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SummitTIMES

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ON TOP OF THE NEWS

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Sopakha GPU villagers put their foot down, demand resumption of abandoned road project

**SUMMIT REPORT
GANGTOK, 17 FEB:**

Residents of several villages under Sopakha Gram Panchayat Unit under Maneybong-Dentam constituency in West Sikkim have demanded for the early completion of a 4 KM road from Bandukhey-Utarey road to Daragaon via Dhadeygaon.

It is informed that this road has been lying incomplete for the past year, work abandoned barely 30% into the project.

The villagers are now threatening to launch a "strong movement" from 20 February onwards if the contractor does not resume work by then.

Regarding the same, residents of Dhadeygaon, Daragaon, Gurung



Gaon, Majhgaon and Khopikharka Gaon met the panchayats of Sopakha GPU on Monday and requested them to initiate effective measures in

this regard.

It is informed that the panchayats have directed the concerned contractor, Suk Prasad Limboo, to resume the

work by 19 February.

People have threatened to take their protest to the highest authorities if this deadline is not kept.

They have also threat-

ened to launch a strong movement from 20 February onwards if they do not see the work resumed.

The people complain that a JCB has been left

untouched at Dhadeygaon for the past eight months and the concerned department has also not shown any concern on the matter.

1031 students pass out of IGNOU Gangtok



GANGTOK, 17 FEB (IPR): IGNOU, Gangtok, conducted its 33rd Convocation programme here at Rap Jyor Caveri Hall, 5th Mile Tadong, today. The Convocation programme was held simultaneously in selected thirty-nine Regional Centres throughout the country.

Total of 1031 students were presented their Degree Certificate from Regional Centre Gangtok comprising of 402 Master Degrees, 461 Bachelor Degrees, 95 Diplomas and 75 Certificate Degrees.

The programme was

attended by Centre Head, GB Pant National Institute of Himalayan Environment and Sustainable Development, Gangtok, Dr Rajesh Joshi as the guest of honour. He was accompanied by Regional Director, IGNOU Gangtok, Dr Yonah Bhutia and Registrar, Sikkim University, TK Kaul.

At the onset of the programme, Minister for Human Resource Development, Government of India, Ramesh Pokhriyal 'Nishank' delivered the Convocation Address at IGNOU Headquarters from

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United Sikkim Shuttlers lifts Jorethang Premier Badminton League

**SUMMIT REPORT
GANGTOK, 17 FEB:**

United Sikkim Shuttlers [co-owned by Bhaichung Bhutia, Tarundip Rai & Rajan Kumar] has won the Jorethang Premier Badminton League (JPBL) after beating David Warriors [co-owned by Jacob Khaling & Aditya Golay] in a keenly contested final match held on 16 Feb at Badminton Court Jorethang, a press release informs.

During the qualifying rounds David Warriors were on tenterhooks as the unique point allocation system, involving the concept of a "trump" match, brought four teams quite closely spaced in terms of points, the release mentions.

The fate of David Warriors depended on the match between Salghari Zoom Blockers and Red Panda GMTS. The elimination of Salghari Zoom Blockers enabled David Warriors to qualify for semis, where they



beat the top of the qualifying league team, Dallam Express, to enter the finals.

Amol Rai, the highest paid player of the tournament, unfortunately could not get to showcase his fine badminton skills after qualifying rounds, as his team Poklok Warriors got eliminated on points basis.

The "Best Fairplay" award was won by Salghari Zoom Blockers.

The chief guest for the evening was Minister of Education and Sports,

KN Lepcha, who spent quality time watching matches and encouraging players. He also spoke on the promotion of other sports in Sikkim through similar leagues.

Amongst the team owners who were present to cheer for their teams were MN Sherpa (Dallam Express), Jacob Khaling (David Warriors), RB Tamang (Poklok Warriors), Tsering Sherpa (Red Panda GMTS), Anjana Rai (wife of Tarundip Rai) & Rajan

Kumar (United Sikkim Shuttlers). On the first day, Bhaichung Bhutia was present with his family to encourage all players besides his own team.

A "Champion of Champions" show contest was held amongst the franchise owners, where Jacob Khaling, Rajkumar Gajmer, Tsering Sherpa and Chief Coordinator of JPBL, Jigme Namgyal participated. The spectators enjoyed these interesting matches

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Sikkim martial artists impress at two national Taekwondo c'ships



**SUMMIT REPORT
GANGTOK, 17 FEB:**

Sikkim's Taekwondo teams have returned after impressive outings at two national championships.

A seven-member Sikkim squad won 6 gold and one silver medal at the Grand Open National 1st Republic Cup Taekwondo Championship 2020 organised by Shine Star Academy at Talkatora Stadium, New Delhi on 29 January.

Sikkim finished the championship as runner-up team with the State's Deveswar Prasad winning the

Best Fighter Trophy.

Similarly, another 21-member State team bagged 16 gold medals, 2 silver medals and 3 bronze medals at the 1st TSA Open National Taekwondo Championship 2020 organized by Taekwondo Sporting Academy, Jaipur on 08 and 09 February at Rajasthan University Sports Complex, Jaipur. Here, Sikkim was also the overall team champion.

Addressing a press conference here today, team coach, Sagar Sundas, lauded the outstanding performance and congratulated the medals winners.

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SC directs Centre to grant permanent commission to women officers in Army within 3 months

NEW DELHI, FEB 17 (PTI):

The Supreme Court on Monday directed the Centre to grant permanent commission to all women officers in the Army within three months, terming the Centre's argument of physiological limitations and social norms for denying them command posts "disturbing".

A bench headed by Justice D Y Chandrachud said there will not be any absolute bar on giving them command postings. It said women officers in the past have brought laurels to the country and change of mindset is required on the part of the government to put an end to gender bias in armed forces.

The top court said despite there being no stay on the 2010 Delhi High Court verdict allowing grant of per-

manent commission to women officers, the Centre showed scant regard in implementing the directive in past one decade. It said engagement of women officers in the Army has been an evolutionary process and the Union of India should have acted in accordance with the Delhi High Court judgment when there was no stay on it.

"There is no reason and justification for the union of India not to act as per the Delhi High Court verdict. On September 2, 2011, the Supreme Court has clarified this aspect and said there is no stay on the high court verdict. Despite that scant regard has been paid to the verdict of Delhi High Court and the order of Supreme Court as well," the bench said.

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Two mountain bikers to take part in 16th National Bike C'ship



**SAGAR CHHETRI
GANGTOK, 17 FEB:**

Two mountain bikers from Sikkim left on Monday to participate in the 16th National Mountain Bike Championship 2019-20 to be held at Haldwani, Uttarakhand from 20 to 22 Feb. Sikkimese mountain biker, Asim Sharma is representing the State in senior category and Aniket Shar-

ma in junior category of Cross-Country event in the championship.

In a see-off programme held here on Monday, Secretary to Department of Sports & Youth Affairs, Kuber Bhandari has expressed best wishes to the duo by offering khadas and encouraged them to give their best in the national championship.

Telecom AGR crisis: RBI closely monitoring developments

**KUMAR DIPANKAR & AMMAR ZAIDI
NEW DELHI, FEB 17 (PTI):**

With massive Rs 1.47 lakh crore of AGR dues pushing telecom firms to the brink, Reserve Bank of India Governor Shaktikanta Das on Monday said the central bank is "very closely monitoring" the fallout of the crisis on lenders by way of a default, if any, by telecom players.

In an interview with PTI, Das said so far no red flags have been raised but the central bank continues to monitor the situation closely.

The Supreme Court last week rejected a plea by mobile carriers such as Bharti Airtel and Vodafone Idea Ltd for extension in the payment schedule and asked them to deposit an estimated Rs

1.47 lakh crore in past dues for spectrum and licences by March 17.

Some telecom firms are already struggling with mounting losses and debt and the additional liability has raised concerns of them defaulting on existing loans.

Das said he cannot comment on the Supreme Court ruling.

"With regard to the impact on the banking sector, we are very closely monitoring it. It all depends on how the companies concerned are able to make the payments and when they are able to make the payments. We are monitoring it," he said.

Of the estimated dues that include interest and penalty for late payments,

Airtel and Vodafone Idea owe about 60 per cent. While Airtel on Monday paid Rs 10,000 crore out of the Rs 35,586 crore dues that Department of Telecommunications (DoT) thinks the company owes to the government, Vodafone Idea's plea for being allowed to pay Rs 2,500 crore immediately and another Rs 1,000 crore by Friday to clear a part of the DoT estimated dues of Rs 53,000 crore was rejected by the apex court on Monday.

Airtel has said it will clear the remaining dues before the next date of hearing on March 17 but Vodafone Idea has so far not provided a clear deadline for making payments.

Das said no red flags on default by any telecom company has so far been raised with the central bank. "We are monitoring the situation. We are monitoring it very closely."

The telecom sector, he said, has been one of the pillars of the economic growth of India in the last two decades.

It created demand as well as jobs just like other pillars of massive infra-

structure push given by the construction of the Golden Quadrilateral highway project and information technology or IT sector.

"In the telecom sector, there was a huge expansion. India was able to capitalize on that," he said.

The telecom boom not just lowered the cost of making phone calls and internet usage charges but also created massive employment.

In recent times, few companies in the telecom sector have folded up under mounting debt pile and intense competition, leading to job losses. Even in the current crisis, there are apprehensions being expressed about the continuation of at least one company.

Vodafone Idea Chairman Kumar Mangalam Birla had in December stated that the company may have to shut if there is no relief on the statutory dues. "If we are not getting anything, then I think it is the end of the story for Vodafone Idea," he had said. "It does not make sense to put good money after bad. We will shut shop."

Art of Living's International Women's Conference 2020

SUMMIT REPORT
GANGTOK, 17 FEB:

Art of Living's International Women's Conference 2020 was held at the Art of Living International Centre, Bangalore from 14-16 Feb.

As per a press release, over 400 global women leaders from various fields came together to celebrate womanhood by learning and building each other up, as they delved deeper into the theme of the conference 'The Circle of life: Passion, Dispassion and Compassion' and its reflection in our social and personal pursuits.

Some of the speakers at the conference included Harsimrat Kaur Badal, Union Cabinet Minister, Justice Gita Mittal, Judge of the High Court, J & K, Dr. Kiran Bedi, Lt. Governor, Puducherry, and many more.

The conference included sessions on

themes from creative approaches to use social media tools for positive change; attitudes that shape achievers who are making positive contributions; insights on lifestyles that promote health, well-being and happiness while protecting the environment; to deliberations on the various perspectives that cultures offer that celebrate harmony in diversity.

Recipients of the prestigious Vishalakshi Award instated for valuable and inclusive contribution to the field of arts and culture included Kannada Actor, Malashri Mangalji, Bharatnatyam exponent, Uma Thilak, Kuchupudi proponent, Vanaja Uday, notable choreographer and Indian classical dance expert, Saroja Vaidyanathan, Indian dance research scholar, performer, Methil Devika, and Sanjay Kumar, social activist and reformer.

Hope they are hanged this time: Nirbhaya's mother



NEW DELHI, FEB 17 (PTI): Nirbhaya's parents on Monday expressed hope that the four convicts in their daughter's rape-and-murder case would finally be hanged on March 3, the latest execution date fixed by a court after two earlier death warrants were stayed.

"We hope the order (death warrant) is finally executed," her mother said, just after a Delhi court issued fresh death warrants against the four convicts setting up their execution on March 3 at 6 am.

This is the third time that death warrants have been issued against Mukesh Kumar Singh (32), Pawan Gupta (25), Vinay Kumar Sharma (26) and Akshay Kumar (31).

Two earlier warrants could not be executed as the convicts were yet to exhaust the legal and other remedies available.

The first date of execution, January 22, was postponed to February 1 by a January 17 court order.

Then the trial court, on January 31, stayed, "till further orders" the execution of the four convicts as they had not exhausted all their legal remedies.

Sikkim martial...

At the Grand Open National 1st Republic Cup Taekwondo Championship, Raj Gurung, John Rai, Deveswar Prasad, Gunjan Rai, Ranjana Mukhia and Diya Sharma bagged a gold medal each, while Yangchen Sherpa won a silver medal.

Likewise, at the 1st TSA Open National Taekwondo Championship 2020 in Jaipur, the gold medalists were Humila Subba, Yangchen Sherpa, Dichen Bhutia, Sanskar Subba, Sujal Chettri, Ganjana Mukhia, Neha Rai, Gunjan Rai, Mantosh Kumar Baitha, Pratiksha Thapa, Bindita Basnet, Sunil Limboo, Rohan Jyoti, Raj Gurung, Anil Balmiki and Deveswar Prasad.

Silver medals were bagged by Tshering Diki Tamang and John Rai and bronze medalists are Diya Sharma, Pushpanjali Gurung and Racheal Rai.

West District Planning Committee meets, passes 2020-21 budget

SUMMIT REPORT

GYALSHING, 17 FEB (IPR): A meeting regarding District Planning Committee organized by West District Zilla Panchayat was held today here at the conference hall of Zilla Bhawan, Kyongsha.

The meeting was chaired by Zilla Adhakshya (West), Devika Subba in the presence of Agriculture and IPR Minister, Loknath Sharma; Zilla Upadhakshya-Cum-Chairman Finance Commission, Ashok Gurung; District Collector (West) Karma R. Bonpo; Tika Legi Gurung (Chairman, JMC); I. K. Neopaney, Chairman, GMC; Milan Subba, ADC/Dev (Gyalshing); Gayas Pega, ADC Dev. (Soreng); L. P. Kafley (Chairman for standing committee of PRIs); BDOs; Zilla Panchayat, Panchayat members and heads of various departments.

In the meeting, budget for 2020-2021 in regards to various public welfare works to be initiated by the committee was placed. The budget consisting Rs 3.89 crore as Zilla Panchayat Yojana Budget was passed in the meeting and Rs 20 lakh was placed as the budget for two separate wards of Jorethang Municipal Council, those falling under the jurisdiction of West district Zilla Panchayat.

The budgetary amount of Rs 44 crore was also passed as the labour budget for MGN-REGA. Plans and propos-



als regarding various public welfare schemes were also placed in the meeting and resolutions were passed.

Minister Sharma, in his address stressed upon the pivotal role of Zilla Panchayats, Panchayats, Gram Prashasanik Kendra for formulation of plan for the growth and development of their respective areas. Since the people have given absolute mandate, the public representatives need to be responsible and accountable to address the genuine needs in the interest of the people.

Panchayats and Zilla Members should identify the actual need and requirements at grassroot level to upgrade rural areas, he said.

He asked Panchayats to focus on primary need to fulfil availability and proper functioning of basic facilities in Schools, Water Supply, Medical, Agriculture, Animal Husbandry and Veterinary Services, Power Supply and other sectors. Further he motivated Zilla Pancha-

yats to realise and fulfil assigned responsibilities ignoring party affiliations.

Further, he mentioned that the state government is fully committed to work with transparency and accountability for the development of all districts in the State. Minister Sharma said that the state government has given prime importance to encourage and uplift farmers in socio-economic status.

He also urged Panchayats to encourage farmers for floriculture, dairy farming, vegetable productions and advocated to practice organic farming in the field. He also informed about the ongoing strategic initiatives of the government to ensure value addition of their produce.

Minister Sharma further called for a proper coordination amongst the panchayat members and the Government Departments for implementation of all the public welfare works and schemes in West District. He also apprised the

house on the state's government commitment for all round development of West Sikkim.

Devika Subba highlighted the roles and responsibilities of panchayat and zilla panchayat members and called for necessary coordination between the panchayat members and government officials while executing public welfare works in the district. On the practice of trade licence subletting, Ms Subba sought the help of West District Administration to address the issue in a proper way.

DC (West), Karma R. Bonpo in his address expressed that proper assessment, verification and monitoring should be done before implementing the developmental projects.

Panchayat members in an open house discussion apprised the house on the problems related to drinking water facilities, schools repairing, road connectivity, sanitation, irrigation and others.

MUSS convenes state-level meet



SUMMIT REPORT

RANGPO, 17 FEB: The state level meeting of MUSS was organised at Gangtok under the president-ship of North East Incharge, Mahatama Akhilesh Baaiji, Gangtok In-charge Mahatma Gyan Baaiji, and North East Vice President, Luxman Rai.

Manav Utthan Sewa Samiti's new commit-

tee was also formalized during the meet.

The new committee had been formed on 11 January at a meeting held in Jorethang, it is informed and today the responsibilities were given to the newly formed committee.

Purna Bahadur Yonzon has been nominated the state president, Chet Kumar Pradhan as

General Secretary, Kamal Kumar Subba as Secretary, Bharat Kumar Pradhan as Cashier, Purna Bahadur Kharka Vice President, Surya Kumar Giri Publicity Secretary along with RB Bhandari, HK Sharma, Rekha Thapa, Rinzing Chewang Lepcha, Meena Kumari Rai and Kamal Giri as the Executive Committee Member.

Field Trainers begin training for Census 2021



NAMCHI, 17 FEB (IPR): A five-day training of 15 Field Trainers of South and West districts for Census 2021 began at the State Institute of Rural Development at Karfekar today.

The training program was inaugurated by Director, Census Operations, Sikkim, Yasoda Bhandari in the presence of ADC Satyen K Pradhan who is also the ex-officio District Census Officer (South), SDM (Yangang) Sangay Gyatso who is

also the Master Trainer.

After completing the training, these FTs will train enumerators and supervisors of the districts and also assist the respective Charge Officers.

On the occasion, Director Ms Bhandari spoke on the importance of the Census and its impact on the planning process.

She asked the FTs to train the field workers efficiently, emphasizing that the quality of cen-

sus depends on the field workers.

Addressing the gathering ADC (South) encouraged the participants to understand the training module in an efficient manner as they will be responsible to train the field workers. They have to also maintain smooth co-ordination during the process of census.

Census 2021 is due soon and activities related to the census work have already begun.

IMD issues heat warning for six districts of Kerala

THIRUVANANTHAPURAM, FEB 17 (PTI): With some districts of Kerala sweltering, the India Meteorological department on Monday issued a heat warning for six districts, saying the mercury level will rise by three degrees above normal.

On Monday, Thiruvananthapuram recorded 34.9 degree Celsius which is 2.2 degrees more than the normal 32.7. Alappuzha registered a maximum of 36.8 degree Celsius and Kottayam 37.8. While Kannur recorded 37.2 degree Celsius, Kozhikode showed 35.4 degree Celsius, the IMD said

The IMD, in its website, has issued a maximum temperature warning for the districts of Thiruvananthapuram, Alappuzha, Kottayam, Thrissur, Kozhikode and Kannur.

Maximum temperature is most likely to be above normal by 2 to 3 degree Celsius in these districts on February 17 and 18, the website read.

The Labour department has already issued orders to reschedule working hours of those who work in open sunlight by allowing mandatory break times to prevent sunstroke. The order has come into effect from February 11 to April 30.

The State Disaster Management Authority has warned those exposed to sunlight, including construction workers, roadside vendors, traffic policemen, media reporters and traffic inspectors, to take adequate precaution during their duty hours.

United Sikkim...

with close finish, finally resulting in the victory of Rajkumar Gajmer.

As per Jigmei Namgyal, JPBL-2 has achieved significant milestones in the promotion of badminton in Sikkim. It has brought to the fore a number of extraordinarily talented young players. It has also proven the fitness levels of both young and veteran players, which is one of the most important factors for sportsmen to move on to higher levels in sport.

And last but not the least, JPBL-2 has shown a sustainable model that can be extrapolated to develop other sport in Sikkim, the release mentions.

The winners also won the grand prize of Rs 2.5 lakh while the runners-up were awarded Rs 1.5 lakh.

This league was organised by Badminton Association of Jorethang (BAJ) in co-ordination with Sikkim Krantikari Morcha Sports Wing and Labour Front under the aegis of Badminton Association of Sikkim at Badminton Court Jorethang.

SC directs...

The bench said it is of the opinion that physiological features of women has no effect in granting permanent commission and they have to be given equal opportunity at par with their male counterparts in the armed forces.

The top court said even after 70 years of post-colonial era, there is a need for change in mindset with regard to giving equal opportunity to women officers in the Indian Army.

It said the Centre's submission of physiological limitation is based on flawed notion and there is no constitutional basis to deny them equal opportunity.

It said that women officers have brought laurels to the country and several gallantry, sena medals and UN Peace Keeping awards for their contribution in armed forces and to cast aspersion on them on the basis of physiological features is wrong as based on fallacy.

The bench, however, clarified that deployment of women officers in combat role is a matter of policy as held by the Delhi High Court and the competent authority has to look into it.

The top court said permanent commission can be given to the women officers in the Army irrespective of their tenure of service.

1031 students...

New Delhi which was broadcast live on Gyan Darshan TV channel.

Dr Rajesh Joshi in his address congratulated the graduating students and expressed joy in students entering a new chapter in life. In his own words, he said that the graduating student during convocation not only receives a degree but also a mark of wisdom which is imperative for inclusive growth of an individual, the society and the nation.

Dr Joshi talked about noteworthy contribution made by IGNOU in offering higher education to citizens of India living in rural areas. He stated that it is a matter of pride for the country that IGNOU has revolutionised distance education in the country by adopting new technologies such as internet, satellite, CD-ROMs, Video Conferencing, Radio and visual broadcasting on television.

Regional Director, IGNOU Gangtok, Yonah Bhutia said that it was a joyous occasion on the day of convocation. He highlighted the achievements of IGNOU which gave opportunity of education to millions of unreached citizens in the rural areas. In the end, he urged prospective learners to take advantage of the programmes provided by the University.

Registrar, Sikkim University, TK Kaul congratulated the students and gave a brief history of the IGNOU during his speech.

AFFIDAVIT	
IN THE COURT OF ADDITIONAL DISTRICT COLLECTOR, WEST DISTRICT, GYALSHING	
I Tshering Doma Gurung, daughter of Purna Bahadur Gurung, resident of Lower Arithang, Chongrang, Police Station Gyalshing, West Sikkim do hereby affirm and declare on Oath the following:-	
1.	That, my actual name is Tshering Doma Gurung as recorded in my Certificate of Identification SL.No.3398/DC(W)/2019, dated:11/09/2019.
2.	That, my name has been inadvertently recorded as Tshering Doma Gurung in my Birth Certificates, Serial no:AA-1/12/77536, dated: 14/9/05.
3.	That, the purpose of this affidavit is to declare that Tshering Doma Gurung and Tshering Doma Gurung are the names of same person i.e myself.
4.	That, this affidavit is made bonafide.
Whatsoever declared by me are true to the best of my knowledge and belief and no information has been concealed. I have signed this affidavit in the court of Additional District Collector, West District, Gyalshing on 17th February 2020 in the presence of the under mentioned witnesses:-	
1. Purna Bahadur Gurung	Tshering Doma Gurung
Lower Arithang Chongrang	Deposent
Tashiding	

~ SummitTIMES ~ CLASSIFIEDS

GENERAL LAND FOR SALE

General land 30X40 (3 Plots) available for sale at Tadong 6th Mile next to Harka Maya College. Flat Land no cutting required. Price 27 Lakhs (negotiable).

Contact: 9800201335

LAND FOR SALE

A land measuring an area for 50x32 1/2 at Road-side just below housing colony is for sale. It is just a one minute walking distance from Namchi bazaar taxi stand. Interested party may contact 9593373387 and 9434406761

LAND FOR SALE

An area measuring 1 acre at Sadam South Sikkim near Loretto Convent School at Gupti road. Price negotiable any one interested can contact: 78640-04501, 62970-03235, 98320-48410

Sikkimese woman wins bronze in Int'l Paragliding Accuracy Championship

REBYNA RANA
GANGTOK, 17 FEB:

Paraglider, Rupa Devi Karki won a bronze medal in the women's category of International Paragliding Accuracy Championship 2020 held at Serchhip, Mizoram, from 12 to 15 February.

Jhinee Baek and Jaeryung Ha, both from Korea, came first and second respectively in the women's category. The men's category was won by Byungchung Jeun from Korea.

Rupa Devi Karki is from Yangang, South Sikkim. The other paraglider from Sikkim participating in the event was Anish Gurung from Ranka.

Arjun Kumar Rai and Raju Rai were the tournament's technical team - Arjun as a launch marshal and Raju as target judge. The championship was organised by Mizoram Aerosports



Association and Tourism department, Government of Mizoram to promote aerosports in Northeast India and also to promote adventure tourism.

"I had surveyed this

site at Serchhip Mizoram in 2010 with the help of local travel agents. We have worked hard to promote Paragliding in Mizoram. On my technical advice they formed

Mizoram Aerosports Association and organised two FAI (Federation of Aeronautic International) International Paragliding Accuracy Championships funded by

Mizoram Tourism and NEC (North East Council). This is a very safe site and the Mizoram Government has been very supportive," said Arjun Kumar Rai.

Airtel pays Rs 10,000 crore to govt towards statutory dues

NEW DELHI, FEB 17 (PTI):

With the government coming down heavily on telcos after the Supreme Court's rap, Bharti Airtel on Monday said it has paid Rs 10,000 crore to the telecom department towards statutory dues.

The company said it will make payment of balance amount after self-assessment exercise.

"The...amount of Rs 10,000 crore has been paid on behalf of Bharti Airtel, Bharti Hexacom, and Telenor," the Sunil Mittal-led company said in a statement.

As much as Rs 9,500 crore has been paid on behalf of Bharti Airtel (including Telenor India which merged with the company), and another Rs 500 crore for Bharti Hexacom.

As per the government's assessment, Airtel owes nearly Rs 35,586 crore in statutory dues, including licence fee and spectrum usage charge.

After facing the ire of the Supreme Court for putting on hold recovery of dues from telecom companies, the telecom department on February 14 began issuing orders asking firms such as Bharti Airtel and Vodafone Idea to clear past dues immediately.

The DoT swung into action and started issuing circle or zone-wise demand notices to firms, asking telcos cough up their liabilities immediately or face action in line with licence terms without any further notice.

Some circles like UP (West) insisted that payment be made by Friday 11.59 PM, while others like UP (East) zone said its field office will remain open even on Saturday (February 15) to facilitate payment of liabilities by companies - underlining the telecom department's resolve to collect the unpaid dues at the earliest and indicating its unwillingness to yield further on timelines.

On February 14 (Friday), Airtel had said it will pay Rs 10,000 crore to the Department of Telecommunications by February 20 and the remaining before March 17. But on Monday, the

company rushed to make part payments and said, "we are in the process of completing the self assessment exercise expeditiously and will duly make the balance payment upon completion of the same, before the next date of hearing in (the) SC".

The company said it will also submit supporting details at the time of making balance payment.

In all, 15 entities owe the government Rs 1.47 lakh crore -- Rs 92,642 crore in unpaid licence fee and another Rs 55,054 crore in outstanding spectrum usage charges.

These dues arose after the Supreme Court, in October last year, had upheld the government's position on including revenue from non-core businesses in calculating the annual Adjusted Gross Revenue (AGR) of telecom companies, a share of which is paid as licence and spectrum fee to the exchequer.

The apex court last week directed the managing directors and directors of telcos and other firms to explain why contempt action be not taken against them for non-compliance of its order to pay adjusted gross revenue (AGR) dues to the DoT.

Taking strong note of the non-compliance of its order, a bench of Justice Arun Mishra, Justice S Abdul Nazeer and Justice M R Shah expressed anguish over the order passed by the DoT's desk officer, staying the effect of its verdict in the AGR matter. Vodafone Idea Ltd is confronted with the dues worth Rs 53,000 crore - its liabilities add up to Rs 24,729 crore of spectrum dues and another Rs 28,309 crore in licence fee.

Vodafone Idea, in a regulatory filing on Saturday, had said it is assessing the amount that can be paid towards AGR dues, although it reiterated that continuation of business in India will depend on "a positive outcome" of its modification plea filed before the apex court.

SSA gearing up for Chief Minister's Gold Cup Archery Tournament

SAGAR CHHETRI
GANGTOK, 17 FEB

Sikkim Archery Association [SAA] has announced that the prestigious Chief Minister's Gold Cup Archery Tournament [Compound] will be held here at Archery Shooting Range in Tenzing Namgyal Memorial Ground, Tathangchen from 23 February onwards.

Twenty-three teams from in and outside the State have been taking part in the 19th edition of this traditional form of archery tournament this year. This is also the first event for the newly elected executive committee of the SAA led by Sonam Dorjee Bhutia as president.

Addressing a press conference here this afternoon, SAA joint secretary, Sangay Gyatso Bhutia mentioned that the tournament has 14 teams from different parts of Sikkim, 02 from neighbouring hills of West Bengal and 07 from Bhutan.

The new executive committee of SAA was formed on 05 January this year.

He stated that the main objective of the tournament was to preserve and promote the traditional form of archery which still survives



in Sikkim, neighbouring hills and Bhutan. He stated that the association has been working to promote this traditional form of archery among the young generation.

On behalf of the association, Mr Bhutia expressed his gratitude to the State government for extending all support for the promotion and development of archery in the State.

"We would like to thank the State government for providing financial and other support not only to archery but other sports as well. We hope for the same support from the government continuously for the promotion and development of sports and betterment of sports persons," he expressed. He stated that such traditional sports would also help to promote the tourism of the State.

Yangtse Tours & Travels from Bhutan is the defending champion of the

tournament. The tournament carries cash prizes of Rs 2 lakhs to the winner and Rs 1 lakh to the runners-up.

SAA president, Sonam Dorjee Bhutia mentioned that the association was formed in 1985 and has been working to preserve and promote traditional archery and has also been conducting talent hunt, coaching camps and exposure to archers of Sikkim in modern archery in and outside the State. He stated that the new executive committee has lots of programmes and targets for the further development and promotion of traditional and modern archery in the State.

The press conference was also addressed by general secretary, Gyaltsen Lachungpa, publicity secretary, Karma Denzongpa, executive members, Palzor T Bhutia and Tsewang Nedup Bhutia and a member, Tshering P Bhutia.

Brahmakumaris begin month-long Maha Shivratri Festival



SUMMIT REPORT
GANGTOK, 17 FEB:

Month-long 84th Maha Shivratri Festival organised by Prajapita Brahmakumaris Iswariya Mahavidhyalaya began in different parts of the State today, a press release informs.

The festival was celebrated at Rangpo Cen-

tre of Brahmakumaris and had the presence of president Sikkim Bihari Jagran Manch, Swaminath Prasad, State In-charge Sakchi Foundation, Ranjeeta Singh, along with many other delegates from different organisations, and local residents.

Prajapita Brahma-

kumaris Iswariya Mahavidhyalaya Sikkim in-charge, BK Sonam, said that Maha Shivratri Festival is one of the biggest festivals so it is being celebrated in different parts of the state spreading the message of Shiva and Prajapita Brahmakumaris Iswariya Mahavidhyalaya.

Governor's greetings on Maharshi Dayanand Saraswati Jayanti

SUMMIT REPORT
GANGTOK, 17 FEB:

On the occasion of 196 Maharshi Dayanand Saraswati Jayanti, falling on 18 Feb, 2020, Governor of Sikkim, Ganga Prasad has extended warm greetings and best wishes to millions of followers of Maharshi worldwide, a Raj Bhavan press release informs.

The Governor has said, "One of the greatest thinkers, philosophers and social reformers that our country has produced, Maharshi Dayanand Saraswati founded Arya Samaj, a

mission with a vision to revive ancient Indian wisdom and create enlightened Indian society. His thrust on modern education with rich Indian Philosophical base as the tool to transform Indian society has inspired the progressive societies worldwide. Following the path shown by him, generations of Arya Samaj followers have focussed on women education and have started social initiatives such as orphanages, old age homes and hospitals aimed at the welfare of deprived and margin-

alised section of society.

We are fortunate to read about him and take inspiration from his work to make this world a better place to live. A strong and influential personality like Maharshi Dayanand Saraswati will always inspire us towards our nation and culture.

May the teachings of Maharshi Dayanand continue to enlighten our society and guide us all to work collectively for the wider cause of society fostering peace, brotherhood and harmony among all."

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in conversation with
ANURADHA SHARMA, journalist

20 February 2020 / 4PM



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

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.

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.



If you seek help, you may call :
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District surveillance Officer
EAST : 7029372100
WEST : 9593297809
NORTH : 9641957468
SOUTH : 7407691463
New STNM
AMS : 9434711402

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

Native Speakers Without a Language

Unfortunately, that could happen sooner than we feared

In August 2017, the People's Linguistic Survey of India released 11 volumes of its planned 50 volume survey of the country's languages. The volumes, published by Orient BlackSwan, covered languages from the states of Nagaland, Manipur, Arunachal Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh, Haryana, Maharashtra, Assam, West Bengal, Bihar and Karnataka. Yes, Sikkim is not in this initial set, but several of the languages spoken in the region must have figured in the linguistic survey. What should also be worrying is that the regional languages, what we also know as mother tongues, here must be in as precarious state as the survey has found in the ten states in question. The PSLI raised the alarm during the launch of the volumes when it shared that as many as 780 languages are spoken in India, at least 400 of which are at risk of dying in the next 50 years.

That's an average of eight languages every year! That should have everyone worried, but clearly, the disinterest and the indifference which brought so many languages to the brink is too pervasive. There is not much happening, anywhere, at any level to save the languages at risk of being lost. May be whatever little is being attempted to avert such extinction is driven by the emotion of "save" and that is why it is failing. Perhaps we should consider nurturing instead of saving or protecting because while the latter can make the efforts insular and imperil the language even more, the former option of "nurture" allows languages space and opportunities to grow, adapt and remain relevant.

The PSLI surveyors also discovered that 250 languages were lost in the last five decades in India. The extinction is obviously picking up pace, and who knows, the timeframe of 50 years for 400 languages might actually shrink as the extinction snowball gathers more momentum as it hurtles to the abyss and who knows, maybe even obliterates more languages along the way. It is a worrying scenario. But is it? Because, as mentioned earlier, it does not appear to have generated too much concern.

The Survey, now already eight months old, might or might not resuscitate the fate that awaits regional languages, but offers us a chance to ponder more seriously on where we are going wrong with our efforts at keeping languages and dialects alive. Languages are essentially about communication and then they take on aspects of culture and invariably underline the very ethos of a people. That said, a language obviously ceases to be one when there is no one left speaking it. This does not necessarily happen with the complete annihilation of a people and is most times caused by the language becoming redundant as a communication tool. There is also the whole generational challenge. While it is not rare to, say, catch some old folk from different communities chatter away in Limboo language in parts of West Sikkim, it is already rare to find even Limboo kids speaking to each other in their mother tongue. The same applies to some other languages as well, all of which appear to be surviving, but because they are not being passed on, are already imperiled.

But there has to be more to it. How does a language die? Past experience proves that the moment "outsiders" stop trying to learn a language, it is already on death-row. It is not enough for only native speakers to continue using a language because we do not lead closed lives anymore and need to interact all the time with people from other communities, speaking different languages among themselves. And outsiders stop learning a language when they feel no need for it as a tool for communication. For instance, all old members of the plainsmen business community speak fluent Tibetan. They had to pick up the language if they wanted to trade with Tibet which is what most of them were engaged in till six decades ago. Everyone in Sikkim, including those who have been here barely a year, speaks Nepali. They have to because they need to get their message across. Similarly, any Sikkimese going out for studies comes back equipped with at least passable Hindi-speaking skills. The Chinese are introducing English in their schools because they want to now converse with the world. That more or less settles what is actually a settled argument that language is first about communication.

Being solely about communication, however, imperils a language because the link-language keeps changing as our networks widen or as new technologies become popular. Languages, hence, also need to remain relevant and important, and this they can achieve by patronizing high literature and the sharing of important thoughts and ideas in their respective languages. One misses that in Sikkim. There is so little quality literary work in regional languages that even the aesthetic appeal of learning them is being lost. We have to strive to make it worth the while for those learning regional languages by making it about more than just chatting. For that, those who complain about losing their language need to create more awareness, produce more literature, get a pop-culture going in their languages, make it more vibrant.

How Iran's millennials are grappling with crippling US sanctions

MANATA HASHEMI
theconversation.com

In early January, after tensions between Iran and the United States escalated to the brink of war, President Donald Trump announced a detente of sorts, stating, "The United States is ready to embrace peace with all who seek it."

It may have sounded like a conciliatory gesture, but the Trump administration went on to levy additional economic sanctions against the country only two days later.

As someone who has studied the lives of Iran's working classes, I know just how damaging economic warfare has been. It's hit young Iranians, who comprise a large portion of the population, particularly hard. High rates of inflation – on the order of 38.6% over the past 12 months – and a youth unemployment rate of 28.6% have drastically reduced their ability to purchase basic goods and feel any semblance of financial security.

Over the past 12 years, I've studied various groups of lower-class young people and their families in their homes, neighborhoods and workplaces, in shops, and in parks. I've also interviewed 44 youth between the ages of 15 and 29 who have been sidelined to the socioeconomic margins.

I wanted to know how they cope with prolonged insecurity and the constant threat of crisis. Interestingly – and despite what you might see on the news – many don't react by rebelling against authority or by regularly taking to the streets.

A central observation from my research and forthcoming book has been that, when faced with conditions of uncertainty, the young people I spoke with simply sought respect, acceptance and support from their communities. Life becomes a quest not for revolution, riches or vengeance, but for dignity.

A HIGHLY CONFORMIST CULTURE

The desire for status and dignity is an integral part of Iranian society.

Most of the poor, younger city dwellers I studied try to achieve this through both their conduct and their dress. They want to be seen as classy, diligent and moral. In communities that value prestige and look down on poverty, this becomes their ticket to a better life.

So in an attempt to conceal their poverty, they'll spend their limited income on the latest trends so

they can attain a "modern" appearance, from having the latest smartphones to wearing brand-name shoes and shirts – or at least knockoffs.

In order to avoid being seen as lazy or delinquent, the young people I interviewed work diligently and avoid being associated with petty criminals, like drug dealers. Even though there's rarely enough work to go around, they get creative. They work in the informal economy as shop apprentices, street vendors and seamstresses. Those who can't



find work take up unpaid work babysitting for family members or helping with a family business in an effort to appear hardworking. By doing this, they can assume a moral high ground – regardless of how little money they're actually making.

As one local, middle-aged woman told me, "There's something wrong with a kid who doesn't work."

These young men and women are adhering to a set of values prized by their communities and promoted by society through billboards, national television and official speeches.

The result is a relatively stable social order – and a youth culture that's highly conformist.

This might come as a surprise to some, since some Western media outlets sometimes fixate on acts of rebellion.

In reality, deviance – especially among the lower classes – is rare. Many simply can't afford the consequences of being shunned by those around them.

REWARDS DON'T NEED TO BE MATERIAL

The quest for dignity is only part of the story. Like many young people around the world, most youth in Iran have dreams of a better future. But for those dealing with daily economic hardship, there's a chasm between their goals and what's possible.

"I wanted to get my bachelor's degree and have

a job where I sat behind a desk," said Babak, a street vendor, "but I had to drop out of ninth grade in order to meet my family's expenses."

That gap may never be fully breached. But many young Iranians I met still feel as if it's possible to – in the words of a mechanic's apprentice – "bring themselves up."

The young people I interviewed do this not by trying to game the system, but by following the rules: diligence, self-sufficiency, a smart appearance, and moral and sexual cleanliness. For this, communities reward them with jobs, small promotions, or even just more deference. The material benefits might be minimal, but people nonetheless feel validated and included in the broader fabric of the nation.

In other contexts, researchers have found that "looking the part" – performing what's deemed to be attractive to society – matters to people's life prospects. The youth I knew in Iran do the same. They might not fully escape poverty, but they can escape stigma.

To them, that matters.

THE LIMITS OF VIRTUE

Of course, not everyone in Iran can maintain an appearance of industry, class and virtue.

There are young people who are desperately poor, who can't even scrape together enough money for a new pair of shoes. There are drug addicts. There are young women who have been outed as prostitutes.

Focused on only helping those they deem "deserving," communities do little to lift up people who have fallen through the cracks. Friends and acquaintances are unwilling to recommend them for jobs, neighbors avoid connecting with them, families view them with shame.

It can all seem a bit Darwinian, with those deemed unfit becoming social pariahs.

And yet, there are many youth who persevere, who believe that living by the rules, day in and day out, is the right way to live. As Ibrahim, a laborer, emphasized, "I try to live in a good way. If people remember you as good, this is reason to be proud." To youth like Ibrahim, living a worthy life means not simply accumulating material goods, but staying true to a moral code.

In the face of rising prices, dwindling jobs, and few prospects for socioeconomic change, the routines of daily life create space for those who have suffered most under the weight of suffocating sanctions to breathe – and, in many cases, grow.

[the writer is Farzaneh Family Assistant Professor of Iranian Studies, University of Oklahoma]

The search for an effective HIV vaccine continues

ANATOLI KAMALI
theconversation.com

HIV remains a dangerous pandemic. The number of new infections remains high – about 1.7 million new cases every year. Young people, particularly young women, account for a large portion of the new infections. Scientists have made progress in developing HIV prevention tools in recent years. But marginalised groups – such as adolescent girls and young women, and men who have sex with men – can't always access these tools easily.

A vaccine that prevents HIV infection will provide long-lasting protection and alleviate the need for prevention methods. It is critical to stopping the spread of HIV in areas where the use of current prevention tools is complicated by social, economic and political concerns. Simply put, we won't be able to end the AIDS epidemic without a vaccine.

And there is progress. For example, the International AIDS Vaccine Initiative, a nonprofit scientific research organisation, leads a programme that's been advancing the global search for a safe, effective preventive vaccine while building scientific capacity in Africa. This programme has supported 11 clinical research centres and over 50 scientists working in this field in African countries.

HOW MANY HIV VACCINE TRIALS ARE THERE IN THE WORLD?

There are more HIV vaccine trials happening around the world right now than there have been in years. About 40 vaccine candidates are in or near clinical trials.

But there are numerous scientific challenges to developing an HIV vaccine. The virus is complex and the

methods that produced vaccines for other diseases haven't been applicable to HIV.

The International AIDS Vaccine Initiative and its partners have, over the past 20 years, tested 33 HIV vaccine candidates. These advanced to



clinical trials in 11 countries including Kenya, Rwanda, Uganda, Zambia, India and Germany.

WHAT ARE THE MAIN THINGS THAT ARE TESTED IN TRIALS, AND HOW?

Because HIV mutates rapidly and evades the immune system, HIV vaccine clinical trials focus on a variety of promising scientific approaches and theories.

The first trials of a new vaccine performed in humans are known as Phase 1 studies and test the safety of the treatment. These studies may also look for early signs of effectiveness, such as viral load reductions a week or two after the vaccine is taken. Once Phase 1 studies are completed, the vaccine moves into Phase 2 testing. These studies collect safety and dosing information and begin to

show how effective the treatment is when taken for several months.

One approach used in the halted HVTN 702 trial built on the promise of modest results seen in the US Army-led HIV vaccine trial in Thailand in 2009. The 2009 trial was the first



and only one to date to demonstrate that an HIV vaccine can protect against infection. But this vaccine candidate decreased the infection rate by only 31% and had no effect on viral load.

Another large efficacy trial called HVTN 705/HPX2008 or Imbokodo launched in 2017 and currently has 2,600 women volunteers in South Africa. It's evaluating a vaccine regimen designed to induce immune responses against a variety of HIV strains.

The main theoretical approach to developing an HIV vaccine aims to prevent HIV infection by getting the body to produce antibodies that fight most HIV strains.

Two vaccines have been designed to produce antibodies in reaction to the outer coat of the HIV virus. One of

these is in a Phase 1 trial with men and women in Nairobi, Boston and Seattle.

Additional approaches use viral vectors, tools commonly used to deliver a gene from a target pathogen and elicit an immune response in the recipient. These are in early development and are approaching clinical trials.

In addition, two multinational clinical trials are testing whether it is possible to prevent HIV by directly infusing people with antibodies several times a year. Known as the AMP studies, for antibody-mediated prevention, these trials have completed enrolment of 4,600 men and women across four continents, including Africa.

It's important to note that the preventive HIV vaccines being studied in clinical trials do not contain HIV. Approximately 30,000 people have participated in HIV vaccine studies around the world in the past 25 years. None have been infected with HIV from any of the vaccines tested.

WHAT IS THE IMPACT OF THE DECISION TO HALT THE HVTN 702 TRIAL IN SOUTH AFRICA?

It's obviously very disappointing, but there are many other vaccine candidates. We commend the trial volunteers, trial workers, scientists, and all the partners who collaborated to evaluate the vaccination regimen in this trial. Their efforts have led us to a greater understanding of what it will take to stop the global HIV/AIDS crisis.

Several promising HIV vaccines are in various stages of clinical development. We are optimistic that one or more of them may lead us to a vaccine that will reliably prevent infection from the wide variety of HIV strains.

[the writer is Regional Director for Africa, IAVI, and Honorary Professor in the Department of Infectious Disease Epidemiology, London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine]

AIDS serious problem, should be tackled on war-footing: Mizoram gov

AIZAWL, FEB 17 (PTI): Mizoram Governor PS Sreedharan Pillai on Monday called for concerted efforts to control and fight the growing HIV/AIDS prevalence in the state.

Delivering his customary speech on the opening day of the Assembly's Budget Session, Pillai, who assumed charge in October last year, said AIDS was a serious problem in the state, which "should be

tackled on a war-footing". "We need more aggressive and collective efforts from the government, the churches, the NGOs and all voluntary organisations to check the rapid spread of the deadly disease," he said.

Claiming that primary healthcare provisions for people feature among the government's top priorities, the governor said an "improved" scheme has been launched in Mizoram recently, which aims to

provide an insurance cover of Rs 2 lakh cover to the beneficiaries.

Highlighting the economic achievements of the government, Pillai said Mizoram had been witnessing a remarkable growth in the recent years, and was taking measures to become a self-reliant state.

According to the governor, the state's economic growth, last year, stood at 14.82 per cent - which is among the best in the

country. The government has implemented its flagship programme -- Socio-Economic Development Policy (SEDP) -- to ensure growth in various sectors, Pillai stated.

It has also set up state-level and district-level coordination committees for doubling farmers' income, he said.

Pillai also expressed hope that Mizoram would emerge as the "cleanest state in India" in near future, as at least 23 notified

urban towns have been covered under Swachh Bharat Mission (Urban).

"The government has taken up several initiatives to generate more electricity from solar power and hydro-electric power projects. It is making massive efforts to improve literacy rate in the country by carrying out a drive in areas with low-literacy rates, including Lunglei, Mamit, Lawngtlai and Aizawl districts," he added.

Arunachal gov pitches for appraisal system for teachers

ITANAGAR, FEB 17 (PTI): Arunachal Pradesh Governor BD Mishra on Monday pitched for an appraisal system for teachers, stressing that there is a need for a wave to improve the quality of education in the state.

Addressing the inaugural session of the higher and technical education conference here, Mishra said that parents must inculcate an "entrepreneurial tendency" among their school-going children.

He urged teachers and students to work with a "nation first" attitude and take their profession as a nation-building measure.

Higher education is a result of continuous growth and its foundation needs to be strong, he said.

"The need is to make primary, secondary and college teaching and studying progressive and broad-based," the governor said in his address.

"There is and will always be a mismatch between large workforce accretion and limited job availability," he added.

The governor underscored the need for effective implementation of education policies and stressed that education must be for enabling individuals and not a certification for securing jobs only.

At the function, the governor felicitated retired lecturer C K Singh of Dera Natung College with the 'Life Time Teacher Award'.

He also felicitated Temin Payum, assistant professor (Botany) of J N College in Pasighat and S Suresh Kumar, principal-in-charge of Government Polytechnic in Namsai with the 'Outstanding College Teachers Award'.

Mishra gave the 'Governor's Cash Award' for toppers in the undergraduate exams for 2019 to four students.

Kambala jockey Gowda refuses to undergo SAI trials



NEW DELHI, FEB 17 (PTI): Kambala jockey Srinivas Gowda, who has created a social media storm after his record-setting performance in a traditional buffalo race, has refused to undergo trials to be conducted at the SAI Centre in Bengaluru. Gowda has drawn comparisons with Olympic sprint legend Usain Bolt after video clips of him running a distance of 100 meters in just 9.55 seconds evoked a social media frenzy, prompting Sports Minister Kiren Rijiju to ask SAI top coaches to conduct trials.

But, according to Sports Authority of India sources, Gowda has declined to take part in the trials.

"He (Gowda) has reached Bengaluru today to meet the Chief Minister. A team from SAI, Bengaluru is in CM's office to talk to him and take him to the SAI centre," the source told PTI.

"But apparently, he is not interested. We have also learnt that he is suffering from an injury."

Gowda, a construction worker from Moodabidri, took just 13.62

seconds to run a distance of 145m, covering the first 100m in 9.55 seconds, at the Kambala at Aikala village near Mangaluru, prompting some on social media to compare him with Bolt, whose 100m world record is 9.58 seconds.

Congress leader Shashi Tharoor and business tycoon Anand Mahindra tweeted to ask Sports Ministry and Athletics Federation of India to take Gowda under its wings while some athletics experts were not amused at the feat of Gowda.

Days after calling Gowda for trials, the Sports Minister on Monday said one cannot compare performances in Olympic sports with traditional sports.

He, however, said the government will give opportunities to any talent that is brought to its notice.

"Media can't control things with people writing anything in social media these days. If any talent comes to our notice we will give him a platform, an opportunity," Rijiju said after the launch of Khelo India University Games' official anthem at his residence here.

"The standard of Olympics and world championships is very high. People who play traditional sports, you can't suddenly compare them with international champions unless we don't assess them officially, check their records.

"If any one can send an amateur video, we can't accept it. We want to give it an official trial. We will take a proper trial under top coaches and if there is talent, if there is potential to go the distance, then we will bring them in national camp," he added.

Kambala is an annual race held in Karnataka where people sprint 142m through paddy fields with buffalo. During the race, the racers try to bring the buffaloes under control by holding their reins tight and beating them up, making it amply clear that the animal plays an equally important role in achieving the timing.

Traditionally, it is sponsored by local Tuluva landlords and households in the coastal districts of Dakshina Kannada and Udupi.

BJP, TMC target each other over bridge collapse

MALDA (WB), FEB 17 (PTI): The collapse of a portion of an under-construction bridge in West Bengal's Malda district triggered sharp exchanges between the ruling TMC and opposition BJP on Monday over the incident that left three people dead and seven injured.

The deceased included a junior engineer and two labourers whose bodies have been recovered, a senior police officer said.

Of the seven injured, five are being treated at the Malda Medical College and Hospital and two others have been referred to a hospital in Kolkata in "very critical" condition, he said.

Senior Trinamool Congress leader of Malda district and former state minister Krishnendu Narayan Choudhury demanded an inquiry



to find out if there was any role of "cut money or whether the local representatives of the Centre-appointed implementing agency of the project had any nexus with local goons close to BJP". 'Cut money' refers to bribe or commission demanded by local musclemen or politicians for a project.

BJP state president and MP Dilip Ghosh hit right back, saying "Those who take cut money

themselves are possessed by the thought of cut money." The cause behind the collapse needs to be ascertained, whether there was any fault in planning, structural design or was it due to negligence, he said.

BJP MP from Malda North seat Khagen Murmu said the BJP-led central government followed what Prime Minister Narendra Modi had said "will neither indulge in corruption nor will

allow it". Murmu urged the Centre to initiate a high-level probe into the incident and take action against those found responsible, irrespective of their political affiliation.

A girder of the under-construction second Farakka bridge came crashing down around 8 pm on Sunday, trapping several people.

Personnel of the disaster management department are still removing the debris.

In signs of thaw, Mamata meets governor Dhankhar



KOLKATA, FEB 17 (PTI): West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee held a one-on-one meeting with Governor Jagdeep Dhankhar on Monday, in what is being seen as a sign of thaw in their frosty relationship.

Though what exactly transpired at the hour-long meeting at Raj Bhavan was not immediately known, sources said the two discussed "various issues".

It was for the first time since Dhankhar assumed office in July last year that the two had a person to person talk.

"Had an extremely satisfying an hour long interaction with Honble Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee at Raj Bha-

wan," Dhankhar later tweeted. There was no immediate reaction from Banerjee. He had been seeking a meeting with Banerjee since December last but it did not come about as the government invariably cited the chief minister's preoccupation with other engagements.

Dhankhar's ties with the government have been filled with rancour ever since he rushed to the rescue of Union minister Babul Supriyo, who was heckled and manhandled at Jadavpur University where he had gone to address a function of the RSS-linked ABVP.

He was not invited to convocations of several universities despite being their chancellor,

something for which he openly criticised the government.

The TMC government also clipped his powers as the Chancellor of Universities by amending the relevant rules and ensured that all communication between the vice-chancellors and him were routed through the education department.

The governor also berated the government over alleged deterioration in law and order and, in December last year, withheld approval to some bills, citing lack of adequate information. In a rare instance, the state assembly had to be adjourned for two days for want of the governor's assent.

NALSA asks states to publicise about NGT's online portal

NEW DELHI, FEB 17 (PTI): The National Legal Services Authority of India (NALSA) has asked all its state authorities to raise awareness about a portal launched by the National Green Tribunal through which aggrieved persons can approach the green body.

The communication addressed to all the state legal services authorities said that it becomes difficult for people living in far off places to access NGT and its benches due to geographical distances.

"In their ongoing awareness programmes/camps, disseminate information about online mechanism/remedy of

approaching NGT with regard to the victim of pollution and environment damage.

"Apprise panel advocates and para legal volunteers about the same so that they assist needy and eligible persons in filing such online applications in appropriate cases," the communication stated.

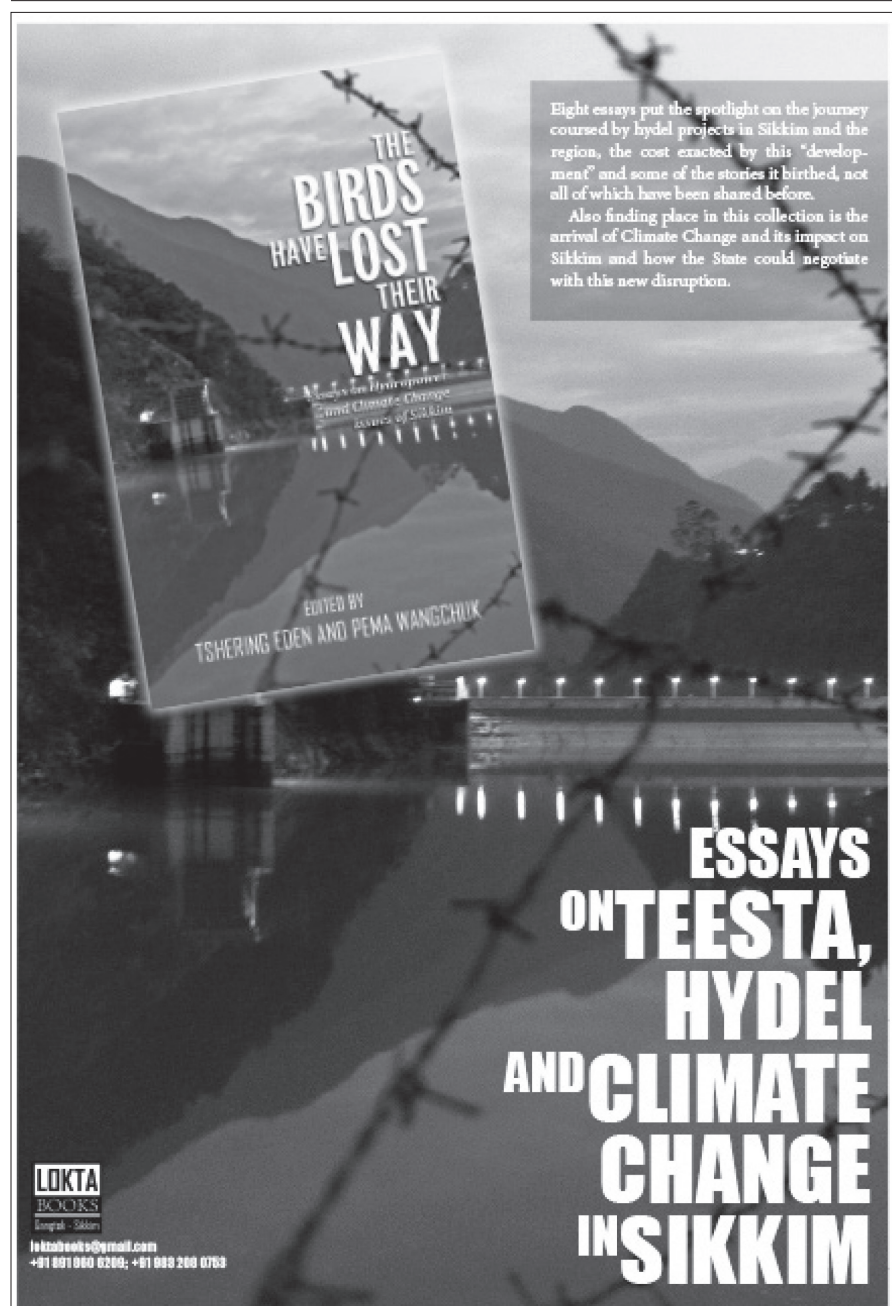
The NGT has started the new system in addition to the existing procedure of E-filing.

Recently, NGT Chairperson Adarsh Kumar Goel had requested NALSA to apprise the masses about the availability of the newly-started online service and assist

the needy and eligible persons. NGT was established on October 18, 2010 under the National Green Tribunal Act 2010 for effective and expeditious disposal of cases relating to environmental protection and conservation of forests and other natural resources.

It is a specialised body equipped with the necessary expertise to handle environmental disputes involving multi-disciplinary issues.

New Delhi is the principal place of sitting of the Tribunal and Bhopal, Pune, Kolkata and Chennai are the other four place of sitting of the green panel.



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Stonis, Pattinson's homophobic slurs disappoint Schutt

SYDNEY, FEB 16 (PTI): A fine swing bowler for Australia's women's cricket team and a champion of same-sex marriage, Megan Schutt is upset with her male counterparts James Pattinson and Marcus Stoinis' recent homophobic slurs.

She wants men to be more receptive towards homosexuality as they are "attacked" more for being gay.

Heading into the upcoming Women's T20 World Cup as the number one bowler in the format, Schutt faced a volley of vitriolic attacks after she came out as a lesbian a few years ago.

Undeterred, the straight-talking cricketer went on to marry her girlfriend Jess Hollyoake, finding happiness after being called a paedophile and asked to go to hell.

"It was a pretty horrible thing. I remember putting out a rainbow flag (it represents LGBT pride) on our balcony and Jess didn't want to have that up there at the time. She said, what if someone targets our house because of that?" Schutt was quoted as saying by Sydney Morning Herald.

"And I said, 'We can't hide, this is a time to show support for everyone else around us'. No one who is trying to fight for same-sex marriage is having a good time right now so we need to stick together more than ever."

She was asked about the recent incidents in which two Australian players, Pattinson and Stoinis, were sanctioned for homophobic slurs on the field. According to her, these incidents highlight the need for further awareness and education.

"I think it's important to talk about it. I wasn't angry as much as I was disappointed, which is such a dad thing to say. It's disappointing that we still use that language, and I don't believe that those boys actually are homophobic, I truly don't."

"And they wouldn't be saying it with that intent, but they're still using the wrong words. Why can't you just call someone a dickhead?"

Schutt said men are attacked more for being gay.

"I haven't been attacked for being a lesbian but I know men that have been for being gay."

"And the fact that it's always men that are still using those derogatory terms is the most disappointing part of it because they're going to have gay friends, whether they're out to them or not."

On the field, Schutt is known for her change of pace and an ability to seam and swing the ball. She reminisced about the time when she would be judged, abused for coming out in the open about her personal life.

"It was honestly a pretty horrific time, I got called some really nasty things. The usual stuff was go to hell and I don't really care that much, but I had people who call you (a) paedophile or say you're worse than an animal and just things that are really extreme."

Celta strike late to put brakes on Real Madrid

MADRID, FEB 17 (AFP): Real Madrid's winning streak ended when they conceded a late goal to draw 2-2 at home to Celta Vigo and finish the weekend with their lead over Barcelona down to one point.

Real manager Zinedine Zidane was philosophical.

"There's nothing to explain, it's just the way things are, it's football," he said.

"I'm not worried about it, but I'm disappointed, as always when you drop two points at home."

Barcelona beat third place Getafe on Saturday to open a 10-point gap on the chasing pack. Sevilla could have climbed to third on Sunday but were held, 2-2, at home by rock-bottom Espanyol.

Real had won five straight in La Liga to accelerate past Barcelona. On Sunday they welcomed back Eden Hazard, who had been out since November. Coach Zinedine Zidane also recalled his other 100 million euro player Gareth Bale to complete an all-star attack with Karim Benzema.

Yet Celta leapt into the lead after seven minutes. A pass from Iago Aspas sent Fedor Smolov galloping clear up the middle and he shot low past Thibaut Courtois.

"There were mistakes, especially for the first goal," said Zidane.

"We were not well positioned, it happens, and it'll happen to us again."

Celta had only climbed out of the relegation places the weekend before and looked anxious and over-



awed on the ball. Real dominated the rest of the first half and their starry attacking lineup produced pacy, intricate and imaginative attacking interchanges but a combination of good defending and bad finishing kept Real out for the rest of the first half.

Real again dominated the start of the first half.

Sergio Ramos, already playing as an extra striker, slammed the ball into the net but had been standing offside.

In the 52nd minute, Marcelo, not for the first time, found space on the left. His low cross deflected to Toni Kroos following the attack. The Ger-

man drilled in the equaliser. It was the sixth straight season Kroos had scored against Celta.

In the 65th minute, goalkeeper Ruben Blanco pulled down the impressive Hazard. Ramos slammed the penalty into the bottom corner of the net.

"We're glad he's back," said Zidane who took the Belgian off in the 73rd minute.

"We know what he can do for us. He didn't go further than we planned after three months out," Zidane said.

"He was involved in a lot of attacking action." Celta responded by rediscovering their attacking nerve.

With four minutes left, a sharp

pass from Denis Suarez, who had come on in the 71st minute, caught the Real back four rigid on the edge of their own area. Santi Mina, who had been on for just two minutes, raced onto the ball and drilled a shot past Courtois.

"An extraordinary pass," said Zidane.

Real play Levante in the league next Sunday before entertaining Manchester City in the Champions League.

"Now we have to prepare for our next game, because after that it's going to get harder and harder." Real Madrid also used the match Sunday to send a message to China.

- MESSAGE FOR CHINA -

The players came on before the match wearing shirts with the Chinese message "China, come on!" During the game the advertising hoardings flashed up the English message "Wuhan! Come on! We support you!"

"Real Madrid wishes to express its full support for all of the people affected by the coronavirus," the club tweeted in English.

Yao Fei, Charge d'Affaires in China's Madrid embassy, responded with a tweet of thanks in Spanish.

"A million thanks to Real Madrid for their valuable support for China in the fight against the coronavirus! Victory will be ours!"

The point ensured Celta stayed just outside the relegations places ahead of Mallorca, who beat Alaves on Saturday, on goal difference. The pair are two points clear of Leganes, who drew with Betis on Sunday and Espanyol who drew at Sevilla.

Sevilla missed a chance to exploit Getafe's loss to Barcelona and fourth-placed Atletico Madrid's 2-2 draw at Valencia on Friday.

Lucas Ocampos headed Sevilla in front after 14 minutes before Adrian Embarba levelled the scores with a free-kick. China winger Wu Lei put the away side ahead five minutes after the break.

After Victor Sanchez was sent off Suso exploited Sevilla's man advantage to score his first goal for the club since arriving on loan from AC Milan last month.

De Villiers needs to prove himself to earn T20 World Cup place: Boucher

JOHANNESBURG, FEB 17 (PTI): The retired AB de Villiers will be considered for a place in the South African T20 World Cup squad only if he shows good form and proves himself to be the "best man for the job", says the team's head coach Mark Boucher.

Soon after taking charge as South Africa's head coach in December last year, Boucher said he may try to persuade a few recent retirees, including de Villiers, to return to the South Africa squad ahead of the T20 World Cup to be held in Australia in October-November.

"He's (de Villiers) a discussion in the media and in the public but he is no discussion for me. I have had chats with him and we will probably know pretty soon what's going to happen with him," Boucher said after South Africa's 1-2 defeat to England in the just-concluded three-match T20 series at home.

"Like I said from day one when I took over, if we are going to a World Cup, I would like to have our best players there."

"If AB is in good form and he is raring to go and he makes himself available for the time we have

asked him to be available; if he is the best man for the job, then he must go," he added.

Boucher said "ego" would not come in the way of taking de Villiers back, whose previous request for a comeback before last year's ODI World Cup was turned down by the then team management and the national selectors.

"It's not about egos or anything like that, it's about sending your best team to the World Cup to try and win that competition," he added.

De Villiers, 36, retired from all international Cricket in May 2018.

Harmanpreet sets sights on T20 WC title, says it's going to be big if India win



SYDNEY, FEB 17 (PTI): Still not over the disappointment of missing a world title in 2017, India captain Harmanpreet Kaur has set her sights on the ICC Women's T20 World Cup trophy as she feels her team has grown substantially to be among the top contenders.

India women came tantalisingly close to winning the ICC ODI World Cup three years back, losing to hosts

England by nine runs in the final.

Harmanpreet said India are looking to make the most of the experience of the last three years.

"Our team is growing day by day, everyone is looking so positive," Harmanpreet said as all the 10 skippers gathered for the captain's media launch at the Taronga Zoo in here on Monday.

"It's going to be very

big if we win, I was very surprised at all the reaction from 2017. My parents didn't tell me, they didn't want us to feel the pressure. If we win, it's going to be very big for us. We will try to give our best."

The ICC Women's T20 World Cup will open with the mouth-watering clash between India and defending champions and hosts Australia in Adelaide on February 21.

Found Indian players open to letting others pick their brains: Sodhi



KUSHAN SARKAR WELLINGTON, FEB 17 (PTI):

New Zealand spinner Ish Sodhi is in awe of the "crazy" skills that Indian cricketers possess and what has added to the respect he has for Virat Kohli's side is its willingness to share the knowledge bank with anyone who cares to approach.

The 27-year-old Ludhiana-born wrist spinner has been speaking to the likes of Ravichandran Ashwin, Ravindra Jadeja and Yuzvendra Chahal, who he considers a friend.

"You start off with respect and want to tap into their brains. These are all very helpful guys more than willing to share their experiences," Sodhi told PTI during an interview.

"Chahal is a great person to tap into. He is completely a different bowler, big hearted. It is great to rub shoulders with these guys and listen to their experiences," he added.

Sodhi said he is enamoured by Ashwin's range of tricks and Jadeja's work ethic.

"I was speaking to Jadeja the other day about how he goes on with his training. Talking to Ashwin about the carrom ball and the googly

he bowls despite being an off-wpinner. It's crazy," Sodhi, who has played 17 Tests, 32 ODIs and 45 T20 Internationals, said.

But it's not just the Indian spinners that he interacts with, Sodhi also tries to understand a big-hitter like Rishabh Pant's mindset when he goes after spinners.

"Like Rishabh, who is one of the most destructive hitters of spin. I would ask him what are the lengths that are hardest to hit. I have never seen someone with that kind of reach when he is attacking the spinners," said Sodhi.

Virat Kohli has, in the past, been dismissed a number of times by leg-spinners but Sodhi doesn't find any distinct weakness in the Indian captain's game.

"Even though leg spinners get him out, he scores a lot of runs off them as well. Virat is a batsman you need to constantly attack or else he puts the pressure back on you. You need to come up with plans and be really courageous while bowling to him," said Sodhi.

Although he is only 27, Sodhi will be seen in a new role of spin consultant for IPL franchise

Rajasthan Royals apart from learning about the financial and operational side of franchise management.

"It's a challenging role and the one that I am looking forward to. My main role will be that of spin consultant and devise plans for the spinners. Try and give them advice about some of the overseas players they haven't played before," Sodhi spoke about his role.

In fact, as spin consultant, one of Sodhi's go to mantras would be what Shane Warne told him during an IPL.

"The biggest thing he told me was to stay calm and relaxed as I approached the crease so that I could create a nice base and spin the ball from there," he recalled.

"In T20 cricket, you can lose that as you try to bowl fast. Most of the time, you don't have a base to go up and over the ball a number of times. (Will be) trying to use those old tips that I got from him," he said.

On the other hand, the interest in operational side was due to his urge to have a professional degree in finance which wasn't possible due to his cricketing commitments. "I wanted to study fi-

nance. When the offer to become spin consultant came along, the senior staff of the franchise told me that they will guide in matters of finance and operations," he said.

While he is not part of the New Zealand squad for the first Test against India, he provided his insights on what would be the spinners' role at the Basin Reserve in Wellington, which will host the first Test starting Friday.

"Spinners would need to keep the stumps in play (bowl the stump line). In NZ, even for those who turn the ball away from right handers, LBW is the mode of dismissal. Keeping it nice and straight. You have to be smart with your fields for Indian batsmen."

"You need to have people at the boundary as these are guys who are very good at picking the length."

The second Test at Christchurch could be challenging for the Indians, opined Sodhi.

"Hagley Oval is supposed to be quickest in our country. One of the bounciest as well. With a bit of grass cover, it could be quite challenging if seam bowlers get it right. It will be old fashioned Test cricket, a battle of attrition," he concluded.

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Infected passengers aboard US evacuation flights as China virus toll mounts

More than a dozen infected Americans from a coronavirus-riddled cruise ship off Japan flew on evacuation flights to the US with other passengers on Monday, as the epidemic claimed more lives in China to take the death toll above 1,700.

The COVID-19 virus has infected more than 70,500 people in its epicentre of China and sparked panic buying, economic jitters and the cancellation of high-profile sporting and cultural events.

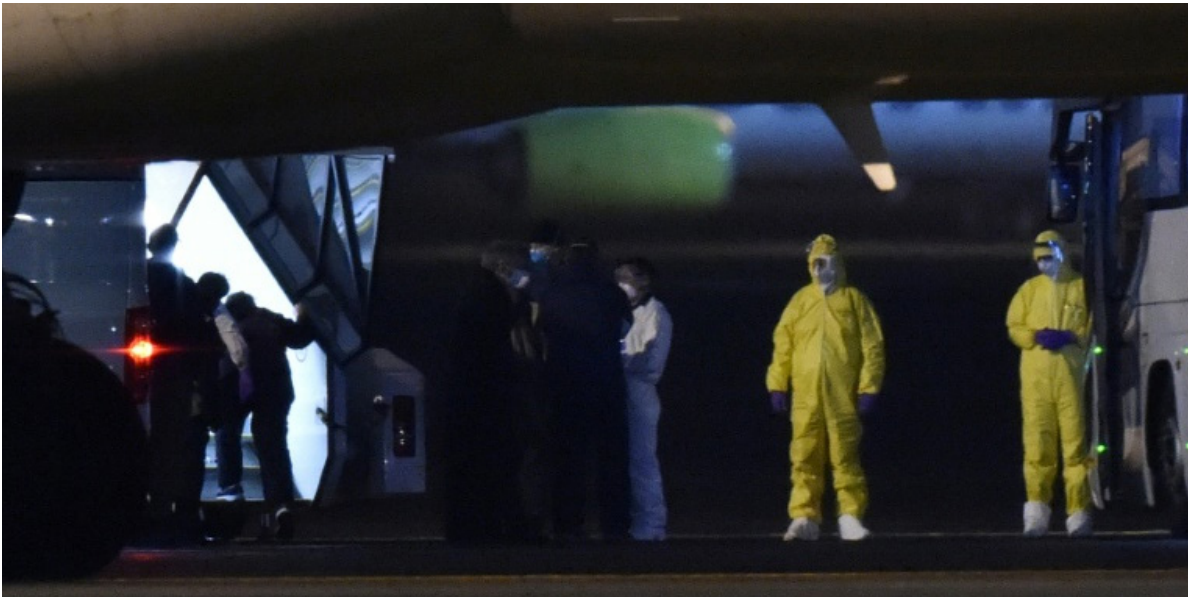
With fresh cases emerging daily in Japan, the government has advised citizens to avoid mass gatherings, and on Monday cancelled celebrations for the Emperor's birthday -- an annual jamboree that sees thousands of well-wishers descend on central Tokyo.

Beijing's municipal authorities have ordered everyone arriving in the capital to self-quarantine for 14 days, the presumed incubation period of the virus. State media said China may postpone its annual parliament session, which has been held in March for the last 35 years.

Outside China, the biggest cluster of infections is from the Diamond Princess cruise ship off Japan's Yokohama, where an additional 99 cases were revealed on Monday.

That brought the total to 454 diagnosed despite passengers being confined to their cabins during a 14-day quarantine.

As criticism grows of Japan's handling of the ship crisis, governments are scrambling to repatriate their citizens, with



Canada, Australia, Italy, and Hong Kong poised to follow Washington in removing nationals from the vessel.

Early Monday more than 300 passengers were transferred onto coaches via a makeshift passport control and loaded onto two planes heading for air bases in California and Texas.

The first flight touched down at Travis Air Force Base in California shortly before midnight Sunday.

Before they boarded the flights, US officials were informed 14 of them tested days earlier had received positive results. Authorities allowed them to board but isolated them from other passengers in a "special containment area".

Those on board were expected to undergo a further 14-day quarantine period on US soil.

"I am happy and ready to go," Sarah Arana told AFP before leaving the ship. "We need a proper quarantine. This was not it."

Australia became the latest country to order its citizens evacuated from the ship, with Prime

Minister Scott Morrison saying more than 200 Australians still on board would be rescued on Wednesday.

"My health is fine" - Some Americans on the ship, however, declined the government's offer.

"My health is fine. And my two-week quarantine is almost over. Why would I want to be put on a bus and a plane with other people they think may be infected when I have spent nearly two weeks isolated from those people?" tweeted Matt Smith.

Forty other US passengers tested positive for the virus and were taken to hospitals in Japan, said Anthony Fauci, a senior official at the National Institutes for Health.

It was not immediately clear if they were already counted among the 355 confirmed cases on the ship.

In China, authorities have placed about 56 million people in Hubei under quarantine, virtually sealing off the province from the rest of the country in an unprecedented effort to contain

the virus. New cases outside the epicentre have been declining for the last 13 days. There were 115 fresh cases outside the central province announced Monday -- sharply down from nearly 450 a week ago.

Chinese authorities have pointed to the slow rise in cases as proof their measures are working, even as the death toll climbed to 1,770 with more than 11,000 recovering.

But World Health Organization head Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus has warned it is "impossible to predict which direction this epidemic will take".

Concerns remain about global transmission, especially on cruise ships, which appear to have become especially virulent breeding grounds. Fears are mounting over passengers on the Westerdam cruise ship, who all received a clean bill of health when they disembarked in Cambodia -- a staunch Beijing ally.

But an 83-year-old American woman was stopped by authorities in Malaysia over the week-

end when she was detected with a fever and later diagnosed with the virus. There were more than 2,200 passengers and crew on the ship when it docked in Siha-noukville, many of whom have now dispersed around the globe.

"Great deal of uncertainty" -

With the virus battering tourism and disrupting global supply chains, experts are fretting about the toll it could take on a fragile global economy.

IMF chief Kristalina Georgieva said there could be a cut of around 0.1-0.2 percentage points to global growth but stressed there was "still a great deal of uncertainty."

Coronavirus virus fears surged through Asian markets, with traders also unsettled by news that Singapore had cut its growth forecast for this year as the virus hammers the city-state's tourism and trade.

"If it comes out bad enough for confidence to plummet, investors could quickly find themselves on the creek... without a paddle," said Stephen Innes of AxiCorp.

Pakistan launches nationwide anti-polio campaign

BY SAJJAD HUSSAIN

ISLAMABAD, FEB 17 (PTI): Pakistan on Monday launched a countrywide anti-polio campaign to vaccinate about 39.6 million children under the age of five in the country as the government appealed to the people for their support to eradicate the crippling disease.

Special Assistant to Prime Minister Imran Khan on Health Services Zafar Mirza said the government is committed to reach every child with the polio vaccine.

According to the World Health Organisation, Pakistan is one of the three countries, along with Afghanistan and Nigeria, where polio

is still endemic.

We have critically reviewed our performance during last campaign and worked with provincial and district teams for an even better preparedness for this nationwide vaccination drive, he said.

Mirza appealed to the people to join hands with the government to eradicate the polio virus from the country.

Over 2,65,000 polio workers will go door-to-door to administer polio drops to about 39.6 million children, officials said.

The initiative has come days after Pakistan confirmed 5 new polio cases, taking the number of those affected by the

disease this year to 17.

Last year, 144 polio cases were reported nationwide, far higher than 12 in 2018 and eight in 2017.

Prime Minister Khan had in December said that it was a "matter of shame" that Pakistan was among the countries where polio was still prevalent.

Attempts to eradicate the disease have been seriously hampered by deadly targeting of vaccination teams in recent years by militants, who oppose the drives, claiming the polio drops cause infertility.

Attacks on immunisation teams have claimed nearly 70 lives since December 2012.

Trump threatens intelligence block over Huawei: US diplomat



WASHINGTON, FEB 17 (AFP): The United States' ambassador to Germany said Sunday that President Donald Trump had threatened to cut off intelligence-sharing with countries that dealt with Chinese tech firm Huawei. Washington has been pressing allies to ban Huawei, one of the world's largest tech firms, from next-generation 5G mobile data networks, saying it is a security risk.

Ambassador Richard Grenell said Trump "instructed me to make clear that any nation who

chooses to use an untrustworthy 5G vendor will jeopardize our ability to share intelligence and information at the highest level." Grenell said on Twitter that the president had called him on Sunday from Air Force One, the presidential plane, to convey the message.

Key US allies in Europe, notably Britain and France, have said they will not ban Huawei from building 5G networks but will impose restrictions.

Publicly, the US has been restrained in its response, but Trump was reportedly furious with

London. US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo told the Munich Security Conference on Saturday that Huawei was a "Trojan horse for Chinese intelligence."

The tech company vehemently denies the US allegations, and Beijing has characterized its treatment as "economic bullying."

A US indictment on Friday laid more criminal charges against Huawei related to theft of intellectual property, adding to earlier allegations that the company stole trade secrets from American carrier T-Mobile.

'No Time To Die' China premiere, tour scrapped amid coronavirus outbreak



LOS ANGELES, FEB 17 (PTI): The Beijing premiere and a tour of other cities in China for the upcoming James Bond film, "No Time To Die", has been called off due to the coronavirus outbreak.

According to Deadline, movie's lead star Daniel Craig and other cast members won't attend the April screening or the subsequent publicity tour of the country.

Cinemas across the world's second-largest box office market remain shut indefinitely amid efforts to controlling the spread of the virus. There

is currently little clarity on when business may return to normal. The death toll in China now exceeds 1,770 people.

Craig returns to play the suave British spy for the fifth and final time in the movie, directed by Cary Joji Fukunaga.

"No Time To Die" also stars Ben Whishaw, Naomie Harris, Ralph Fiennes, Lea Seydoux, Jeffrey Wright, Rami Malek, Lashana Lynch, and others.

The film is slated for a UK release on April 8 and in North America on April 10.

Armed gang steals toilet rolls in panic-buying Hong Kong

A gang of knife-wielding men jumped a delivery driver in Hong Kong and stole hundreds of toilet rolls, police said Monday, in a city wracked by shortages caused by coronavirus panic-buying. Toilet rolls have become hot property in the densely packed business hub, despite government assurances that supplies remain unaffected by the virus outbreak.

"Supermarkets have found themselves unable to restock quickly enough, leading to sometimes lengthy queues and shelves wiped clean within moments of opening. There has also been a run on staples such as rice and pasta, as well as hand sanitiser and other cleaning items.

Police said a truck driver was held up early Monday by three men outside a supermarket in Mong Kok, a working-class district with a history of "triad" organised crime gangs.

"A delivery man was threatened by three knife-wielding men who took toilet paper worth more than HK\$1,000 (\$130)," a police spokesman told AFP.

A police source told AFP the missing rolls were later recovered and two suspects were arrested on scene although

it was not clear if they were directly involved in the armed robbery.

Footage from Now TV showed police investigators standing around multiple crates of toilet roll outside a Wellcome supermarket. One of the crates was only half stacked. Hong Kongers reacted with a mixture of bafflement and merri-ment to the heist.

One woman passing by the scene of the crime who was interviewed by local TV station iCable quipped: "I'd steal face masks, but not toilet roll."

The city, which has 58 confirmed coronavirus cases, is currently experiencing a genuine shortage of face masks. The hysteria that has swept through Hong Kong since the coronavirus outbreak exploded on mainland China is partly fuelled by the city's tragic recent history of confronting a deadly disease.

In 2003, some 299 Hong Kongers died of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS), an outbreak that began on the mainland but was initially covered up by Beijing -- action that left a lasting legacy of distrust towards the authorities on public health issues.

The new coronavirus outbreak also comes at a time when the city's

pro-Beijing leadership has historic low approval ratings after refusing to bow to months of angry pro-democracy protests last year. Authorities have blamed online rumours for the panic-buying and say supplies of food and household goods remain stable.

But the panic-buying has itself created shortages in one of the world's most densely populated cities where supermarkets and pharmacies have limited floor space.

Photos posted online have shown some people proudly stuffing their cramped city apartments with packets of hoarded toilet rolls. On Sunday, the head of the city's Consumer Council warned people not to stockpile toilet rolls in their flats as they were prone to mould in the notoriously humid climate.

She also reiterated that there were ample stocks of paper. Supermarket chain Wellcome called Monday's robbery a "senseless act", and called on people not to bulk buy or hoard toilet roll.

"We want to emphasize that we have sufficient toilet roll supply to meet demand," it said in a statement. "The temporary shortage was caused by the sudden and unusual surge in demand."

India takes over presidency of CMS COP 13

ADITI GUPTA GANDHINAGAR, FEB 17 (PTI): India, which is hosting the 13th Conference of Parties to the Convention of Migratory Species and Wild Animals, officially took over its Presidency on Monday for the next three years.

Union Environment Minister Prakash Javadekar said India will fully cooperate and ensure conservation of environment.

The minister was handed over the Presidency of the COP by the

Philippines, which was presiding over the convention from 2017 till now.

India will now preside over it till 2023.

"This Presidency will be for three years. We will cooperate with the Secretariat and we want to spread the message effectively to the world to protect environment through migratory species conservation.

"I am very sure India will take all initiatives so that this goes to the next level of protection and conservation," the minis-

ter said.

With CMS COP 13, India is now presiding over two UN conventions as last year in September, India was handed over the Presidency of UN Convention to Combat Desertification at COP 14 for two years.

CMS COP 13 was inaugurated by Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Monday after two days of pre-COP meetings and is likely to go on till February 22, when the Gandhinagar Declaration is expected to be adopted and released.

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HAPPIEST PLACE ON EARTH! Bachelorette, Hannah Brown smiled from ear to ear while enjoying at Disneyland.

Kareena, Amit Aggarwal give new dimension to fashion at LFW grand finale

BY SHUBHA DUBEY

MUMBAI, FEB 17 (PTI): Bollywood diva Kareena Kapoor Khan and ace couturier Amit Aggarwal on Sunday night gave a stunning closure to Lakme Fashion Week Summer/Resort 2020. In the grand finale, which was about futuristic fashion, the Delhi-based designer presented his elaborate collection in sync with Lakme's theme of the season "#BetterIn3D" and Kareena was his perfect muse.

The venue for the closing show was the iconic Mukesh Mills, one of the favourite shooting locations for Bollywood filmmakers.

Kareena, who has been the cosmetic brand's face for years, said she always enjoys walking at the LFW and Amit's dramatic outfits added to her excitement.

"I think the #BetterIn3D range is quite cool because the colours in the collection this time are that all women can wear. The outfit is also slightly 3D, dramatic and geometrical. It has got a futuristic vibe and I had a great time wearing Amit's creation," the actor told PTI.

Amit dressed his muse in a bright green ensemble with a plunging neckline and long trail, adorned by his signature polymers woven into the fabric to create 3D forms.

The designer said nobody could have pulled off his vision better than Kareena. "This association makes me believe in the faith that Lakme has put in me all these years. I wanted to push it to the next level. As a creative person, the concept of the show interested me."



wanted to do justice to it. When the concept came to me I was happy as it resonated with my brand and with Kareena's charm and elegance it became even a more memorable experience," Amit told PTI.

The designs comprised razor-sharp constructions with intricate patterns, which were enhanced by colours like green, mauve, violet, berry, red and silver.

The fabric put to use to create the structured silhouettes were chiffon, tulle and organza among others.

conversing with your inner being. Kindness and compassion need to start at home. Remember to let go of the judgements as you do. You're doing your best to overcome the obstacles. It's okay if you trip and fall in the process.

Tip: Be mindful of the way in which you address yourself.

CANCER: You want exactly the same things, which is to work things out. So why are you letting your ego get in the way? Why are you working against each other instead of standing together as one unit? Awaken your empathy, Cancer. Listen to their side of the story like you would want them to listen to yours. This will give you perspective on the matters you are struggling with.

Tip: Operate from a place of unconditional love.

LEO: Visualise yourself as a mighty oak tree, with the roots firmly established in the ground, providing you the strength to reach towards the sky. Leo, this is why intentions are powerful. They provide you with the foundation you need to go after your dreams. Today, you're being asked to revisit your goals and realign yourself

We Need to Stop Calling Birds of Prey a Box Office Failure

Harley Quinn: Birds of Prey opened in theaters on February 7 and within just days, the internet had declared the film a failure. Bringing in \$32 million domestically during its opening weekend, most reasoned, indicated that the film was set to be a flop, a misstep for the DC Extended Universe. It didn't take long for people to speculate about what mistakes had been made leading to this so-called failure and Warner Bros. even made a quick name change, rebranding the film from its lengthy original title of Birds of Prey (and the Fantabulous Emancipation of One Harley Quinn). Except, despite the lower-than-expected box office, Birds of Prey wasn't a failure in its first week. The film made around \$81 million globally during that first weekend, a sum that either recouped or came close to recouping the film's budget depending on what budget figure you use, meaning anything beyond that could arguably see the film in the green.

Flash forward to this weekend and the film is now sitting at a worldwide gross of \$145 million. It's a number that is, currently just a bit shy of half of Shazam!'s entire theatrical run, just for reference (and we'll get to that more in a moment). While the film does have a long way to go and admittedly didn't meet the projections for its opening weekend, the fact remains that people are going out to see the film. Word of mouth is helping with Birds of Prey, especially when fans take to social media to note that the film is a far cry from the widely panned Suicide Squad that first introduced Harley to the DCEU. The film hasn't bottomed out in its second week the way, say Dark Phoenix did. Yet, the headlines are still hung up on the idea that the film is a "flop".

It's not and we would all do well to shift our perceptions a bit.

Birds of Prey was never going to be a massive blockbuster. Unlike most films in the DCEU, Birds of Prey didn't have the lead we've seen in previous films, the way Justice League benefited from Man of Steel and Batman v Superman. All Birds of Prey really had was Suicide Squad, which isn't really an establishing film in the same way Man of Steel was for Justice League. Other than to introduce audiences to Harley and set up the idea that she was, at one point, dating the Joker. The film also didn't have the fan recognition of its major characters

and the way Joker did. Yes, Harley is popular with DC fans, but the Joker is a character that transcends the fandom. Even a person who has almost no interest in superheroes is aware who the Joker is. The character has become, for better or for worse, a cultural touchstone of sorts. Measuring the film against Joker and the rest of the DCEU is therefore a little unfair. The films are just not the same.

It's also a little unfair to compare Birds of Prey to another, smaller DCEU film, Shazam! While both Birds of Prey

are smaller films with an action-oriented slant (though Ford v Ferrari features cars rather than brawling), Ford v Ferrari even had something that Birds of Prey did not have in the way of major star power with Christian Bale and Matt Damon in starring roles. One can even argue that they are both niche films yet Ford is praised for its modest box office take while Birds of Prey is sneered at for the same dollar amount.

The difference? Ford v Ferrari is a film written by men, directed by a man,



and Shazam! have the smaller film with lesser known characters similarity, there's also the massive difference that Shazam! is very obviously a superhero movie. Even on the movie's posters you've got the Big Red Cheese in his brightly colored super suit looking for everything in the world like he could comfortably stand right up next to say, Superman, and fit in. The same can't be said for Birds of Prey and, in fact, even when you see the movie it doesn't feel like a superhero film. It's an action film that just so happens to have comic book characters and a superpower with Black Canary's epic cry.

The takeaway? Birds of Prey isn't a standard superhero movie and shouldn't be judged as one, but there's something more to consider as well when looking at how Birds of Prey is discussed. On Twitter, a few people have compared the language of how headlines have addressed Birds of Prey to the language used to describe a film with a similar budget and similar opening haul: Ford v Ferrari. In the case of Ford v Ferrari, it's opening weekend was described as "racing to first place" or as a "strong" opening with \$31 million domestic while Birds of Prey had distinctly negative phrasing with words such as "disappoints" and "went astray" with its slightly better take of \$33 million. Similar budget, both

and stars men in roles that see the characters doing stereotypical male things. Birds of Prey is written by a woman, directed by a woman, produced by two women, stars mostly women, and centers around women being badasses as they fight against men. The "male" film "wins" while the "female" film "disappoints." All differences beyond that aside, it's not a good look.

Ultimately, Birds of Prey may not be the massive blockbuster that other comic book films have been, but the true tale of the film's box office is far from over and it's far from being a flop or a failure. The film is doing well with critics and those who have gone out and seen it. It's not a failure. It just didn't smash a bunch of records and maybe that's the real story here. Maybe we need to adjust our expectations that everything has to be massive at the box office in order to have value.

But we certainly have to stop declaring things a failure when they're not.

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Elton John cuts concert short due to walking pneumonia

LONDON, FEB 17 (PTI): Music legend Elton John was forced to halt a show in New Zealand after being diagnosed with walking pneumonia.

The 72-year-old musician lost his voice in the middle of his performance at Auckland's Mount Smart Stadium on Sunday, reported BBC.

"I've just completely lost my voice. I can't sing. I've got to go. I'm sorry," an emotional John told the crowd.

The concert was part of the Oscar winner's New Zealand leg of Farewell Yellow Brick Road tour.

Walking pneumonia, also

called atypical pneumonia, is a type of lung infection often caused by bacteria or viruses. Its symptoms are comparable to those of a bad cold, often including a cough, chest pain, a sore throat and a headache.

John was checked by a medic halfway through the show and, despite his illness, he was able to perform classics such as "Candle in the Wind" and "All the Girls Love Alice".

But his voice gave way as he tried to sing "Daniel", after which he called off the set.

After he left the stage, the singer posted an apology to

his fans on Instagram.

"I played and sang my heart out, until my voice could sing no more. I'm disappointed, deeply upset and sorry. I gave it all I had.

"Thank you so much for your extraordinary support and all the love you showed me during tonight's performance. I am eternally grateful. Love, Elton xx," he wrote.

John announced in 2018 that he would stop touring in order to prioritise his family, but only after embarking on the three-year Farewell Yellow Brick Road global tour.

The musician's next

shows in Auckland on Tuesday and Thursday would go ahead as planned, the tour promoters said.

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ARIES: Why is the idea of love limited to a partner? The cards are urging you to see the beauty around you. To find romance in the smallest of things, like the sun that shines for you every morning and the flowers that wink at you when you're late for work (again). Remember, just because you haven't experienced cosmic union yet doesn't mean you won't. Keep that manifestation game strong.

Tip: Think of love as a vibration rather than a person.

TAURUS: If it was in alignment with your soul's growth, it would have worked out with them no matter what. Let go of that final thread of attachment. As you do, be grateful for the joyous moments. The laughter you shared when you were together. Honour and acknowledge the lessons you are being to integrate. Know that they are taking you closer to your truth.

Tip: Don't look back.

GEMINI: How do you address yourself when you are in your own company, Gemini? How do you handle failure or deal with an oopsie-daisy moment? Be mindful of your language when

with the life to want to build.

Tip: Set clear intentions.

VIRGO: According to Carl Jung, the collective unconscious is the deepest part of our psyche, shared by humanity as a collective. This wisdom is inherited and further enhanced by our personal experiences. Virgo, this is the reservoir you need to tap into whenever you find yourself without a road map.

Tip: Trust your inner wisdom.

LIBRA: All of us have a destiny to fulfil. While some of us are fortunate enough to consciously create it, others walk their paths unknowingly. Libra, your connection with the divine has always been a special one. You've had the ability to look beyond the veil and perceive your truth since the beginning of time. Why are you doubting your power now?

Tip: Walk your path with courage and confidence.

SCORPIO: There is a clear distinction between 'giving of' yourself and 'giving up' yourself. If you are constantly feeling exhausted, guilty, or even resentful, then you are doing too much of the latter. Being of service is wonderful, Scor-

prio, but never at the cost of your own self. Take a step back to reassess the situation.

Tip: Respect your own boundaries.

SAGITTARIUS: Moment of truth: you have more on your plate than you signed up for. How do you keep coming back to this point, Sagittarius? Could your need to micromanage be the reason you are overworked? Spirit is reminding you that there is an easy way around this. Seek the support of like-minded individuals. Open yourself to help. Spend some time building and training the right team so you can delegate the tasks at hand. Remember, it takes an orchestra to deliver a wonderful performance.

Tip: Learn to delegate.

CAPRICORN: Newflash, Capricorn: it is okay to ask for help. There is no reason why you need to shoulder these burdens all by yourself. You have been blessed with people who are willing to make your days slightly easier and full of love. Lean on them in this time of need. When you carry more than your fair share of the load, your heart becomes full of resentment, which in turn makes your life bitter. To avoid this, take a

step back and let others step in where they can.

Tip: It's okay to reach out for help.

AQUARIUS: Everything in the Universe works on the principle of balance, a balance between giving and receiving. Plants provide us with oxygen to breathe and in return we give them the carbon dioxide they require. Nothing ever goes to waste. Aquarius, when you understand this fundamental truth, you will realise there is an infinite supply available of all that you want. So allow yourself to give freely.

Tip: Let go of the lack mentality.

PISCES: Today, you are being asked to address the blocks in your feminine. The side that gives so freely but shies away from receiving. Where do you think this wound is stemming from? Do you not believe that you are deserving of love? It's time to make an internal shift, Pisces. While you are blessed with the ability to look beyond the veil, you will find that your psychic abilities are especially heightened. Be cognisant of divine downloads coming through. They are helping you move closer to your truth.

Tip: Allow yourself to receive.