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SummitTIMES

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ON TOP OF THE NEWS

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257 new cases and one more Covid death in Sikkim

SUMMIT REPORT
GANGTOK, 23 JUL:

Sikkim's tally of confirmed cases of COVID-19 reached 24,598 today with 257 new cases detected in the last 24 hours. This is for the third consecutive day that Sikkim has crossed the 250-mark in daily fresh cases, a surge that began on Monday, 19 July, when 257 new cases were detected, took a breather on Tuesday with 147 new cases, and has since stayed above 250. Before this, the last time the 250-mark was breached was more than a month back on 10 June when 287 new cases were reported.

Thus far this week [since 18 July], Sikkim has reported 1,361 new cases and seen eight Covid deaths. This is already a more than 30% spike over the previous week [11-17 July] when a total of 1,075 new cases were reported and eight deaths recorded. And there is still another day left in this week.

The spike in numbers could also be partially explained to the scaling up of



testing in the State.

Be that as it may, the 257 new cases were detected from the testing of 1,936 samples on Thursday, giving Sikkim a daily test positivity rate of 13.2%.

Unfortunately, the state also registered another COVID death [at STNM Hospi-

tal] taking Sikkim's death toll to 329.

In the meantime, 179 more formerly Covid-positive people were discharged from home and facility isolation on Thursday after making full recoveries. Sikkim's count of recovered cases of COVID-19 has hence further improved

to 21,209.

As per the Daily Report of COVID-19 in Sikkim prepared by the Integrated Disease Surveillance Programme of the Health Department, while 151 new cases were detected in rapid antigen testing of 1,328 samples, 106 sam-

ples returned positive for COVID-19 in RT-PCR testing of 607 samples.

Of the new cases, 85 were registered in East District, 79 in West District, 83 in South District and 10 in North District.

Today, 15 more COVID patients were hospitalized, taking the number of such patients currently in hospital to 107, of whom, 17 are currently in the ICU.

What Sikkim should perhaps draw some solace from is the fact that less than 4% of its Covid patients have symptoms severe enough to require hospitalization and not even 1% [0.06%] see their condition deteriorate to a level that requires them to be taken to the ICU. While there are 107 patients in hospital, 17 of whom are in the ICU, the State currently has 2,796 active cases, 96% of whom are either asymptomatic or with mild symptoms and steady Oxygen-levels which means they will recover from the virus at home and with some basic care.

CM reaches Shillong to attend All NE Chief Ministers' meet

KOKRAJHAR, 23 JUL (IPR): Chief Minister Prem Singh Tamang was given a rousing reception by the District Collector, Kokrajhar District, Assam Megha Nidhi Dahal at Gosagaon near Bengal/Assam border.

The Chief Minister is on his way to attend All North East Chief Minister's meeting at Shillong.

The Chief Minister also expressed gratitude to the Assam government and the officials for the arrangement and also all the individuals who were present.

SP Kokrajhar Prateek Thule Ex-

ecutive Member Bodoland Territorial Council and district officials were also present.

The executive members of Bodoland Territorial Council expressed their gratitude to the State Government for helping stranded workers during the first phase of the pandemic.

It may be mentioned that Megha Nidhi Dahal is the first Sikkimese to clear the UPSC exams in general category in 2015. The software engineer from Lingmoo Kolthang under Rangang Yangang Constituency in South Sikkim secured the 63rd position in the All India Ranking.



After waiting seven years for compensation, Jang villagers now threaten to gherao NHPC

WANGCHUK BHUTIA
MANGAN, 22 JUL:

Even after seven years, 28 hydel-affected families of Jang village near Dikchu in East Sikkim are yet to receive compensation for damage to land and property.

The village is situated on a precarious perch right above the 510 MW NHPC Teesta Stage V reservoir and the area has been sinking ever since the hydel project was commissioned.

The condition of the area started worsening in 2014 and the villagers urged NHPC to undertake protection work. However, the power developer said that it will pay compensation for damages instead. Due to lack of proper rim treatment in the reservoir site, land in the area is sinking and houses have developed cracks and suffered other damages.

Three houses have been severely damaged following which NHPC

shifted the residents to the NHPC colony in Samdong where they are living in two-room accommodation. Some other families are still living in makeshift houses near their original houses.

Those affected were told that they will be compensated for damages sustained by their houses and lands. Since then the people stopped cultivating their land which is no longer suitable for farming.

Even after seven years, those affected are still waiting to be compensated so that they can move to a safer location. Some of the families still living in the project area said that they fear for their lives at night during rainy season as toe erosion continues. They have to take shelter for the night with a neighbour or relative.

The affected people have stated that a lot of joint surveys and inspections were conducted



following which NHPC submitted a letter to the District Administration stating that the land is unsafe and NHPC will acquire the land and the houses. The Geological Survey of India has also declared the area unsafe while the damage assessment of houses and land has been completed as well.

The file for grant of compensation has been cleared by the state government but is lying at



the NHPC office at Balutar Singtam which is not taking it forward, alleged the affected people.

People also said that NHPC should not be allowed to go forward with Teesta Stage IV, when they have not been able to keep their promises to those affected by Stage V.

The affected people warned that they will gherao the NHPC office and stop power generation if their problem is not solved at the earliest.

14/23 samples test positive for Covid in mass RAT testing at Phongla; Results for 207 RTPCR tests awaited

NAMCHI, 23 JUL (IPR):

As COVID-19 mass testing drive has been intensified the team from Namthang Primary Health Centre led by Medical Officer, In-charge, Namthang, PHC Dr Mingyur D Lassopa, Dental Surgeons, Dr Sushmita Chettri and Dr Ayesha Chettri, they collected RT-PCR samples and did RAT at Phongla today.

The team covered villages namely Suiram, Phongla and Tangzi under Tangzi Bikmat Gram Panchayat Unit and Chuba Phong Gram Panchayat Unit.

The team did 23 Rapid Antigen Tests (RAT) at Phongla out of which 14 detect positive. They also collected 207 Reverse Transcription Polymerase Chain Reaction (RT-PCR) samples at Phongla. Whereas in Namthang Primary Health Centre 2 RAT were done and both test turned out positive.

CISCE board to announce class 10, 12 results tomorrow

NEW DELHI, JUL 23 (PTI): The CISCE will announce results for class 10 and 12 on July 24, board Chief Executive and Secretary Gerry Arathoon said on Friday.

"The results of the class 10 (ICSE) and class 12 (ISC) examinations will be declared on Saturday, July 24 at 3 PM. The results will be made available on the website of the Council and through SMS," said Arathoon.

"The Tabulation Registers will be made available for Schools through the CAREERS Portal. The schools can access the results by logging into the CAREERS Portal of the Council using the Principal's login ID and password.

The Council for the Indian School Certificate Examinations (CISCE) had cancelled the exams for both the classes this year in view of the aggressive second wave of COVID-19. The result will be announced on basis of an alternate assessment policy decided by the board.

Arathoon informed that unlike previous years option of rechecking of answer scripts will not be available this year as the candidates have

been awarded "imputed marks". However, a dispute resolution mechanism will be in place for correction of calculation errors, if any.

"In the event a candidate has objections regarding computation of marks in the result, she or he may make a written application to the school, stating the objection in detail along with reasons thereof.

"Schools will be required to review all such applications, and only upon being satisfied with the contentions made therein, forward the same to the board along with your comments and remarks endorsing the contentions made and documents supporting the opinion regarding the computation of marks," he said.

The CISCE will review the request, the supporting documents and the principal's remarks and convey its decision to the School concerned in writing.

"In case the result will need to be altered, the CISCE will notify the Head of the School concerned. This dispute resolution mechanism is only for the correction of calculation errors," he said.

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call for submissions
CONVERSE
CHRONICLES

CONVERSE SIKKIM is pleased to announce its first publication showcasing writings from Sikkim entitled Converse Chronicles. It will be an anthology containing poems, short stories, essays and book excerpts. As such, entries are invited for possible inclusion from established and aspiring writers.

Mail in your entries at - converse.sikkim@gmail.com

General guidelines for both prose and poetry -

- The entries should be in Word (Document) format, mailed as an attachment with a small introduction of the writer, name and other relevant details.
- The subject of the mail should be - 'Entry For Converse Chronicles'
- Prose can be fiction/non-fiction/essays/narrative pieces.
- Word limit - 2000

Last date of submission - 10 August 2021

Darj NGO accuses school principal of nepotism



**SMRITA KHAWAS
DARJEELING, 23 JUL:**

Unemployed Youth and Citizen Rights Forum has accused the Principal of Peshok Saraswati High Secondary School of nepotism.

The Forum's Prabha Rai addressed a press conference today wherein she said that the forum had filed an RTI application three months ago seeking information about the functioning of the school but no response has been received till now.

"Why we were forced to come forward and talk about our education system in the Hills is because we can see so many unfair appointments in schools where persons belonging to some party or related to a leader

or even the headmaster is getting appointed in schools," she said.

Ms Rai said that the motive of the forum is to make the education system transparent because everything is based on education.

She mentioned that some of the questions asked in the RTI application are: what was the financial transaction of Saraswati Higher Secondary School during the time of 2017-2020; what is the list of regular teachers teaching below class 10 and their educational qualification and the Board or University from which they passed; how many staff of the said school are relatives of the headmaster; and how many teachers are appointed from same family.

India records 35,342 fresh cases, 483 more fatalities



NEW DELHI, JUL 23 (PTI): With a single-day rise of 35,342 cases, India's COVID-19 tally climbed to 3,12,93,062 on Friday, while 483 more fatalities pushed the death toll due to the viral disease to 4,19,470, according to the health ministry.

The number of active cases has declined to 4,05,513, accounting for 1.3 per cent of the total caseload, while the national COVID-19 recovery rate was recorded at 97.36 per cent, the ministry's data updated at 8 am showed.

A decline of 3,881 cases was recorded in the active COVID-19 caseload in a span of 24 hours.

Also, 16,68,561 tests to detect the infection were carried out on Thursday, taking the total number of such tests conducted so far in the country to 45,29,39,545, while the daily positivity rate was recorded at 2.12 per cent. It has been less than three per cent for

32 consecutive days, the ministry said.

The weekly positivity rate was recorded at 2.14 per cent.

The number of people who have recuperated from the disease has surged to 3,04,68,079, while the case fatality rate stands at 1.34 per cent, the data stated.

The cumulative number of Covid vaccine doses administered so far in the country has reached 42.34 crore.

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

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

India crossed the grim milestone of two crore Covid cases on May 4 this year and the three-crore mark on June 23.

Minister chairs meeting on Pig Production Incentive Scheme



GANGTOK, 23 JUL (IPR): Minister, Animal Husbandry and Veterinary Services Department, Lok Nath Sharma virtually addressed a meeting on the implementation of recently announced Pig Production Incentive Scheme in all districts of Sikkim.

The meeting was virtually joined by the Secretary, AH&VS, Dr. Sangey D. Bhutia, ADCs (Dev) and Block Development Officers, officials from the department including Directors, Additional Directors / Joint Directors from all districts, Deputy Directors, Veterinary Officers, field functionaries along with the Panchayats and progressive farmers from various Gram Panchayat Unit.

It may be mentioned here that the farmer shall receive financial incentive of Rs. 15000 against

fulfilling eligible criteria of three pig of fifty kilogram each, at the rate of five thousand per pig.

The Minister in his address, stressed upon the preparation of absolute working mechanism at different level with a common motive to benefit the targeted beneficiaries of Piggery farming.

He directed the Additional Directors / District In-charges to complete extensive field survey within the stipulated time period of two months for the identification of deserving beneficiaries and submit report, accordingly. Piggery farmers shall be benefitted on the authenticated survey report to be prepared by the field functionaries in close coordination of Panchayats of their respective Wards/GPU.

He drew light on the prime role of officials

and field functionaries in generating massive awareness and sensitizing farmers about the historic scheme thereby ensuring tremendous growth in rural economy towards a self-reliant state.

With the launching of financial incentives in Piggery sector, the number of pigs will undoubtedly be increased, hence, the monitoring part need to be strengthened, he advised.

The Minister also outlined on the importance of acquiring insurance of Pig as a mandatory requirement of the scheme's guidelines and discussed on various aspects on obtaining insurance to benefit the farmers. He also anticipated execution of proactive role and essential cooperation from ADCs, BDOs and Panchayats in successful implementation

of the exemplary scheme of PPIS, envisioned by the Chief Minister of Sikkim, Prem Singh Tamang.

During the interaction, the Additional Directors/District Heads informed about the current work progress in their respective districts in the initial stage.

Earlier, Secretary Dr. Sangey D. Bhutia briefed the participants about the scheme and also informed that a three tier committee has been formed at State, District and GPU Level for the smooth implementation of the programme.

Additional Director (Scheme Incharge - Piggery) Dr. Sharman Rai presented detailed project report on Pig Production Incentive Scheme for Back Yard Pig Farmers of Sikkim with a mission to make the state a self-sufficient and exporter in organic pork.

Xi's Tibet trip and a troubling message amid border row with India

NEW DELHI, 23 JUL [BLOOMBERG]: Xi Jinping pledged to bolster construction along Tibet's Himalayan frontier, as the Chinese president re-affirmed Beijing's control in his first official trip to the border region.

Xi called on ethnic Tibetans and other minority groups Friday to help defend the country in a visit timed to mark the 70th anniversary of the Communist Party's control over the area, according to the official Xinhua News Agency. The trip, which included a stop in the Chinese military hub of Nyingtri, comes as tensions simmer along the country's contested border with India, amid claims by both sides of aggressive troop movements and infrastructure building.

"His message will be especially troubling for India," said Robert Barnett, a British academic who has written about Tibet, as he posted videos showing the Chinese leader speaking to locals. Barnett said Xi's trip "suggests that he places the border struggle with India close to the very top of China's national agenda."

The People's Republic of China this year marked the 100th anniversary of its founding, as well as seven decades of control over Tibet. The push into the region in 1951 was part of a broader effort by Mao Zedong's Communists to consolidate control over territory historically claimed by China before decades of colonialism, war and internal strife.



Riots erupted in the Tibetan capital of Lhasa in 2008 over allegations of religious oppression, leaving at least a dozen dead. A spate of self-immolations by ethnic Tibetans followed a few years later.

Xi arrived in the regional capital Lhasa on Thursday accompanied by an entourage including Vice Premier Liu He, China's economic czar, and Zhang Youxia, vice chairman of the country's top military body. While Xi urged respect for Tibetan culture -- visiting a monastery and using local greetings -- he emphasized the ethnic-assimilation policies that have drawn international criticism, calling for officials to promote "ethnic harmony" and to "actively guide Tibetan Buddhism to adapt to a socialist society."

"All regions and people of all ethnicities in Tibet will march toward a happy life in future," Xi tells a crowd in one video of his visit. "I am full of confidence as you all are. Lastly, I will not delay your dancing. Let me say this: I wish everyone a happy life and good health."

"Tashi Delek," he adds, using a phrase wishing good fortune.

ment was focused on providing job training. In May, Wu Yingjie, the party chief in Tibet, lauded the progress Beijing has made developing the region, saying that "religion has been increasingly compatible with a socialist society."

"The timing of his visit seems designed to de-emphasize China's original promises of autonomy and freedom to Tibetans, and instead to emphasize to Tibetans that they owe everything to the Communist Party," said Barnett, the academic.

Xi's visit comes about two weeks after Tenzin Gyatso, the 14th Dalai Lama, turned 86. The choice of successor to the spiritual leader of the Tibetans, who now lives in exile in India, is shaping up to be a struggle between India and the US on one hand and China on the other.

Senior security officials in India, including in the prime minister's office, have been involved in discussions about how New Delhi can influence the choice of the next Dalai Lama, Bloomberg News reported in April. China's Foreign Ministry has said the reincarnation of the Dalai Lama is an internal affair that "allows no interference."

Tenzin Lekshay, a spokesman for the Tibet government in exile in northern India, said in a tweet late Thursday that Xi should "understand the true aspiration of Tibetan people and resume the dialogue to resolve the Sino-Tibetan conflict."

Flipkart donates ICU Ventilators to West Bengal



**SUMMIT REPORT
SILIGURI, 23 JUL:**

As a part of its ongoing efforts to support and augment the relief efforts towards Covid 19, Flipkart, India's homegrown e-commerce company today donated 30 life-saving ICU ventilators West Bengal Medical Services Corporation Limited. This is a part of Flipkart's efforts to donate ICU ventilators and support various state governments in their efforts to enhance their capacity to treat Covid-19 patients and provide timely critical care and strengthen the fight against Covid-19.

Minister, Industry, Commerce & Enterprises, West Bengal, Dr Partha Chatterjee, said, "The Government of West Bengal has systematically strengthened all surveillance and containment measures against the possible spread of the second wave of COVID-19. We have taken vaccination drives which

is our key defence against the virus and so far West Bengal has administered over 2.6 Crore doses of Covid Vaccines. We understand that it is equally important to support and upgrade the public health infrastructure appropriately and the state government deeply appreciates Flipkart's relentless efforts towards the fight against Covid-19 in supporting the community and several efforts undertaken

in West Bengal. The contribution of 30 ICU ventilators will further help strengthen our critical care work as we fight against COVID-19."

Rajneesh Kumar, Chief Corporate Affairs Officer, Flipkart, said, "The fight against Covid-19 is a long one and needs all hands on deck. We are honoured to continue serving the community in these difficult times. Strengthening healthcare with the appropriate equipment is the need of the hour and Flipkart is committed to working with various stakeholders and state governments in close collaboration to make these available. We are hopeful that these ICU ventilators will augment the critical care and support the government's efforts in the fight against Covid. We are happy to contribute to this fight against COVID in addition to supporting livelihood opportunities & supporting MSMEs."

Over the past 15 months, through the pandemic, Flipkart has committed to providing its support to various state governments and local authorities across the country. Through supplies of critical medical care, personal protective equipment and by leveraging its supply chain for the delivery of essential medical supplies and oxygen cylinders, Flipkart continues to play its part in the fight against Covid.

Kisan sansad enters 2nd day, farmers discuss agri laws

NEW DELHI, JUL 23 (PTI): The 'Kisan sansad', being held at Jantar Mantar near Parliament where the Monsoon Session is underway, entered its second day on Friday.

Paramilitary forces and police personnel have been deployed at the site with heavy barricading at the entrance to avoid any kind of untoward incident. The protest by the farmers was peaceful.

The farmers started 'kisan sansad' (farmers' parliament) with speaker Hardev Arshi, deputy speaker Jagtar Singh Bajwa and the agriculture minister.

The sansad had a one-hour question hour where questions were thrown at the agriculture minister who tried his best to defend the Centre's new agriculture laws.

The minister told the sansad how amid the raging Covid pandemic, farmers were requested to head back to their homes and get themselves vaccinated. Every time the minister failed to give a satisfactory response, the members shamed him, raised their hands and objected to his answers.

Bajwa, while addressing the media, said, "The agriculture minister failed to answer questions following which members of the sansad

shamed the minister leading to disruption.

The question raised was when prime minister himself has stressed on the fact that there was MSP, it is still there and it will continue to be there then why is there an issue to make it a law (kanoon). If all the three agri laws are made for the farmers, then why not cancel them and make them again by consulting the farmers on it."

Arshi said the kisan parliament was adjourned for a brief period and the Friday's proceedings were similar the way the actual Parliament functions.

"In the question hour, we raised questions and the agriculture minister could not respond to the queries and continued to misguide the house," he said.

A group of 200 farmers reached Jantar Mantar in central Delhi on Thursday to protest against the Centre's three contentious farm laws as the Monsoon session of Parliament was underway.

Delhi Lt Governor Anil Bajjal has given a special permission for the demonstration by a maximum of 200 farmers at Jantar Mantar, a few metres away from the Parliament Complex, till August 9.

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KOLKATA OFFICE:

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Kalimpong Apang Kalyan Sangathan submits memorandum to DM

**SUMMIT REPORT
KALIMPONG, 23 JUL:**

Kalimpong Apang Kalyan Sangathan has submitted a memorandum to the District Magistrate today regarding various issues related to differently abled persons living in Kalimpong.

"We met District Magistrate of Kalimpong today and submitted a memorandum in which we have asked the administration to help physically challenged people in Kalimpong as well as Hills. We can see most of the government offices are on the second and third floor and physically challenged people have to face problems while visiting offices. So we requested the administration to shift the offices to the ground floor," said Kalimpong Apang Kalyan Sangathan president, Chotae Lal Prashad.

He informed that they also requested the DM to implement the free ration scheme for differently abled persons.

Under National Food Security Act 2013 the government has a scheme in which free ration is provided to differently abled people but till now it has not been implemented here, he said.

Mr Prashad informed that the main reason behind submitting the memorandum was to urge the government to provide land and construct 30 houses for differently abled persons.

He said that there are no centres for differently abled where they can learn something to earn a livelihood and therefore, land is required to set up such a centre.

The Sangathan has also asked the administration to vaccinate differently abled persons against Covid-19 in their homes.

CONTACT

**SUMMIT TIMES
REPORTERS**

**SINGTAM
8170070813**

**MANGAN/ DIKCHU
9832612485/
9434011213**

**GANGTOK
9800571148
8116388176**

**9832424750
8016270440**

PIB webinar on Tokyo Olympics



GUWAHATI, 23 JUL (PIB): Initiatives on Sports Infrastructure, Technology, Training and Coaching to provide impetus to win Medals for the country in 'Tokyo Summer Olympics', experts opined in a Webinar organised by Press Information Bureau on the topic here today. Experts from varied sectors including the Government sector along with academicians deliberated and discussed about the potential way to emerge victorious and to bring pride to the nation from sports and its winnability perspective.

As the 'Tokyo Summer Olympics 2020' begins today at 4:30 IST with Opening Ceremony, Ambassador Swachh Bharat Abhiyaan, Padma Shri Naresh Chander Lal, Andaman and Nicobar Islands emphasised with enthusiasm and optimism that Tokyo Olympics could be a platform not only to demonstrate talent of the athletes, but also in honing the competence and mettle needed to emerge victorious in competitive environment. Talking about the Government Initiatives,

he said that Knowledge session and Webinar on this pertinent topic is to emphasis the encouragement which the people of this nation have towards their sports personnel so that they perform and deliver to the best of their abilities.

Senior Assistant Professor, Prof(Dr) Mohd Arif Khan, Dept of Social Work and Assistant Professor, Dr Mohd Arshad Bari, department of Physical Education, Aligarh Muslim University said that North East is having the geographical and the necessary ingredients of developing competitive advantage of growing talent with mountainous terrain encouraging hard work from early age. They said that this talent has to be harnessed with training and motivation. Prof Khan also talked about the inter-disciplinary education in National Education Policy of Central Government and how it would help to develop sporting talent in the country.

With reverence to famous sports personalities of India, Prem-

pal Sharma, reminisced his journey as former bureaucrat and Indira Gandhi Puraskar awardee by former President Pranab Mukherjee, as he appreciated the efforts of PIB Guwahati in organising this discussion and said that fruits of hard work come with discipline, dedication and honesty. He said that the 127 Indian Athletes competing in 18 disciplines have to emerge not only victorious in Medals tally but also exemplify in demonstration of courage and grit which is vital to win any competition.

Talking about Central Government initiatives in the field of Sports, HoD, Sunil Kalai, Department of Journalism and Communication, Tripura University (A Central University), Suryamaninagar, Tripura and Prof Krishan Rai, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, National Institute of Technology, Durgapur said that Sports Authority of India's efforts to identify talented sports persons and nurture them to excel at national and international com-

petitions have been encouraged by initiatives in tandem with 23 National Centres of Excellence (NCOE), 67 SAI Training Centre (STC) and National Sports Talent Contest (NSTC), among others as mentioned with optimism by Union Minister of Youth Affairs and Sports Shri Anurag Thakur recently.

Assistant Teacher, Md Kamil Mallick, Thikribari High School, Goalpokhar, Uttar Dinajpur said mothers in families are primary decision makers and should encourage their children to do excel in sports if they are eager to choose sports as a career option.

The entire webinar was planned and coordinated by Joint Director (M&C), Samrat Bandyopadhyay, PIB, Guwahati. Senior officers of PIB and Regional Outreach Bureau of North East Government offices were present in webinar. The webinar delved into details on varied aspects of the topic such as sports infrastructure, training, and motivation to sports athletes, coach and staffs.

Plastic sticks used in balloons, candies may be banned from next January: Centre

NEW DELHI, 23 JUL [PTI]: Candy sticks and ice-cream sticks made of plastic may get phased out from January 1, 2022, the Centre informed Parliament on Friday. Responding to a query on the phasing out schedule of single-use plastic, Minister of State for Environment Ashwini Choubey said as per the draft notification issued earlier this year, manufacture, import, stocking, distribution, sale and use of some of the identified single-use plastic items are proposed to be prohibited by January 1,



2022.

Earbuds with plastic sticks, plastic sticks for balloons, plastic flags, candy sticks, ice-cream sticks, polystyrene (thermocool) for decorative items are proposed to be phased out by January 1, while single-use plastic

(including polystyrene and expanded polystyrene) items - plates, cups, glasses, forks, spoons, knives, straw, container and container lids, trays, plastic/PVC banners less than 100 microns and stirrers are expected

to be phased out by July next year.

Single-use plastic items expected to be phased out by September 30 this year include carry bags made of virgin or recycled plastic less than 120 microns in thickness and non-woven plastic carry bag less than 60 GSM (gram per square metre) or 240 microns in thickness, the minister informed Lok Sabha in a written response, adding that the provisions shall not apply to commodities (including carry bags) made of compostable plastic material.

Vi Hero assures worry-free prepaid experience

**SUMMIT REPORT
SILIGURI, 23 JUL:**

Vi, the leading telecom services provider has unveiled a new campaign focusing on Vi Hero Unlimited plans. The 6-week long campaign will have two TVC and extensive digital roll-out. Users can avail the benefits of Vi Hero Unlimited on recharges of Rs. 249 and above.

The campaign that features popular actor Vinay Pathak as the

protagonist, presents Vi Hero Unlimited plans as the solution to the perpetual problem of data quota exhaustion faced by prepaid users.

The campaign highlights the 3 features that Vi Hero Unlimited plans offer - Weekend Data Rollover, Night Time Free Data from 12am to 6am and Double Data, all under one umbrella. Thus, assuring a worry free mobile internet experience for

customers. Vi Hero Unlimited campaign seeks to drive home the unlimited possibilities for those on Giganet by Vi 4G network enabling customers to thrive in the digital ecosystem. With this, Vi aims to provide more value to its Unlimited plan users. This unique proposition is aimed to increase unlimited and 4G subscriber base by attracting new users to Vi network.

Nippon India Mutual Fund launches Nippon India Flexi Cap Fund

**SUMMIT REPORT
GANGTOK, 23 JUL:**

Nippon Life India Asset Management (NAM India), asset manager of Nippon India Mutual Fund (NIMF), announces the launch of Nippon India Flexi Cap Fund. It is an open-ended dynamic equity scheme looking at providing a one-stop solution to capture the opportunities across Market Caps. Nippon India Flexi Cap Fund seeks to create long-term capital appreciation by investing in a diversified portfolio across large, mid, and small caps based on market view and relative attractiveness. The New Fund Offer (NFO) opens on 26 Jul, 2021 and closes on 09 Aug, 2021 and the fund will be benchmarked against NIFTY 500 TRI. The minimum investment required is Rs. 500 and in multiples of Re. 1 thereafter. The fund will attempt to create Alpha through bottom-up stock selection and appropriate allocation approach to identify opportunities in potentially high growth themes.

Nippon India MF has

of one of India's experienced equity research teams on the buy-side. Nippon India Flexi Cap Fund seeks to capitalize the relative stability of large caps through reasonable allocations to established leaders along with optimal mix of the growth opportunities offered by the Mid & Small Cap segment. Presently the fund will have a bias towards domestic recovery themes with investments across key areas like beneficiaries of consolidation due to technology or regulation, 'back to normal' or business normalization, new business models which thrive on disruption, China plus one or import substitution etc.

Speaking on the launch, Saugata Chatterjee, Co-Chief Business Officer, Nippon India Mutual Fund said, "The launch of Nippon India Flexi Cap Fund adds to our wide range of investor-centric products and deepens our offerings for the investor community. Flexi Cap is one of the largest categories in the Equity space. The total AUM under the newly created

Flexi-cap category stood at Rs. 1.76 trillion# as of June-end. With Nippon India Flexi Cap Fund, we aim to deliver better returns by investing in best opportunities across market caps." Manish Gunwani, CIO - Equity Investments, Nippon India Mutual Fund, says, "We believe the current market condition creates an opportunity for investment in Flexi Cap Funds. A Flexi Cap strategy can dynamically adapt to varied market scenarios and thus has the potential to outperform across market cycles. The current macro-economic conditions are favorable for the FlexiCap category as the global economy is expected to grow faster than estimated, Capex Cycle picking up with lower interest rates and liquidity support and earnings are also likely to improve as growth momentum picks up."

The fund will be managed by Manish Gunwani, CIO - Equity Investments along with Dhruvil Shah, Varun Goenka & Nikhil Rungta (Co-Fund Manager), Kinjal Desai, Fund Manager - Overseas.

Kerala's 'oldest learner' Bhageerathi Amma no more

KOLLAM (KER), JUL 23 (PTI): Kerala's oldest learner Bhageerathi Amma, who passed the literacy examination at the age of 105 two years ago and won the praise of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, died here, family sources said.

She was 107 years old and breathed her last late on Thursday night at her house due to age-related ailments, they said.

Hailing from Prakkulam in Kollam district, the centenarian was a recipient of the prestigious Nari Shakti Puraskar by the Central government for her exceptional contribution towards women's empowerment.

She had scripted history by becoming the oldest student by clearing the fourth standard equivalency examination conducted by the state-

run Kerala State Literacy Mission (KSLM) in 2019.

The woman had appeared for the examination, conducted by the state literacy mission, at Kollam and came out with flying colours with 205 out of a total of 275 marks and full marks in maths.

KSLM sources here said due to her advanced age, Bhageerathi Amma had difficulty in writing the exams and took three days to complete the three question papers on environment, mathematics and Malayalam.

The woman, who had always yearned to study and gain knowledge, had to give up her dream of educating herself after her mother died as she had to take care of her younger siblings.

Bhageerathi Amma had quit formal education in class three at the

age of 9.

Her passion for studies had won accolades from none other than Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

While narrating the story of Bhagirathi Amma, Modi had said in his radio address last year that, "If we wish to progress in life, we should develop ourselves, if we wish to achieve something in life, the first pre-condition for that is the student within us must never die."

She left without fulfilling the dream of passing the 10th standard equivalency exam, family sources said.

Bhageerathi Amma has 12 grand and great-grandchildren.

One of her six children and three of her 15 grandchildren are no more, they added.

Deepinder Goyal's stake in Zomato is now worth \$650 million

NEW DELHI, 23 JUL [PTI]: A 66% stock jump on debut turned Zomato Ltd. founder Deepinder Goyal into a poster boy for India's fledgling startup scene, pushing his fortune close to the \$1 billion mark.

Goyal is worth \$650 million based on his current 4.7% stake in Zomato, according to the Bloomberg Billionaires Index. He also owns more than 368 million options that vest over the next six years, which if exercised would almost double his stake in the company, which now has a market capital-

ization of \$13.3 billion.

While that's far behind the fortunes of Mukesh Ambani -- worth about \$80 billion -- and dozens of other Indian industrial tycoons, the group of ultra rich startup entrepreneurs in the country is small. Those topping \$1 billion include Byju Raveendran of online education provider Byju's, Vijay Shekhar Sharma of digital payments pioneer Paytm, and Sachin Bansal and Binny Bansal, cofounders of online retailer Flipkart.

The IPO is a triumph for not just Goyal, the son of two teach-

ers who founded his company in 2008, but also scores of Indian startup entrepreneurs aspiring to influence and wealth. India had a record \$6.3 billion of funding and deals for technology startups in the second quarter, underscoring entrepreneurial ambitions and rising venture-capital interest in the world's second-most populous market.

"Today is a big day for us," Goyal said in a blog posting on Friday. "But we couldn't have gotten here without the incredible efforts of India's

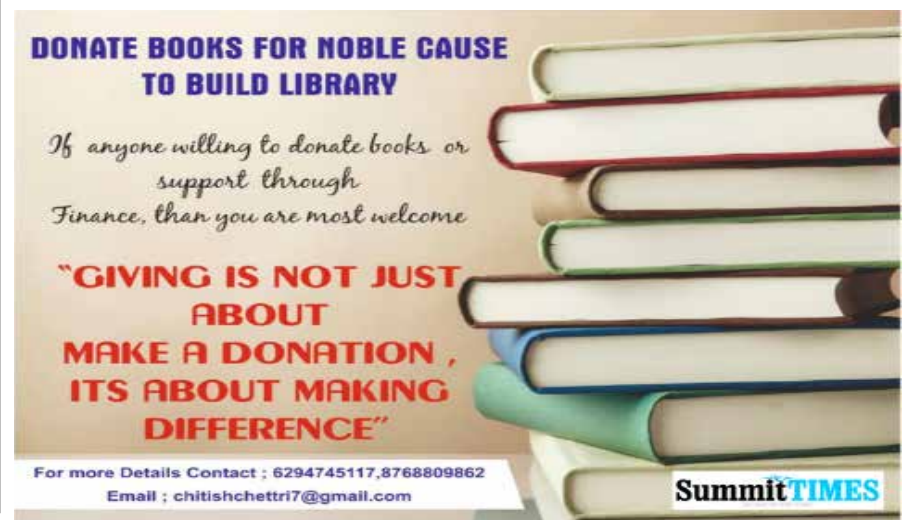
entire internet ecosystem."

Zomato, the first of a generation of Indian internet unicorns to tap local capital markets, also represents an opportunity for the country's retail investors. The IPO generated a seldom-seen frenzy among them, with some crowing on Twitter about bagging share allotments and joking that they would delete rival Swiggy's app from their phones.

Goyal first got the idea for an online service when, as a math and computer science student at the Indian Institute of Technology, he was particularly frustrated with a pizza order.

His resolve strengthened after he graduated and joined Bain & Co., where he saw colleagues in the company cafeteria skimming the limited menu and talking longingly about food at nearby restaurants.

Goyal and colleague Pankaj Chaddah started uploading menus of neighborhood cafes and restaurants onto the company intranet, with phone numbers. That was a huge hit with co-workers, driving a weekend venture they christened foodiebay.com. After his wife got a teaching job at Delhi University, Goyal quit to pursue entrepreneurship full-time.



Avoid the Babel Syndrome

Resuscitate languages and the rest will follow

One of the more encouraging signs when it comes to the vibrancy of languages is to see the young make lists in the mother tongues. It is a rarity, because even speakers of the lingua franca nowadays take notes in English and they are already conversing on the smartphones in emojis. The worry then is that the mother tongue, the language they would be expected to be the most fluent in when conveying emotions and ideas, has now become the formal language – something they can write exams in or maybe use to speak with elders, but cannot joke or share ideas in. So, when the mother tongue becomes the language of casual conversations and spontaneous note-taking, it becomes a special moment, underlining a community's success at keeping their culture alive because no culture can survive once its language is lost.

In fact, a major concern exists in communities all over the world over the preservation of native languages and cultures. While earlier, indigenous communities could rely on traditional educational systems to ensure their cultural survival, this support system does not exist anymore. Earlier, the language would get passed down around kitchen fires and along with it would slip through the essence of ethnic cultures and traditions. As Sikkim grows more cosmopolitan, outside influences have edged out this form of education. The formal education system which includes many indigenous/ local languages in its curriculum does not include the subtlety with which cultures were instinctively fostered earlier. At best, the schools can equip the students with the language, which they should then utilise to learn. Unlike the present trend where the learning curve ends with the schooling years, the learning should in fact begin once the basics of a language have been picked up and then should launch the process of mastering it. This becomes necessary because indigenous languages are finding fewer and fewer people using them anymore and the few who have mastered the tongue need to record whatever it is they can cull from the older generation so that some element of their identity survives the march of time. In fact, this is one aspect of the cultural revivalism afoot all over the Hills that needs to be paid more attention to.

While it is all too easy to play the role of the victimised and collect sympathy, it is in proving real concern and engagement that the Hill communities are failing. This applies not just to the minority Lepchas and Bhutias of the Hills but also the Nepalese. It needs no reiteration that language is the link to identity. It is the language that keeps cultures alive. The nuances of each language highlight the influence of the past which shapes the present of individual communities. That said, let's look at the state of ethnic languages among the speakers themselves. When a language is being taught in school, it has to mean more than just a medium of communication. It has to become the tool of learning and discovery. One does not know whom to blame here, but few in Sikkim have proven that they can deploy their language skills for this purpose.

Blame it on the influence of television or now access to affordable broadband which has wiped out the reading habit or the confusion of being exposed to too many languages [Nepali, English, Hindi and the mother tongue, in Sikkim's case], but fact remains that we are grooming a generation of students who are not proficient in any language. We are talking here in terms of reading, understanding and writing. Anyone can communicate, but a student is expected to do better.

The previous generation has to shoulder most of the blame. They relied too much on tokenism. A language day here, a smattering of language skills there and they thought they had done enough. They were wrong. A language has to become relevant to survive. It can be made relevant if important and interesting books are written in that language, if popular music uses it. Just look around, how many interesting books can a lay person find in Bhutia or Lepcha which is not available in other languages. Even Nepali language essentially survives now as the lingua franca. To prove the point - can anyone recall the last work in fiction in Nepali which was a runaway hit that everyone wanted to read and possess? Fact remains, we are wiping out our cultures because we are not serious enough about our languages.

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The Reason Cases Are Rising Among the Double Vaccinated – it's not because vaccines aren't working

JAMIE HARTMANN-BOYCE
THECONVERSATION.COM

Sir Patrick Vallance, the UK's chief scientific adviser, has announced that 40% of people admitted to hospital with COVID in the UK have had two doses of a coronavirus vaccine. At first glance, this rings very serious alarm bells, but it shouldn't. The vaccines are still working very well.

There are several factors at play that explain why such a high proportion of cases are in the fully vaccinated.

COVID vaccines are extremely effective, but none 100% so. This itself isn't surprising – flu vaccines aren't 100% effective either. Yet in the US alone flu vaccines are estimated to prevent millions of cases of illness, tens of thousands of hospitalisations and thousands of deaths every year. The COVID vaccines are doing the same in the UK right now – all one has to do is compare the curves from the winter wave with those from this summer.

As cases are rising, hospitalisations and deaths are rising too, but not at anywhere near the same level as they were in the winter. In the second half of December 2020 – a time when UK case rates were similar to what they are now – about 3,800 people were being admitted to hospital with COVID each day. The average now is around 700. So though that's

still higher than we wish it was, it's a lot lower than it was the last time we had this many infections.

COVID is also growing among the vaccinated because the number of people in the UK who have had both doses is continuing to rise. At the time of writing, 88% of UK adults have had a first dose and 69% a second. As more and more of the population is vaccinated, the relative proportion of those with COVID who have had both jabs will rise.

If you imagine a hypothetical scenario in which 100% of the population is double vaccinated, then 100% of people with COVID, and in hospital with COVID, will also have had both jabs. As with deaths, this doesn't mean the vaccine isn't working. It just means the vaccine rollout is going very well.

We also need to remember that the vaccine rollout in the UK has systematically targeted people at the highest risk from COVID. Older people and people with health conditions that make them more vulnerable were the first to get vaccinated. Once vaccinated, these people (including me) are at much lower risk from COVID than they would have been otherwise – but they are still at risk.

That means that when we compare people with both vaccinations being hospitalised to those who ha-

ven't had both doses, we aren't comparing like with like. People with both vaccinations are more likely to have been at greater risk from COVID in the first place. This makes them both more likely to be hospitalised and more likely to have already received both of their vaccine doses.

IS COVID DIFFERENT IN THE VACCINATED?

The latest data from Public Health England suggests that against the delta variant, which is now dominant in UK, two doses of any of the vaccines available in Britain are estimated to offer 79% protection against symptomatic COVID and 96% protection against hospitalisation.

We don't have clear estimates yet from Public Health England on the level of protection against death caused by the delta variant – fortunately, this is partly driven by the fact deaths have been relatively low during this third wave in the UK.

But for the alpha variant, Public Health England data estimates the Pfizer vaccine to be between 95% and 99% effective at preventing death from COVID-19, with the AstraZeneca vaccine estimated to be between 75% and 99% effective. The evidence we have so far doesn't suggest that the delta variant substantially changes this picture.

There's lots we still need to learn about how people with both vac-

cine doses respond to getting infected with the virus. The UK's COVID Symptom Study is looking at this. One of the key questions that remain is who is at most risk. Emerging data – released in a preprint, so yet to be reviewed by other scientists – suggests people who are overweight or obese, poorer people, and people with health conditions causing frailty seem to be more likely to get infected after having both jabs.

The preprint also suggests that age itself doesn't seem to affect chances of developing COVID after being vaccinated, nor does having a long-term condition such as asthma, diabetes or heart disease – but we need more data on this to be sure of these findings.

Generally, the COVID Symptom Study has found that people report the same COVID symptoms whether or not they've been vaccinated, but that people who've been vaccinated have fewer symptoms over a shorter period of time, suggesting less serious illness. The most commonly reported symptoms in people who had had both doses were headache, runny nose, sneezing, sore throat and loss of smell.

[the writer is Senior Research Fellow, Departmental Lecturer and Director of Evidence-Based Healthcare DPhil Programme, Centre for Evidence-Based Medicine, University of Oxford]

Tokyo 2020: how Japan's moment of glory has become a millstone for the economy

TAKU TAMAKI
THECONVERSATION.COM

"Japan is back!" declared Shinzo Abe, the then Japanese prime minister, after he made a surprise appearance dressed as Super Mario at the closing ceremony of the 2020 Tokyo Olympics. Tokyo 2020 was supposed to be a moment of national glory, a chance to put the Fukushima nuclear disaster of 2011 firmly in the past, and to showcase Japan's technological pre-eminence in spearheading an environmentally sustainable Olympics.

Yet the 2020 Tokyo Olympic Games is beginning – a year later than planned – without spectators. As athletes converge on Tokyo, the city is back in emergency restrictions for the fourth time.

The government remains determined to make the games a COVID-secure success. But with Japanese multinationals shying away, infections surging, and costs three or four times higher than the original estimates, it is barely even clear if this spectacle can go the distance.

GREAT ECONOMIC HOPES

Tokyo 2020 was supposed to be a great economic stimulus, replicating the achievements of Tokyo 1964. It was thanks to hosting that Olympics that Japan invested in infrastructure such as the famous Shinkansen bullet train.

In Tokyo, they built an expressway linking the international airport in Haneda to the centre, and widened some of the city's major arteries, while an important new highway between Osaka and Nagoya was also opened. These infrastructure improvements helped to bring about the Japanese economic miracle over the next couple of decades.

But this time around, there were signs of trouble long before the pandemic. The main Olympic stadium, which was designed by the late British architect Zaha Hadid, had to be re-designed from scratch as its complex roof structure became too expensive. Instead, the organisers built a stadium at roughly half the cost.

As costs spiralled, the organisers looked at moving some events out of Tokyo to existing venues elsewhere. Not only would this reduce costs, it would help spread the benefits of economic development – in an echo of UK-style "levelling up".

Just like Britain, Japan suffers from widening inequalities between the capital and the rest of the country. For example, house prices rose 15% in Tokyo between 2002 and 2018 while falling between 5% and 15% everywhere else. Over the same



period, the disparity in wages grew from about 20% to more like 35%.

The Japanese regions were sceptical of the whole idea that the Olympics would help level up. Local business people knew that construction projects would still be concentrated around Tokyo, with limited benefits to their regions. There was also talk that demand in Tokyo would cause a supply shock, leaving manufacturers in the regions clamouring for materials.

That particular concern might have been overblown in the end, and some moves did see investment. For example, cycling has been moved to Izu some 125 miles west of the capital, and the city's velodrome has been upgraded.

MAP OF JAPAN

Other moves failed, however. Miyagi prefecture in north-east Japan, 250 miles from Tokyo, was considered for rowing and canoe sprinting. This was seen as a way to accelerate the slow pace of reconstruction following the March 2011 earthquake and the meltdown of the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear plant.

But again financial reality intervened. Disputes over cost-sharing and other logistical issues emerged, and it was decided to hold rowing in Tokyo Bay as originally intended. Another venue in Miyagi is hosting football, while baseball and softball are taking place in Fukushima itself.

Despite such efforts to save money, the government's estimate for the cost of the Olympics had risen from the initial US\$7.3 billion to US\$12.6

billion (£5.3 billion to £9.2 billion) by late 2019. Then came the pandemic. Thanks to the postponement, the official estimates are a \$22 billion cost, and some are saying it will be nearer US\$30 billion. Meanwhile, the huge stimulus from international tourists that the Japanese authorities would have been expecting from the Olympics is no longer happening.

WHAT NOW?

Even before it began, domestic support for the Olympics was weak, as the wider economic benefits were unclear, especially outside Tokyo. With COVID infections currently accelerating in Japan, and Tokyo particularly badly hit – 4,943 new national cases on July 21, including 1,832 in the capital – the public mood has shifted further against the games. According to a recent survey, 55% of Japanese think the games should not go ahead, and 68% think that infections can't be controlled by the organisers.

As expected, some athletes arriving into Japan have tested positive, including participants from Uganda and the US, along with British athletes "pinged" on a flight en route to Tokyo as close contacts to people with infections.

The possibility of the games turning into a super-spreader event seems to have prompted Toyota to pull its TV adverts. The leaders of Panasonic, NTT, Fujitsu, NEC and Keidanren, the employers' association, are skipping the opening ceremony. Increasingly, the idea that there needs to be a trade-off between

health and the economy seems to be losing traction.

The Japanese government is still determined to go ahead with the games, despite being warned of accelerating community transmission by its scientific advisers. The fourth Tokyo state of emergency began a few days ago, curbing people's movements until August 22. Bars and restaurants are having to curtail late-night services as part of the restrictions, inflicting further pain on a sector that has already been hit hardest by COVID. Tokyo's nightlife is being blamed for the spike, never mind that the government has been unwilling to impose tougher restrictions, claiming it is prevented by the constitution.

In this situation, running a COVID-secure Olympics looks increasingly like a major challenge. With the system of isolation bubbles at the athletes' village already failing, it brings to mind events on the stricken cruise ship Diamond Princess, where COVID spread like wildfire after it left Yokohama in February 2020.

Just like the UK is trying to plough on with its own plan for opening up the economy as cases surge, it's only a matter of time before both nations find out whether the supposed trade-off between health and the economy is workable – or is actually a false dichotomy.

[the writer is Lecturer in International Relations, Loughborough University]

Asian Development Bank approves \$165 million loan for Covid-19 vaccines in Nepal

KATHMANDU, 23 JUL [KATHMANDUPOST]: The Asian Development Bank on Thursday approved \$165 million, around Rs19.7 billion, for Nepal to purchase safe and effective vaccines against the coronavirus disease.

The said amount will support the National Deployment and Vaccination Plan in Nepal by procuring an estimated 15.9 million doses of Covid-19 vaccines, which will benefit about 6.8 million Nepalis, the multilateral funding agency said in a statement.

"Asian Development Bank's support will help Nepal to procure much-needed Covid-19 vaccines to protect its citizens from the further spread of this disease," said the bank's President Masatsugu Asakawa. "It is essential that Covid-19 vaccines are quickly purchased and administered to



help get the economy back on track by enabling the restoration of livelihoods and economic activities, as well as the resumption of educational and human development pursuits."

The project is financed by Asian Development Bank's \$9 billion Asia Pacific Vaccine Access Facility launched

in December 2020 to offer rapid and equitable vaccine-related support to its developing member countries, including Nepal.

Vaccines eligible for financing must meet at least one of the Asia Pacific Vaccine Access Facility eligibility criteria: the vaccine has been selected for

procurement through the Covid-19 Vaccines Global Access (COVAX) mechanism; the vaccine has been prequalified by the World Health Organization (WHO) or WHO emergency use listing; or the vaccine has received regular or emergency licensure or authorization by a Stringent Regulatory

Authority, the bank said.

In addition to this project, funding agency's ongoing technical assistance grants will support the strengthening of the vaccine delivery system, communication and community engagement to raise awareness on the risks of Covid-19 and the benefits of vaccination.

Manipur journalist, arrested under NSA for "cow dung" post, released

IMPHAL, 23 JUL [NDTV]: A journalist in BJP-ruled Manipur who was jailed under the stringent National Security Act in May for a Facebook post on the death of a BJP leader due to COVID-19 has been released by the Manipur High Court.

Kishore Chandra Wangkhem, a journalist with the news website The Frontier Manipur, had after Manipur BJP chief S Tikendra Singh died of Covid, posted on Facebook, "Cow dung and cow urine didn't work?"

A bench of Chief Justice PV Sanjay Kumar and Justice Kh Nobin Singh ordered the release of Mr Wangkhem after the journalist's wife, Elangbam Ranjita, filed a petition. Ms Ranjita opposed the arrest under the stringent National Security Act (NSA).

The arrest had also drawn criticism from rights activists who claimed the BJP government in Manipur has often misused the NSA to silence its critics.

The journalist's law-

yer, Chongtham Victor, said they will soon demand compensation for unlawful detention.

On May 13, Mr Wangkhem along with an activist, Leichombam Erendro, were arrested for Facebook posts on the death of the state BJP chief.

Under the NSA, a person can be detained if he or she is known to be a threat to national security. It allows preventive detention for months.

The detention of the Manipur journalist over his social media post that cow dung or urine can't cure Covid does not fall under such a definition, rights activists have argued, and demanded compensation for the "illegal detention".

The family of activist Erendro Leichombam, who was released on July 19, has also demanded compensation. Mr Leichombam was released by an order of a Supreme Court bench of Justices DY Chandrachud and MR Shah, who said "he cannot be kept in jail even for a day", according to Bar and Bench.

Mamata Banerjee named Trinamool's parliament chief ahead of Delhi visit



NEW DELHI, 23 JUL [NDTV]: West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee will be the new chairperson of the parliamentary party of the Trinamool Congress, MP Derek O'Brien announced on Friday, ahead of her visit to New Delhi next week that is expected to lay the groundwork for a greater national focus for the fiery regional leader.

Taking over from MP Sudip Bandyopadhyay, Ms Banerjee will be among the few political leaders who have headed the parliamentary contingent of their party without being elected to the parliament. In 1998,

Sonia Gandhi had led the Congress parliamentary party when she became chief of the party.

"Mamata Banerjee will become our Trinamool parliamentary party chairperson. This is a reality we are formalising. Mamata Banerjee is a seven-time MP. She was already guiding the parliamentary party. This is a strategic decision," Mr O'Brien said at a news conference in Delhi.

The announcement comes in the midst of a stormy parliament session that has already seen Trinamool MP Dr Santanu Sen face action for tearing up IT Minis-

ter Ashwini Vaishnav's response to the Pegasus snooping scandal.

Speaking about the disruptions and opposition uproar, the Trinamool leader said, "We want parliament to run. We want two or three issues to be discussed. Pegasus issue needs to be discussed... We want the farm laws to be repealed."

He said the party was "not bothered" with the suspension of Dr Sen, adding "The people will suspend them (the BJP). Our colleague Mohua (Moitra) has moved a privilege motion (against the suspension)." Her nephew

Seen by many as the makings of an effort to assume a wider role in national politics and unite the country's disparate opposition against the BJP, Mamata Banerjee's trip to Delhi starting Monday has generated a fair amount of buzz.

Her nephew Abhishek Banerjee, a Trinamool Congress general secretary, has been in Delhi to prep for the visit that will be her first after her huge victory in the Bengal elections against the BJP. She is expected to meet Prime Minister Narendra Modi as well as opposition leaders including Sonia Gandhi.

Rights body panel member probing Bengal violence belongs to BJP: Mamata Banerjee

KOLKATA, 23 JUL [PTI]: Claiming that the post-poll violence narrative of the BJP is concocted, West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee on Thursday alleged that a member of the NHRC committee that visited the state to probe the violence belongs to the BJP. In an indictment of the Trinamool Congress government, the committee, constituted by the NHRC on the order of the Calcutta High Court to investigate alleged human rights violations during post-poll violence, had said in its report that the situation in the state is a manifestation of "Law of Ruler" instead of "Rule of Law".

"One NHRC member

has turned out to be a BJP man. He was in the past a frontline ABVP official. I think he has merely gone by the BJP version and contributed his part to the report," Ms Banerjee told a press conference.

She said that some sporadic incidents of violence had taken place in the state after the assembly polls but at that time, the Election Commission was in control of law and order.

The Trinamool supremo said that the election results were declared on May 2 and till May 4, she was only heading a caretaker government and took full command after swearing-in on May 5.

"We had to undo the

arbitrary transfer of officials by the EC during the polls and restored order by bringing back DMs, SPs and local level officers who know the areas," the chief minister said.

Wondering why the NHRC panel report submitted to the high court was leaked to the media, she said, "I won't say more on the issue as it is sub-judice but feel sad the way the BJP is destroying the sanctity of certain hallowed institutions."

Contrary to the claims, it was the BJP that had killed Trinamool members in its stronghold areas, she alleged.

"The post-poll violence narrative of the BJP is concocted with

fake videos and weaved with a sinister design. But having been rejected by the people of Bengal, they won't succeed," Ms Banerjee said.

The NHRC committee submitted its report to a five-judge bench of the high court headed by Acting Chief Justice Rajesh Bindal on July 13.

The National Human Rights Commission, in its report, had also talked about "retributive violence" by supporters of the ruling party against those of the main opposition party.

The high court on Thursday directed the West Bengal government to file an affidavit stating its position on the NHRC report by July 26.

"Please leave the House": Trinamool MP who snatched paper suspended

NEW DELHI, 23 JUL [NDTV]: Trinamool Congress Rajya Sabha member Dr Santanu Sen was today suspended from the House for the remaining part of the monsoon session for snatching IT Minister Ashwini Vaishnav's statement on the Pegasus affair and flinging them amid the uproar in Parliament yesterday. In a tweet today, he called his removal "unparliamentary".

Rajya Sabha Chairman Venkaiah Naidu declared his suspension within moments of V Muraleedharan, the Minister of State for Parliamentary Affairs, moving a motion on this.

"I move that Dr Santanu Sen, AITC, be suspended from the services of the House...for his unruly behaviour, unbecoming of a member of Rajya Sabha, yesterday..." Mr

Muraleedharan said in his motion.

Minutes after passing the motion, Chairman Naidu requested Dr Sen to leave the House. Amid protest by Trinamool MPs, he then adjourned the Rajya Sabha till 12.30 pm.

Dr Sen later tweeted saying his party's and its leader's voice cannot be stopped.

Earlier in the day, following his suspension, several leaders of the opposition met Mr Naidu over the matter. They asked why the Minister of State for Parliamentary Affairs was allowed to speak and move the motion against Dr Sen when it was not listed in the business of the day.

Among those who met Mr Naidu were Jairam Ramesh, Tiruchi Shiva, Sukhendu Ray, and Anand Sharma.

Minister Vaishnav

was yesterday forced to cut short his statement on the Pegasus snooping row due to the uproar among opposition members. As soon he rose to speak, Dr Sen snatched his papers, tore them, and flung them at Deputy Chairman Harivansh Narayan Singh.

This forced the minister to lay the paper on the table instead.

"Trinamool Congress has a culture of violence in West Bengal. They want to bring the same culture in Parliament. What kind of message they want to give to next generation of Parliamentarians?" Mr Vaishnav said today when asked about yesterday's incident.

Responding to him, Trinamool MP Mahua Moitra said her party was happy the Bengal's culture had entered Parliament, which was

against the BJP and for democracy.

"When Amit Shah was Home Minister, he used all IPS officers to spy. He is now bringing that Gujarat model all over India now," she said, hinting once again at the Pegasus row.

Her party colleague Derek O'Brien said he will speak on the matter later in the day. When asked where Dr Sen was, he said, "Shantanu Sen is not a terrorist. Pegasus is for terrorists. Ask those who have Pegasus."

The controversy surrounds media reports of the alleged targeting of journalists, top opposition leaders, and others in India by unknown entities using Pegasus, a spyware manufactured by an Israeli company that sells its products only to governments and vetted state agencies.

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KOLKATA OFFICE:
Irrishad Ali/Imteyaz, Synapse, 6, Madan Street, Mezzine - 2, 2nd floor, Kolkata - 700072. Ph. 033-22124348/ fax 033-22124337/ mnp. +91-9830547774/ +91-983108397. E-mail: contact.synapse@gmail.com/irishad_ali123@rediffmail.com

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Archery:
Deepika ninth in ranking round; Koreans dominate

TOKYO, JUL 23 (PTI): Star Indian archer Deepika Kumari finished ninth in the women's individual ranking round to secure an easy first-round clash in the main event as the country's Olympic campaign kickstarted at the Yumenoshima Park here on Friday.

The world No.1 finished with 663 points, while 20-year-old Korean prodigy An San (680) topped the qualification round with an Olympic record score of 680.

Deepika will now have an easy first-round outing against world No.193 Karma of Bhutan, who finished 56th in the ranking round.

The Indian might run into San in the quarter-final stage. Deepika had lost to her in straight sets during their only exchange in an Olympic Test event at the same venue in 2019.

The previous Olympic record score in the individual ranking round was 673 held by Ukraine's Lina Gerasymenko way back at Atlanta 1996 Olympics.

The world record (692) is held by Kang Chae Wong, the world No.3 who finished third with 675 points for a Korean top-three in the qualification round.

Jang Minhee (677) finished second.

Deepika fancied her chances at the halfway mark (36 arrows) as she occupied the fourth place with 334 points, one point ahead of Korean heavyweight Kang Chae Wong.

But she slipped in the back-end and was woefully out of mark with two 53s in the eighth and penultimate end to slip behind, while Mexican Alejandra Valencia climbed to the fourth place.

"I feel my performance was good as well as bad... it was in between I would say," Deepika said.

On her slip-up in the final six sets, she said: "I don't know why it was like that; I was trying to control my shots so that I could play better.

Deepika's biggest challenge is likely to be in the last-eight where she might run into San who is making her Olympic debut.

Two years after she lost at the same venue to San at the 'Tokyo 2020 Test Event' here, Deepika would look to avenge her final defeat.

"I'm talking to myself, I'm controlling my emotions and trying to make myself better and better.

"I want to show my best performance here and I will show that in my next rounds," Deepika vowed to come back strong.

The qualifying round results are used to seed the athletes and nations for the individual, mixed team and team competitions, deciding their opponents in the competition.

Archers shoot 72 arrows at the target set 70 metres away, in 12 series of six arrows.

They are ranked from highest to lowest at the end of the round. An archer's position after the ranking round becomes their seeding for match-play.

The Games will officially open this evening.

Olympic cycling road races are studies in contrast

TOKYO, JUL 23 (AP): The men's and women's Olympic road races that begin the cycling program at the Tokyo Games this weekend are similar only in their start amid the forests of Musashinonomori Park and their finish line at Fuji International Speedway.

After identical stretches through the outskirts of Tokyo, their courses differ with the men tackling the iconic climb of Mount Fuji twice and the women avoiding it entirely.

The men also have the punchy climb of Mikuni Pass that the women avoid, and will end up riding 145 miles to the 85 for the women while nearly doubling the amount of climbing.

Yet the biggest difference between the men's and women's races is this: More than a dozen men have a chance to capture the gold medal in Saturday's wide-open ride through the Tokyo countryside, while the women's race Sunday amounts to a showdown between the four-woman Dutch team and everyone else.

"Everybody in the world is trying to figure out how to beat the Dutch girls," acknowledged Jim Miller, the high-performance director for USA Cycling, which will roll with Ruth Winder, Coryn Rivera, Amber Neben and Chloe Dygert on Saturday.

"It's the Dutch's race to win or lose and every other nation is going to race off how they control the race. I think we have a good team for that," Miller added. "We have good tactics to at least have a crack at the Dutch women."

So, who is on this so-called Dutch dream team?

It starts with Anna van der Breggen, the



reigning Olympic gold medalist, fresh off a dominant victory in the Giro d'Italia Donne. Joining the world champ are Marianne Vos, who captured gold at the 2012 Games in London; La Course by Le Tour and Liege-Bastogne-Liege winner Demi Vollering; and Annemiek van Vleuten, who was leading the Rio Olympics road race before a crash on a downhill section left her with a concussion and three spinal fractures.

Together, the four riders from the Netherlands have won nine world championships, three Olympic medals and just about every marquee race for professional women Amstel Gold, La Fleche Wallonne and many others.

"We have a very strong crop of cyclists at our disposal from which we could select three fully-fledged Olympic teams. That really is a luxury position," Dutch national team coach Loes Gunnewijk said.

"We're one of the favorites but we are used to that. And the riders

can also do very well there. It's still sport, there are no guarantees in advance. All the pieces of the puzzle have to come together that day. But we leave with one goal: that is gold and a third consecutive title."

Before the women take to the course, though, the men will race for one of the first medals of the delayed Tokyo Games.

Among those at the start line Saturday will be Tadej Pogacar, just six days removed from his second consecutive victory in the Tour de France. He'll be racing alongside his Tour rival, Primoz Roglic, on the four-man Slovenian team.

Olympic courses typically suit one-day specialists rather than Grand Tour riders, but the huge amount of climbing coupled with a fast run-in to the finish means both Pogacar and Roglic could well factor into the finish at Fuji. So could Ecuador's Richard Carapaz, who was third at the Tour, and Top 10 finisher Guillaume Martin of France.

But they're just part of a handful or several handfuls of riders with an opportunity to claim Olympic gold.

Defending champion Greg van Avermaet is back for Belgium, but he'll likely be riding in support of young standouts Remco Evenepoel and Wout van Aert, a three-time Tour stage winner. Colombia's climbing specialists headlined by Nairo Quintana and Sergio Higuita have an opportunity to shine; Britain brings experience with Geraint Thomas and brothers Simon and Adam Yates; Australia has Richie Porte, Denmark features Jakob Fuglsang and Kazakhstan has Alexey Lutsenko.

Then there's the Dutch men, who are out to prove they're every bit as strong as their women counterparts. Bauke Mollema won a stage at the Tour and Wilco Kelderman finished a surprising fifth place in the overall standings.

"There are several

guys who did their Tour to prepare for the Games. Maybe they still have an edge," Evenepoel said.

"But someone like Tadej recovers quickly from such a tough race. He also knows how to do it, so I don't see why he wouldn't be a joint top favorite. Then when you see how Wout flew in the past few weeks, you can say he's in the shape of his life.

"He has always said he would work towards his goal and that his Tour would be to prepare for the Games," Evenepoel added. "He's done that well. He looks sharp and fresh. This Wout shouldn't be afraid of this course."

You can count former Tour winner Bradley Wiggins among those in the brilliant Belgian's camp, too.

"Wout is the best rider in the world at the moment," he said said on his Eurosport podcast.

"The guy is phenomenal. I have huge respect for him. He's now the favorite for the road race. He has to be. And I'd love to see him win it.

Looking at Tokyo Olympics through the lens of the 1964 Games

TOKYO, JUL 23 (AP): Just 19 years after devastating defeat in World War II, the 1964 Tokyo Olympics showcased the reemergence of an innovative country that was showing off bullet trains, miniature transistor radios, and a restored reputation.

Japan's resiliency is on display again, attempting to stage the postponed 2020 Tokyo Olympics in the midst of a once-in-a century pandemic. The challenge is different, and this time there is widespread public opposition that has divided the country over the health hazards with nagging questions about who benefits from staging the Games.

Roy Tomizawa, who documented the '64 Olympics in a recent book, described those distant Games 57 years ago as the Inclusion Games in an email to The Associated Press.

He called the attempt this time the Exclusion Games."

But he offered some hope.

Whether you agree or disagree with the Japanese government, the Games are going ahead in the face of significant risk, Tomizawa said. But he said these Games might also be turned into Inclusion Games.

With a high degree of difficulty, he added.

"Organizing an Olympics and Paralympics during this pandemic is like Simone Biles executing a Yurchenko Double Pike, a vault so difficult no other female gymnast wants to do it. Biles can. Maybe Japan can, too," Tomizawa said.

Tomizawa's book is titled: 1964 The Greatest Year in the History of Japan: How the Tokyo Olympics Symbolized Japan's Miraculous Rise from the Ashes.

It came out last year, just months before the postponed Olympics were to open.

Tomizawa writes in the book about the massive effort to be ready in '64:

Police were taking pickpockets off the streets and ensuring bars in Tokyo were complying with directives to close down early. ... In fact, every man, woman, and child in Japan was getting ready to welcome the world to their country believing it was their civic duty to ensure that foreigners who came to town were not deprived of any necessity or assistance.

This was the year that Cassius Clay won the heavyweight championship and became Muhammad Ali. It was when Roy Emerson of Australia and Maria Bueno of Brazil took the titles at Wimbledon, when Arnold Palmer claimed his fourth and final Masters, and when the Beatles arrived on a Pan Am flight from London to play their first concert in the United States.

And it was later that same year in Tokyo when Yoshinori Sakai born on Aug. 6, 1945, in Hiroshima, the day the atomic bomb was dropped on the city ignited the cauldron in the national stadium to open the 18th Olympic Games.

Tomizawa grew up in New York, and his father, Tom, a second-generation Japanese-American, was an editor who worked for the television network NBC at the Olympics in Tokyo the first to be shown internationally using communication satellites.

The family connection and curiosity got Tomizawa looking for a history in English of those 1964 Games. He couldn't find one, so he wrote his own.

Tomizawa, who has worked for 20 years in Japan, interviewed 70 Olympians from 16 nations. Some were famous at the time: Australian swimmer Dawn Fraser or American 10,000-meter gold-medalist Billy Mills.

Some made other history, like Bulgarian teammates Nikolai Prodanov and Diana Yorgova, who were married in Tokyo during the Olympics. It was billed as the first Olympic wedding and featured a Shinto priest, sake, traditional Bulgarian dances, and an interpreter to explain what was going on.

He said his favorite interview was with Jerry Shipp, a shooting guard on the American gold-medal winning basketball team coached by Hank Iba. It lasted for several hours with Shipp recounting a tough childhood growing up in an Oklahoma orphanage.

Shipp led the Americans in scoring ahead of Bill Bradley on a team that also included Larry Brown and Walt Hazzard. In addition to Shipp, Tomizawa also interviewed Jeff Mullins, Mel Counts and Luke Jackson.

I think the Olympians tell more of the story of the Games themselves and their reaction to what they saw of Japan, Tomizawa said.

Some had been to Japan in '50s and '60s. I think everyone was surprised and shocked when they arrived in Japan thinking it would be a backward economy.

They were also taken aback by the nature of the Japanese.

For the Canadians, the Australians, the Americans, the Brits it was the brutal enemy, Tomizawa said.

When they came, they were welcomed and given such help and support and cheering. It was a surprise to all of them.

They also found what Tomizawa called operational excellence, convincing doubters about the country's capabilities. The current Tokyo organizers will need that resiliency, although just getting through these Olympics is sure to be portrayed as a success no matter the details and the financial costs.

Japan is officially spending 15.4 billion on the Olympics, but government auditors say the costs are much higher. All but 6.7 billion is public money.

The International Olympic Committee chips in about 1.5 billion, and some of this is payment-in-kind rather than cash. Its payoff is the 3 billion to 4 billion it earns in broadcasts rights, much of which would be lost with a cancellation.

Australian swimming's relay dynasty is built on trust

TOKYO (AP): A constantly refilling pool of talent. Well-rehearsed changeovers. And plenty of speed.

There are many reasons why the Australian women are heavily favored to win a third straight gold medal in the 4x100-meter freestyle relay at the Tokyo Olympics.

None bigger, though, than the trust that they've developed in each other while winning gold at three of the past four Games.

"We've built that through many years of competing together," said Bronte Campbell, who was a member of the 2016 team and is a "relay-only" swimmer for these Games.

"So that's probably the glue that holds the whole team together. It is such an honor to be on the team, and it's so hard for us to make that team every time. So when you do make it, you know you have each other's backs and you really, really trust in each other," Bronte added in a recent joint interview with her older sister, Cate Campbell.

Australia has so many great sprinters these

days that Bronte, a former world champion in the individual 100, might swim only the heats of the 4x100 this year. That's because Emma McKeon, Cate Campbell, Madison Wilson and Meg Harris all finished ahead of her at the Australian trials last month.

Cate, who is swimming in her fourth Olympics, ties together the generations.

"We have kind of inherited this legacy event," Cate said. "We took over from legends by the likes of Libby Trickett and Alice Mills (now Alice Tait) and Jodie Henry. Now the baton is in our hands and we want to make it so that we leave it in a really good strong position.

"It's honestly a real honor and a privilege to be a part of this relay team," Cate added. "It's been one of the highlights of my career."

The Australians held a 10-day relay camp in February on the Gold Coast in Queensland, which provided not only a chance for extensive training but also a reunion of sorts amid the pandemic.

"Not everyone lives in the same state and we



hadn't seen each other for about a year," Bronte said. "We really have had no contact with anyone and that's a huge part of it as well, making sure that the team really gels. So that was great."

The team practiced every scenario that they might face in Saturday's heats and Sunday's final — one of the first medal events on the swimming program.

"The coaches would kind of tell the swimmers, 'On this one you have to do a really short touch on the wall.' Then I would have to get used to changing with a short touch. Or, 'You're going to be long on the wall' or 'You're going to speed up on the way into the wall,'" Cate said.

"And then ultimately you have to trust your-

self. You have to trust that you've done the work, that I know how to do this and that I can execute it when it matters. And history shows that I can. So it's a lot of preparation and then self-belief on the day."

While the Australians are favored, the Netherlands also has a veteran team featuring Ranomi Kromowidjojo and Femke Heemskerk, who were both members of the Dutch squad that claimed gold in 2008, when Australia came third.

Sweden, led by 100-meter world-record holder Sarah Sjöström, is also a threat, as is the United States — like always.

The key to winning is usually in the changeovers, which require teammates to read each other's strokes.

"I usually get up on the blocks when they're about 25 meters out and I can watch them come in," Cate said. "You get a little bit of a feel for their stroke and whether they're speeding up or slowing down. Whether their stroke is shortening or lengthening.

"But a pretty good general rule to go by is, once their head crosses through the black T (on the bottom of the pool) you're pretty safe to go. You may not have the fastest changeover but you're pretty much guaranteed that it will be safe."

Added Bronte: "The freaky thing about a relay changeover is you actually never see them touch the wall. So you should be gone and in the air before their hand hits the wall, because your feet should still be on the blocks when their hand hits the wall, which means your body has got to move quite a long time before that. So you just got to pick your mind and then back yourself, because you can't hang around to watch them touch."

In the end, Australia usually touches first.

England quarantine rules being relaxed to avoid shortages

LONDON (AP): The British government has sought to ease food supply pressures in England by exempting more than 10,000 workers from quarantine rules that had led to staff shortages and empty shelves and fears of panic-buying. In an announcement late Thursday following mounting pressure from increasingly vexed retailers, it outlined plans for daily COVID-19 testing of critical food industry workers that will effectively allow those who test negative to continue working even if they have been notified on their phones to self-isolate due to contact with someone with the virus.

The move, along with a limited relaxation of self-isolation rules in other key sectors and vital public services, including essential transport, the emergency services and energy industry, came amid growing concerns within government of the impact of the so-called pingdemic on many key sectors of the British economy.

Amid a resurgence of the virus across the U.K., hundreds of thousands of people, including British Prime Minister Boris



Johnson, are having to self-isolate for 10 days after being advised by the National Health Service's test and trace app that they have come into close contact with someone who has tested positive for the virus.

It was primarily concerns over food supplies that drove the government's change in approach as more and more workers, including crucial delivery drivers, were having to self-isolate, leading to scenes of empty supermarket shelves and fears of panic-buying by anxious consumers.

The government said it has identified priority locations, including the largest supermarket distribution centers, where testing will begin this week. The program will be expanded to as many as 500 sites next week, encompassing providers of staple foods such as bread and dairy products.

"All of the people working in those key strategic sites, distribution depots and those manufacturing facilities will be able to use this scheme, and probably well over 10,000 people," Environment Secretary

George Eustice told Sky News on Friday.

The government's new policy was welcomed by retailers but many said the government must be prepared to take further action, potentially bringing forward its previously announced plan to change the self-isolation rules on Aug. 16.

On that date, the government has said it would exempt double-jabbed individuals from the self-isolation rules. That change comes nearly a month after most legal coronavirus rules in England were lifted. The other nations

of the U.K. — Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland — are being more cautious in lifting restrictions.

"It is absolutely vital that government makes up for lost time and rolls out this new scheme as fast as possible," said Helen Dickinson, chief executive of the British Retail Consortium. "Disruption is limited at the moment, and retailers are monitoring the situation closely."

Alongside the measures to protect food supplies, the government published guidance on Thursday night setting out limited exemptions for fully-vaccinated critical workers from 16 other sectors if their inability to work would have a "major detrimental impact" or risk national security. However, the guidance has already led to some confusion within the sectors involved.

Under the new guidance, fully vaccinated employees providing what are deemed critical services would be able to keep working and avoid self-isolation if they have been named on a list kept updated by officials.

The government said the policy is not a "blanket exemption" for all employees in a sector — for instance, while railway signal operators on whom the network depends may be given an exemption, individual train drivers are unlikely to be.

"While the announcement of a process which may exempt select critical workers from self-isolation in England will be a relief to some businesses, it will leave many more still facing critical staff shortages and lost revenue as the number of people being asked to isolate remains high," said Hannah Essex, from the British Chambers of Commerce.

Many critics say the app has been unfairly singled out and that the widespread pinging has more to do with a sharp increase in infections the U.K. is recording as a result of the spread of the more contagious delta variant and the lifting of lockdown restrictions.

With daily infections predicted by the government to at least double to 100,000 this summer, the number of people being pinged by the app will inevitably grow, potentially to more than 1 million a week.

US carried out airstrikes in Afghanistan: Pentagon

WASHINGTON, JUL 23 (PTI): The US carried out airstrikes across Afghanistan in the last several days as part of an effort to support the Afghan security forces fighting Taliban insurgents, the Pentagon has said.

The news of US airstrikes in Afghanistan came a day after America's most senior military officer admitted that the Taliban had gained strategic momentum, with their forces now controlling about half of Afghanistan's more than 400 district centres.

The Pentagon, however, refrained from giving any specifics of its airstrikes in Afghanistan.

Without speaking to specifics, I can say that in the last several days, we have acted through airstrikes to support the ANDSF (Afghan National Defense and Security Forces) but I won't get into tactical details of those strikes, Pentagon Press Secretary John Kirby told reporters on Thursday at a news conference here.

But we continue to be able to and we continue to, as the Secretary said yesterday, conduct airstrikes in support of the ANDSF," he said.

The commander of US forces in the region, Central Command's General Kenneth Frank McKenzie, would retain the authority to call for airstrikes in support of Afghan forces until the US withdrawal from Afghanistan was complete.

According to a defence official, the US military has carried out approximately six or seven strikes in the past 30 days, mostly using drones to launch the strikes, CNN reported.

A US defence official

on Thursday said that the strikes targeted captured military equipment that the Taliban [were] able to seize from the ANDSF," the Voice of America reported.

"There were enemy forces, enemy personnel targeted" alongside the captured equipment, the official added, speaking on the condition of anonymity because of the sensitive nature of the information.

The Taliban in recent days swept across Afghanistan, pushing back the Afghan military and taking over significant swaths of territory as the US nears the ends of its withdrawal.

US Central Command, which is in charge of Afghanistan, said recently that the withdrawal of US forces is more than 95 per cent complete.

President Joe Biden has said the withdrawal would be complete by the end of August.

Approximately 650 troops are set to remain in the country to secure the US diplomatic presence in Afghanistan, including the embassy, and to assist in securing Kabul's international airport, which is a necessary facility for the movement of diplomats.

General Mark Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said on Wednesday that Taliban forces were putting pressure on 17 of Afghanistan's 34 provincial capitals.

"There's a possibility of a complete Taliban takeover or a possibility of any number of other scenarios, breakdown, warlordism, all other kinds of scenarios that are out there. We're monitoring very closely, I don't think the end game is yet written," he said.

Iran's top leader says understands protests over drought

DUBAI, UNITED ARAB EMIRATES (AP): Iran's Supreme Leader leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei on Friday said he understands protesters' anger over a drought in the country's southwest, as a fourth death related to ongoing demonstrations there was reported.

The remark, reported by state television, was the first direct comment on the protests by Khamenei since they began in the Khuzestan region a week ago. Semi-

official news agency Fars reported a man was killed by shotgun fire in street violence in the nearby city of Aligoudarz, which police blamed on "counterrevolutionary elements."

"People showed their discontent, but we cannot have any complaint since the issue of water in the hot climate of Khuzestan is not a minor issue," Khamenei was quoted as saying. He accused Iran's enemies of trying to exploit the situation.

He praised the people of the region for their loyalty and efforts during the devastating war against Iraq in the 1980's, adding that "the people should not face problems" anymore.

Protests have taken place in many cities and towns of Khuzestan, according to the Human Rights Activists in Iran group. Security forces have fired tear gas and water cannons, and have clashed with demonstrators, the group added.

On Friday, Amnesty International said security forces had used live ammunition during the protests, and it urged them not to do so. "Using live ammunition against unarmed protesters posing no imminent threat to life is horrifying," is said in a statement.

Iranian state media had previously reported that a police officer and two civilians had been killed amid the protests.

Mobile phone internet service in Iran was disrupted during the protests, according to Internet-access advocacy group NetBlocks.org

The protests in Khuzestan come as Iran struggles through repeated waves of infection amid the coronavirus pandemic, and as thousands of workers in its oil industry are on strike to demand better wages and working conditions.

Iran's economy has also struggled under U.S. sanctions since then-President Donald Trump's 2018 decision to unilaterally withdraw America from Tehran's nuclear deal with world powers, crashing the value of the Islamic Republic's currency, the rial.

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Xi Jinping makes rare visit to Tibetan town bordering Arunachal Pradesh

BEIJING, JUL 23 (PTI): Chinese President Xi Jinping has made a rare visit to Nyingchi, a strategically located Tibetan border town close to Arunachal Pradesh, the official media reported on Friday. Xi arrived at the Nyingchi Mainling Airport on Wednesday and was warmly welcomed by local people and officials of various ethnic groups, Xinhua news agency reported.

He then visited the Nyang River Bridge, to inspect the ecological preservation in the basin of the Brahmaputra river,



which is called Yarlung Zangbo in the Tibetan language.

Nyingchi is a prefecture-level city in Tibet that is adjacent to the Arunachal Pradesh border.

China claims Arunachal Pradesh as

part of South Tibet, which is firmly rejected by India.

The India-China border dispute covers the 3,488-km Line of Actual Control (LAC).

Chinese leaders periodically visit Tibet. But Xi, who also heads the

ruling Communist Party of China and the powerful Central Military Commission -- the overall high command of the Chinese military -- is perhaps the first top leader in recent years to visit Tibet's border town.

Nyingchi was in news in June when China fully operationalised its first bullet train in Tibet.

The train connects Tibet's provincial capital Lhasa with Nyingchi. It has a designed speed of 160 km per hour and operates on a single-line electrified railway covering 435.5-km.

if not years" to restore everything, though the company is confident of repairing 80% of the damaged infrastructure by the end of this year.

Separately, Turkey also has seen flooding in recent days. Work was continuing to find a missing person following floods in Artvin province in the country's northeast that started Wednesday, and one person was being treated for injuries. More than 450 people were evacuated.

German railway: Floods caused \$1.5 billion damage to network

BERLIN (AP): Germany's national railway operator estimated on Friday that last week's flooding caused damage worth 1.3 billion euros (\$1.5 billion) to its network, offering another glimpse of the extent of the devastation.

Authorities are still working to determine the overall cost of the floods that did their worst damage in western Germany and eastern Belgium. German Chancellor Angela Merkel said this week that the damage is

"immense" and will take a long time to repair.

At least 177 people died in Germany in the flooding and a further 31 deaths were reported in Belgium, taking the overall death toll to 208.

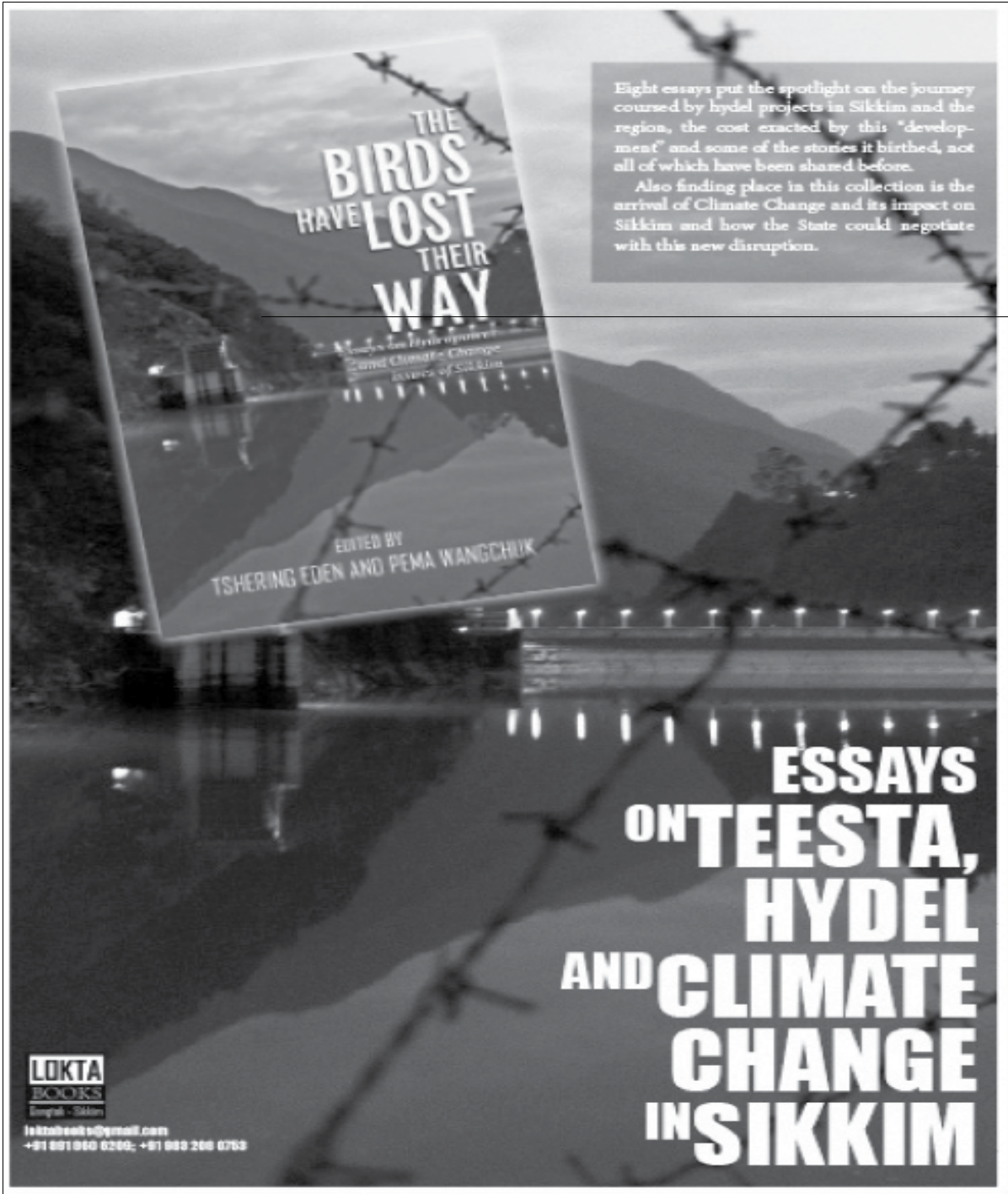
German railway operator Deutsche Bahn said that more than 50 bridges, 180 level crossings, nearly 40 signal boxes, over 1,000 electric and signal masts, as well as energy and lighting systems and station elevators were damaged.

"Never before has our infrastructure been destroyed to this extent in one go," said Volker Hentschel, a board member at the company's DB Netz infrastructure division. He said its initial estimate is that the flooding caused damage to the railway network and stations of around 1.3 billion euros.

The government, which owns Deutsche Bahn, has vowed to make a quick start on rebuilding efforts. Hentschel said it will take "months,

if not years" to restore everything, though the company is confident of repairing 80% of the damaged infrastructure by the end of this year.

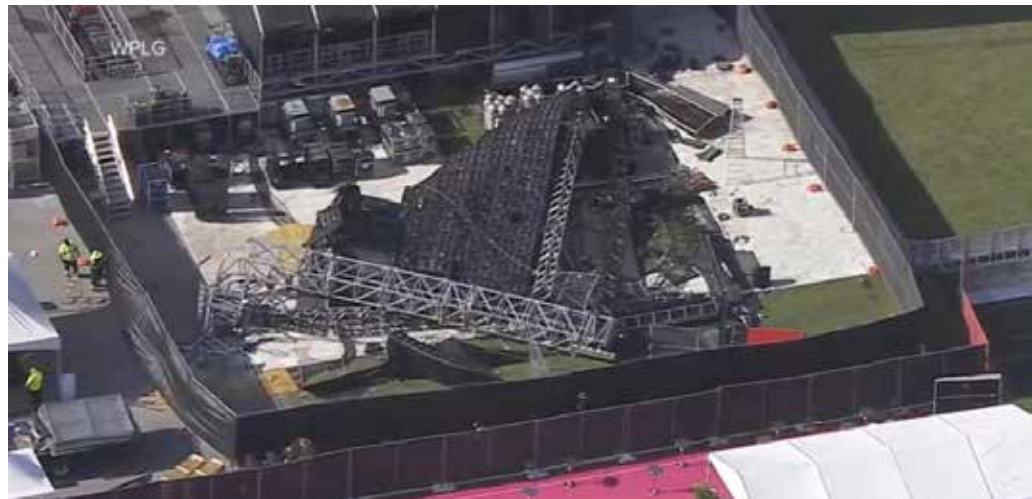
Separately, Turkey also has seen flooding in recent days. Work was continuing to find a missing person following floods in Artvin province in the country's northeast that started Wednesday, and one person was being treated for injuries. More than 450 people were evacuated.





SUITED UP! The singer, Madison Beer dons a crisp white suit to attend the Victoria's Secret Tease Creme Cloud fragrance launch in LA.

Giant screen collapses ahead of Rolling Loud music festival



MIAMI (AP): A giant video screen collapsed Thursday at a South Florida stadium, a day before the Rolling Loud hip-hop music festival was set to begin. There were no injuries. Organizers posted on Twitter that the screen toppled over onto one of the festival's stages at Hard Rock

Stadium in Miami Gardens, but it was expected to be repaired before doors opened Friday.

"Nobody was hurt and it will be fixed before doors open tomorrow. The show goes on!" the tweet said.

Helicopter news footage shows a large pile of downed scaffolding and other

equipment next to one of the stages.

Like many other events, Rolling Loud was canceled last year because of the coronavirus pandemic. Originally set for May 2020, the event was rescheduled several times. This weekend's lineup includes A\$AP Rocky, Travis Scott and Post Malone.

On Friday, Louis Vuitton became the latest brand to end its contract with Wu. A man who saw rumors about the incident online contacted the woman in June and

Christian Slater Shares Priceless Reaction to Chris Evans' Baffling Viral Tweet About Him

After Chris Evans posted earlier this month about Christian Slater, the Dr. Death actor offered his very authentic response. Christian Slater is still thoroughly confused by Chris Evans' recent viral tweet about him.

During the 51-year-old Dr. Death actor's visit to Jimmy Kimmel Live on Thursday, July 22, guest host Anthony Anderson brought up the fact that the star was trending on Twitter earlier this month after he was the focus of Chris' delightfully head-scratching message.

The 40-year-old Knives Out standout's tweet from July 1 read, "If Christian Slater from 1989 walked into the room, and I had never heard his name before, and had to guess what it was just from what he looked like, I would guess 'Christian Slater.'" And yes, we're currently nodding and

smiling just like you are.

After reading this post aloud, Anthony quipped, "First off, I think Chris Evans does not need to tweet drunk and high at the same time again. But do you know why he tweeted this about you, or for you?"

Christian paused for a beat while shaking his head with a smile. He then responded, "You know, I have no idea. That was definitely a surprise." After another pause, he clarified, "A pleasant one."

The Mr. Robot alum continued, "It's the only time my daughter, who's 19, has ever been impressed with anything I've ever done."

This led Anthony to add, "Oh, my god. I guess what happens when Captain America gives up the shield, the world just goes to shambles." Christian nodded his head in agreement.

Later in the interview, Christian shared that he prepared for playing a surgeon



in Dr. Death by assisting his brother-in-law, a vascular surgeon, in real-life medical procedures. However, after a day of holding the clamp in five different procedures, the actor got home that night and realized his wedding ring was missing.

"I haven't found it," the

father of three continued. "So somebody in Baltimore is walking around with a very nice wedding ring."

Given that Chris Evans seems to know a lot about Christian, maybe the Avengers star already has a plan to track down the missing jewelry.

Hemingway Look-Alike Contest returns to the Florida Keys

KEY WEST, FLA. (AP): The 40th edition of an Ernest Hemingway look-alike contest opened Thursday night at an iconic Key West bar once frequented by the author, marking the return of a contest canceled last year amid the coronavirus pandemic.

Some 70 stocky, bearded men resembling the late writer competed in the first of two preliminary rounds at Sloppy Joe's Bar. The contest's second preliminary round is set for Friday and the 2021 winner is to be chosen Saturday night.

The three-night contest is a cornerstone of the island's Hemingway Days festival, staged around the literary legend's July 21 birthday



to salute his writing talent, legacy and adventurous life. Hemingway lived and wrote on the subtropical island for most of the 1930s.

Thursday night's entrants paraded across Sloppy Joe's stage before a judging panel of former winners including

Joe Maxey, a retired Tennessee banker who won the last contest, staged in 2019.

Late Wednesday, a woman from Somerville, Massachusetts, was named the winner of the Lorian Hemingway Short Story Competition. Madison Bakalar's "So This Is

How We Go" bested 784 other American and international entries.

Lorian Hemingway, Ernest Hemingway's author granddaughter and founder of the literary competition, said Bakalar's story impressed the judges for its ability to combine universally human emotions about loss with a finessed gallows humor.

Hemingway Days continues through Sunday with events including an offbeat "Running of the Bulls" spoof, a literary walking tour and the Key West Marlin Tournament.

While living in Key West, Hemingway penned classics including "For Whom the Bell Tolls" and "To Have and Have Not."

Man defrauded Chinese pop singer in sex scandal

BEIJING (AP) — A man has confessed to defrauding Chinese-Canadian pop singer Kris Wu over a teenager's accusation he had sex with her when she was drunk, according to Beijing police.

The announcement added a bizarre twist to a scandal that cost Wu endorsement contracts with brands including Porsche and Bulgari. The former member of Korean boy band EXO has denied the accusation, which prompted an outpouring of support for the woman online and criticism of Wu.

On Friday, Louis Vuitton became the latest brand to end its contract with Wu.

A man who saw rumors about the incident online contacted the woman in June and

obtained information that allowed him to pretend to be her in order to ask Wu's lawyer for money, the Beijing Public Security Bureau said in a statement late Thursday. It said the man tricked both sides, indicating the woman played no part in the fraud.

Wu's mother sent the woman 500,000 yuan (\$77,000), and then the man, pretending to be Wu's lawyer, tried to persuade the woman to send the money to him, the statement said. It said he tried unsuccessfully to obtain an additional 2.5 million yuan (\$390,000) from Wu's real lawyer.

The man, identified only by the surname Liu, was arrested Sunday in Nantong, near Shanghai, after the singer's

mother complained to police the family had been defrauded, according to the police statement. It said he confessed.

The woman had been quoted by the internet portal NetEase as saying Wu encouraged her to drink too much at a party in December and she woke up in his bed. In a statement on his social media account, Wu said he met the woman but denied encouraging her to drink and said other parts of her account didn't happen.

The woman was quoted as saying other women told her Wu seduced them with promises of jobs and other opportunities. Police are investigating allegations Wu "repeatedly deceived young women into sexual relations," the police statement said.

Brands cut ties with Wu the day after the NetEase report, reflecting their sensitivity to public opinion after the ruling Communist Party stirred up anger at shoe and clothing brands in retaliation for Western reports of human rights abuses in the mostly Muslim region of Xinjiang in the northwest.

Wu, known in Chinese as Wu Yifan, grew up in Guangzhou in southern China and in Vancouver, British Columbia. He performed with EXO in 2012-14 and then launched a solo career. As an actor, he appeared in 2017's "XXX: Return of Xander Cage" and two Chinese box office successes, "Mr. Six" and "Journey to the West: The Demons Strike Back."

Aries:
Your daily affirmation: "I trust myself to create the abundance I deserve." Repeat these words out loud to yourself with unyielding faith as you begin your day. Even better, write it down in your journal a few times or pin it up on your work desk as a reminder. What the Universe wants you to know is that the wealth you need for this venture will come your way soon.
Tip: "I trust myself to create the abundance I deserve."
Taurus:
That vision board looks sharp, Taurus, but it isn't going to manifest itself. This phase of your life is about putting the given plan into action. Remember, everything seems intimidating at first—until you get the hang of it. So, motivate yourself to take that first step and trust that you will find a way to learn the ways of the world as you go along.
Tip: It's time to put the given plan into action.
Gemini:
There are some days when everything seems topsy-turvy, but today is "not" one of those days, Gemini. You've got a smile on your face and a song in your soul. You know that the divine forces are with you, and they will turn the most challenging circumstances around. So keep the faith, beautiful. Keep affirming the good within and without. As you do, trust that the

portal of healing and abundance is being activated for you.
Tip: The divine forces are with you and they're helping you turn the most sticky situations around.
Cancer:
Setting off on an adventure may or may not be an option right now. But that doesn't mean life has to be colourless. What the Universe is offering you today: the opportunity to board that flight of fantasy. So, take some time off from your routine to dream a new dream, to vision board about what you want to call into your reality, and set an intention about the ways in which you would like to be supported by the Universe.
Tip: Get ready to board the flights of fantasy.
Leo:
It's been a roller coaster ride, Leo, with little or no respite. Quite frankly, you're exhausted! So, instead of pushing against the flow, hit the pause button. Take that much-needed breather. A yin yoga session or a therapeutic massage are some of the ways in which you can decompress. If spending time outdoors is an option, reconnect with Mother Nature. Dig your feet into the soil and wrap the trees around you in a warm embrace. Meditating under the open skies may also be a good way to bring your body and being into bal-

ance.
Tip: Take a breather.
Virgo:
When we're stuck in the ego space, all we're able to focus on is the differences. When we tap into that space of love, however, we open the pathway to oneness. It all comes down to where you will choose to vibrate at, Virgo, and we do hope that you will make the right choices today. It's time to make peace where there has been war. It's time to become the flagbearer of change. Your angels and guides are with you, helping you bring about a shift.
Tip: It's time to become the flagbearer of change.
Libra:
Given that we're in retrograde season, unhealed trauma from the past is coming up in a big way. Here's the thing, Libra: you have a choice. You always have a choice. To choose the path of denial or to act responsibly. Something tells us you're in the mood to work through the heavy emotions and bring about a significant change. Remember, the other person is merely a mirror. A catalyst who is getting you to look within.
Tip: The other person is merely a catalyst, so treat them with respect.
Scorpio:
What if we said that you are an open channel for love,

healing, and abundance, and that everything you ever need will always be provided to you? You are beginning to see proof of your co-creating abilities, and it's oh-so-magical. Scorpio! Today, the cards are also bringing your attention to the quote 'the more you give...' So, offer your help freely, support small businesses, donate to charitable organisations that have been on your radar. Know that the seeds of goodness you are planting today will come back to you manifold.
Tip: "The more you give..."
Sagittarius:
You're many things, Sagittarius, but mediocre is certainly not one of them. What the cards are reminding you is that you are here to inspire change. You are here to start a revolution and help the masses question the rules that have been handed down to them. But, you can only create this change if you practice what you preach.
Tip: You are here to inspire change by living your truth boldly.
Capricorn:
Do you ever just look around and notice all the things that are transpiring for you, all the ways in which the Universe is conspiring so you can live the life of your dreams? The miracles are endless, Capricorn, and the support of both your earth angels and spirit team

is strong. So, take a moment to count your blessings instead of nitpicking.
Tip: Oh, look! There's a rainbow beyond the clouds.
Aquarius:
We all need a little bit of hope and optimism once in a while. We all need a little bit of motivation to get back in the game. What makes "you" feel good, Aquarius? What are the activities that release your happy hormones? More importantly, who are the people in your life that remind you of the rainbow that exists beyond the clouds. It's time to get in touch with them in your own special way.
Tip: It's time to open the door to hope and optimism.
Pisces:
There's got to be more to life than amassing wealth and making your way up the corporate ladder. Thank goddess for art, music, and drama! Thank goddess for the creative and the intuitive and for everything that lies in between. If you've been unsure of your sacred purpose, this is your affirmation that you are meant to help humanity ascend to the next level of consciousness as a conduit of the Divine Feminine energy. Pisces, do you know how many people you inspire by just being "you"? PS: We're blinded by your awesomeness.
Tip: You are here to help humanity ascend to the next level of consciousness as a conduit of the Divine Feminine energy.