice President M Venkaiah Naidu after Reverend Dr Philipose Mar Chrysostom's death.

Kerala Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan, in his condolence message wrote, "Padma Bhushan Dr. Philipose Mar Chrysostom Valiya Metropolitan brought people together transcending the boundaries of religion and politics, cared for them and made them laugh. Beloved thirumeni's passing is a loss to humanity, a void that cannot be filled. Respectful

homage."

"My heartfelt condolences for the passing of His Grace the Most Rev. Dr. Philipose Mar Chrysostom Mar Thoma Valiya Metropolitan Thirumeni. His kindness received love and affection from all communities. He will be fondly remembered, tweeted Congress leader Rahul Gandhi.

Rev. Dr. Philipose Mar Chrysostom Mar Thoma Valiya Metropolitan is credited with implementing many projects for the benefit of the poor and the downtrodden. He was born on April 27, 1918.

"Stressful Lottery": Online hunt IN INDIA TO GET VACCINATED

NEW DELHI, 05 MAY [REUTERS]: Tech experts have written software code and designed websites to help people book scarce COVID-19 vaccinations online, raising concern about an unfair advantage for the tech savvy and jeopardising chances of an equitable vaccine rollout.

India has faced criticism for a slow vaccine campaign as it battles a second wave of coronavirus infections that is seeing about 350,000 new cases recorded every day. Only 2 per cent of its 1.3 billion population have been fully immunized.

The government further opened up vaccination for adults from May 1 but registration on its CoWIN website is mandatory for those between the ages of 18 and 44. Slots are hard to get as demand far outstrips supply.

In a bid to streamline the process, computer experts have used the publicly available coding of the CoWIN platform to create websites that post results every few minutes after running automated searches on the government website.

Alerts are sent over email and routed to several Telegram app chat groups where thousands are waiting.

Berty Thomas, 35, automated a search to book

himself a slot then created a website - under45.in - which checks for slots and sends alerts to about 100,000 people in 60 Telegram groups in various cities.

"I feel happy I'm able to use my skills to help people get vaccines," said Thomas, an investment banker based in Chennai.

Shyam Sunder said his website - getjab.in - was notifying users by email when slots become available. Some 80,000 people from 400 districts across the country had registered with his site, he said.

But the technological workarounds are facing criticism from those who say they sacrifice the

goal of vaccine equity in a country where many people - especially in rural areas - do not have the digital skills to join the online hunt.

"What we need: Free and equitable vaccination policy. What we have got: Techies making use of scripts to quickly book off the entirety of whatever little vaccine slots that open up," Twitter user Rakshith said.

RS Sharma, chairman of the government panel managing the CoWIN platform, told Reuters security measures were in place and there was no unfair use of the booking platform, which he said was getting 55,000 hits a

second.

To book a slot, users of the CoWIN website need to log in with their mobile phone number and get a one-time password, before beginning their hunt of vaccine centres via an area code or district name.

In the short time that takes, slots often get snapped up.

But the automated alerts offer no guarantees. A Wednesday morning alert for some shots posted on one Telegram group for Bengaluru city had more than 100 comments, with only a few saying they succeeded, while others complained slots vanished in no time.

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Director

GOVERNMENT OF SIKKIM
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DATE CORRIGENDUM

RO. NO:31/IPR/PUB/CLASSI/21-22,Dated:- 20.04.2021
Name: VEHICLE AUCTION NOTICE

Terms & condition vide SL Nos. 4&5, the date of opening of tenders for condemned Govt. Vehicles has been fixed on 4th June 2021 instead of 12th May 2021 and last date of submission of tender forms postponed to 3rd June 2021 instead of 11th May 2021, due to present pandemic situation.

Deputy General Manager(Mech)
,Central Traffic Workshop, SNT Division,
Transport Department

R.O. No. 44/IPR/Pub./Classi./21-22 Date: . 04.05.2021

SIR THOTUB NAMGYAL MEMORIAL HOSPITAL
GANGTOK SIKKIM 737101
WALK IN INTERVIEW

A walk-in interview will be held for local eligible candidates for filling up two (2) post of Laboratory Technician on contractual basis under the project "Establishment of Network Of Research Laboratories for Managing Epidemics and Natural Calamities" in the Dept. of Microbiology STNM Hospital Gangtok.

Details of the Post is as furnished under:

Sl no	Name of post	No of post	Essential qualification	Preferential qualification	Monthly emolument
1.	Laboratory technician	02	Intermediate/12 th pass in science stream with two-year Diploma in Medical Laboratory Technician from recognized Institute	Experience in working in a Microbiology Laboratory	Rs. 18,000/-

The following documents (attested by the competent authority) should be submitted on the day of the interview

- Age proof: birth certificate/Class X mark sheet
- Degree certificates of Diploma in Medical Laboratory Technician (DMLT)
- Sikkim Subject/Certificate of identification
- Employment card (renewed) in case of unemployed candidate.
- No objection Certificate (NOC) in case of in-service candidate
- Two recent passport size photos

No TA/DA will be admissible for attending the interview.

Date: 18th May 2021 (Tuesday)
Reporting Time: 9:30 AM
Venue: Seminar Hall, Department of Medicine, 4th Floor, STNM Hospital, Sochakgang, Gangtok.

Principal Investigator
VDL Network (ICMR Project)
Department of Microbiology
STNM Hospital, Gangtok

RO NO. 43/IPR/Pub/Classi./2021-22
Date. 03.05.2021

GOVERNMENT OF SIKKIM
DEPARTMENT OF INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY
Secretariat Annexure - I, Sonam Tshering Marg Gangtok, Sikkim

Notice Inviting Tender for "Supply, Installation & Commissioning of Servers, Server Operating Systems & tablets and Maintenance for a period of 5 (Five) Years" for implementation of e-Cabinet Project.

Department of Information Technology, Government of Sikkim invites Tenders for "Supply, Installation & commissioning of Servers, Server Operating Systems & Tablets and Maintenance for a period of 5 (five) years" for the implementation of e-Cabinet Project. The last date of receipt of Tender is 17th May 2021. For further details please visit www.sikkim.gov.in.

Sd/-
Additional Director
Department of Information technology
Government of Sikkim

R.O. No. 37/IPR/Pub./Classi./21-22 Date: . 26.04.2021

Wither the Engineering for Routine Trouble-spots?

Sikkim needs its engineers to deliver

Isn't it ironic that after intemperate winter showers failed the crops, pre-monsoon nor'westers are now already collapsing away roads? Even as the weather confounds with its climate-change temperament, the certainty of landslides discovers new formations to slice away in Sikkim. But should it really come as a surprise?

Planning has consistently delineated development from ecology in Sikkim and although the State has admittedly taken handsome strides in attempting to conserve and nurture its environment, it has been doing so in isolation and piecemeal. Laudable initiatives like the State Green Mission, the creation of a Commission to study the health of Sikkim's glaciers and the spring rejuvenation programme to map and protect its water sources, have not been effectively tied into the State's race to develop infrastructure. For instance, even as dhara vikas is being implemented and atlases of Sikkim's dharas being printed, new roads are carving routes through, or too near to, these very springs and construction excavation gets routinely dumped into already stressed jhoras and on already unstable slopes.

The unmonitored digging and scraping venture of hydel developers is another cause for worry, and although the government has recognized it and instituted a committee to spell out how these developers should go about their business, the close watch that these projects need to be kept under is still not palpable. Compounding the situation is the half-hearted followup that natural disasters receive. Neither the media, nor the 'concerned agencies' have done an even remotely thorough job of recording how Sikkim has healed or learned from the September 2011 earthquake, and if a calamity of such proportions is so casually forgotten, the niggling worries of traditional troublespots and notorious slide zones end up only as news-reports, not feature length meditations.

The incidents [of slides and disruptions and tree falls] are reported extensively, but the causes remain unexplained. The North Sikkim Highway has been on a consistent sink and slide ever since it was cut out as has been the case of the marg to Nathula in East Sikkim. It clearly takes more than just heavy rain to excavate hills and dump them on roads. More engineering sense should be invested to understand landslides and figure them out. Now that the Governor and his entourage have been ambushed by North Sikkim Highway's most notorious neighbours of Lanthey and Meyong Chu slide zones, another reason has arrived to send in the experts to figure out why these slides remain active despite decades of repair and restoration works. And while the road formation and water course science is figured out, perhaps some real experts and better engineers should also be invited in to recommend more reliable fixes.

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Where coronavirus variants emerge, surges follow – new research suggests how genomic surveillance can be an early warning system

BART C. WEIMER & DARWIN BAND-DOY

THECONVERSATION.COM

Genomic surveillance programs have let scientists track the coronavirus over the course of the pandemic. By testing patient samples, researchers are able to diagnose COVID-19. But they're also able to use genetic changes in the virus to recreate its travel routes and identify the emergence of new viral variants.

As microbiologists, we examined how quickly the coronavirus genome has mutated during the pandemic and then figured out how quickly these changes led to new cases and rapid disease spread.

By connecting genetic change with the appearance of new clusters of disease, our research suggests how genome surveillance can provide a new early warning of what's to come. Daily reports on how the virus is evolving could sound the alarm before case numbers explode.

MUTATIONS HAPPEN AND CAN BE TRACKED

Starting around 2012, researchers began to develop genome sequencing as a way for public health experts to track infectious diseases. Basically they are able to "read" an organism's whole genetic code, the long list of A, C, G and T molecules that comprise the blueprints for the proteins that carry out the cell's functions.

When pathogens infect a host, they reproduce themselves. Changes to the genetic code can happen at this point – like typos you might make copying down a page of text, substituting an A for a T in one spot, for instance. These changes are mutations. They provide new instructions to the next generation that can give them new capabilities – maybe they are better able to move between hosts, survive and initiate outbreaks or cause new symptoms.

Multiple versions of the same organism, but with variations in

the genetic code, circulate during a disease outbreak. Depending on how successful they are at infecting new hosts and spreading, various versions can become more or less common.

Historically, public health labs tracked disease outbreaks by the name of the pathogen – SARS, salmonella, Ebola and so on. But as the speed and accuracy of genome sequencing increased, researchers realized that the same pathogen can be divided into many different subpopulations based on genetic variation.

These are the variants you hear about with regard to the coronavirus – the B.1.1.7 strain that first emerged in the U.K., the B.1.617 version that was identified in India, and the B.1.427 and B.1.429 variants that both originated in California. All are technically classified as the same SARS-CoV-2 virus, but they may have quite different features.

SCREENING ISN'T THE SAME AS SEQUENCING

When a person's sample is tested for SARS-CoV-2, the lab uses a technique called PCR to identify whether certain coronavirus genes are present. This method is good for screening – diagnosing whether the person in fact has COVID-19 or not. It also provides important surveillance data about how many people have the coronavirus in a particular time and place.

But it doesn't sequence the whole genome, which is made up of 30,000 nucleotides – those As, Gs, Cs and Ts. The PCR screening test just looks for one small stretch of the coronavirus's genetic code – the gene related to the virus's spike protein that helps it infect human cells. This technique won't flag mutations happening in other parts of the genome because it's not looking for them.

Other mutations are definite-

ly occurring, though. Sequencing the entire genomes of coronavirus samples creates a massive list of variants. Our work tackles this ever-changing list to show that not only do mutations in the spike gene lead to new outbreak clusters – additional mutations in other genes increase outbreaks, too.

CONNECTING VARIANTS AND OUTBREAKS

To figure out the role of these mutations, we directly linked the variants present at a certain time and place with the coronavirus's reproductive number, known as R for short. R is a way to quantify the intensity of an infectious disease outbreak. It stands for how many additional people an infected person will spread the germ to.

But R doesn't tell you what version of the viral genome was passed along. By directly linking R and the variant present, we were able to pinpoint the specific mutation that was emerging and increasing viral spread. We found that as new variants became more common, COVID-19 diagnoses surged.

By merging genomics with classical epidemiology, we created a tool that factors in rising variants and R to warn how quickly cases will spread and which variants are more likely to trigger new outbreaks.

To test this approach, we linked the SARS-CoV-2 genotype to the daily R during the first three months of the pandemic using 150 genomes. Our method predicted the near future of outbreaks in four different countries that each had various levels of mandated social interventions.

This preliminary evidence relied on a small number of genome sequences, but it was all the data available from the early stages of the pandemic. As the pandemic continues, labs are sequencing thousands

of genomes across the globe weekly. We replicated our initial estimates using 20,000 genomes from the U.K. and arrived at the same observation – new variants led to more transmission, variants are continuing to expand and will continue to increase in prevalence as the pandemic continues.

By incorporating genome sequencing data with information about transmissibility, we created a kind of early warning system, allowing us to forecast spreading events. In the real world, advance warning like this could inform public health decisions about social interventions. People can prepare for predicted outbreaks. A bonus is that our model also would show when highly contagious variants are declining – providing solid evidence to support loosening restrictions to allow a return to normalcy.

SCANNING THE HORIZON FOR FUTURE THREATS

We believe that public health is at the dawn of integrating genome sequencing with infectious disease tracking. We envision a reference library of pathogen genomes, representing the diversity of their many emerging variants. It could be a new tool for epidemiologists, a part of routine surveillance programs that can last beyond the current pandemic.

In the future, scientists hopefully won't need to wait for an outbreak to grow. Our research suggests that by identifying a rise in variants early, public health officials can quickly respond – before the inevitable rise in new disease cases. We think this kind of early warning system can increase the public's safety for any pathogen and reduce outbreaks for all types of organisms.

[Bart C. Weimer is Professor of Population Health & Reproduction, University of California, Davis; Darwin Bandoy is Ph.D. Student in Integrative Pathobiology, University of California, Davis]

Do people become more religious in times of crisis?

DANIELLE TUMMINIO HANSEN

THECONVERSATION.COM

Organized religion has been on the decline for decades in the United States. However, during the COVID-19 pandemic, researchers found that online searches for the word "prayer" soared to their highest level ever in over 90 countries. And a 2020 Pew Research study showed that 24% of U.S. adults stated their faith had become stronger during the pandemic.

I am a theologian who studies trauma and this shift makes sense to me. I often teach that traumatic events are, at their heart, crises of meaning that cause people to question assumptions about their lives, including their spiritual beliefs. The years 2020 and 2021 certainly fit that bill: The global COVID-19 pandemic has indeed led to traumatic experiences for many people, due to the isolation, illness, fear and death that it created.

QUESTIONING BELIEFS

People who experience traumas tend to question some of the assumptions they might have had about their faith – what pastoral theologian Carrie Doehring calls "embedded beliefs." These beliefs may include ideas about who God is, the purpose of life or why evil events happen to good people.

So, for instance, many Christians may inherit an embedded belief from the tradition that God is all good and that evil emerges when God "rightly" punishes people for their sins. In other words, an all-good God would not punish someone without a reason.

Christians raised with that assumption might ask what made them incur God's wrath if they contracted COVID-19. In such an event, the embedded belief in a punishing God may become something called a negative coping strategy – a coping strategy that has negative effects on a person's life.

Here's what this might look like practically: If a person believes they're being punished by God, they may feel shame or despair. If they feel God is punishing them for no reason, they may feel confusion or try to identify something that is problematic or sinful about their identity. As a result, their faith becomes something that is a source of stress or cognitive dissonance rather than a source of comfort. If that happens, then the belief is functioning as a negative coping strategy that

the person needs to address.

TRAUMA AND RELIGIOSITY

Mental health experts like Judith Herman have known for several decades that healing from trauma involves making meaning of the traumatic event. Traumatic events are often confusing for people because they don't make much sense. In other words, traumas differ from the expectations of everyday life, and as a result, they seem to defy meaning or purpose.

Spiritually, individuals may begin to recognize that some of their beliefs got challenged by the trauma. This is the time when spiritual meaning-making occurs because people start to discern which embedded beliefs still make sense and which need to be revised.

During this stage of recovery, theologian and trauma expert Shelly Rambo explains that traumatized individuals may draw on prayers, personal reflections, rituals and conversations with spiritual experts such as chaplains, ministers and spiritual directors. These have been shown to function as positive coping mechanisms that help individuals feel more grounded in the aftermath of a trauma.

Over time, these resources help individuals develop more intentional beliefs, meaning consciously chosen beliefs that take their suffering into account. These might include reasons why the suffering occurred and what its significance is for the overall meaning of the person's life. Doehring refers to these as deliberative, or consciously chosen, beliefs. Individuals have a sense of commitment to these beliefs because they make sense in light of the trauma.

So in the hypothetical case of someone who believes God is punishing them for contracting COVID-19, that feeling of shame and despair may result from a failure to understand why God would treat them that way. These negative feelings would then function as negative coping mechanisms that prevent healing, as psychologist Kenneth Pargament and his colleagues have observed about similar situations where people felt God was punishing them.

The person might then try to alleviate their distress by questioning the assumption that God punishes people with illness, thereby starting a kind of spiritual quest or reassessment of beliefs. They may even start to think differently about God being a punishing deity. The shift be-

tween what the person assumed about God and this new, consciously chosen belief, is an example of the shift between embedded and deliberative beliefs.

TRAUMA AND ATHEISM

Some people may argue that suffering logically ought to turn people into atheists. After all, the horror of something like the COVID-19 pandemic could easily make someone question how it would be possible for any deity to allow such horrors.

It would make far more sense to reason that creation is random, chaotic and determined only by some combination of the forces of nature and human decisions. The agnostic philosopher Bertrand Russell crafted such a proposal when he argued that Christians should accompany him to a children's hospital unit because they would inevitably stop believing in God once they saw such profound suffering.

The way humans experience suffering spiritually, however, may not necessarily lead to atheism or agnosticism. Indeed, research from experts who study the intersection of psychology and religion – including psychologists of religion and pastoral theologians – has found that events that could be labeled as traumatic do not necessarily destroy faith.

Indeed, they can also strengthen it because faith-based beliefs and practices can help individuals make sense of their life's story. In other words, trauma challenges so many assumptions about who we are, what our purpose is and how to make sense of a traumatic event. Faith-based beliefs and practices offer meaningful resources to help navigate those questions.

This is why spiritual beliefs and practices across various religions can often lead to faith strengthening rather than weakening, following a trauma.

So even though people may have had limited access to buildings like churches or synagogues during the pandemic, they still had access to spiritual resources that can help them navigate traumatic events. This may explain data showing that some individuals are stating their faith is stronger than it was prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.

[The writer is Assistant Professor of Pastoral Theology & Director of Field Education, Seminary of the Southwest]

Covid forecasters warn India deaths may double in coming weeks

NEW DELHI, 05 MAY [BLOOMBERG]: The coronavirus wave that plunged India into the world's biggest health crisis has the potential to worsen in the coming weeks, with some research models projecting that the death toll could more than double from current levels.

A team at the Indian Institute of Science in Bangalore used a mathematical model to predict about 404,000 deaths will occur by June 11 if current trends continue. A model from the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation at the University of Washington forecast 1,018,879 deaths by the end of July.

While coronavirus cases can be hard to predict, particularly in a sprawling nation like India, the forecasts reflect the urgent need for India to step up public health measures like testing and social distancing. Even if the worst estimates are avoided, India could suffer the world's biggest Covid-19 death toll. The U.S. currently has the largest number of fatalities at around 578,000.

India reported a record 3,780 deaths on Wednesday for an overall toll of 226,188, along with 382,315 new cases, taking its outbreak past 20.6 million infections. In recent weeks, the scenes on the ground, with long lines outside crematoriums and hospitals turning away ambulances, have painted a picture of a nation overwhelmed by the crisis.

"The next four to six weeks are going to be very, very difficult for India," said Ashish Jha, the dean of Brown University School of Public

Health. "The challenge is going to be to do things now that will make sure it is four weeks, not six or eight, and that we minimize how bad things will get. But in no way is India anywhere near out of the woods."

A spokesperson for the health ministry couldn't immediately be reached. The ministry said on Monday that in about a dozen states, including Delhi, Chhattisgarh and Maharashtra, there are early signs that the number of daily new infections are starting to plateau.

The Indian rupee has declined about 1% this quarter in Asia's worst performance as investors turned cautious ahead of an unscheduled speech by India's central bank governor Wednesday. The benchmark S&P BSE Sensex Index is down about 2% as foreign funds sold about \$1.7 billion of the nation's stocks.

ECONOMIC IMPACT

A prolonged crisis has the potential to dent the popularity of Prime Minister Narendra Modi as well as slow or reverse India's recovery from last year's economic recession. Bloomberg Economics lowered its growth projection for the year ending March 2022 to 10.7% from 12.6%, and even these numbers are flattered by a low base as activity ground to a halt due to a strict lockdown last year.

For public health researchers, a key concern is the relative dearth of coronavirus testing, which many scientists believe is causing a sharp undercounting of cases.

The main metric that officials are watching is the test positivity



rate, which is the percentage of people with positive test results. The overall positivity rate is 20% in India now, and in some parts of the country it tops 40%, a shockingly high number that indicates as many as three-fourths of infections are being missed, said Mr Jha.

The World Health Organization considers anything above 5% too high, saying that governments should implement social distancing measures until positivity rates are below that level for at least two weeks.

"Despite scaling up testing considerably, it's still not enough to capture all the infected people," said Soumya Swaminathan, chief scientist at the World Health Organization, speaking on Bloomberg TV. "So the numbers, while very high, are likely an underestimate of the true numbers of infections,"

she said. "It's a grim situation."

SOCIAL DISTANCING

The goal is to run enough tests that a large number of infected people aren't going undiagnosed. If only the sickest patients are tested, many people with milder disease or no symptoms at all may continue to unwittingly spread the disease.

"There are reports of tests being considerably delayed and of patients delaying having to go to hospital as much as they can, given the stresses on the health system," said Gautam Menon, a professor of physics and biology at Ashoka University, who also works on modeling outbreaks. "We don't know enough about COVID-19 spread away from the major cities, in the rural heartland of India, although reports from there suggest that

the situation is dire."

The U.S. government, as part of a package of supplies for India, pledged last week to send one million rapid tests to India. There are several other things that could be done quickly to try to help staunch the outbreak. High on the list is wearing masks, a crucial element for disease control, said Catherine Blish, an infectious disease specialist and global health expert at Stanford Medicine in California.

Major cities in India already require people to wear masks, but such rules can be harder to implement in crowded slums and rural areas. Several states have introduced lockdowns, although PM Modi has resisted a national effort after one imposed by him last year fueled a humanitarian crisis with migrant workers fleeing the cities

on foot and in some cases bringing the virus with them.

LOCKDOWNS

The Indian Institute of Science has estimated that with a 15-day lockdown deaths could be lower at 300,000, falling to 285,000 with a 30-day lockdown. IMHE estimates a lower death toll of around 940,000 by the end of July with universal mask wearing.

Vaccines will be the big way to remove risks, although it will take time to get there, public health experts say.

It takes several weeks for immunity to build after someone has been vaccinated. The process is even longer with those that require two shots, stretching the process out to six weeks to two months.

"The vaccines are working," said Kim Mulholland, an Australian pediatrician and leader of the infection and immunity group at the Murdoch Children's Research Institute in Melbourne. "They just haven't got the capacity."

Ultimately, cases will come down, it's just a matter of when, said Michael Osterholm, director of the Center for Infectious Disease Research and Policy at the University of Minnesota, and an adviser to U.S. President Joe Biden. Scientists still don't have a good understanding of why Covid-19 comes in sudden, roller-coaster-like changes, he said.

"It will eventually burn itself through the population," Osterholm said. "Within several weeks to a month and a half, you will see this peak come back down, and it's likely to come down quickly."

Bengal suspends local trains, negative Covid test must for visitors

KOLKATA, 05 MAY [PTI]:

Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee announced extensive restrictions across the state today immediately after taking oath for a third straight term in power, in view of the exploding coronavirus infection. Local trains will be suspended from tomorrow and Friday onwards, those entering the state will have to show a negative Covid test report. Quarantine facilities will have to be arranged by airport authorities.

"There won't be total lockdown. Emergency and essential services will be outside the purview of restrictions," the Chief Minister said.

As Covid cases in the state spiked during the elections with super-spreader rallies and political meetings, Ms



Banerjee had made it clear that controlling the pandemic will be her first priority after the polls are over.

At a press conference after her low-key oath ceremony today, she said she has written to PM Modi regarding the tests and vaccine situation in the state. "I have written to the Prime Minister to

announce a transparent policy on Covid, oxygen and vaccines," she said.

Incoming travellers on flights, long distance trains and inter-state buses must carry negative RT-PCR test reports, the Chief Minister said. Social and political gatherings have been banned but some social gatherings will

be allowed with special permission and curb on numbers.

Both government and private sector offices will function with 50 per cent workforce and staggered timings will be observed for markets.

Stand-alone shops will remain open for three hours in the morning -- from 7 am to 10 am

-- and two hours in the evening, 5 pm to 7 pm.

Jewellery shops will function from noon to 3 pm.

While Bengal is "managing the oxygen situation", the state is not getting enough vaccines, she said.

"Transport workers, hawkers and journalists will get priority when it comes to vaccines," the Chief Minister added.

On Tuesday, Bengal recorded its highest one-day spike of 17,639 cases, which took the total number of cases to 8,98,533. It also reported the highest number deaths -- 107 -- taking the number of fatalities to 11,744, the state health department said in a bulletin.

The state will reduce testing timelines, Ms Banerjee has assured.

IIM Calcutta welcomes 15th batch of MBAEx programme

KOLKATA, MAY 5 (PTI): Indian Institute of Management (IIM) Calcutta has welcomed the 15th batch of its MBAEx programme, in a virtual ceremony, keeping in mind the pandemic situation.

The MBAEx programme of IIM Calcutta is a one-year full-time residential course for executives with over five years of professional experience, the premier B School said in a statement.

The batch consists of 80 professionals, including doctors, engineers, chartered accountants, defence personnel, and start-up-enthusiasts, the statement said.

It also includes professionals with graduate degree in economics and having worked in

sectors like telecom, energy, pharma, aerospace, e-commerce, supply chain, real estate, education, consulting, automobile, banking, oil, and gas.

Welcoming the current batch, Prof Prashant Mishra, dean-new initiatives and external relations, said, "Since the modest beginning in the year 2006, our MBAEx programme has achieved a milestone this year with the highest number of aspirants entrusting their future with us. It gives me immense pleasure that despite uncertain times, students continue to value IIM Calcutta."

"This is a true testament of our leadership position among Management Schools in India and globally."

62 cops among 238 new COVID-19 patients in Mizoram

AIZAWL, MAY 5 (PTI):

At least 238 more people tested positive for COVID-19 in Mizoram - 62 of which are policemen who have recently returned from poll duty in West Bengal - pushing the state's caseload to 6,794, a senior official said on Wednesday.

The policemen were placed under quarantine upon their arrival here during the last week of April.

Of the 238 fresh cases, 146 were reported

from Aizawl, 42 from Serchhip, 27 from Mamit, eight from Kolasib, seven from Lawngtali and four each from Lunglei and Saitual.

Two Assam Rifles personnel, a BSF jawan, two healthcare workers and six members of a family also figure in the list of newly infected people, he said.

Ninety-two new patients have travel history.

Mizoram currently has 1,609 active cases,

while a total of 5,168 people have recovered from the infection.

The death toll remained unchanged at 17.

As many as 3,16,793 samples were tested in the state, including 3,218 samples since Monday.

According to the state immunization officer, 2,16,789 people have been administered COVID-19 vaccine so far -- of which 46,751 took both the doses.

Kolkata Raj Bhawan remains consistent despite BJP's drubbing, continues taking swipes at Mamata

NEW DELHI, 05 MAY [NDTV]:

Moments after swearing in Mamata Banerjee for her third straight term as West Bengal Chief Minister, Governor Jagdeep Dhankhar sent out a sharp message to her on the post-poll violence in Bengal.

"Our first priority is to bring an end to the senseless, horrendous post-poll violence...I have every hope that the Chief Minister on an urgent basis will take all the steps to restore the rule of law. I have every hope that the Chief Minister, my younger sister, will rise to the occasion," Mr Dhankhar said, Mamata Banerjee by his side.

"You have to rise above partisan interests. I am sure you will script a new governance pat-

tern," he said, addressing the Chief Minister, who stared grimly ahead.

Since the election verdict on Sunday, there have been clashes in parts of Bengal involving both the Trinamool Congress and the BJP. Both parties have traded blame for the violence.

Mamata Banerjee had, moments before the Governor's comments, said her first priority would be to tackle the Covid crisis and she would start off with a meeting with her top officers.

Next on her agenda, she said, was to handle the law and order situation. She has accused the BJP of stirring violence and communal tension after losing the election. On the other hand, the BJP's top leaders allege

that Trinamool Congress workers have murdered its members and set their homes on fire.

"I appeal to all political parties to maintain peace. Bengal does not like violence. Please take proper care that there is no violence," the Chief Minister said, before handing the mic to the Governor, whom she has often accused of openly taking the BJP's side and targeting her government.

"I will tackle law and order from today. That is my second job - to post people in law and order," she said.

When the violence started on Sunday, Ms Banerjee had said the Election Commission was still in charge of law and order in the state and she would take over only after her oath.

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Booker scores 31, Suns dominate OT to beat Cavs 134-118



CLEVELAND (AP): Not themselves for long stretches and struggling with a team going nowhere, the Suns finally showed up in overtime.

Did they ever. “We stayed the course,” Chris Paul said. “We came out and put the game away.”

Devin Booker scored 31 points, Paul added 23 and 16 assists and Phoenix scored the first 15 points of OT to outlast the under-manned Cleveland Cavaliers 134-118 for their fifth straight win, keeping the Suns even with Utah atop the Western Conference standings.

Mikal Bridges made two 3-pointers, dunked, had a block and assist in the opening minutes of overtime and Phoenix outscored Cleveland 20-4 in the extra five minutes.

“We punched them first, jumped out to that lead and kept going,” said Bridges, who scored 22 and made four 3-pointers.

The Suns (47-18) are tied with Jazz for the West’s best record.

Phoenix let a late lead in regulation slip away to Cleveland, which was missing six players, including starting point guard Darius Garland, with injuries but battled one of the NBA’s best teams for 50 minutes before wilting.

“We ran out of gas,” said Cleveland coach J.B. Bickerstaff, who only had a seven-man rotation. “Our guys gave us what they had. Phoenix made us pay for some mistakes early in OT.”

Cavs rookie Isaac Okoro scored a season-high 32 points and Collin Sexton 29 for Cleveland, which dropped its seventh straight.

Okoro muscled inside for a layup — on a play the Cavs ran for him out of a timeout — with 24.9 seconds left to tie it 114-all. The Suns had one last chance in regulation, but Booker dribbled himself into a bad situation in the corner and had to force up a long shot at the horn that missed.

Booker opened OT with a bucket and Bridges took it from there.

His first 3 made it 119-114, his dunk put the Suns up seven, and then shortly after swatting away Cedi Osman’s drive, Bridges hit his second 3 to make it 129-114.

Ball game. “He’s the consummate team guy,” Paul said of Bridges. “When he’s going, we go.”

SPECIAL SIGNING

Earlier in the day, Cleveland signed veteran center Anderson Varejão to a 10-day contract, more of a ceremonial move to close his NBA career and cel-

ebate 12 seasons with the Cavs.

Varejão was active but did not dress or play, disappointing some fans who had hoped to see the popular Brazilian get his first action for the Cavs since 2016.

The team played a video during a timeout in the first quarter to welcome back Varejão, who waved to the crowd.

Bickerstaff is confident having Varejão around for even a short period will benefit the team’s young players.

“He’s a mentor,” Bickerstaff said. “He’s got a wealth of experience and knowledge and he embodies the things that we talk about wanting to be. For him, he can choose to live anywhere in the world. He lives in Cleveland and has made Cleveland his home.

“When I think about how he played the game, we talk about people who compete, we talk about people who are selfless and he was those two things personified.”

TIP-INS

Suns: F Jae Crowder missed his seventh game with a sprained right ankle. ... Coach Monty Williams said it was “cool” that the Cavs signed Varejão. He noted the center’s impact on the game, saying there are coaches who teach the “Varejão screen” to their big men. ... The Suns rank in the middle of the league in 3-point attempts (34.8 per game) and that’s fine with Williams. “I’d rather make more 3s than just jack up 3s,” he said. ... Cleveland was the only team Phoenix didn’t play last season as two games between the teams were scheduled after the season was suspended in March.

Cavaliers: Sexton reached 4,000 career points in his 200th career game, becoming the fourth-quickest Cleveland player to hit the plateau (LeBron James 166, Austin Carr 190, Kyrie Irving, 193). ... Okoro added a season-best six assists. ... Despite the Cavs falling short of their playoff goal and an assortment of problems, Bickerstaff believes he and his staff have made significant strides in their first full season. They fell a cultural shift is underway. “It’s a place where people want to be and a place other people want to come,” he said. “We’re not perfect, but we share the game and compete. We’re in Year 1 of something and the foundation has been laid.”

UP NEXT

Suns: Continue a rough stretch at Atlanta on Wednesday. Seven of Phoenix’s last nine games are on the road.

Cavaliers: Host Portland on Wednesday. The Trail Blazers beat the Cavs by 19 on Feb. 12.

Coe gives stamp of approval to Tokyo Olympic test event

SAPPORO, MAY 5 (AP): Sebastian Coe, the head of the world governing body of track and field, said a half-marathon test event run in Japan’s northern city of Sapporo on Wednesday made him confident that the Olympic marathon can be held successfully in the city when the Tokyo Games open in just under three months.

Spectators were encouraged to stay off the streets and not watch the race in person. Security officials held signs on the roads that read: Please refrain from watching the event from here.”

The smattering of competitors from abroad were largely restricted to their hotel rooms while not competing or training. Coe said strict protocols measures against COVID-19 were followed.

Coe said “today Sapporo demonstrated the highest level of capability to organize successful marathon and race walk events.

Those events are being held outside of Tokyo because of the city’s hot



summers.

Coe, who is seen as a possible candidate to head the International Olympic Committee after Thomas Bach, was outwardly laudatory. He will be on hand on Sunday when Tokyo organizers hold another test event at the new 1.4 billion National Stadium in Tokyo.

Tokyo organizers have held a series of test events in the last several days and have reported few problems. The largest problem is convincing the Japanese popu-

lation that the Olympics, with 11,000 athletes and thousands of others, should take place in the middle of a pandemic.

In polls, 70-80% in Japan say they don’t want the Olympics to take place. That sentiment has not moderated with Tokyo, Osaka and other areas under emergency orders with cases surging, particularly the more contagious variants.

Only about 2% of Japan’s population has been vaccinated for COVID-19. The country

has reported just over 10,000 deaths from the coronavirus.

“You can understand the concern, Coe told a news conference. He tried to reassure by saying that one-fifth of the athletes in the Olympics represent track and field and that World Athletics can meet the challenge.

Tokyo is officially spending 15.4 billion to hold the Olympics, and some estimates say it is twice that much. The IOC is pushing on with the games, partly because

73% of its income is from selling broadcast rights.

Organizers have said they are not likely to decide until June if fans can attend Olympic events. Fans from abroad have already been banned.

Everybody, the athletes particularly, will hope for spectators,” Coe said. But I think they recognize that if that’s not possible then the games will still take place and the competition will still be extremely good.

He said athletes had become used to competing at stadiums where there aren’t any crowds.

Coe, a two-time Olympic gold-medalist at 1,500 meters, also headed the 2012 London Olympics. He said he did not envy Seiko Hashimoto, the president of the Tokyo organizing committee.

The challenges are big. I don’t believe any Olympic Games has been delivered under more difficult circumstances,” Coe said. “These games have an overlay of complexity that is beyond most comprehension.

Looking back, organisers may have tweaked few things: Cummins on hosting IPL in India

MELBOURNE, MAY 5 (PTI): Australia pacer Pat Cummins feels the IPL organisers, in hindsight, could have “tweaked a few things” after deciding to host the league in India amidst a raging COVID-19 pandemic.

Cummins, a key part of the Kolkata Knight Riders team, said previous edition held in UAE was incredibly “well-run” and the organisers pushed it “little step further” by organising it at home this year.

The IPL was “indefinitely suspended” on Tuesday, following mul-

tiplied COVID-19 cases inside the bio-bubble.

Last year, IPL was first postponed and then shifted to the UAE with India being in the grips of the first wave of virus.

“Last year we had the IPL held over in the UAE and that was an incredibly well-run tournament,” Cummins told Foxsports.

“This year, they tried to push it that little step further and have it over here in multiple cities in India. I’m sure looking back they might have tweaked a few things.”

Cummins, however, didn’t specify what exact-

ly could have been done differently in his comments which were made before the postponement of the league on Tuesday.

The decision was taken after the virus breached the bio-bubble, infecting SunRisers Hyderabad batsman Wriddhiman Saha, Delhi Capitals’ spinner Amit Mishra and KKR’s Varun Chakravarthy and Sandeep Warrier.

Chennai Super Kings’ bowling coach L Balaji was also among the prominent non-playing staff to test positive and later it emerged that batting coach Michael Hus-

sey also returned positive for COVID-19.

There were a lot of criticism for conducting the T20 league at a time when India was facing such a devastating health crisis.

“It’s two different worlds. We’re lucky, we’re safe, we’re comfortable and there’s people just trying to get basic medical treatment,” the Australian vice-captain said.

“First thing was to find out whether us playing the IPL was the right thing and basically everyone said, we would be lost without the IPL for

three or four hours every night. I’m just trying to do my bit. India’s been such a good country to me and cricketers.”

With the T20 event being postponed, the Australian IPL players and support staff might fly off to Maldives in a bid to get home.

The Australian government had last week banned travellers from COVID-ravaged India till May 15 with the country’s Prime Minister Scott Morrison making it clear that the IPL players will have to make their own arrangements.

Bucks rally in 4th to beat Nets 124-118, clinch playoff spot

MILWAUKEE (AP): Milwaukee’s late-season schedule has given the Bucks plenty of opportunities to measure themselves against the two teams they’re chasing in the Eastern Conference standings.

The results have been encouraging.

Giannis Antetokounmpo scored 36 points and the Bucks used a fourth-quarter rally to beat the Brooklyn Nets for the second time in three days, winning 124-118 on Tuesday night. This mini-sweep comes less than two weeks after the Bucks won two straight games from East-leading Philadelphia.

“I’m happy we were able to put on a show for our fans and able to build good habits in those games, but that’s all,” said Antetokounmpo, who also had 12 rebounds. “They don’t mean nothing. Nobody’s going to remember these games when we’re in the

playoffs.”

Brooklyn (43-23) lost its third straight to fall 1½ games behind Philadelphia (44-21). Milwaukee (41-24) clinched a fifth straight playoff appearance, but is third in the East, three behind Philadelphia and 1½ behind Brooklyn.

The Bucks are chasing their first NBA title since 1971. They posted the NBA’s best regular-season record in 2018-19 and 2019-20, but lost in the Eastern Conference finals two seasons ago and in the second round last year.

That’s why they’re not making too much about their regular-season success against the teams ahead of them.

After all, the Nets didn’t have James Harden for either of their two losses in Milwaukee. Philadelphia didn’t have All-Stars Joel Embiid and Ben Simmons playing together in any of its matchups with Milwaukee.

If nothing else, these last two weeks have given the Bucks a confidence boost.

“It’s important to be playing well going down the stretch here,” Bucks coach Mike Budenholzer said.

Milwaukee blew a 10-point lead in the second half and trailed 103-97 with 10 minutes left, but it responded with an 18-1 run.

Brooklyn cut the margin to four with 1:02 left, but Antetokounmpo sank a pair of free throws and Jrue Holiday made a steal in the final minute to seal the victory. Holiday had 23 points, 10 assists and eight rebounds.

“They got a nice groove going in the fourth, made shots, made plays,” said Brooklyn’s Kevin Durant, who had 32 points, nine rebounds and six assists. “You’ve got to give them credit.”

Kyrie Irving scored 38 points for the Nets, who got outrebounded 55-39.

Milwaukee’s Donte DiVincenzo had a career-high 15 rebounds to go along with 10 points. Khris Middleton had 23 points and seven rebounds.

“They were overall more physical than us on both ends of the floor,” Nets coach Steve Nash said.

The Bucks’ fourth-quarter comeback followed their 117-114 Sunday afternoon victory over the Nets, also in Milwaukee.

TIP-INS

Nets: Spencer Dinwiddie, who suffered a partial tear of his right anterior cruciate ligament in late December, posted a video of his rehab work on Instagram while adding the note, “I think it’s been 17 weeks. What’s the fastest anybody ever returned to Bball? Lol.”

Asked about the post, Nash said it wasn’t realistic to believe Dinwiddie could return in time to contribute in the play-

offs, though he didn’t completely rule it out and said “stranger things have happened.”

Bucks: Jim Paschke, who has called over 2,000 Bucks games as the team’s play-by-play television broadcaster over the last 35 seasons, announced he will retire at the end of the season. Paschke’s overall broadcasting career has lasted 48 years. ... Backup point guard Jeff Teague missed the game due to an abdominal strain.

UP NEXT

Nets: At Dallas on Thursday to continue a five-game trip. The Nets lost to the Mavericks 115-98 in Brooklyn on Feb. 27.

Bucks: Host Washington on Wednesday as they attempt to sweep the regular-season series. The Bucks won at Washington 125-119 on March 13 and 133-122 on March 15, with Antetokounmpo recording a triple-double in both games.

Ban of African stadiums puts World Cup qualifiers in doubt

BLANTYRE, MAY 5 (AP): The African soccer confederation under new president Patrice Motsepe has banned 20 of its 54 member countries from using their stadiums to host international games because they don’t meet “minimum requirements” in a move that potentially throws next month’s World Cup qualifiers into disarray.

Eight of the countries whose stadium accreditations were revoked by the Confederation of African Football are involved in those qualifiers, which are scheduled to start June 5. They include Senegal, the top-ranked team in Africa, and Mali.

Senegal’s 60,000-seat Stade L’opold Senghor in Dakar is closed for renovations and a stadium in the city of Thies that the national team used for recent games has not been approved. Mali’s 50,000-seat Stade du 26 Mars in Bamako also hasn’t been accredited, leaving both countries with no approved venues.

Countries without any accredited stadiums have been given until Friday by CAF to organize neutral venues for what were meant to be their home games. That would force teams and officials into extra cross-border travel during the coronavirus pandemic.

The complications could force CAF to delay the qualifiers. The other teams in World Cup qualifying to have their stadiums banned are Burkina Faso, Niger, Central African Republic, Liberia, Malawi and Namibia.

Sierra Leone is also affected, though it is no longer involved in World Cup qualifying. It was due to host Benin in a delayed African Cup of Nations qualifier next month to decide the final team for that tournament.

Their decisive qualifier in March was canceled because of a dispute over COVID-19 tests and rescheduled for the June international window. That game now can’t happen in Sierra Leone.

Some of the reasons given by CAF for the stripping of stadium accreditations included substandard fields, “poor and inadequate” dugout areas for team officials and the lack of fixed seating for fans. CAF informed the countries of the stadium bans on Sunday.

Motsepe, a South African mining billionaire who owns Pretoria-based club Mamelodi Sundowns, was elected unopposed as the new head of African soccer in March with the support of FIFA president Gianni Infantino. One of his promises was to improve the continent’s soccer infrastructure.

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Blinken brings anti-graft message, old Russia foe to Ukraine

WASHINGTON, MAY 5 (AP): When Secretary of State Antony Blinken travels to Ukraine this week he'll be carrying a tough anti-graft message and strong US backing for the country's response to Russian aggression. He'll also be bringing along a familiar face in the Washington-Moscow tug-of-war over the former Soviet republic: Victoria Nuland.

The one-day stop is intended to demonstrate America's continued commitment to Ukraine as it copes with Russia's support for separatists and a buildup of troops along its eastern border, as well as to press Kyiv on corruption.

It comes at a time of heightened US tensions with Russia not only on Ukraine, but also because of US criticism of Russia over human rights, hacking and interference in elections. Both countries recently ordered tit-for-tat diplomatic expulsions.

Yet beyond these major issues, the mere presence in Kyiv of Nuland, now the No. 3 State Department official, is likely to irritate Russia. A Russia hawk, Nuland is reviled by the Kremlin and was a main target of Moscow's attacks on the US during Ukraine's 2013-14 revolution and Russia's annexation of Crimea when she served



as assistant secretary of state for Europe during the Obama administration.

Blinken said Monday in London that he would use the visit to show our unwavering support for the independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine." Other officials have said he would also press on institutional reform and anti-corruption measures. "There is a lot of hard work to be done to ensure a brighter future for all Ukrainians, the top US diplomat for Europe, Phillip Reeker, said last week.

But Blinken's trip also comes on the heels of a Ukraine-related FBI raid on former President Donald Trump's personal lawyer, Rudy Giuliani, and renewed questions

about the Trump administration's dealings with Ukraine that led to the firing of a US ambassador to Ukraine, Marie Yovanovitch, and laid the foundation for GOP attacks against President Joe Biden.

The East-West battle for influence and standing in Ukraine has been a recurrent theme since the collapse of the Soviet Union, and Nuland's advocacy for reform-minded, pro-Western Ukrainian politicians incurred the Kremlin's wrath.

A career diplomat who retired from the foreign service rather than serve in the Trump administration, Nuland drew Moscow's ire and accusations of meddling for appearing at an opposition rally in Kyiv's Maidan square during

the uprising that eventually overthrew Ukraine's pro-Russia leader Viktor Yanukovich.

But even while serving as State Department spokeswoman under Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, Nuland, who goes by her nickname Toria, was a frequent thorn in Moscow's side, regularly chiding Russia for its policies. That prompted Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov to remark on her departure from the spokeswoman's role after John Kerry took over as President Barack Obama's top diplomat in 2013.

My first trip after Toria left her post as spokesperson, Foreign Minister Lavrov looked at my staff, and he said to me, John, I see you finally fired that Toria Nuland', Kerry said to laughter at

her swearing-in ceremony for assistant secretary of state for Europe. And I took great pleasure in looking at him and saying, No, I promoted her."

Then came the infamous phone call, a recording of which was leaked by Russian intelligence services, in which Nuland derided the European Union's hesitancy in attempts to mediate a resolution to the Ukraine crisis. F - - - the EU, Nuland said in the call with then-US ambassador to Ukraine, Geoffrey Pyatt.

The leak of the call went viral and was widely seen as a Russian attempt to split the US from its European partners on Ukraine. But, while it did cause a media stir, the US and Europe remained generally united in their positions, Russia found a new target for its hostility, Nuland's successor as spokeswoman, Jen Psaki, who is now Biden's press secretary, and she carried on in her position until Trump's election in 2016.

Now, after an absence of four years, and eight years after Kerry teased Lavrov about Nuland's elevation in the ranks, she's been promoted again: undersecretary of state for political affairs, where she'll enjoy considerable influence in policy decisions about Europe and elsewhere.

Netanyahu again fails to form new Israeli government



JERUSALEM, MAY 5 (PTI): Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has again failed to form a government by the midnight deadline, putting his political career in jeopardy and prolonging the country's political stalemate that has seen voters return to the polls four times in less than two years.

The mandate given by President Reuven Rivlin to Netanyahu to form a government expired on Tuesday at midnight with no breakthrough in coalition talks.

It is for the third time in two years that Netanyahu, 71, has failed to form a government.

He had been trying for the past 28 days to build a coalition after the fourth inconclusive general election in two years.

Netanyahu's right-wing Likud party is by far the largest on Israel's fractured political scene. Likud had won 30 seats in the general election in March, but Netanyahu could not muster enough coalition partners to command a majority of at least 61 seats in the 120-member Knesset, the Israeli parliament.

President Rivlin's spokesman in a statement said: "Shortly before midnight, Netanyahu informed the President's Residence that he was unable to form a government and so returned the mandate to the president." The statement said that Rivlin would contact

the parties represented in the Knesset (Israel's unicameral parliament) on the continuation of the process of forming a government.

The onus is now on the President to decide which of Israel's other political leaders he might entrust with the task of trying to form a governing coalition.

The favourite to get the nod is centrist Yair Lapid, whose YeshAtid party came second behind Netanyahu's Likud in the March 23 election.

Lapid is a one-time Finance Minister who entered politics in 2012 after a successful career as a TV news anchor.

But even if Lapid is given the mandate, the key man in coalition negotiations would be Naf-tali Bennett, a former Defence Minister and leader of the right-wing Yamina party. Bennett's party had won seven seats in the election.

Netanyahu failed to persuade Bennett to join him in a power-sharing agreement that would have seen the pair take turns as prime minister.

Bennett had dismissed the offer, saying that even with his support Netanyahu could not muster a majority.

Likud blamed Bennett for foiling Netanyahu's chances by refusing to commit to a right-wing government, which would certainly have led to the formation of a government joined by

additional members of parliament.

The new political development raised the possibility that his Likud party could be pushed into the opposition for the first time in 12 years.

A long period of political stalemate in Israel has been complicated by Netanyahu's ongoing trial for corruption, a charge he denies.

His rivals argue he should not remain in office while facing criminal charges.

Netanyahu is Israel's longest-serving leader, having led five governments since 1996. The last, which saw him share power with the then-main Opposition party to help tackle the coronavirus pandemic, collapsed in December, triggering the latest elections.

With the mandate now back in his hands, the President is set to consult again on Wednesday with the parties before deciding on his next move, expected within the next few days.

President Rivlin could now formally ask another political leader to try to assemble a coalition.

But this could risk the country going to the polls once again.

Instead of giving it to an individual, he could also choose to hand the mandate over to parliament, effectively inviting any of the parliamentarians to come back to him as the head of a 61-seat majority.

Iraq pushes vaccine rollout amid widespread apathy, distrust

BAGHDAD, MAY 5 (AP): Iraq's vaccine roll-out had been faltering for weeks. Apathy, fear and rumors kept many from getting vaccinated despite a serious surge in coronavirus infections and calls by the government for people to register for shots.

It took a populist Shiite cleric's public endorsement of vaccinations and images of him getting the shot last week to turn things around.

Hundreds of followers of Muqtada al-Sadr are now heading to clinics to follow his example, underscoring the power of sectarian loyalties in Iraq and deep mistrust of the state.

I was against the idea of being vaccinated. I was afraid, I didn't believe in it, said ManhilAlshabli, a 30-year-old Iraqi from the holy city of Najaf. But all this has changed now.

Seeing him getting the vaccine has motivated me, said Alshabli, speaking by phone from Najaf where he and many other al-Sadr loyalists got their shots. Alshabli compared it to soldiers being energized when they see their leader on the front line.

Iraq has grappled with a severe second wave of the coronavirus pandemic. New case numbers spiked to over 8,000 per day last month, the highest they have ever been. The surge was driven largely by public apathy toward the virus. Many routinely flout virus-related restrictions,

refusing to wear face masks and continuing to hold large public gatherings.

Daily rates have decreased in the last week, with 5,068 new cases reported on Monday.

Iraq's Health Ministry has repeatedly tried to reassure Iraqis that the vaccines are not harmful, but this has not convinced many who harbor long-standing distrust of the health care system.

Iraq's centralized system, largely unchanged since the 1970s, has been ground down by decades of war, sanctions and prolonged unrest since the 2003 U.S. invasion. Successive governments have invested little in the sector.

Many avoid going to public hospitals altogether. Last month, a massive blaze tore through the coronavirus ward in a Baghdad hospital, killing more than 80 people and injuring dozens. Iraq's Health Minister Hasan al-Tamimi was suspended for alleged negligence, and resigned Tuesday over the incident.

So far, fewer than 380,000 people have been fully vaccinated in the country of 40 million.

Last week, as sluggish vaccination efforts continued, pictures of the black-turbaned al-Sadr, wearing a black mask and getting jabbed in the arm, began circulating on social media.

Shortly after, his followers launched a vaccination campaign, calling

on supporters to join them and posting photos of themselves carrying his posters while seated at medical centers receiving the vaccine.

The Health Ministry has cashed in on the campaign, publishing on its Facebook page the photo of al-Sadr getting the shot, saying his vaccination was meant to encourage all citizens to do the same.

Faris Al-Lami, assistant professor of community medicine at the University of Baghdad, said the government is widely viewed as corrupt and that its actions since the start of the pandemic only deepened the public's mistrust.

He cited certain early practices, such as using security forces to take patients from their homes as if they were criminals, and holding up the burials of those who died of the virus for several weeks.

Al-Lami also pointed to what he said are current problematic policies. For example, he said high-risk patients, such as those with chronic or immunodeficiency diseases, have to wait inside hospitals to get their shots, putting them at high risk of infection. Meanwhile, people with personal connections can get them easily.

He said it's a positive development when the vaccination of a political or religious figure encourages people to get their shots. But the ideology that is based upon

blindly following anyone's decision is a disaster in itself, he said.

Iraq received 336,000 new doses of the AstraZeneca vaccine in late March and Iraqis above the age of 18 are qualified to get the jab. Last month, the first shipment of Pfizer doses arrived in the country, with 49,000 shots.

All the vaccines that arrived in Iraq are safe and effective ... but until this moment, there are some citizens who are afraid of taking the vaccine as a result of malicious rumors, said Ruba Hassan, a Health Ministry official.

The Health Ministry has introduced measures to push Iraqis to get the shots. They include travel restrictions for those unable to produce a vaccination card and dismissals of employees at shops, malls and restaurants. While the measures have led more people to seek out vaccinations, they have also confused and angered a still largely reticent public.

Restaurant owners said they were blindsided by the measures, uncertain if it meant they would face closure if they refused them.

There is no clear law to follow, said Rami Amir, 30, who owns a fast food restaurant in Baghdad. I don't want all my staff to be vaccinated because they might have severe side effects or complications, he said, echoing

widespread skepticism.

Omer Mohammed, another restaurant owner, said applicants for a new job at his eatery dropped out when he said vaccination cards were a necessary prerequisite.

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SummitTIMES
PIONEER IN THE NEWS

After years, court hands tax win to Michael Jackson heirs

LOS ANGELES (AP): A U.S. tax court has handed a major victory to the estate of Michael Jackson in a years-long battle, finding that the IRS wildly inflated the value at the time of his death of Jackson's assets and image, leading to an estate tax bill for his heirs that was far too high.

The IRS had put the value of three disputed aspects of Jackson's worth at the time of his 2009 death at about \$482 million. In his decision issued Monday, Judge Mark Holmes put that figure at \$111 million, far closer to the estate's own estimates.

The estate's executors said it was a huge and unambiguous victory for Jackson's children.

"We're pleased," co-executor John Branca told The Associated Press on Tuesday. "We always try to do the right thing. We tried from the beginning to follow the IRS rules and regulations, and relied on the best experts possible. It's unfortunate that we were forced to litigate to protect ourselves."

The judge most disagreed with the IRS over the value of Jackson's image and likeness. While the IRS put it at \$161 million, Holmes ruled it was just \$4.15 million. He noted that despite Jackson's acquittal on all counts at his 2005 trial for child molestation, the allegations continued to dog him, and while Jackson was selling out dates for a planned world tour when he died, he could not find a sponsor or merchandise partner.

"The fact that he earned not a penny from his image and likeness in 2006, 2007, or 2008 shows the effect those allegations had, and continued to have, until his death," Holmes wrote in the sprawling 271-page decision that tracks Jackson's fame and finances through most of his life.

The tax fight had led to a bill of about \$700 million after an audit of the 2013 taxes on the estate, whose heirs are Jackson's mother and three children, about \$200 million of it a penalty for



underpaying.

A new tax bill will now be calculated using Holmes' figures, and it will include no penalties.

Also in dispute were Jackson's 50% stake in Sony/ATV Music Publishing, a catalog that includes 175 Beatles songs; and his interest in another catalog that includes the songs he wrote.

The IRS expert had put those assets at a combined total of about \$320 million. The judge found that with Jackson's debts, both combined were worth only \$107 million at the time of his death.

The ruling, awaited for years, resolves one of the few disputes that still hovered over Jackson's estate nearly a dozen years after his unexpected death on June 25, 2009, after a lethal dose of the anesthetic propofol.

Another was resolved a week earlier when a judge dismissed a lawsuit brought by choreographer Wade Robson, one of two men featured in the 2019 documentary "Leaving Neverland," who alleged Jackson sexually abused him as a child. The similar lawsuit of James Safechuck, the other man featured in the documentary, was dismissed in October. The men's attorney called the decisions a dangerous precedent for protecting children, and said they plan to appeal.

With years of disputes cleared and a pandemic-forced delay on projects lifting, the estate's leaders feel like they are in an excellent spot to again start promoting Jackson's legacy.

"We're at an absolute turning point," Branca said. "I think people have come to realize that Michael was innocent of any charges and unable to protect himself. We've got a wonderful Broadway play coming, we'll be reopening our Cirque du Soleil show soon and we've got some surprises coming."

The judge noted the huge success that the estate has seen since Jackson's death through such shows, a hit concert film, and several strategic decisions to sell assets.

However, he said, the IRS appeared to be factoring those successes into its decisions rather than considering only the circumstances at the moment of Jackson's death, when things were considerably more grim after several years of waning popularity, poor management and reckless spending from Jackson.

The judge mocked the estate's initial valuing of Jackson's image and likeness at only \$2,000, however, saying it was putting "one of the best known celebrities in the world — the King of Pop — at the price of a heavily used 20-year-old Honda Civic."

Pink to receive Icon Award at Billboard Music Awards

LOS ANGELES, MAY 5 (PTI): Singer Pink will be honoured with the Icon Award at the 2021 Billboard Music Awards (BBMAs).

The award aims to recognise artistes who have achieved success on the Billboard charts and left an indelible impact on music.

Pink joins previous honourees that include Neil Diamond, Stevie Wonder, Prince, Jennifer Lopez, Celine Dion, Cher, Janet Jackson, Mariah Carey and Garth Brooks.

"As a little girl, I always dreamed about being a singer and sharing my love of music with the world," the 41-year-old singer, who is the youngest recipient to date, said in a statement.

"Years later, to receive the Billboard Music Awards Icon Award is hard to fathom! I feel so hon-

oured to join the ranks of music idols like Cher, Garth Brooks, Janet Jackson and Stevie Wonder. It's a true 'pinch me' moment and I feel humbled and blessed," she added.

Singer-actor Nick Jonas will host the 2021 edition of the Billboard Music Awards, which are scheduled to take place on May 23.

The nominations for the awards were recently announced by Dick Clark Productions and the NBC.

Singer-songwriter The Weeknd is leading the nominations with 16 nods, followed by DaBaby (11), the late Pop Smoke (10), and country singer Gabby Barrett (nine).

Contenders for the Top Artist award are Taylor Swift, the Weeknd, Drake, Juice WRLD and Pop Smoke.

Actor indicted in \$227M Ponzi scheme involving film rights

LOS ANGELES (AP): An aspiring actor was indicted Tuesday in Los Angeles on suspicion of running a massive Ponzi scheme that solicited hundreds of millions of dollars from investors for phony Hollywood film licensing deals, federal prosecutors said.

Zachary Joseph Horwitz, who has appeared in low-budget movies under the screen name Zach Avery, was charged by a federal grand jury with multiple counts, including securities fraud, wire fraud and identity theft, the Los Angeles Times reported.

It wasn't immediately known if Horwitz has an attorney.

From 2014 to 2019, Avery allegedly he lied to investors to secure \$690 million in loans to his film company, 1inMM Capital, prosecutors said. More than 200 investors, including three of Horwitz's closest college friends and their family members,

lost about \$230 million, the Times reported.

Prosecutors said Horwitz told investors that their money would be used to purchase film distribution rights that would then be licensed to platforms such as HBO and Netflix.

But instead of using the funds to make distribution deals, Horwitz allegedly operated his company as a Ponzi scheme, using victims' money to repay earlier investors and to fund his own lifestyle, including the purchase of a \$6 million home, prosecutors said.

Representatives for Netflix and HBO have denied that their companies engaged in any business with Horwitz, according to an affidavit.

Horwitz was arrested April 6 on an initial fraud charge and he spent more than two weeks in jail before his release on a \$1 million bond, according to the newspaper.

LIBRA:

Aren't you tired of this on-again-off-again romance? Aren't you tired of giving a certain someone yet another chance when they've continuously proved to be unworthy of your love? It's time for you to take a stand for yourself, Libra. Listen to the voice of reason this time around. Remember, you are more powerful than you give yourself credit for being, and that you possess the power to break past patterns that do not serve your highest good.

SCORPIO:

Karma plays an integral role in determining the course of our lives. Before we make our way to the physical plane, we commit to mastering certain lessons. But that doesn't mean we are stuck in an endless loop. We always have the option to become aware of the soul lessons, pay our dues, and make that paradigm shift. It all comes down to how consciously we are willing to walk through the maze. Word for wise: it's time to let go of the old story and realise that there is a parallel reality available to you in each moment.

SAGITTARIUS:

In the bestseller 'Ikigai: The Japanese Secret to a Long and Happy Life', Hector Garcia Puigcerver writes, "The grand essentials to happiness in this life are something to do, something to love, and something to hope for." That mysterious smile you're wearing today reveals you've got this formula down pat. On your to-do list this week: staying in the energy of passion, breaking past your own barriers, and inspiring those around you to abandon mediocrity in favour of magnificence. PS: Something tells you your story is going to go down in history, Sagittarius.

CAPRICORN:

Your worth is not measured by your productivity. We repeat: your worth is not measured by your productivity. So, balance your need to 'do' by allowing yourself to 'be'. Prioritise rest and rejuvenation over everything. The good news is, as you allow yourself to relax, you may find yourself floating in the subtle realms, somewhere between dream and reality. It's a good idea to be receptive to the ideas that come to you in these moments of surrender as they could help you redefine the course of your life.

AQUARIUS:

It's time for a quick check-in, Aquarius: how do you *really* feel about a certain relationship? Do you believe the person in question has changed like they claim they have? Here's what you want to keep in mind when you find yourself oscillating in your head: the signs don't lie. So take a stance for yourself wherever necessary and listen to the voice of reason for a change. Remember, there is no shame in looking out for yourself.

PISCES:

There are people who make a hoo-ha about what they're doing by posting about it on social media and telling everybody they come into contact with about it—and then there are people who do their bit for the collective without uttering a word. You are one of those silent warriors, Pisces, who has been holding space for hundreds around you. All we want to say is that we see you, we hear you, and we appreciate you. Keep shining your light, beautiful, because the world needs more hope and optimism at a time like this.



LOVELY IN LAVENDER! The actress, Lily Collins is seen looking adorable while on the set of Emily in Paris in Saint-Jean-Cap-Ferrat, France.

Steven Soderbergh on why Oscars show order was changed

LOS ANGELES, MAY 5 (PTI): Oscars producer Steven Soderbergh does not regret his decision to switch the awards order at the ceremony, a decision that has attracted a lot of criticism.

The ceremony usually ends with the announcement of best picture winner but this year, it ended with best actor winner announcement, which went to Anthony Hopkins.

With the 83-year-old actor not in attendance and the producers not allowing Zoom acceptance speeches, many felt that the switch did not come off well for the pandemic era Oscars.

Soderbergh, however, is not too concerned.

"So the goal was to really do something different and let the academy sift through the response and decide what they would do going forward, Soderbergh told the Los Angeles Times in an interview.

The director had not allowed zoom acceptance speeches into the ceremony, which ended on a down note with the best actor winner

Anthony Hopkins not there to accept his trophy in person.

Hopkins win for "The Father" had come as a surprise to many as fans were expecting a posthumous win for late Chadwick Boseman for "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom".

When asked by the Times that, in hindsight, he would rethink the decision to prohibit attendance via Zoom. Soderbergh said, No.

The director, however, said the decision to not end the show with the standard best picture award was out of a respectful conscience.

"We thought it might be fun to mix it up, especially if people didn't know that was coming," Soderbergh said.

"So that was always part of the plan. And then when the nominations came out and there was even the possibility that Chadwick could win posthumously, our feeling was if he were to win and his widow were to speak on his behalf, there would be nowhere to go after that. So we stuck with it.

utter despair that made you lose faith in the Universe and everything around you. But you're finding your way back to your centre. You are making peace with the fact that there are some questions that have no answers. On your priority list today: you, you, you. It's time to give yourself the love and nurturing you desire at this moment. Remember, you are an alchemist. You have the power you need to transmute the pain and sorrow into pure gold.

LEO:

We all have to do what we have to do in order to survive at a time like this, and that's okay, Leo. But, if your plate is too full for your own good, it's time for you to check in with yourself. Are the given projects helping you achieve your long-term goals? Are they forming a golden bridge between where you are where you need to be a decade from now? If you answered the aforementioned questions in the negative, it's time for you to carefully eliminate the commitments that are not in alignment with your highest good.

VIRGO:

There are two kinds of people in this world: people who wait for big things to happen and people who make big things happen. We have no doubts about which category you fall into, Virgo. What the cards are urging you to focus on: the big dreams that have been on hold for some time now. It's true the timing wasn't quite right before. However, the challenges that stood in your way have now been cleared, making space for you to move forward. Plan your next move with precision. This is your chance to conquer what has always been yours.

THE DAY AHEAD

ARIES: What's your plan of action, Aries? We repeat: what's your plan of action? The idea at hand is a million dollar one, and the world deserves to see it come to fruition. So stop doubting yourself *this much* as you take on the daunting task of breaking past your own barriers. What the cards want you to know: the journey is going to be far more rewarding than the destination.

TAURUS:

We all have our own ways of processing grief and sorrow—ways that others may or may not fully understand. Give yourself the time off you need, Taurus. Remember, you are worthy of your own love and it's important for you to be there for yourself at a time like this. What the cards want you to know: a woman in your life, somebody who embodies the qualities of love and nurture, is holding space for you through the turmoil. Reach out for the help and support you need in your weak and vulnerable moments.

GEMINI:

It's been a rollercoaster ride, Gemini, and you feel like you have lived a 100 lives in a single lifetime. The not-so-good news is that things may not get easier immediately. So take a breather as and when you can. This will keep you from feeling overwhelmed. The good news? Your ambitious side is not in the mood to take a break, despite everything that has gone down in the recent past. So keep that fire of passion within your burning. Something tells us that you will find the courage to take a giant leap of faith soon.

CANCER:

You've had your share of turmoil, Cancer. Moments of