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SummitTIMES

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ON TOP OF THE NEWS

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Sikkim registers record 170 cases in a day, three more Covid deaths

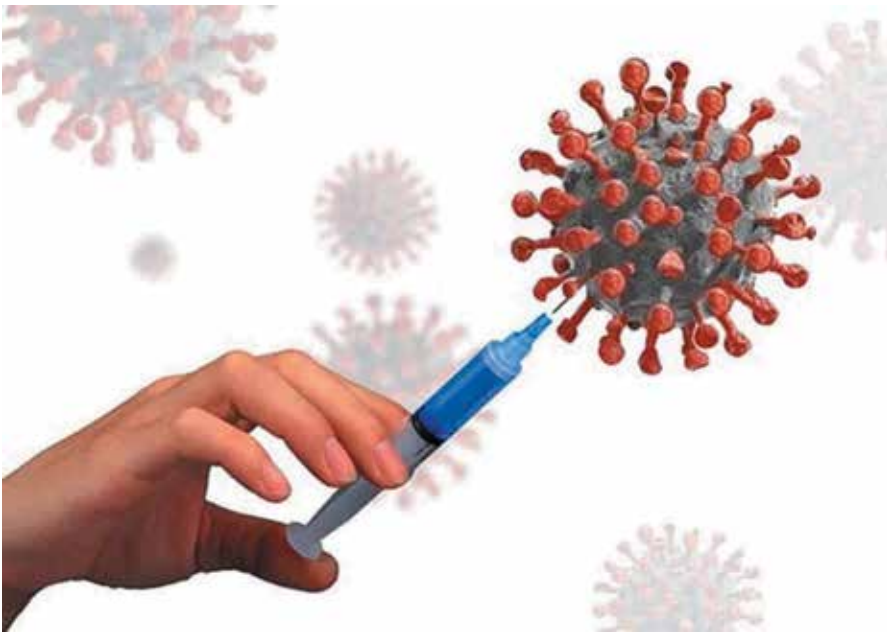
SUMMIT REPORT

GANGTOK, 29 APR:

Sikkim broke its record for highest daily cases within a day today when 170 new cases were detected in the last 24 hours. Only a day earlier, on Wednesday, Sikkim had posted a record 151 new cases. Also today, the State registered three more deaths among Covid-positive people.

With the 170 new cases, Sikkim's count of active cases has jumped to 1247, of whom nine are currently admitted in the ICU facility of STNM Hospital.

With the three new deaths - two at STNM Hospital and one at Central Referral Hospital [where a third Covid fatality was reported in as many days] - the COVID-19 related death toll here has reached 146.



The 170 new cases were picked up in the testing of 734 samples collected on Wednesday.

A total of 132 cases were detected in RT-PCR testing of 549 samples, while one came positive in TruNat and 37 in rapid anti-

gen testing of 180 samples.

Among the new cases, 124 were reported from East District, 34 from South District, nine from West District and three from North Sikkim.

In the meanwhile, the number of recovered

cases grew to 6,176 in Sikkim with 22 more persons discharged from home isolation after completing their isolation period.

Health Secretary, Dr Pempa T Bhutia, in a Facebook post appealed

to the public to stop social gatherings.

"170 new cases today. The highest spike in a day in Sikkim. All are requested to protect yourself and your family to avoid any further spike. We should contain this virus otherwise the day is not far where there is no beds no oxygen and lack of health care workers. As far as possible we should stop social gatherings. This is possible if we all come together. Please follow COVID appropriate behavior and avoid unnecessary travels," he wrote.

There are currently 118 Covid patients admitted in hospitals - 90 at STNM Hospital, 22 at CRH, 5 at Mangan District Hospital and 1 at Namchi District Hospital. 22 new Covid-positive patients were admitted into hospital today.

Su-Swastha Yojana for govt employees launched



GANGTOK, 29 APR [IPR]:

Chief Minister Prem Singh Tamang formally launched the Su-Swastha Yojana under Health and Family Welfare Department at a function held at Manan Kendra today.

Su-Swastha yojana is a flagship programme of the State Government and is a cashless scheme which aims to provide Government employees access to qualitative cashless healthcare service with empanelled hospitals across the country and covers up to Rs 10 lakhs for government servants and their dependent family members on paying a nominal premium.

While rolling out the Su-Swastha website and enrolment portal, the Chief Minister highlighted the efforts taken by the State government to improve the health sector in the State.

He said that the Su-Swastha Yojana is an initiative undertaken by the State Government to provide health insurance to the government employees of Sikkim. With rising medical expenses, health insurance has now become imperative. The cashless health insurance basically removes the hassles of having to pay cash at the hospitals of the insured person(s) in a time of need, thereby focusing more on treat-

ments, he added. He also urged the Government employees to avail the health insurance scheme implemented by the State Government.

The Chief Minister further added that healthcare has become topmost priority of every individual now a days as unprecedented pandemic of Covid-19 has caused massive distress to thousands across the globe. In the same manner, he also appealed the people to adopt the core value of COVID-19 appropriate behaviour at all times and avoid unnecessary movements to curb the transmission of virus.

The Chief Minister stated that the Government has stood by its commitment to strengthening the health sector and has set a benchmark in many sectors with different initiatives and successful implementation of various schemes and programmes. He also outlined various measures undertaken in the health sector to augment the facilities and provide a better health care services to the people of the State by setting up of dialysis centres in the districts, tertiary Cancer Care Centre in STNM Hospital, Viral lab testing etc. He also pointed out various medical facilities established at the district level as well to deal with

medical emergencies in these trying times.

The Chief Minister also lauded the efforts of the concerned departments who have been selflessly dedicating themselves towards ensuring the safety and security of the people.

He also directed the SWADHI health private limited, also a service provider of the scheme to monitor, support and assist the insured persons to avail the facilities.

In his address, Minister for Health and Family Welfare Department, Dr MKSharma threw light on healthcare services provided in the State. He also highlighted on Su-Swastha yojana, which is an easy and affordable medical insurance scheme meant for government employees of the State.

Principal Secretary Health and Family Welfare Department, K Srineevasulu in his welcome address also spoke in detail about the State Government far-sighted vision in providing health care services to the people.

During the course of the programme, two employee beneficiaries were also distributed a token of Su-Swastha Health Card by the Chief Minister.

In the programme, **turn to pg 02**

Govt offices to now reopen only on 10 May

SUMMIT REPORT

GANGTOK, 29 APR:

The State Government has further extended the period of closure of Government offices including Public Sector Undertakings till 7 May, which means that offices will only now reopen on 10 May since 8 and 9 May are Saturday and Sunday, respectively.

While the announcement was made by Chief Minister, PS Tamang early in the day during the launch of the Su-Swastha health insurance scheme for government employees, a notification to this effect was released later in the day.

It may be mentioned that on 27 April, the gov-

ernment had announced that offices will be shut from 28-30 April in order to break the chain of COVID-19. Offices were scheduled to reopen on 3 May since 1 and 2 May was a weekend.

The notification issued today by the Home Department also states that "government vehicles, other than those engaged in essential/emergency services, shall not be allowed to ply on the road except for medical or other emergencies."

The departments and officials engaged in essential services like health, police, fire services, etc will continue to function.

SICA resolves to keep middlemen out, even if it requires banning guest players

SUMMIT REPORT

GANGTOK, 29 APR:

Sikkim Cricket Association [SICA] is firmly resolved to keep middlemen who infiltrate cricketing bodies to bribe spots for players from outside the state as guest players in state leagues.

In a press statement issued today, SICA president, Lobzang G Tenzing, informs that SICA had last year objected to BCCI's policy to allow guest players in senior men's and senior women's teams even though it appeared to be a good policy.

In the worst-case scenario, the SICA president, puts on record, that he may call a special general body meeting and urge

members to completely ban Guest Players even in Senior Men's and Senior Women's team of SICA.

This assertion is driven by the resurgence of "cash for cricket" syndrome in circles outside the State in which middlemen prey on the insecurities of BCCI empanelled players and offering them slots in State cricket teams for cash.

Over the last few years, Sikkim Cricket Association has focused on transparency based on strong moral ethics, a SICA press release states while adding that this reputation has attracted players from outside the state wanting to play for Sikkim.

The unscrupulous el-

ements from outside the State are constantly in the process of penetrating the Organization with offers to make the Organization corrupt, the release states while warning "all individuals who are involving themselves in money for Cricket not only in Sikkim but in all North-East States."

The Anti-Corruption Unit of BCCI and the Crime Branch of Sikkim is being constantly updated by SICA, the release adds.

The North-East State Cricket Associations are also in touch with each other to stop this corrupt practice of paying the state Associations to play as guest players, SICA states.

Ahead of Saturday launch, total confusion over vaccination drive

NEW DELHI, 29 APR [AFP]: India's mammoth push to beat its raging Covid surge with vaccinations looks troubled, with its vast inoculation programme plagued by shortages, confusion and political squabbles.

From Saturday, just as the country reels from a brutal explosion of cases, an estimated 500-600 million Indians will become eligible when the drive is opened to all adults.

Until now, only "frontline" workers like medical staff, people over 45 and those with existing illnesses have been given the AstraZeneca shot or Bharat Biotech's homegrown Covaxin.

But even this more modest programme has faltered, with some areas running out of shots and others throwing them away because of a lack of demand, in part due to hesitancy.

"The queues here are so colossal," said Jayanti Vasant as he waited at a busy vaccination centre in Bangalore. "The people are just fighting amongst themselves."

Stocks

So far around 150 million shots have been administered, equating to 11.5 percent of the population of 1.3 billion people. Just 25 million have had two shots.

According to the government, the states have stocks of more than 10 million shots and a further eight million will be made available in the coming days.

The Serum Institute is making 60-70 million AstraZeneca doses per month, and is aiming for 100 million by July. Bharat is aiming to produce 10 million a month and targets 60-70 million.

The firms also have deals to produce other shots including Russia's Sputnik V -- some of which should arrive soon -- Johnson & Johnson's single-dose vaccine and Novomax.

But it could be months until these are deployed.

"Do you want to control the epidemic, save lives or both? If you want both you'll require a huge amount of vaccines. And we don't have it," said T

Jacob John, a retired clinical virology professor at the Christian Medical College, Vellore.

Targeted strategy

Several states have said they don't have enough shots to start vaccinating all over-18s, including Maharashtra and New Delhi, two of the worst-hit areas.

But despite this, and even though people have to register on a government app but there may still be a rush at vaccination centres on Saturday.

On Wednesday, when online registration began, more than 13 million people signed up and users complained of technical glitches.

Further confusion has been created by New Delhi's decision to ask states and private hospitals to order vaccine supplies on their own, creating a three-tier pricing system that requires them to pay more per dose than the central government.

This has led to squabbles between the central government, run by the Bharatiya Janata Party, and states gov-

erned by opposition parties.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that some private clinics have been told they won't receive any vials for months.

Experts say that given the short-ages, and its colossal population, India should have a much more targeted vaccination policy than just opening up its programme to everyone over 18.

This could include concentrating vaccinations in hotspots -- some 75 percent of cases are in nine out of India's 36 regions -- and higher-risk population groups.

"We will have to use whatever supplies are available in a very careful and judicious way," agreed Lalit Kant, former head of epidemiology and communicable diseases at the Indian Council of Medical Research.

"Priority areas must be identified by the (central government) and the states using a proper epidemiological picture to decide who needs it first," Kant told AFP.

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Centre Re-releases Revised Guidelines For Covid Home Isolation

NEW DELHI, 29 APR [NDTV]: The Union Health ministry on Thursday issued the revised guidelines for home isolation of asymptomatic Covid cases, in which it advised against procuring or administering Remdesivir injections (key anti-viral drug) at home.

Asymptomatic patients, according to the revised guidelines, are those who are not experiencing any symptoms and having oxygen saturation of more than 94 per cent.

While patients aged above 60 years and those with co-morbid conditions shall only be allowed home isolation after proper evaluation by the treating medical officer, immunocompromised patients (included HIV, transplant recipients, cancer therapy) are not eligible for home isolation, as per the new guidelines.

Patients should have oxygen saturation of more than 94 per cent, it said. In case of drop in oxygen saturation levels or shortness of breath, the person should require hospital admission and seek immediate consultation with the treating physician, the guidelines said.

The government also recommended warm-water gargles and take steam inhalation twice a day.

"If fever is not controlled with a maximum dose of tab. Paracetamol 650 mg four times a day, consult the treating doctor, who may consider advising other drugs like non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drug (NSAID) (ex: tab. Naproxen 250 mg twice a day). Tab. Ivermectin (200 mcg/kg once a day, to be taken on empty stomach) for 3 to 5 days should be considered," the guidelines stated.

The decision to administer Remdesivir or any other investigational therapy must be taken by a medical professional, the ministry said. "Do not attempt to procure or administer Remdesivir at home. Systemic oral steroids are not indicated in mild disease. If symptoms persist beyond seven days (persistent fever, worsening cough etc.), consult the treating doctor for treatment with low-dose oral steroids," the guidelines said.

According to the new guidelines, a patient must isolate himself from other household members, stay in the identified room and away from other people in home, especially senior citizens and those with co-morbid conditions like hypertension, cardiovascular disease, renal disease etc.

"Patient should at all times use triple layer medical mask. Discard mask after 8 hours of use or earlier if they become wet or visibly soiled. In the event of care giver entering the room, both care giver

and patient may consider using N 95 mask," the guidelines says.

AYUSH 64 found useful in the treatment of mild to moderate COVID-19 infections, Govt claims

DELHI, 29 APR (PIB): In the middle of the havoc wreaked by second wave of the pandemic, AYUSH-64 has emerged as a ray of hope for the patients of mild and moderate COVID-19 infection. The scientists of reputed research institutions of the country have found that AYUSH 64, a poly herbal formulation developed by the Central Council for Research in Ayurvedic Sciences (CCRAS), Ministry of Ayush is useful in the treatment of asymptomatic, mild and moderate COVID-19 infection as an adjunct to standard care. It is worthwhile to mention that initially the drug was developed for Malaria in the year 1980 and now is repurposed for COVID-19.

The Ministry of Ayush-Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR) collaboration has recently completed a robust multi-centre clinical trial to evaluate the safety and efficacy of AYUSH 64 in the management of mild to moderate COVID-19 patients.

AYUSH 64 comprises of Alstonia scholaris (aqueous bark extract), Picrorhiza kurroa (aqueous rhizome extract), Swertia chirata (aqueous extract of whole plant) and Caesalpinia cristata (fine-powdered seed pulp). It is extensively studied, scientifically developed, safe and effective Ayurveda formulation. This medicine is also recommended in National Clinical Management Protocol based on Ayurveda and Yoga which is vetted by National Task Force on COVID-19 Management of ICMR.

Director, Dr Arvind Chopra, Centre for Rheumatic Diseases, Pune and honorary chief clinical coordinator of the Ministry of Ayush - CSIR collaboration informed that the trial was conducted at three centres. KGMU, Lucknow; DMIMS, Wardha and BMC COVID Centre, Mumbai involving 70 participants in each arm. Dr Chopra stated that AYUSH 64 as an adjunct to standard of care (SoC) showed

significant improvement and thus lesser period of hospitalization as compared to SoC alone. He also shared that several significant beneficial effects of AYUSH 64 on general health, fatigue, anxiety, stress, appetite, general happiness and sleep were also observed. Dr Chopra concluded that this controlled drug trial study has provided substantial evidence that AYUSH 64 can be effectively and safely used to treat mild to moderate cases of COVID-19 as adjunct to SoC. He also added that, patients on AYUSH 64 will still require monitoring so as to identify any worsening of disease requiring more intensive therapy with oxygen and other treatment measures provided during hospitalization.

National Research Professor, Dr Bhushan Patwardhan, Ayush and Chairman of the Interdisciplinary Ayush Research and Development Task Force on COVID-19 stated that the results of AYUSH-64

study are highly encouraging and in the current crisis situations needy patients should be able to get benefits of Ayush 64. He also underlined that this multi-centre trial was monitored by Ayush-CSIR Joint Monitoring Committee (MC) under the chairmanship of Dr. VM Katoch, former Secretary, Department of Health Research and former Director General, Indian Council of Medical Research (DG, ICMR). He further added that these clinical studies periodically reviewed by an independent Data and Safety Management Board (DSMB).

Chairman of the MC, Dr VM Katoch informed that the committee has carefully reviewed the outcome of AYUSH 64 study and recommended AYUSH 64 in the management of asymptomatic, mild to moderate COVID-19. It is worthwhile to note that this committee has also recommended Ministry to communicate to the state licensing authorities/regulators

regarding adding new indication of AYUSH 64 for repurposing in the management of mild to moderate COVID-19.

Director General, Dr N Srikanth, CCRAS elaborated that additional studies on Ayush 64 are underway at reputed research institutes including CSIR-IIIM, DBT-THSTI, ICMR-NIN, AIIMS Jodhpur and Medical Colleges including Post Graduate Institute of Medical Education & Research, Chandigarh; King George's Medical University, Lucknow; Government Medical College, Nagpur; Datta Meghe Institute of Medical Sciences, Nagpur. Results received so far have shown the usefulness of AYUSH 64 in dealing with mild and moderate COVID-19. He also added that the outcome of the seven clinical studies has revealed that AYUSH 64 exhibits early clinical recovery in COVID-19 cases without further progression. In all clinical studies, AYUSH 64 was found to be well tolerated and found clinically safe.

"It appears you want people to die": High Court on Centre's COVID-19 protocol on Remdesivir

NEW DELHI, 29 APR [PTI]: The Delhi High Court on Wednesday objected to a "change" by the Centre in the Covid treatment protocol related to Remdesivir use amid a shortage of the drug, saying "it appears you want people to die".

"This is wrong. This is a complete non-application of mind. Now people who do not have oxygen will not get Remdesivir either."

"It appears you want people to die," Justice Prathiba M Singh said after the central government submitted that under the protocol being followed now only patients on oxygen support were being given Remdesivir.

The court also said it will consider later whether a medical committee should review if the protocols or guidelines for administering Remdesivir need any modification.

"Don't change the protocol only to reduce the shortage. That is wrong. As a result, doctors are not able to prescribe Remdesivir," the court said and added, "This is complete mismanagement." On the allocation of the drug to Delhi, the Centre told the court that over 52,000 vials, out of the allocated amount of 72,000, were sent to the national capital till April 27.

It said the allocation was being made on the basis of the actual caseload of a state.

The court, however, said the allocation cannot be so low for Delhi.

The court also said it was "shocking" that an MP was able to procure 10,000 vials of the medicine from Delhi, transport it to Ahmednagar in Maharashtra via a chartered flight and distributed it there.

"This is shocking the conscience of the court. That is 10,000 vials that could have been given to

patients in Delhi. There is complete mismanagement of the quota being received by the state," it said.

The Centre then said that in the coming days the allocation would increase as there would be a rise in production.

The Delhi government, represented by additional standing counsel Anuj Aggarwal, said they received only 2,500 vials of the over 52,000 sent to the national capital.

When the court asked about the remaining nearly 50,000 vials, it was informed that they were distributed via private channels to hospitals and patients.

The Delhi government, thereafter, told the court that in view of the private distribution of the drug, it has decided to create a portal only through which hospitals would be able to procure the medicine.

The court, however, did not agree with the proposed system saying many people who need the medicine are not hospitalised due to lack of beds or are availing treatment at home.

Justice Singh said that the better option would be to allow the patient or family or attendant to place the request on the portal for the drug and thereafter, the person can collect it from the hospital after making payment.

The court said this will ensure that 90 per cent of the patients who need Remdesivir receive the medicine, while if only hospitals were administering the drug then only around 50 per cent of the patients would get it.

It directed the Delhi government to put on hold the launch of the portal till the time the suggestions made by the court are incorporated in it. The court was hearing a plea by a lawyer who is suffering from COVID-19 and was able to get only three out of the six doses of Remdesivir required.

Selection trials announced for State Sports Academy

SUMMIT REPORT GANGTOK, 29 APR:

Department of Sports & Youth Affairs is holding football selection trials for boys in the 14 to 17 age group for admission to the State Sports Academy, Gangtok.

The registration form can be downloaded from the website syasikkim.org of the department and submitted to the Dis-

trict Officer in-Charge of Sports & Youth Affairs Department at Gyalshing, Namchi, Mangan and Gangtok by 03 May, it is informed.

It is informed that the date for the selection trail will be uploaded on the official website and social media page of the Sports & Youth Affairs Department by 10 May.

3.79 lakh Covid cases, 3,645 deaths as daily figures reach new high

NEW DELHI, 29 APR [NDTV]: India's daily Covid figures hit a new high today with 3,79,257 fresh infections and 3,645 deaths reported in 24 hours. The caseload surged to 1.83 crore; over 2.04 lakh people have died so far. The spike has overwhelmed hospitals.

India has been recording over three lakh cases every day for over a week now. More than 2 lakh cases a day are being recorded since April 15. The shortage of hospital beds, medical oxygen and crucial anti-viral drugs has added to crisis.

All adults can get Covid shots from Saturday as the government widens the vaccine drive to fight the virus. On Wednesday, over 1.3 crore people applied for vaccination on CoWIN, the government's registration website; a few glitches were reported initially.

The US, UK, Russia and China are sending help to India amid the crisis. In a tweet, US Secretary of Defense Lloyd J Austin III, said, "We're committed to use every resource at our disposal, within our authority, to support India's frontline healthcare workers."

Advantage Mamata Banerjee, BJP close second in Bengal, predict exit polls

NEW DELHI, 29 APR [NDTV]: Mamata Banerjee's Trinamool Congress might scrape through in polls to get a third straight term in Bengal, an aggregate of six exit polls indicate. The numbers also indicate that the challenger BJP's goal -- replacing Trinamool as the ruling party with 200 assembly seats -- might have to wait. The party is likely to emerge a close second to the Trinamool -- a sea change from the paltry few seats it currently has in the assembly, showed NDTV's poll of exit polls.

The Trinamool Congress, which surged to power in 2011 toppling the 34-year Left citadel, had improved its tally by 27 seats in 2016, winning 2011.

Numbers indicate that this time, its tally is likely to drop sharply, and the party may win only 148 of the state's 294 seats -- exactly the majority mark.

The BJP tally may shoot up to 131 from the current three seats. The Left Front, which did not make it to a

The US is sending supplies worth more than \$100 million to India, the White House said in a statement on Wednesday, according to news agency Reuters. The supplies include 1,000 oxygen cylinders, 15 million N95 masks and 1 million rapid diagnostic tests

China's Ambassador to India Sun Weidong on Wednesday said in a tweet: "Chinese medical suppliers are working overtime on orders from India, at least 25,000 orders for oxygen concentrators in recent days. Cargo planes are under plan for medical supplies. Chinese customs will facilitate relevant process."

Karnataka and Bengal on Wednesday recorded the biggest surge in Covid cases since the start of the pandemic. More than 39,000 cases were recorded by Karnataka while Bengal saw a record single-day surge of 17,207 cases. Today, voting is being held for 35 seats of Bengal in the eighth and final round of state elections. Across the world, nearly 14.96 crore people have been infected so far; 31.5 lakh people have died.

double digit tally in the last election, may win 15 seats. Of the six exit polls, the best performance by the Trinamool Congress has been predicted by the ETG Research, which says the party may get 164 to 176 seats. The BJP numbers have been predicted to be between 105 and 115 seats and 10-15 seats may go to the Left, it has predicted. ABP News-C voter has predicted 152-164 seats for the party. The BJP is likely to get 109-121 seats. Even The Left, the poll predicted, is likely to do better with 14 to 25 seats.

A clean sweep by the BJP has been predicted by India News-Jan Ki Baat, where the party might win 162-185 seats.

The Republic TV-CNX predicts a possible hung assembly, with the BJP winning 138-148 seats. 148 seats will put the BJP just on the majority mark -- a precarious situation where the Left is likely to get 11-21 seats and the Trinamool 128-138 seats.

Su-Swastha Yojana ...

CEO SWADHI, Dr Parbin Moktan presented a power point on Su-Swastha Yojana.

The programme was also attended by Cabinet Ministers, MP Lok Sabha, Political Secretary to Chief Minister, Advisor to Health Department, Heads of Departments, senior government officials and nodal officers of Su-Swastha Yojana of various departments.

Earlier, Chief Minister also inaugurated the Su-Swastha Yojana Facilitation Centre situated at the first floor of Old STNM Hospital in Gangtok.

Muddawala Spunky Pankaj

JIWAN RAI

Sikkimese journalism in general has merely been a passer on of feelgood information. This could possibly be the after-glow of the monarchical tradition. Sikkim has somehow remained too mute about her real story. Be it the bullying that the Chogyal establishment received from Delhi in the past or the inside story of the merger or the subsequent stories under different post-merger establishments – all of them have invariably been reported by individuals who were not Sikkimese (COI holders to be precise). It is as if, holding a COI and speaking frankly against the establishments are incompatible. For example, without books like Smash and Grab and Sikkim Requiem for Himalayan Kingdom, we would have known so little. What does that mean? Without Sunanda K. Datta-Ray and Andrew Duff, both non-COI holders, we would have missed a huge chunk of our own story.

In the last two decades or so, Sikkim has witnessed a mushrooming of newspapers and magazines opening space for local journalists. Again, the overall trend has been the passing on of 'feel-good' information. Barring a few excellent senior journalists who I will leave unnamed here, the majority of them have never dared to dig too deep and smell a rat. However, Sikkim journalism is not without its bright spots. There are a few young journalists who do display that rare spunk to report ground realities without glossing over them. To me, Pankaj Dhungel is a leading local journalist of that breed who has been gloriously bold and blatantly truthful.

He accidentally catapulted himself into the public limelight through a rather humiliating 'mudda ma aunuho's' episode. It was not a flattering experience for sure but from that time, people began to take note of what and how he was reporting. Let me enumerate what major

issues would have remained underreported without this 'mudda media man'.

The most courageous reporting by him was under the heading 'Sikkim: No CT Scan



for COVID positive health minister in STNM hospital'. It turns out that the CT scan machine at STNM hospital had conked off in June 2020. It happened right after the state government-Manipal hospital conflict. He reported "So far, STNM has been conducting X-rays of patient's lungs to assert on the severity, with a portable machine at its disposal on the 8th floor of the hospital, a designated COVID wing of STNM."

His second-best reporting came just the day before yesterday when he highlighted the 'moderate rain' induced flooding at the New STNM Hospital under the heading "Sikkim's COVID-19 hospital is flooded, literally".

In between pictures of nearly knee-deep water clogging the hallways of the hospital, he reported, "Doctors and nurses in the COVID-19 section have been complaining to the authorities that the newly inaugurated COVID-19 hospital, set up in the second half of 2020, had already been suffering from poor drainage issues."

His reporting under the heading "In Sikkim, criticising the government can get you fired" was quite bold and revealing. His candid story started with these almost blunt lines,

"On December 10, then the Medical Superintendent of Sikkim's STNM hospital, Dr CS Sharma highlighted in a leading English Daily the 'manpower shortage at

tions. However, what was striking by its absence was a scratching deep below the surface of the issue. Pankaj's reporting has been above the average reporting for a number of reasons. He went to the college and attempted to interview individuals representing every stakeholder in the issue. He made attempts to get the HRDD chief officials and even Minister to comment on the issue. He then told readers about them being unreachable. He also followed the story passionately, reporting every single event that happened around the issue. Many significant issues die prematurely for the sheer lack of follow up by media.

The bottom line is the quality of journalism is a mirror image of the people's genuine willingness to uphold truth and the courage to pay the cost. The emergence of a young man like Pankaj and a few others in journalism is a good sign. More would have been merrier. But something is better than nothing.

ViewPoint

the hospital and current health professionals being fatigued by constant COVID-19 concern'. The same day, he lost his job."

His fourth best reporting was on the felling of trees in Gangtok. He quoted the High Court as the heading of his story "Felling of trees doesn't make Gangtok a Smart City". It was an elaborately detailed report and the Sikkimese people needed to read what was going on and what should not be going on in the name of a Smart City project.

Finally, his report on the expulsion of four boys from Gyalshing College takes the cake. This unfortunate incident has been widely reported in Sikkim media and the issue has received attention from the widest range of people and organiza-

In the end, I leave a few questions for all of us to ponder. How much would we have missed if we had never had local journalism in Sikkim? How (well or ill) informed would the Sikkimese population be without the service of the local media? In other words, are we becoming a soundly and adequately informed population? Is the public awareness level satisfactory? Is there an increasing public hunger for media information? Or have we become addicted to propaganda, unfounded rumours, flippant entertainment visuals, cheap jokes and stupid mudslinging in the name of "being informed"? Finally, how much intellectual input do we gain by way of our exposure to local journalism?

"Constraints, yet tried to walk the talk on COVID-19 vaccine equity": India at UN

UNITED NATIONS, 29 APR [PTI]: India, despite severe constraints and within its own limited resources, has tried to "walk the talk" on vaccine equity and shared COVID-19 vaccines with more than 80 countries, the country told the United Nations.

The UN Department of Global Communications (DGC), which spreads awareness around the world about the work the UN does, has actively encouraged further sharing of vaccine doses from all countries, Counsellor in India's Permanent Mission to the United Nations A. Amarnath said in the General Assembly's 43rd Session of Committee on Information.

India urged the Department to also "suitably highlight the efforts of Member States, international organisations, and vaccine producers, who have already done so, especially with those who need it most."

India, despite the severe constraints and within our own limited resources, has tried to walk the talk' on vaccine equity. We have shared vaccines with more than 80 countries and provided life-saving drugs, medicines and protective equipment to over 150 countries. Our efforts underscore that we will not defeat the pandemic unless all of us, everywhere, come out of it safely, Mr Amarnath said.

Under India's "Vaccine Maitri" initiative, which translates into Vaccine Friendship, the country has been providing vaccines to nations across the world - from India's immediate neighbours to countries in Latin America and Africa - and is a significant source of supply to the COVAX facility.

As of today, a total of 66.37 million Made-in-India COVID-19 vaccine supplies have been sent through grants, commercial arrangements and COVAX initiative to 95 nations around the world.

The cumulative number of COVID-19 vaccine doses administered in India currently stands at 14,78,27,367 as on April 28.

As nations roll-out vaccination drives, there is widespread conversation about whether the COVID-19 vaccine is trustworthy and what the side effects are, Mr Amarnath said.

Dissemination of scientific and fact-based answers to the above questions are key to enhance the trustworthiness' of the vaccines among the people, Amarnath said, urging the DGC to give due focus to vaccine safety, in its global communications, to shore up public confidence on vaccines.

Without this, our common goal of vaccinating the entire humanity cannot be achieved, Mr Amarnath said.

Sanitization by Namchi Municipal Council



NAMCHI, 29 APR (IPR): As per the direction of the State Government to sanitize Government Offices and other areas and as a measure to break the chain of COVID-19 transmission, Namchi Municipal Council (NMC) has undertaken the task

to disinfect these places today.

Various locations were sanitized by NMC namely NMC Office and corridor BAC premises, Namchi Police Station, IPR Office, Dambudara vegetable market area, Parking Plaza inside and

outside including taxi stand (Local and Siliguri) and Central park, ATM counters, Jorethang, Gangtok and Bhanjyang roads along with many other places today.

The sanitization process will continue in the coming days as well.

Advanced light helicopter Dhruv clears trials, ready for operations

BENGALURU, 29 APR [PTI]: Hindustan Aeronautics Limited's Advanced Light Helicopter Dhruv Mk III MR has successfully demonstrated its deck-operations capabilities that include landing on deck, folding of blades and storing the helicopter inside the onboard hangar.

The recently concluded ship-borne trials off Chennai coast in collaboration with the Indian Coast Guard also covered maintenance activities inside the hangar and on the deck, hot refuelling with engines running on the deck, Bengaluru-headquartered HAL said in a statement. The helicopter is equipped with the Shakti engines and an advanced glass cockpit.

HAL had recently delivered ALH Dhruv Mk III MR to Indian Coast Guard

as part of its 16 ALH contract. "These trials have proven the capability of ALH Dhruv to carry out extended operations from ships. Some of the missions that were successfully executed were surveillance, search and rescue, antipollution to address oil spillage, etc."

"With the successful demonstration of these capabilities like blade folding, stowage, the helicopter is now ready to be fielded for operations," said HAL CMD, R Madhavan.

Dhruv Mk III MR is equipped with the surveillance radar that can detect and identify ships and boats up to a range of 120 nautical miles to enable the Indian Coast Guard in its duty to secure the nation from threats, according to HAL.

Maha govt starts safety inspection of COVID-19 hospitals

MUMBAI, APR 29 (PTI): In the wake of recent fire incidents in hospitals in Maharashtra, the government has started safety inspection and audit of electrical installations in state as well as private-run COVID-19 medical facilities, a minister said on Thursday.

During the exercise, a major area of inspection and safety audit would be hospital ICUs, air conditioning system and lifts, energy minister Nitin Raut said in a statement.

Taking cognisance of a spate of fire incidents in hospitals in recent times, Raut said he had asked the Chief Electrical Inspector to audit electrical safety in hospitals across the state as per the existing Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs).

Along with electric installations, safety audit of lifts would be also undertaken, he said.

Following the order, the Energy Department issued a circular on April 26 for conducting safety audit of hospitals and submission of a report to the state government.

Accordingly, Dinesh Khonde, Chief Electrical Inspector of the state, issued an order for inspection on April 28 and submission of a report in 10 days.

The order consists of a check list and SOPs for the inspection exercise.

Raut has instructed officials to take local bodies and the District Disaster Management Committee into confidence while conducting the audit and inspection.

"Following the pandemic, hospitals are overburdened which has created pressure on electric equipment. The continuous load on electric equipment may lead to mishaps and incidents of

fire due to short-circuits.

"If due precautions were taken, mishaps and untoward incidents could be prevented," Raut said.

Inspections would help in finding out faulty electric installations and their findings would be communicated to hospital authorities for compliance, the minister said. "The purpose of the inspection is not to harass anyone or to target any hospital, but to ensure the safety of the patients."

"Considering the pandemic, some hospitals have increased their admission capacity which is likely to increase power consumption and subsequently cause extra load on the system."

"The task is now to bring to the notice lacunae, if any, to hospital authorities in time to prevent mishaps," a statement of the energy department quoted Khonde as saying.

Khonde said it is mandatory for all COVID-19 hospitals and care centres to have standby diesel generator (DG) sets for electricity supply in case of a power breakdown. "It is mandatory for hospitals to get clearance for fire and electric safety, including lifts and electric installations," he said.

He said fire incidents in some ICU wards have happened due to short-circuit in the AC system, which will be inspected carefully during the exercise.

The government move comes a day after four patients died when a fire broke out following a short circuit at a private hospital near Thane city on Wednesday, civic officials had said.

On April 23, thirteen COVID-19 patients died in a blaze at the intensive care unit of a private hospital at Virar in Palghar district.


Government of Sikkim
Rural Development Department
Tashiling, Gangtok-737103, Sikkim.
E-Procurement Notice
Tender Reference No: - SKPMGSY(LSB)BATCHIOnline20-21

Memo No:- 144/RDD/PMGSY Dated:- 27/04/2021


CANCELLATION OF E-TENDER

Tender bearing the above Tender Reference Number with Tender ID 2021_CESDA_108791_1 which was uploaded on www.pmgsvtenderssikkim.gov.in dated 20.04.2021 for "Construction of Long Span Steel Bridges in the State of Sikkim under Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana" stands cancelled as per clause 30,30.1 of ITB of the Standard Bidding Document.

Yours Sincerely

Pr. Chief Engineer - cum - Empowered Officer
Rural Development Department
Government of Sikkim, Deptt.
Rural Development
Govt. of Sikkim

R.O. No. 42/IPR/PU/Classi/2021-22
Date: 29/04/2021


What is Novel Coronavirus - nCoV?

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

Symptoms of nCoV

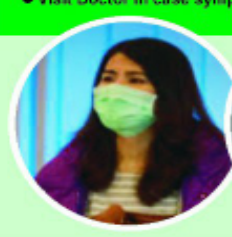


- Fever
- Difficulty in breathing
- Dry Cough
- Severe acute respiratory syndrome
- Pneumonia - like symptoms

Precautions to Prevent nCoV

- Wash your hands often with soap.
- Use an alcohol based hand sanitizer
- Observe good personal hygiene.
- Avoid touching your face with unwashed hands.
- Avoid contact with people with possible symptoms.
- Avoid contact with animals and consumption of undercooked meats.
- Avoid travel to nCoV affected places.
- Wear a mask if you have respiratory syndrome. and cover your mouth while coughing or sneezing.

Treatment

- Treatment is symptomatic and supportive, based on the patient's clinical condition.
- No vaccinations available as of now.
- Visit Doctor in case symptoms detected.

If you seek help, you may call :
-Toll free no. 104
District surveillance Officer
EAST : 7028372100
WEST : 9593297809
NORTH : 9641957468
SOUTH : 7407691463
New STNM
AMS : 9434711402

**DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH & FAMILY WELFARE
GOVERNMENT OF SIKKIM**

History Lessons for All

Sikkim's history should not be just for the State to study

History, they say is always written by the victor who decides which portions of the vanquished histories suit his plans and which bits are best left untold. The same has held true for the history taught in schools in India. The curriculum is embarrassingly North India-centric, so much so that even though students learn by rote the names of all those who made it emperor in the Slave Dynasty, ask them about what the northeast was up to in the meantime and they draw a blank, a complete blank. It is accepted that prior to the advent of the East India Company, the region was a collection of one empire and several kingdoms and princely states, each with its own intrigues and their own histories. But those stories are not included in the History of India textbooks.

So, the history we learn in school is actually the composite histories of the areas which came together to form the Union of India in 1947 and later? Well, not really. The focus is too limited to the areas which either the British researched in some detail or were studied some more by later-day historians. It is unfortunate that the number of pages devoted in history text books to particular areas is directly proportional to the number of MPs that area has.

But that's not history. It is only part of the narrative.

The blind-spotting of areas that got cut off with partition is even worse. The Muslim League for example was a part of the Indian Freedom Struggle and the demand for the creation of Pakistan came much after the movement had already gathered critical mass. We, however, read very little of the role played by this group in the Struggle for Independence save reading about them as the organization that forced the Partition. Icons like Subhas Chandra Bose and Bhagat Singh too are glossed over. But that's another debate.

Before progressing further, it is important to make clear why we study history in the first place - to get a better understanding of where we belong - where we fit into the larger scheme of things, where we come from and how we arrived where we are today. There has been much talk about making Sikkim join the mainstream which is why it is not enough to just study Sikkimese history in schools in Sikkim [which would still be a good place to begin]. Sikkim needs to figure in the history books studied elsewhere in the country. In junior school, students learn of what Confucius meant to China even before they are taught when and how Sikkim joined India. One is not suggesting that the State become even more parochial and force Local even in the curriculum, but Sikkim does have a history that's worth learning. Few dynasties have ruled for the three hundred years that the Namgyal dynasty has to its credit [the British rule which hogs the history books lasted less than a hundred years]. Surely the British intrigues vis a vis Tibet should make for interesting reading, as should the Nepali adventures in Sikkim in the 18th century. If kids can learn of the distant Great Wall of China, why can't the story of the Lepcha tower of pots be told to them; maybe not as history, but at least as more than a myth. And would the Lepcha rebellions launched from Eastern Nepal or the stand they took based out of Kalimpong make for some interesting chapters?

It might not be out of place to even suggest here that Sikkim should prepare at least two chapters on Sikkimese history to fit into text books for schools all over the country and take it to the Centre for whetting by the text book boards for inclusion in the syllabi. The country remains endlessly occupied with rewriting its History textbooks anyway, why not slip Sikkim in too.

WRITE US:

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

Why variants are most likely to blame for India's COVID surge

RAJIB DASGUPTA
theconversation.com

With more than 300,000 new COVID cases a day and hospitals and crematoria facing collapse, Director-General of the World Health Organization Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus has called the situation in India "beyond heartbreaking".

India's government has blamed the people for not following COVID-safe public health directives, but recent data shows mask use has only fallen by 10 percentage points, from a high of 71% in August 2020 to a low of 61% by the end of February.

And the mobility index increased by about 20 percentage points, although most sectors of the economy and activity had opened up. These are modest changes and do not adequately explain the huge increase in cases.

A more likely explanation is the impact of variants that are more transmissible than the original SARS-CoV-2 virus.

VARIANTS IN INDIA

Viruses keep changing and adapting through mutations, and new variants of a virus are expected and tracked in a pandemic situation such as this.

The Indian SARS-CoV-2 Genomics Consortium (INSACOG), a group of ten national laboratories, was set up in December 2020 to monitor genetic variations in the coronavirus. The labs are required to sequence 5% of COVID-positive samples from states and 100% of positive samples from international travellers.

The United Kingdom is currently testing about 8% of its positive samples and the United States about 4%. India has been testing about 1% altogether. INSACOG has so far tested 15,133 SARS-CoV-2 genomes. This means of every 1,000 cases, the UK has sequenced 79.5, the US 8.59, and India only 0.0552.

In the final week of December, India detected six cases of the UK variant (B.1.1.7) among international travellers.

The current second wave started in the north-western state of Punjab in the first half of February and has not yet plateaued. One of the advisers to the Punjab government confirmed that more than 80% of the cases were attributed to the UK variant.

Significantly, the most affected districts are from Punjab's Doaba region, known as the NRI (non-resident Indian) belt. An estimated 60-70% of the families in these districts have relatives abroad, mostly in the UK or Canada, and a high volume of travel to and from these countries.

B.1.617, or what has been called the "Indian double mutation", has drawn attention because it contains two mutations (known as E484Q and L452R) that have been linked to increased transmissibility and an ability to evade our immune system.

Many experts in India now think this is driving the surge.

Even as India's health ministry announced the detection of the mutants on March 24, it went on to add:

"[...] these have not been detected in numbers sufficient to either establish or direct relationship or explain the rapid increase in cases in some states."

The head of the Indian Council of Medical Research said there was no reason for panic because mutations are sporadic, and not significant. That day, the states of Maharashtra and Punjab accounted for 62.5% and 4.5% of 40,715 new cases, respectively.

Across the world, several key mutant strains have emerged thanks to ongoing virus replication in humans. Both ability to replicate and transmit,

and a better ability to escape our immune systems, led to the variants establishing themselves as dominant strains across geographies and populations.

The UK variant (B.1.1.7) is at least 30% more transmissible. At a recent webinar, Indian experts observed the "Indian strain" (B.1.617) is similarly transmissible to the UK variant, but there is little evidence so far of it being more lethal than the original virus.

WHY HIGHER TRANSMISSIBILITY IS SO CONCERNING

According to epidemiologist Adam Kucharski at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, the conundrum is this:

"[...] suppose 10,000 people are infected in a city and each infects 1.1 other people on average, the low end for the estimated rate of infection in England. After a month, 16,000 people would have been infected. If the infection fatality rate is 0.8%, as it was in England at the end of the first wave of infections, it would mean 128 deaths. With a variant that is 50% more deadly, those 16,000 cases would result in 192 deaths. But with a variant that is 50% more transmissible, though no more deadly, there would be 122,000 cases after a month, leading to 976 deaths."

In all likelihood, this is the current Indian scenario: a higher overall death count despite the variants being no more fatal in relative terms.

Setting up a genomic surveillance system and consistently testing 5% of the positive samples is an expensive but important tool in the journey ahead. This can help us identify emerging hotspots, track transmission and enable nimble-footed decision-making and tailored interventions.

[The writer is Chairperson, Centre of Social Medicine and Community Health, Jawaharlal Nehru University]



Severe COVID in young people can mostly be explained by obesity - new study

NERYS M ASTBURY,
CARMEN PIERNAS & MIN GAO
theconversation.com

From the start of the pandemic, it was clear that some people who were infected with the coronavirus were experiencing more severe illness, which increased their chances of being hospitalised, admitted to an intensive care unit (ICU) or dying.

As we age, a weaker immune system and chronic health conditions could influence the way our body responds to the virus. Indeed, age is the biggest risk factor for developing severe COVID or dying from it. Over 70% of deaths attributed to COVID in the UK are in those aged 75 years and over.

Ethnicity, sex and obesity were also found to be risk factors for severe COVID outcomes. But, of course, we can't do anything about our age, sex or ethnicity. We can do something about being overweight, though.

Body mass index (BMI) is a measure applying height and weight to calculate a weight score. A person with a BMI over 25 is considered to be overweight, and over 30 is considered to be obese.

Early studies reported that many more people who were overweight or obese were admitted to an ICU and needed mechanical ventilation than people who were not overweight or obese. Indeed, even Prime Minister Boris Johnson attributed the severity

of his own COVID infection to the fact he was "way overweight" at the time.

A study published last year in Nature reported that obesity increased the risk of COVID-related death substantially. People with the highest BMI (over 40) were at 92% higher risk of dying from COVID compared with people with a healthy BMI (18.5-25). But most people are not this overweight. Many people have been inactive during the lockdowns and may have gained a bit of extra weight, so could that excess weight also increase the risk of developing severe COVID? Our latest study looked at just that.

Using the anonymous health records from almost 7 million people aged 20-99 years in England, we explored the risk of severe COVID across the full BMI range.

Of the 6,910,695 people who had their weight recorded, 13,503 were admitted to hospital with COVID, 1,602 needed treatment in an ICU, and 5,479 died of COVID during the first wave in the UK (January-May 2020). Most of these people were aged over 60 (72% of hospital admissions, 56% of ICU admissions and 93% of deaths).

RISK STARTS TO INCREASE AT HIGH-END OF HEALTHY WEIGHT

We found that the lowest risk was found among those with a BMI of 23, at which point the risk increased linearly, around 5% higher

risk of hospital admission, 10% higher risk of ICU admission, and 4% of death per each unit increase in BMI.

Our analysis took into account several factors that might influence risk, such as age, sex, ethnicity and existing health conditions, including type 2 diabetes. People with a BMI under 23, which includes people who are underweight (BMI below 18.5) were also at risk of COVID-related hospital admission and death. This could be linked to frailty associated with having a low body weight.

Notably, the effect of excess weight on the risk of severe COVID was greatest in young people aged 20 to 39 years of age, and decreased after age 60. Excess weight had very little effect on the risk of severe COVID in people aged over 80 years.

The increase in the risk of hospitalisation per BMI unit for those aged 20-39 is 9%; for those aged 40-59, 8%; for 60-79 years, 4%; and 1% for people aged 80-99 years. The increase in the risk of death per BMI unit for those aged 20-39 is 17%; for those aged 40-59, 13%; for 60-79 years, 3%; and 0% for people aged 80-99 years.

Younger people generally experienced much less severe COVID and were less likely to die compared with older people. Still, a younger person with a BMI of 30 would have a much higher risk of severe COVID than

their healthy weight peers.

The risks associated with higher BMI were greater for black people compared with white people. The increase in the risk of hospitalisation per BMI unit for black people was 7% compared with 4% for white people. And the increase in the risk of death for black people was 8% versus 4% for white people. There was no evidence that the risks for other ethnic groups differed from those of the white populations.

MANY GOOD REASONS TO LOSE WEIGHT

Although we couldn't look to see if losing weight could reduce these risks in this study, it is plausible that shedding excess weight could help reduce the risk of developing severe COVID. And, of course, losing weight has other health benefits too.

But losing weight is hard. We need more support systems to help people lose weight. This could help reduce the severity of COVID at a population level, which may help reduce the burden on healthcare systems, while also reducing the risks for heart disease, type 2 diabetes and some cancers.

[Nerys M Astbury is Senior Researcher, Diet and Obesity, University of Oxford; Carmen Piernas is University Research Lecturer, Nutrition, University of Oxford; Min GAO is PhD Candidate, Non-communicable Chronic Disease, University of Oxford]

Top leader of banned Assam outfit ULFA-I gunned down in encounter

GUWAHATI, 29 APR [NDTV]: Top leader of the United Liberation Front of Asom -Independent (ULFA-I), Dwipen Saud, was gunned down this morning after a fierce gun battle with the security forces in western Assam's Bongaigaon district.

Dwipen Saud was the banned outfit's newly appointed western command chief. He was appointed after former deputy commander-in-chief Drishti Rajkhowa surrendered in November. Shortly after the encounter, doctors at Bongaigaon Civil Hospital said Dwipen Saud was "brought dead".

Padum Rai, another outfit member, has been taken into the custody along with two guns, a grenade, and several mobile phones.

The gun battle started at around 5.30 AM as police conducted raids after getting inputs from intelligence sources.

Police said they had information that the outfit was planning to conduct a "high-profile kidnapping". "We had infor-



mation that ULFA Western Command was planning some high-profile kidnapping along with other anti-India forces which now appears to be foiled," said Assam DGP Bhaskar Jyoti Mahanta.

The banned outfit has been named in at least two recent kidnappings--two employees of an oil and gas company Quippo; and three employees of the Oil and Natural Gas

Corporation.

Yesterday, ULFA-I's top leader Jibon Moran was taken into custody for interrogation by Indian Army, sources said, adding that he is expected to surrender to the state police soon.

The Indian Army took him into custody when he entered Lazo village in Tiprap district of Arunachal Pradesh, bordering Myanmar. Sources said he will

be interrogated by the Central intelligence agencies at the Army camp.

ULFA-I - in a recent press statement - said that Jibon Moran was to be relieved from all his positions over his health conditions. He was allowed to return home.

Moran, a top leader of the ULFA (I), also managed the outfit's finances. Sources say his surrender will be a big boost for

the security forces and the Indian government.

The 65-year old underwent training in Myanmar after joining the outfit in 1984 and saw various blows to the outfit, including Operation Bajrang in 1990 and Operation All Clear in Bhutan in 2003.

Moran is a resident of Uban village in Kakopathar in upper Assam's Tinsukia district.

When Spoelstra and Popovich face off, the respect is clear

MIAMI (AP): The postgame routine between San Antonio's Gregg Popovich and Miami's Erik Spoelstra is almost always the same. A handshake or embrace near midcourt at the final buzzer. They exchange a few words. They laugh. And then the coaches head off in opposite directions.

"Respect," Popovich said.

"Class," Spoelstra said.

It has been this way for a while now, and was again Wednesday when they went head-to-head for the 37th time. The postgame meeting tradition goes back to at least the 2013 NBA Finals, a seven-game series that the Spurs felt they let get away — Ray Allen's game-tying 3-pointer with 5.2 seconds left in regulation of Game 6 had a little to do with that.

But even in that moment, as Miami's on-court championship celebration was just starting, Popovich gave Spoelstra a hug and said a few words of congratulations into his ear. Later that summer, Popovich sent Spoelstra a note with more words of praise and wisdom.

And the mutual admiration has grown ever since between the two coaches who have been in their jobs longer than any other current coaches in the NBA; Popovich took over in San Antonio in 1996, Spoelstra was promoted by the Heat in April 2008, a few days before Dallas hired Rick Carlisle.

"I really admire what he's done, coming up through the ranks and how he's matriculated through the different levels in the league and ended up in a position he's in," Popovich said of Spoelstra, who famously started in the Heat video room under Pat Riley and has been in Miami ever since. "He's worked so hard, done such a great job, and it's just kind of thrilling to see somebody achieve that."

Included in those 37 meetings are two NBA Finals matchups in 2013 and 2014 — the Heat won the first one, the Spurs took the rematch. Popovich is 21-16 in the series, but Wednesday was a milestone for Spoelstra, who got his 600th regular-season victory.

He and Popovich are two of only six coaches to win 600 regular-season games with one franchise.

"He's always just been an incredible example of class, dignity," Spoelstra said of Popovich. "To be able to do that after wins or losses, I just think it's a great example that you can still have class regardless of how the outcome comes during a game."

Spoelstra sees plenty of similarities between the franchises. There's stability in ownership, stability in the front offices, even a penchant for simple black polo shirts in this dressed-down era for coaches in the NBA thanks to a relaxation of rules during the pandemic.

And each franchise has long had the reputation for doing things the right way. Popovich spoke volumes about that tie-in between the teams when he asked former Heat assistant Dan Craig, now the associate head coach for the Los Angeles Clippers, to join him with USA Basketball for some workouts in Las Vegas three summers ago. Popovich will coach the U.S. men's basketball team in the Tokyo Olympics this summer.

"Our paths haven't crossed a great deal, if at all, over the years. Maybe just in passing, and summer league, but that's about it," Spoelstra said. "He's been an incredible example of a role model, I think, for so many of us coaches. We just watch how he operates and runs that program, they have a great culture, their structure, but I think there's also a growth mindset, and an openness to be vulnerable and learn about different things."

And yes, after Miami finished off its 116-111 win on Wednesday, there was the midcourt chat and a congratulatory pat on the back. It only took a few seconds, as usual, and then they headed their separate ways once again.

As always, the respect was clear.

"We've had some great battles," Popovich said. "Our teams have competed against each other enough, and at high levels, where we both appreciate what that's like to go through that — sometimes on top, sometimes not. So, I think a respect develops out of that and an understanding of how tough these jobs are and how fortunate we are to be able to compete at this level. I think that's a big part of it."

BRO appoints first woman officer for road project along border with China

NEW DELHI, 29 APR: In a first, the Border Roads Organisation (BRO) has appointed a woman officer to command a Road Construction Company (RCC) tasked to provide connectivity in a high-altitude area along the India-China border, officials said on Wednesday.

They said Vaishali S Hiwase from Wardha in Maharashtra will discharge her duties in a challenging environment.

"With two air maintained detachments lo-

cated at 10,000 ft and above the alignment of road is going through some formidable passes and treacherous terrain of hard rock with vertical cliffs," the BRO said.

It said Vaishali, who has an M Tech degree, has already completed a demanding tenure in Kargil.

"This is a humble beginning by BRO that will usher a new era of women empowerment that will see women officers taking over most arduous tasks," the BRO said.

Prohibitory orders come into effect in Kathmandu Valley

Kathmandu, 29 Apr [KathmanduPost]: After almost over a year after the country went into nationwide lockdown to contain the virus spread, major cities across the country that have seen a surge in the second wave of coronavirus infections have enforced prohibitory orders in a bid to break the chain of infection.

Kathmandu Valley has emerged a major hotspot, as it has been reporting more than half of the total new cases recorded daily across the country.

Kathmandu, Bhak-

tapur and Lalitpur too went into a lockdown starting 6am Thursday as per the recommendation of the chief district officers. Though the recommendation was for a week-long lockdown, it was extended for 15 days by the Cabinet on Monday.

Until Wednesday, Nepal reported 312,699 cases and 3,211 Covid-19-related fatalities. The active cases count stands at 30,209.

Over 2,200 police personnel have been deployed to enforce the prohibitory orders in the Valley.

UP records highest single-day rise of 298 COVID deaths

LUCKNOW, APR 29 (PTI): A record single-day rise of 298 COVID-19 fatalities in Uttar Pradesh pushed the death toll to 12,241 on Thursday, while the infection tally mounted to 12,17,955 with 35,156 fresh cases.

A total of 25,613 people have recovered from the disease in the past 24 hours, while the active cases stand at 3,09,237.

So far, 8,96,477 patients have recuperated from COVID-19 in the

state, Additional Chief Secretary Amit Mohan Prasad told reporters.

More than 2.25 lakh samples were tested for COVID-19 in the past 24 hours, taking the total samples tested so far to 4.03 crore, the highest in the country, Prasad said. Among the active cases, 2,38,856 are in home isolation, while 7,663 are undergoing treatment in private hospitals and rest of them are in government hospitals, he said.

4.6 earthquake, 18 aftershocks in Assam after 6.4 temblor hit state



GUWAHATI, 29 APR [NDTV]: A day after a powerful earthquake of magnitude 6.4 struck Assam, the northeastern state was hit by a second one - a moderate earthquake of 4.6 - on Thursday. Tremors were felt across the state at around 1:20 am. No damage has been reported by the second earthquake so far.

Since yesterday, Assam has recorded at least 18 aftershocks, according to officials. A majority of them have been reported in Sonitpur, the district that was hit by a 6.4 magnitude earth-

quake on Wednesday morning. According to the National Center for Seismology (NCS), Sonitpur is seismically very active, falling in the highest Seismic Hazard zone V associated with collisional tectonics where Indian plate subducts beneath the Eurasian Plate.

"The historical and instrumentally recorded earthquake data (NCS catalogue) reveals that the region is affected by moderate to large earthquakes and the most prominent events among those are the July 29, 1960, Assam earthquake of magnitude 6.0," said

the NCS in a statement.

Ten people were injured following the earthquake on Wednesday morning; two reportedly died of heart attack.

Strong tremors were repeatedly felt in several parts of the northeast and neighbouring Bhutan, forcing people to run out of their homes, according to a Reuters witness.

The epicentre of the earthquake was near Dhekiajuli town, 140 km (86 miles) north of Guwahati. The earthquake struck at 7:51 am at a depth of 17 km from the surface.

India thanks Bangladesh for extending support in fight against COVID-19

DHAKA, 29 APR: The High Commission of India in Bangladesh on Thursday thanked the Dhaka government for expressing solidarity with New Delhi in its fight against coronavirus. "Thank you @MOFA_Dhaka for expressing solidarity of #Bangladesh with #India and for support extended as #IndiaFightsCorona, tweeted the Indian High Commission.

The Commission further said that it is confident that India and Bangladesh together can overcome COVID-19.

"Confident #India-Bangladesh friendship will help us all overcome

#Covid19 together@PMOIndia @DrSJaishankar@HarshVShringla@VDoraiswami@MEA-India," added the Commission. Bangladesh has offered to dispatch emergency medicines and medical equipment supplies for the people of India who are fighting against the COVID-19 pandemic.

The supplies include about 10,000 vials of injectable anti-viral, oral anti-viral, 30,000 PPE kits, and several thousand zinc, calcium, vitamin C and other necessary tablets, a foreign ministry press release said here today.

It said Bangladesh

stands in solidarity with its close neighbour India at this critical moment and Dhaka is ready to provide and mobilise support in every possible way to save lives.

"The Government of Bangladesh expresses deep sorrow and condolences at the loss of lives in India due to the recent spread of the COVID pandemic," read the release.

Meanwhile, India's total active caseload has reached 30,84,814. It now comprises 16.79 per cent of the country's total positive cases. A net incline of 1,06,105 cases recorded from the total active caseload in the last 24 hours.

Shakeup in Iran's presidential office after leaked tape

TEHRAN, IRAN (AP): Iran's president has replaced the head of a think tank that recorded an interview with the country's foreign minister that leaked out this week, a tape that provided a rare glimpse into the theocracy's power struggles and set off a firestorm in Iran.

In the recording of the conversation between Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif and an economist at the Strategic Studies Center, the think tank associated

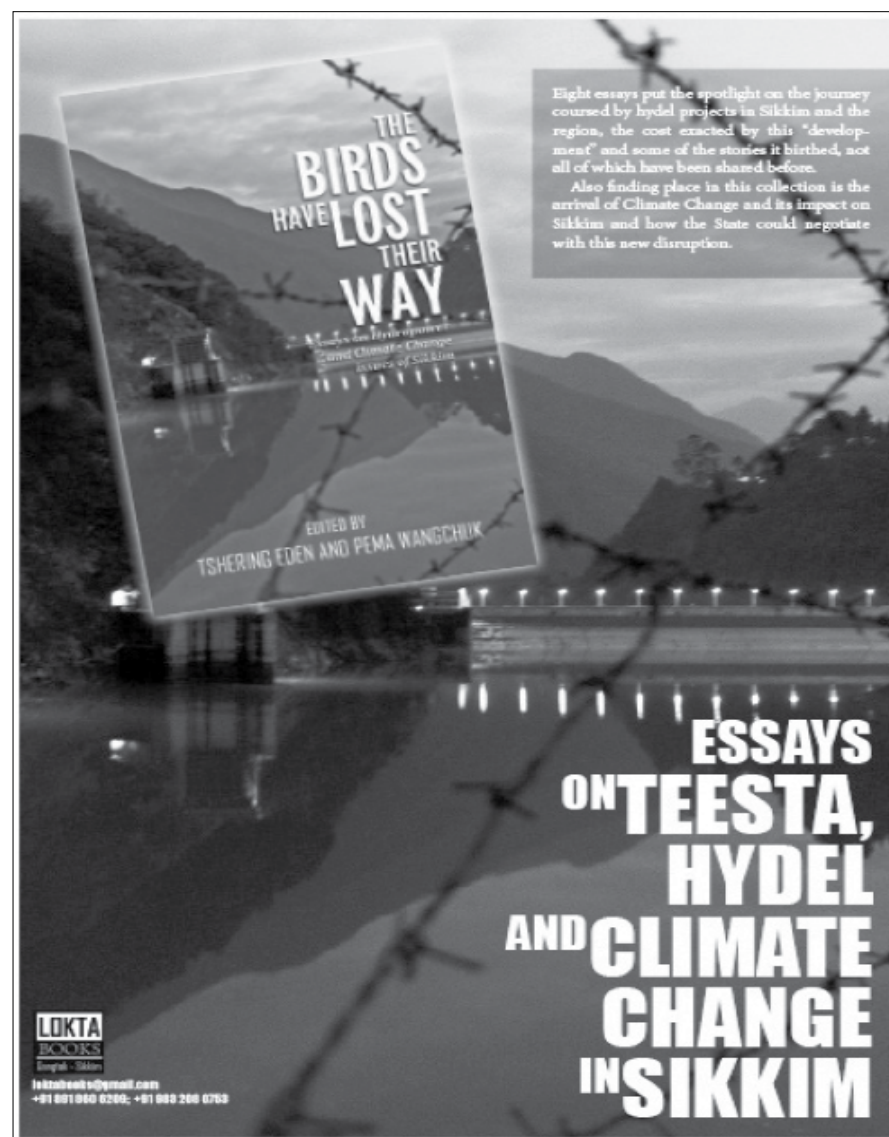
with Iran's presidency, Zarif offers a blunt appraisal of diplomacy and his constricted role in the Islamic Republic.

Iran's presidency announced the former chief of Strategic Studies Center resigned and Ali Rabiei, who already serves as the Cabinet spokesman, would replace him.

The audio tape, leaked earlier this week to London-based, Farsi-language news channel Iran International, set off political controversy

across Iran ahead of the country's June 18 presidential election. While Zarif has said he does not want to run in the election, some have suggested him as a potential candidate to stand against hard-liners in the vote.

Zarif's leaked remarks included cutting references to the limits of his power and those of Gen. Qassem Soleimani, a top commander in Iran's paramilitary Revolutionary Guard who was killed in a drone strike in Baghdad.



Inbee Park takes 1-stroke lead at LPGA event in Singapore

SINGAPORE (AP): The Park family — No. 2-ranked Inbee Park and her husband and caddie Gi — led the way after the opening round of the HSBC Women's World Championship on Thursday.

Park birdied two of her final three holes in a bogey-free round for an 8-under 64 and a one-stroke lead at the LPGA Tour tournament.

"I think I'm going to give him 10 (out of 10) and probably 10 for the rest of the week because I'm really thankful that he's doing this for me and in this heat," Park said. "I'm just really thankful that he's carrying the bag."

Park's regular caddie, Brad Beecher of Australia, was not able to carry her bag because of coronavirus quarantine restrictions.

Park is the defending Olympic champion and has two previous wins at the Singapore tournament, in 2015 and 2017.

Hee Young Park (65) holed out from the fairway for an eagle to start her back nine and birdied three of her final five holes and was a stroke behind. Five players were three strokes off the lead in third with 67s, including Women's British Open champion Sophia Popov.

Lydia Ko, whose win in Hawaii a week ago moved her up to No. 7, shot 69, while No. 1-ranked Jin Young Ko had a 71 and No. 5 Danielle Kang shot 72.

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

Former Women's PGA champion Hannah Green shot 71 and now has 13 consecutive rounds under par. Green was one of only three players who shot in the 60s all four rounds in Los Angeles last week in a tournament won by Brooke Henderson.

Sung-hyun Park, the defending champion from 2019, shot 78.

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

Players had to undergo COVID-19 testing before they left for Singapore and once they arrived.

The tour moves to the Bangkok area next week for the Honda LPGA Thailand. A third tournament in China planned for the following week was canceled because of virus restrictions.

Current plans are to have the LPGA return to Asia later this year — from mid-October to early November — for four tournaments in China, South Korea, Taiwan and Japan. All four tournaments were last played during the same period in 2019.

Kentucky Derby is family affair for Asmussens and O'Neills

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (AP): Steve Asmussen grew up in a barn in dusty Laredo, Texas. He and older brother Cash were the help in their parents' Ma-and-Pa stable. Nearly 4,000 miles away, Patrick O'Neill watched from Hawaii as his Uncle Doug made his way up the training ranks.

The families' worlds collide in the Kentucky Derby on Saturday.

Asmussen, a Hall of Famer on the verge of becoming the sport's winningest trainer, saddles Super Stock, co-owned by his 79-year-old father Keith. Doug O'Neill, a two-time Derby winner, brings Hot Rod Charlie, co-owned by Patrick and spotted at auction by his brother Dennis.

"We never, ever imagined we'd be able to compete at this level coming from Laredo, Texas," said Marilyn Asmussen, Steve's 79-year-old mother who began training horses in 1976 when few women had that job or were respected for it. Her husband was a jockey and still breaks yearlings.

Patrick O'Neill, an enthusiastic yet hardened owner at 28, says, "We're treating this like it is, which is a once-in-a-billion opportunity."

Asmussen is trying to snap an 0-for-21 skid in the Derby. His best finishes were a pair of seconds in 2011 with Nehro and in 2017 with Lookin At Lee.

"I'm somebody who learns far more from a loss than a win," he said.

Having his parents and their longtime partner, Nashville music manager Erv Woolsey, along for the ride has turned the usually stern Asmussen downright mushy. His son, Keith, rode Super Stock in his first three races, including a stakes victory in



Texas.

"I was scared for him," said Steve, who gave up as a jockey after growing too tall and heavy.

"I called my grandfather and told him what I wanted for Christmas, to ride him in a race," the younger Keith said. "I'd like to think I played some part in Pop and Erv keeping him."

Instead of selling Super Stock, the bay colt stayed in the family and gave Keith and Marilyn Asmussen their first Grade 1 victory as owners in the Arkansas Derby, punching his ticket to Louisville. The family celebrated together for the first time since the coronavirus pandemic began a year ago.

"Amazing how the actions of a horse can make you feel about yourself," Steve said on a recent Breeders' Cup pod-

cast. "What a true blessing that is."

While Steve eventually found success training, brother Cash was a star rider in France, winning some of Europe's biggest races in the 1980s and '90s.

"The success that I've had and the success that Cash had before me were made possible because of the horsemanship and professionalism of my parents," Steve said. "That kind of support, that kind of love is what encourages people to dream and to chase it."

Patrick O'Neill loved racing from a young age. He's named for his late grandfather, who he says "definitely had a little bit of a gambling problem." The elder Patrick brought his four sons — Dave, Danny, Dennis and Doug — to the racetrack as kids in Detroit.

"My dad (Dave) saw what happened with gambling and was turned off," Patrick said. "Dennis and Doug saw all the excitement and the characters."

Dave and Danny died of melanoma. Dennis and Doug eventually moved to California, with Doug becoming a trainer and Dennis a bloodstock agent. Patrick grew up in Hawaii, but kept in touch with his uncles and attended the Derby when Doug won in 2012 with I'll Have Another and in 2016 with Nyquist.

Patrick followed racing through his college days at Brown University, where he played football. He bugged his bemused roommates and teammates Eric Armagost, Dan Giovacchini, Reiley Higgins and Alex Quoyeser to add TVG racing channel to their cable package for an extra \$6

a month. "That definitely ate into our beer funds," he said.

He invited his buddies to Del Mar one summer. The horses and ambiance at the seaside track north of San Diego quickly converted them. Someone suggested buying a horse together.

O'Neill said no and tried to tamp down their chatter about entering the Kentucky Derby and Breeders' Cup. He counseled they'd be lucky to win a race at Del Mar.

"I've seen what happens in the sport and I didn't want to lose friends," he said, "but I quickly changed my mind. Life is about people, memories and experiences."

The first horse they owned was "godawful," O'Neill recalled. The next one finished last at Del Mar and was claimed for \$100,000, giving them the money that

led to the purchase of Hot Rod Charlie.

O'Neill's group owns 25% of the colt they nicknamed "Chuck." Their stable Boat Racing LLC ("kind of cheeky" he says) is named after a favorite college drinking game that involves racing to finish drinks in sequence. They supply the youthful energy to complement more experienced owners Bill Strauss (25%) and Greg Helm of Roadrunner Racing (50%). O'Neill and his friends work corporate jobs on the West Coast.

Dennis O'Neill picked out Hot Rod Charlie for \$110,000 at auction. The dark bay colt lost his first three races at Del Mar before winning at Santa Anita.

"Chuck" was a 95-1 shot in the Breeders' Cup Juvenile last fall at Keeneland. He finished second to Essential Quality, beaten three-quarters of a length by the early favorite for Saturday's Derby.

"He was such a prepubescent teen going into the Breeders' Cup," O'Neill said. "He's in his pre-college years and starting to look like an adult." And racing like one, too.

"Chuck" won the Louisiana Derby by two lengths to solidify his spot in the Kentucky Derby. He's finished out of the money just twice in seven career starts and has earnings of over \$1 million.

"Chuck" will be cheered on in person by 160 friends and family on Saturday.

"To have this be a family affair and have all our different networks brought in, it would be magical," O'Neill said of a possible victory. "It would be a movie-like script."

And if the Asmussens are in the winner's circle instead?

"When good people have success," O'Neill said, "it's fine when you lose."

American coach Marsch to take over at German team Leipzig

LEIPZIG, GERMANY (AP): American coach Jesse Marsch will take over at German soccer team Leipzig next season.

The Bundesliga club said Thursday that Marsch will switch from sister club Red Bull Salzburg on a two-year contract until June 2023.

Marsch will take over from Julian Nagelsmann, who agreed Tuesday to replace from Hansi Flick at Bayern Munich. Flick is expected to coach the German national team after Joachim Löw steps down following this year's European Championship. Marsch, a former player who made two appearances for the United States national team, was the first American to coach a team in the Champions League. He helped Salzburg win the

Austrian league and cup double last season and could repeat the feat this year.

Marsch is following a well-worn path from Salzburg to Saxony. Leipzig signed Hungarian midfielder Dominik Szoboszlai from Salzburg last December in the 18th transfer between the two clubs funded by energy drink company Red Bull.

Marsch formerly worked as an assistant coach at Leipzig, helping it reach the German Cup final and finish third in the Bundesliga in 2019. The 47-year-old American previously coached MLS team New York Red Bulls from 2015-18. He was coach of the year in 2015.

"Jesse knows the club, the city of Leipzig and, above all, the club

and playing philosophy," Leipzig CEO Oliver Mintzlaff said. "Alongside his qualities as a coach, Jesse is characterized above all by his positively ambitious style, which he uses to motivate and engage the people and around the club."

Nagelsmann said he was happy that his successor was found so quickly and he backed Marsch to continue the club's development.

"I see how Salzburg play and I've heard how he worked as an assistant to Ralf (Rangnick)," Nagelsmann said. "He's a very emotional coach with a good connection to his players."

Leipzig is in second place in the Bundesliga and virtually assured of playing in the Champions League next season.

Metzelder trial on charges of child pornography begins

DÜSSELDORF, GERMANY (AP): Former Germany defender Christoph Metzelder's trial on charges of child pornography possession and distribution began at Düsseldorf District Court on Thursday.

The 40-year-old Metzelder is accused of possessing child and youth pornography and of forwarding 29 files to three different women.

News agency dpa reported the public prosecutor told the court, for example, that Metzelder in August 2019 sent photos showing the sexual abuse of girls under 10 years old.

Judge Astrid Stammerjohann indicated in a note that Metzelder could

be given a suspended sentence, dpa reported. She interrupted the process after around 30 minutes for a legal discussion. Before the trial, defense attorney Ulrich Sommer said in a TV interview that he believed Metzelder's cell phone can not be used as evidence and therefore demanded an acquittal.

The court previously said Metzelder "contests the allegations. The main trial is to clarify whether or not the allegations made in the indictment are true. The defendant is considered innocent until the proceedings are finally concluded." The public prosecutor's office will probably have to do without the main witness.

South Korea inoculates Olympic athletes ahead of Tokyo Games



SEOUL, SOUTH KOREA (AP): South Korea began administering fast-track COVID-19 vaccines on Thursday to athletes, coaches and others expected to attend the Tokyo Olympics.

The Korean Sport and Olympic Committee said the first group of about 100 people received the first doses at a state-run hospital in Seoul at the start of the country's prioritized vaccination program for its Olympic delegation. They will be given second shots in the coming weeks.

A total of 930 athletes, coaches, officials and other support staff will be vaccinated ahead of the Tokyo Games, which is set to open on July 23. Athletes can receive the vaccines if they have already qualified for the Olympics or are in qualifying tournaments, so some may get vacci-

nated but not attend the games.

The sports ministry said in a statement this week it supports South Korean athletes preparing for the Olympics and hopes their vaccinations would help realize their "safe, successful participation in the games."

It said athletes and coaches will all get the Pfizer vaccine. Officials, support staff and journalists who are 30 or older will be given the AstraZeneca vaccine but those younger than 30 are to receive the Pfizer vaccine in line with a national vaccination program, the statement said.

South Korea tentatively aims to send about 800-900 people to the Olympics, 350 of them athletes and coaches in 27 events. Olympic committee officials expect to finalize the Olympic

delegation in late June when all qualifying tournaments are finished.

The sports ministry said about 150 athletes and coaches hoping to attend the Tokyo Paralympics will separately get virus shots on Friday and May 4. Ministry official Park Seungjoon said support staff for the Paralympics are expected to be given shots in May.

The 150 people also include athletes who are still in qualifying events. South Korea sent about 160 athletes, coaches and others to the Rio Paralympics in 2016, Park said.

Later Thursday, South Korea's health authorities said they have inoculated about 3 million people, about 5.7% of its 52 million people. The government recently said it has secured enough vaccines for 99 million people, nearly

twice its total population, and that it seeks to achieve herd immunity by November.

South Korea has avoided a widespread outbreak like ones seen in India, the United States and elsewhere, but it has recently experienced a steady surge in new infections. As of Thursday morning, the country has reported 121,351 cases with 1,825 deaths.

Meanwhile, rival North Korea said this month it won't take part in the Tokyo Games, citing virus concerns. It is the first time the country will skip a major international sports event because of an infectious disease. North Korea maintains some of the world's toughest anti-virus steps, though it has repeatedly claimed to be coronavirus-free, an assertion disputed by outside experts.

China launches main part of its 1st permanent space station

BEIJING (AP): China on Thursday launched the main module of its first permanent space station that will host astronauts long term, the latest success for a program that has realized a number of its growing ambitions in recent years.

The Tianhe, or “Heavenly Harmony,” module blasted into space atop a Long March 5B rocket from the Wenchang Launch Center on the southern island province of Hainan, marking another major advance for the country’s space exploration.

The launch begins the first of 11 missions necessary to complete, supply and crew the station by the end of next year.

China’s space program has also recently brought back the first new lunar samples in more than 40 years and expects to land a probe and rover on the surface of Mars later next month.

Minutes after the launch, the fairing opened to expose the Tianhe atop the core stage of the rocket, with the characters for “China Manned Space” emblazoned on its exterior. Soon after, it separated from the rocket, which will orbit for about a week before falling to Earth, and minutes after that, opened its solar arrays to provide a steady energy source.

The space program is a source of huge national pride, and Premier Li Keqiang and other top civilian and military leaders watched the launch live from the control center in Beijing. A message of congratulations from state leader and head of the ruling Communist Party Xi Jinping was also read to staff at the Wenchang Launch Center.

The launch furthers the “three-step” strategy of building up China’s manned space program and marks “an important leading project for constructing a powerful



country in science and technology and aerospace,” Xi’s message said. The core module is the section of the station where astronauts will live for up to six months at a time. Another 10 launches will send up two more modules where crews will conduct experiments, four cargo supply shipments and four missions with crews.

At least 12 astronauts are training to fly to and live in the station, including veterans of previous flights, newcomers and women, with the first crewed mission, Shenzhou-12, expected to be launched by June.

When completed by late 2022, the T-shaped Chinese Space Station is expected to weigh about 66 tons, considerably smaller than the International Space Station, which launched its first module in 1998 and will weigh about 450 tons when completed.

Tianhe will have a docking port and will

also be able to connect with a powerful Chinese space satellite. Theoretically, it could be expanded to as many as six modules. The station is designed to operate for at least 10 years.

Tianhe is about the size of the American Skylab space station of the 1970s and the former Soviet/Russian Mir, which operated for more than 14 years after launching in 1986. The core module will provide living space for as many as six astronauts during crew changeovers, while its other two modules, Wentian, or “Quest for the Heavens,” and Mengtian, or “Dreaming of the Heavens,” will provide room for conducting scientific experiments including in medicine and the properties of the outer space environment.

China began working on a space station project in 1992, just as its space ambitions were taking shape. The need to go it alone became more ur-

gent after was excluded from the International Space Station largely due to U.S. objections over the Chinese program’s secretive nature and close military ties.

After years of successful rocket and commercial satellite launches, China put its first astronaut into space in October 2003, becoming only the third country to independently do so after the former Soviet Union and the United States.

Along with more crewed missions, China launched a pair of experimental, single-module space stations — Tian-gong-1, which means “Heavenly Palace-1,” and its successor, Tian-gong-2. The first burned up after contact was lost and its orbit decayed, while the second was successfully taken out of orbit in 2018.

The Tiangong-2 crew stayed aboard for 33 days.

While NASA must get permission from a re-

luctant Congress to engage in contact with the Chinese space program, other countries have been far less reluctant. European nations and the United Nations are expected to cooperate on experiments to be done on the completed Chinese station.

The launch comes as China is also forging ahead with crewless missions, particularly in lunar exploration, and it has landed a rover on the little-explored far side of the moon. In December, its Chang’e 5 probe returned lunar rocks to Earth for the first time since the U.S. missions of the 1970s.

Meanwhile, a Chinese probe carrying a rover is due to set down on Mars sometime around the middle of next month, making China only the second country to successfully accomplish that after the U.S.

The Tianwen-1 space probe has been orbiting the red planet since February while collecting data. Its Zhurong rover will be looking for evidence of life.

Another Chinese program aims to collect soil from an asteroid, a key focus of Japan’s space program.

China plans another mission in 2024 to bring back lunar samples and has said it wants to land people on the moon and possibly build a scientific base there. No timeline has been proposed for such projects. A highly secretive space plane is also reportedly under development.

China has proceeded in a more measured, cautious manner than the U.S. and Soviet Union during the height of the space race.

One recent setback came when a Long March 5 rocket failed in 2017 during development of the Long March 5B variant used to put Tianhe into orbit, but that caused only a brief delay.

Young women, grown up without Taliban, dread their return

KABUL, AFGHANISTAN (AP): Inside Ms. Sadat’s Beauty Salon in Afghanistan’s capital, Sultana Karimi leans intently over a customer, meticulously shaping her eyebrows. Make-up and hair styling is the 24-year-old’s passion, and she discovered it, along with a newfound confidence, here in the salon.

She and the other young women working or apprenticing in the salon never experienced the rule of the Taliban over Afghanistan.

But they all worry that their dreams will come to an end if the hard-line militants regain any power, even if peacefully as part of a new government.

“With the return of Taliban, society will be transformed and ruined,” Karimi said. “Women will be sent into hiding, they’ll be forced to wear the burqa to go out of their homes.”

She wore a bright yellow blouse that draped off her shoulders as she worked, a style that’s a bit daring even in the all-women space of the salon. It would have been totally out of the question under the Taliban, who ruled until the 2001 U.S.-led invasion. In fact, the Taliban banned beauty salons in general, part of a notoriously harsh ideology that often hit women and girls the hardest, including forbidding them education and the right to work or even to travel outside their home unaccompanied by a male relative.

With U.S. troops committed to leaving Afghanistan completely by Sept. 11, women are closely watching the stalemated peace negotiations between the Taliban and the Afghan government over the post-withdrawal future, said Mahbouba Seraj, a women’s rights activist.

The U.S. is pressing for a power-sharing government that includes the Taliban. Seraj said women want written guarantees from the Taliban that they won’t reverse the gains made by women in the past 20 years, and they want the international community to hold the insurgent movement to its commitments. “I am not frustrated that the Americans are leaving ... the time was coming that the Americans would go home,” said Seraj, the executive director of Afghan Women’s Skill Development.

But she had a message for the U.S. and NATO: “We keep yelling and screaming and saying, for God’s sake, at least do something with the Taliban, take some kind of assurance from them ... a mechanism to be put in place” that guarantees women’s rights.

Last week the Taliban in a statement outlined the type of government they seek.

It promised that women “can serve their society in the education, business, health and social fields while maintaining correct Islamic hijab.” It promised girls would have the right to choose their own husbands, considered deeply unacceptable in many traditional and tribal homes in Afghanistan, where husbands are chosen by their parents.

But the statement offered few details, nor did it guarantee women could

participate in politics or have freedom to move unaccompanied by a male relative.

Many worry that the vague terms the Taliban use in their promises, like “correct hijab” or guaranteeing rights “provided under Islamic law” give them wide margin to impose hard-line interpretations.

At the beauty salon, the owner Ms. Sadat told how she was born in Iran to refugee parents. She was forbidden to own a business there, so she returned to a homeland she’d never seen to start her salon 10 years ago.

She asked not to be identified by her full name, fearing that attention could make her a target. She has become more cautious as violence and random bombings have increased in Kabul the past year — an augur of chaos when the Americans fully leave, many fear. She used to drive her own car. Not anymore.

The women building a future working or apprenticing in the salon all dreaded a restored Taliban — “Just the name of the Taliban horrifies us,” said one.

They’re left gaming out how much compromise of their rights they can endure. Tamila Pazhman said she doesn’t want “the old Afghanistan back,” but she does want peace.

“If we know we will have peace, we will wear the hijab while we work and study,” she said. “But there must be peace.”

In their early 20s, they all grew up amid the incremental, but important gains made by women since the Taliban’s ouster. Girls are now in school, and women are in Parliament, government and business.

They also know how reversible those gains are in an overwhelmingly male-dominated, deeply conservative society.

“Women in Afghanistan who raise their voices have been oppressed and ignored,” Karimi said. “The majority of Afghan women will be silent. They know they will never receive any support.”

Afghanistan remains one of the worst countries in the world for women, after only Yemen and Syria, according to an index kept by Georgetown University’s Institute for Women, Peace and Security.

In most rural areas, life has changed little in centuries. Women wake at dawn, do much of the heavy labor in the home and in the fields. They wear the traditional coverings that conceal them from head to toe. One in three girls is married before 18, most often in forced marriages, according to U.N. estimates.

Religious conservatives who dominate Parliament have prevented passage of a Protection of Women bill.

Afghanistan’s broader statistics are also grim, with 54% of its 36 million people living below the poverty level of \$1.90 a day. Runaway government corruption has swallowed up hundreds of millions of dollars, rights workers and watchdogs say.

Dutch government pauses coronavirus app over data leak fears

THE HAGUE, NETHERLANDS (AP): The Dutch government has temporarily disabled its coronavirus warning app amid data privacy concerns for people who have the app installed on phones using the Android operating system.

Health Minister Hugo de Jonge announced late Wednesday that the CoronaMelder app will stop sending warnings for 48 hours while the government checks if users’ data is secure.

The Dutch app uses “exposure notification” technology developed by Google and Apple that generates random codes that can be exchanged by phones whose users are close to one another for long enough to possibly transmit the virus.

The health ministry says that it is possible for other apps on Android phones to access data about whether its user’s had been infected and its contacts with other phones.

“The privacy of users is always a priority. While Google must solve the problem, I can limit the consequences. That’s why we’re taking this decision,” De Jonge said in a statement.



According to the ministry, Google informed the government Wednesday it has fixed the issue. The Dutch government halted messages from the app for 48 hours to check if the leak has been fixed.

In a statement emailed to The Associated Press, Google said it has been “rolling out a fix for an issue where random Blue-

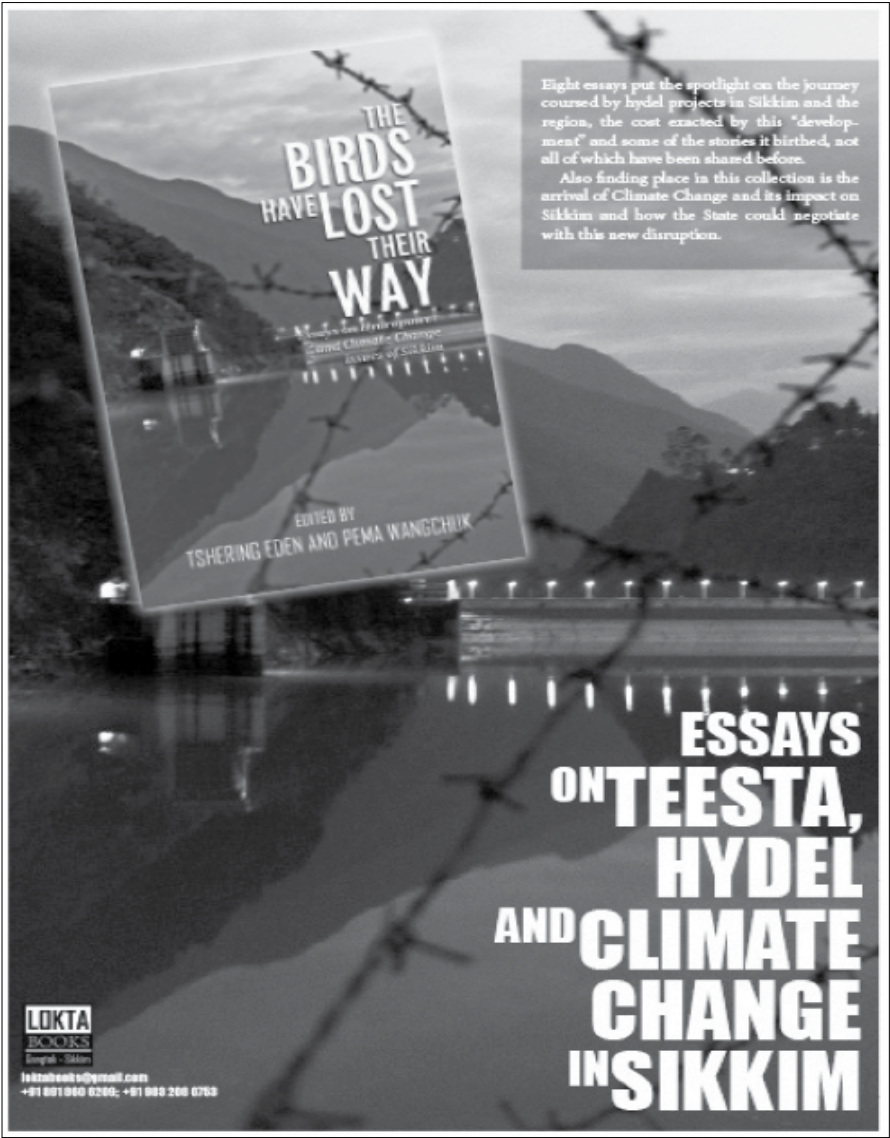
tooth identifiers used by the Exposure Notification framework on Android were temporarily accessible to a limited number of pre-installed applications.”

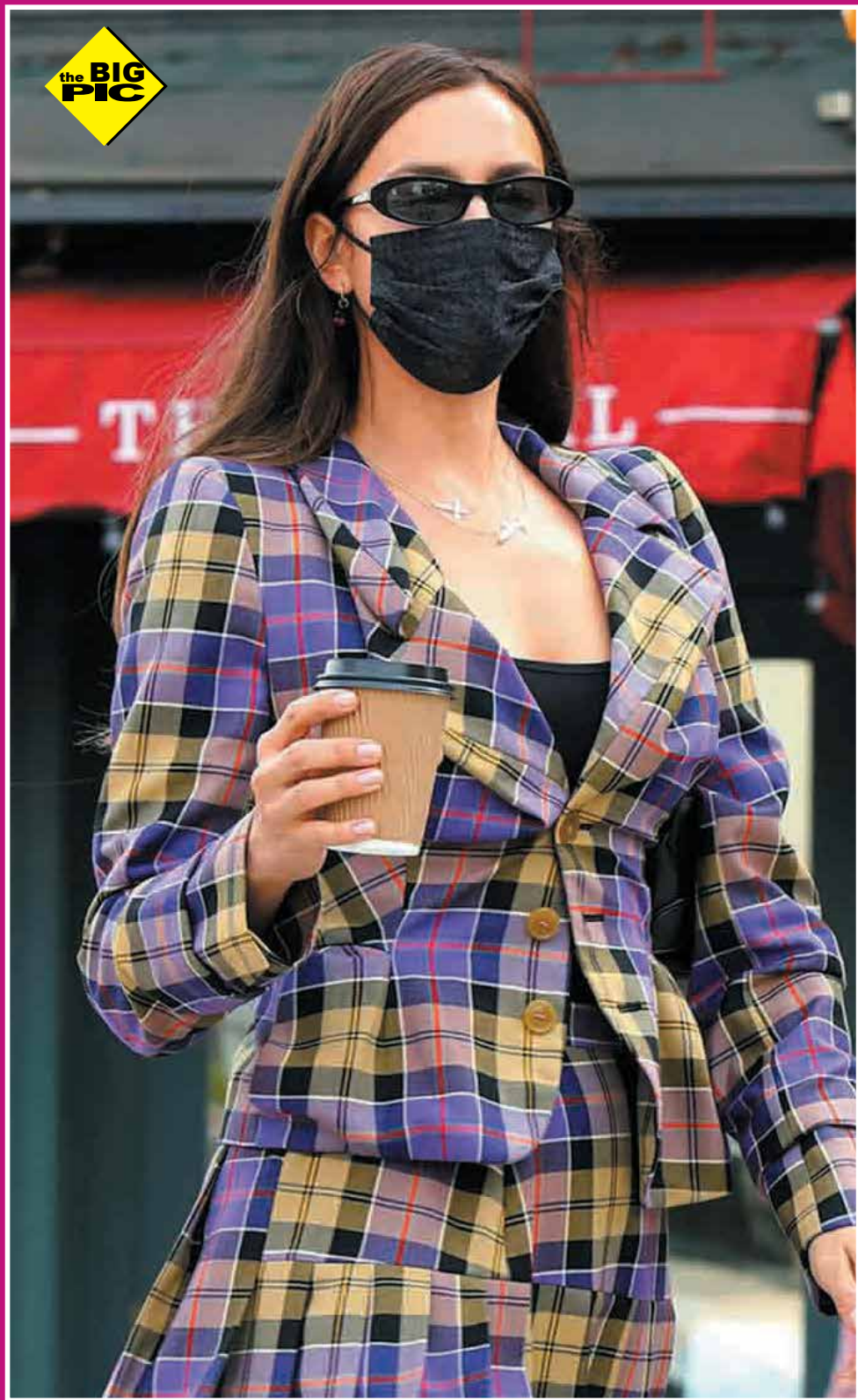
The tech giant said that the rollout began several weeks ago and it expects the fix “to be available to all Android users in the coming days.”

Google said that random

Bluetooth identifiers “on their own have no practical value to bad actors, and it is extremely unlikely that developers of pre-installed apps were aware of the inadvertent availability of those identifiers.”

The company added that it has no indications that any data from coronavirus exposure apps was accessed inappropriately.





AS IF! The model, Irina Shayk gives off some Clueless vibes while sporting a colorful plaid skirt and blazer in NYC.

Celebs like Dolly and Bruce raid closets for charity auction

NEW YORK (AP): Christine Baranski wants your help cleaning out her closet.

The Emmy- and Tony-winning actor is donating three custom-made Bob Mackie gowns for an online charity auction on Wednesday and she's tapped a starry group of A-listers to follow her lead with hundreds of items.

The eye-popping haul includes a Wolverine jacket from Hugh Jackman's closet, a banjo signed by Steve Martin, boots, jeans and a T-shirt from Bruce Springsteen and a dress from Dolly Parton that comes with its own mannequin. A portion of proceeds from every item sold will benefit The Actors Fund.

"Those of us lucky enough to have had successful careers are well aware of how badly our performing arts community has been hit," says Baranski. "It's a great way and it's a fun way to help."

The gowns she's donated were ones she wore for appearances at the Golden Globes, Emmys and Kennedy Center Honors in the 1990s. Each is very glam — she calls them "over the top" — and her daughters aren't interested in wearing any.

"I have a feeling whoever bids on it will do it hopefully with a feeling of affection and maybe that I've given them some joy. That would be nice," she says.

The slate available at Doyle Auctioneers & Appraisers includes a key prop from the worldwide smash musical "The Phantom of the Opera," a Burberry trench coat and a pair of Swarovski encrusted shoes from Cher and signed posters of "All in the Family" signed by Norman Lear.

Baranski helped organize the event and worked to get many of the items, writing personal emails to each celebrity. She spent the first weeks of the pandemic cleaning her closet and realized it could help others.

"As I'm coming out of my closet, I thought, 'Gosh, there's probably a lot of actresses like myself who might be doing this, purging themselves of stuff,'" she says. "Wouldn't it be a great thing

have been so generous," Baranski says. "If I can just use all of these wonderful threads and connections and friendships to galvanize and make something happen, it would be a very rewarding



for an auction?"

Baranski reached out to producer Lorne Michael of "Saturday Night Live" fame to connect with writer and actor Tina Fey and managed to also get an "SNL" haul, including RuPaul's opening monologue outfit and the costume Timothee Chalamet wore when he played Harry Styles.

Theater fans may get excited about a Dolce & Gabbana dress worn by Glenn Close at the opening night of "Sunset Boulevard" in 2017 and the leather suit Alan Cumming wore to the Tony Awards when he won the best actor in a musical trophy in 1998 for "Cabaret."

Judy Craymer is offering the jumpsuit costume she wore on Broadway for the last number of "Mama Mia!," Christine Ebersole is letting go of the necklace she wore in "Grey Gardens" and composer Stephen Sondheim is donating a signed musical manuscript of the first eight bars of "Broadway Baby."

"The happy news is I've just gotten such a tremendous response. People

thing."

Other items up for bids include Bob Mackie dresses from Carol Burnett, a black sequin gown worn by Bette Midler and dresses from Meryl Streep, Cherry Jones, Audra McDonald, Donna Murphy, Patti LuPone and Bernadette Peters. There are boots from the original production of "Hamilton" and a signed script of "To Kill a Mockingbird" by Jeff Daniels.

More treasures include Celeste Holm's Golden Globe awarded in 1947 for "Gentlemen's Agreement," signed books from Julie Andrews and the dress worn by Fey to the 2013 Emmy Awards where she won for writing "30 Rock"

More one-of-a-kind items are an Oscar de la Renta gown worn by Renée Fleming when she sang at the Diamond Jubilee Concert for Queen Elizabeth II in 2012, a limited edition copy of the "Downton Abbey" film screenplay, and some leather jackets from the TV show "The Good Wife."

Britney Spears set to speak in court on her conservatorship

LOS ANGELES (AP): Britney Spears has asked to address the court to talk about the conservatorship that has controlled her life and finances for 13 years, her attorney said Tuesday, and a judge scheduled a June date to hear from her.

Spears' court-appointed attorney, Samuel Ingham III, said in a hearing in Los Angeles Superior Court that she had asked to speak to the court soon, and agreed with Judge Brenda Penny on a June 23 date. He did not say what she would specifically like to say.

It would be the first known time in more than two years that the 39-year-old pop star has spoken in

court. The last time, on May 10, 2019, the courtroom was sealed. None of what she said became public.

The judge may also close the June hearing to the media and public. But Spears, through Ingham, has been pushing for more transparency in the court proceedings and documents of the conservatorship.

Spears did not take part in Tuesday's hearing, and she very rarely attends them.

As with nearly every Spears hearing, about 50 fans from the so-called #FreeBritney movement picketed outside the downtown courthouse.

On Tuesday, they carried signs that read "CONSERVA-

TORSHIP IS SLAVERY" and "THIS IS TOXIC."

One woman, wearing a #FreeBritney T-shirt, had her head shaved during the demonstration in solidarity with Spears, who famously shaved her own head just before the conservatorship was put in place in 2008.

Spears herself has said in court documents and on social media that she welcomes the support for her and scrutiny of her circumstances that have come from fans.

Through Ingham, she has been pushing in court to incrementally exercise more control over her life and finances. But she has yet to request that the court end the conservatorship.

Florence Welch throws her hat into the musical theater ring

NEW YORK (AP): Florence Welch is ditching the machine for musicals.

The Grammy-nominated leader of Florence + The Machine is supplying the lyrics and co-writing music for a stage musical adaptation of "The Great Gatsby," it was announced Wednesday. No cast or premiere venue was announced.

Welch will collaborate on the music with Thomas Bartlett — who earned a Grammy nomination for best song written for visual media in 2019 for "Mystery of Love" by Sufjan Stevens — and story writer Martyna Majok, who was awarded the 2018 Pulitzer Prize for drama for "Cost of Living." The musical will be directed by Olivier Award nominee Rebecca Frecknall.

The copyright to F. Scott Fitzgerald's classic Jazz Age novel expired at the end of 2020, meaning anyone is now allowed to adapt it to a movie, make it into an opera

or stage a Broadway musical without permission from the estate. "This book has haunted me for a large part of my life," Welch said in a

chine's 2009 debut "Lungs" was a hit in the United Kingdom and reached No. 14 on the Billboard 200. The band's breakout track is "Dog Days

ing success with "The Lion King," there is U2's Bono and The Edge, who were battered by "Spider-Man: Turn Off the Dark." Some big names in the



statement. "It contains some of my favorite lines in literature. Musicals were my first love, and I feel a deep connection to Fitzgerald's broken romanticism. It is an honor to have been offered the chance to recreate this book in song."

Formed in London in 2007, Florence + the Ma-

Are Over."

Other rock and pop stars who have written original musicals include Cyndi Lauper, Sheryl Crow, John Mellencamp, Sarah McLachlan, Dave Stewart, Tori Amos, Edie Brickell and Trey Anastasio from Phish. For every Elton John, who found amaz-

pop world who stumbled in musical theater include Paul Simon, whose 1998 Broadway show "The Capeman" was the most high-profile failure of his career. "Taboo," Boy George's foray into the world of musicals, went fine in London but not in New York.

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Aries:

You are at a wonderful place in your life, Aries. A place where you're able to look at the trajectory of your life through the lens of wisdom, and acknowledge all the ways in which you have grown. But, the evolution doesn't end here. There is a lot more that you are meant to discover about yourself on this path. So, listen to the voice in your head that's whispering, "The time to unleash that latent potential is now."

Tip: Open yourself to infinite possibility.

Taurus:

The trouble is, we attach too much importance to money and the role it plays in our lives. But obsessing over something only takes it further and further away from us. The cards are urging you to change your approach a little. Instead of worrying about the returns, focus on what needs to be done here. Your task today is to create from a space of joy and give the project at hand your undivided attention. PS: Sweet results await.

Tip: The Universe is abundant in every way.

Gemini:

It's easy to go into a black hole when things are going downhill and disconnect from everybody around you. Go against your natural instinct and reach out. You have some wonderful people in your life and they will be more than happy to support you today. If you're in the best of spirits, perhaps there is someone around you who is trying to chase away the dark clouds. Hold space for them in a manner you feel inspired to, Gemini.

Tip: You don't have to do this alone. So, reach out.

Cancer:

Cancer, there are some people around you who could be

lowering your vibrations by making you doubt your own power and potential. Take a moment to understand where they are coming from. Could somebody who is insecure in their being convince another person that they are not good enough? You already have the answer to this one. Today, you're finally breaking the illusion and seeing your reality for what it is. From now on, be mindful of who you allow into your space as you filter out the stories you hear about yourself.

Tip: It's time to believe in your own power and potential.

Leo:

You have the larger plan in place and it's looking good. Now, it's time to go over the blueprint. A detail-oriented approach will serve you well at a time like this. What Spirit wants you to remember is that you are in the right place at the right time. So, focus on all that is good in your life, knowing that your intention will give the positive aspects of your life the power to grow.

Tip: You are where you need to be and you are growing at the right pace.

Virgo:

"Dance, when you're broken open. Dance, if you've torn the bandage off. Dance in the middle of the fighting. Dance in your blood. Dance when you're perfectly free." Today, let Rumi's words inspire you to experience the magic of movement. It's time to put on some music and allow yourself to feel a sense of oneness with the rhythm of the Universe. All kinds of emotions are likely to resurface as a result, from anger to ecstasy. Your task is to move into the space of observation and let go of the need to attach a story.

Tip: Just dance.

Libra:

The full moon has been intense for all of us, and there is a lot that has come up to be healed for you, Libra. Today, you're being called to set some time aside for shadow work. What are the things you are struggling to accept about yourself? What are all the ways in which you are doubting your own power and potential? Reflect upon the patterns you would like to clear from your subconscious and put them down on paper. A simple ritual to clear the old energy and help you start afresh: offer your letter to the flames as you visualise yourself rising from the ashes.

Tip: Make way for change.

Scorpio:

You've had your days of undermining your potential and mindlessly wasting your talent. The beginning of the year finds you in the mood for a drastic change, one that allows you to reach your fullest potential and experience a sense of freedom all the same. Some of you could be actively thinking about investing in your own venture. Yes, there will be many details to figure out, which could intimidate you. The key is to start with what you know, and figure out the rest of it as you go along. In the golden words of Alan Watts, "The only way to make sense of change is to plunge into it, move with it, and join the dance."

Tip: You may be inspired to invest in your own venture.

Sagittarius:

If we're all living in a simulation, why the hell do we get so serious about everything? Your thoughts exactly, Sagittarius. Today you're in the mood to unleash your inner child and/or connect with the little ones in your tribe. On your to-do list: making art. Making macrame. Making a mess. Trust that you will turn your home into a portal of good vibes in the process.

Tip: Sometimes making a mess is the most spiritual thing you can do.

Capricorn:

Capricorn, you're in this world, but not of it. You are discovering that you are a multidimensional being, full of magical abilities that are waiting to be realised. The cards want you to know that this is a time of aligning with your true path and uncovering the jewels Spirit has buried deep within you. The transformation may seem daunting at first. Roll with it anyway. Yes, that means you are allowed to take up "too much" space and be a sorcerer/ess in a world full of muggles.

Tip: You are coming into your magic.

Aquarius:

What we resist, persists—a Universal law that's being revealed to you in this moment. So, pause, breathe, and understand the higher meaning behind your circumstances. The truth is, things are happening for you, not to you. This is the ultimate cleanse, Aquarius. What you will discover on the other side is freedom in the truest sense of the word.

Tip: Accept what the present is offering you.

Pisces:

Fertility, birth, growth, degeneration, and death—and so the cycle of life continues. But is death really the end, or simply a portal to the new? The metamorphosis you are experiencing is a testimony to the light that follows the darkest of night. So, take a moment to look back—at the good, the bad, and the ugly. They all helped shape you and make you the person you are today. If that doesn't call for a prayer of gratitude, what does, Pisces?

Tip: You're grateful for it all.