

CITY TALKS

2

HALF OF PUNJAB, INCLUDING MYSELF, CAN'T PRODUCE BIRTH CERTIFICATES: CM



BANKING & FINANCE

5

RBI INJECTS ₹10K CRORE LIQUIDITY INTO MARKET TO ENSURE SYSTEM STABILITY



LIFESTYLE & ENTERTAINMENT

12

RAM GOPAL VARMA MADE CULT FILMS, SAYS ACTRESS ISHA KOPPIKAR



PUNJAB REPORTS FIRST CORONAVIRUS DEATH

SEVERAL TOP POLITICIANS GO INTO QUARANTINE AS THE NUMBER OF INFECTED PEOPLE, INCLUDING SINGER KANIKA KAPOOR, CROSSES 250

CHANDIGARH: India's fourth casualty due to the novel coronavirus was a 70-year-old man from Punjab, who returned from Germany through Italy a fortnight ago and died at a hospital in Punjab's Nawanshahr district after a severe chest pain.

Though a statement issued by the Chief Minister's Office said the "state reported its first case of corona death", Principal Secretary (Health) Anurag Aggarwal maintained that he was "a positive case of coronavirus who died of cardiac arrest". While the number of COVID-19 infections in India has crossed 250, the government on Friday confirmed 63 new patients, the biggest single-day spike so far.

Bollywood singer Kanika Kapoor's announcement on Friday that she had tested positive for COVID-19, meanwhile, triggered a scare among several top politicians who had attended a series of



events with her in Lucknow recently as well as those who were in contact with them. Many have since announced that they were going into quarantine.

Following Kanika's revelation on her Instagram page, BJP leader and former Rajasthan Chief Minister Vasundhara Raje stated that she, along with her son and MP Dushyant Singh had attended a dinner where Kanika was

present, and as a matter of "abundant self-caution" were immediately adopting self-quarantine.

Singh was among many MPs who attended a breakfast meeting hosted by President Ram Nath Kovind on March 18 as well as a parliamentary panel meeting on transport, tourism and culture, attended by around 20 MPs later in the day. While Rashtrapati Bhavan is yet

to issue any statement on the issue, it is learnt that Mr. Kovind would follow all protocols prescribed by the Health Ministry.

The Uttar Pradesh government has not revealed the names of politicians, bureaucrats and socialites who allegedly attended the event.

Late on Friday, the U.P. government said officials have been instructed to identify the persons present in

BAN ON PUBLIC TRANSPORT, EXAMS

The Punjab government has decided to place a ban on the plying of all public transport — government and private buses — from midnight on March 20. Likewise, all Board examinations of Class X and Class XII have been postponed till March 31. Public interactions at government offices have also been called off.

The three functions attended by Ms. Kapoor, keep them under isolation, and carry out medical tests.

Maharashtra remains the worst-hit state, with at least 63 patients so far, one of whom has died. A woman from Pune in her early 40s, who had no history of travel abroad, has tested positive for COVID-19.

The Ministry of Health has

instructed hospitals to not turn away patients suspected of having coronavirus, and that patients with pneumonia should also be tested for the disease. On Sunday, the country will observe a "janata curfew", or a self-imposed citizens' curfew for 14 hours.

On Thursday, India reported its fourth death due to coronavirus, which has infected 2,75,434 people worldwide and killed 11,399, according to an estimate from Johns Hopkins University.

In view of the rising cases of coronavirus in India, the government banned all international commercial passenger flights from March 22 for a week and Prime Minister Narendra Modi urged people to stay indoors and called for a 'Janata Curfew' on Sunday.

The Kejriwal government in Delhi also announced shutting down of restaurants. Takeaways and home delivery services will continue, Arvind Kejriwal said.

Nirbhaya convicts hanged, finally!



NEW DELHI: The four men convicted of the gang rape and murder of a Delhi woman on December 16, 2012 were hanged in the darkness of pre-dawn on Friday, ending a horrific chapter in India's long history of sexual assault that had seared the nation's soul.

Mukesh Singh (32), Pawan Gupta (25), Vinay Sharma (26) and Akshay Kumar Singh (31) were executed at 5.30 am for the savage assault in an empty moving bus on the 23-year-old physiotherapy intern who came to be known the world over as Nirbhaya, the fearless one.

This is the first time that four men have been hanged together in Tihar Jail, South Asia's largest prison complex that houses more than 16,000 inmates. The executions were carried out after the men exhausted every possible legal avenue to escape the gallows. Their desperate attempts only postponed the inevitable by less than two months after the first date of execution was set for January 22.

They were hanged at 5.30 am, Director General of Prison Sandeep Goel said.

After raping and brutalising the woman, the men, one of whom was a juvenile at the time, dumped her on the road and left for dead on the cold winter night. Her friend who was with her was also severely beaten and thrown out along with her. She was so severely violated that her insides were spilling out when she was taken to hospital. She died in a Singapore hospital after battling for her life for a fortnight.

Six people, including the four convicts and the juvenile, were named as accused.

While Ram Singh allegedly committed suicide in the Tihar Jail days after the trial began in the case, the juvenile was released in 2015 after spending three years in a correctional home. AGENCIES

Yes Bank resumes operations

- PEOPLE ARE NOW ABLE TO ACCESS ALL DIGITAL SERVICES & PLATFORMS @RBI @FINMININDIA
- OUTWARD NEFT/IMPS/RTGS SERVICES RESTORED FROM MARCH 18, 2020, 18:00 HOURS
- CUSTOMERS MAY WITHDRAW FDS, RDS AFTER THE MORATORIUM IS REVOKED FROM MARCH 18

MUMBAI: Yes Bank on Wednesday said it has resumed operations and all its banking services are available for its customers now.

"Our banking services are now operational. You can now experience the full suite of our services. Thank you for your patience and co-operation. #YESforYOU @RBI @FinMinIndia," the lender tweeted.

The RBI had on March 5 put a moratorium on Yes Bank restricting withdrawals to Rs 50,000 per depositor till April 3. However, the government in a notification on Saturday said the moratorium will be lifted by 18:00 hrs on March 18.

"We will resume full banking services from Wed, Mar 18, 2020, 18:00 hrs. Visit any of our 1,132 branches from Mar 19, 2020, post commencement of banking hrs to experience our suite of services," Yes Bank said



in a tweet. "You will also be able to access all our digital services & platforms @RBI @FinMinIndia," it said.

The government on Saturday notified the reconstruction plan for cash-strapped Yes Bank and said the moratorium will be lifted by 18:00 hrs on March 18, much earlier than the earlier date of April 3.

"The order of moratorium on the reconstructed bank issued by the government...

shall cease to have effect on the third working day at 18:00 hours from the date of commencement of this scheme," the notification said.

The lender has posted a net loss of Rs 18,654 crore for third quarter ended December 31 due to huge provisioning for bad loans. It had posted a profit of Rs 1,001.8 crore during December quarter of 2018-19.

"You will be able to use

your YES BANK cards and accounts across wallets like Paytm, Amazon Pay and Freecharge among others from March 18, 2020, 18:00 hours," the bank said in an FAQ on its website.

Besides, the customers have been allowed for inward RTGS/NEFT/IMPS based transaction services to pay for their Yes Bank credit card bills and loan EMIs from any bank accounts including Yes Bank accounts.

"Outward NEFT/IMPS/RTGS will resume from March 18, 2020, 18:00 hours. The limits for transactions across digital channels will continue to remain what they were prior to the imposition of the moratorium. However, from March 19, 2020 post commencement of banking hours, transactions at branches will not have any limits," it said.

Among others, customers will be able to pay towards

their utility bills and use the UPI platform, Google Pay and PhonePe, Paytm, Amazon Pay, Freecharge.

"You can withdraw your Yes Bank FDs (fixed deposits) and RDs (recurring deposits) after the moratorium is revoked from March 18, 2020, 18:00 hours. Standard charges will apply on the same. You will be also able to access all services available through digital channel/platforms (Net Banking/ Mobile Banking etc)," it added.

Customers can also initiate "stop a payment" service, Yes Bank said. The other service that remains inactive now is cheque clearing because clearing activities are suspended as per the directive. Customers who use forex card can also not use such services.

"Your cheques already issued will not be honoured till the clearing activities are restarted or further directive from regulator," it added.

Kamal Nath quits as Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister

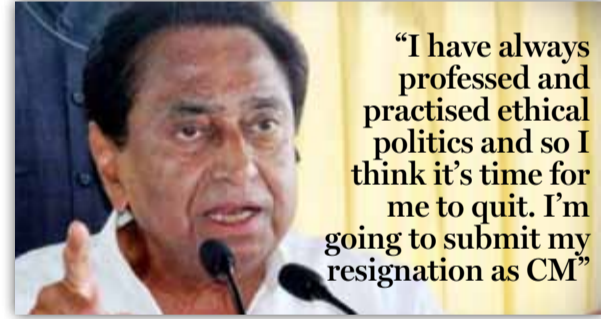
BHOPAL: Madhya Pradesh Governor Lalji Tandon on Friday accepted the resignation of Chief Minister Kamal Nath.

Kamal Nath had submitted his resignation to the governor at the Raj Bhawan here around 1 pm on Friday.

"The governor accepted the resignation of Kamal Nath and asked him to continue as the caretaker chief minister till the new CM takes charge," a Raj Bhawan official told PTI.

Kamal Nath's move of stepping down as the CM came a day after the Supreme Court directed that a floor test be conducted in Madhya Pradesh Assembly to prove that the Congress government led by him enjoys majority in the House following the rebellion by 22 MLAs of his party.

BJP leader Jyotiraditya Scindia termed Chief Minister Kamal Nath's resignation as people's victory in Madhya Pradesh. "However, the (Kamal Nath-led) government



had digressed from that path," Scindia tweeted. Truth has prevailed, he added.

"I have always professed and practised ethical politics and so I think it's time for me to quit. I'm going to submit my resignation as CM," said Nath at a press conference at CM House in Bhopal. During his address to the press CM Kamal Nath leveled various charges against the BJP led Government at the Centre that they are murdering the democracy by not respecting the will of the people and also that they are engaged in horse trading. He also

said that the BJP conspired against the democratically elected Government of Madhya Pradesh by acting in connivance with the 22 MLAs of the Maharaja. The Congress party made last mile efforts to reach to the MLAs held in the Bengaluru resort to try and convince them to join the flock again but all efforts failed eventually. Senior Congress leader Digvijay Singh today conceded defeat by saying that they don't have numbers in their favour to sail through the floor test and continue to be in the government. AGENCIES

Panel wants police to act on riots case



NEW DELHI: The Delhi Minorities Commission (DMC) has sent a notice to the DCP North East Delhi seeking details about the case of an alleged attempt to murder during communal violence in the area on February 24. The DMC attached four photos of the alleged attempt on Mohammad Zubair at an underpass near Bhajanpura market,

which it claimed has been published widely, and asked what action has been taken in the case.

"Since the faces of a number of attackers are clearly visible and one has been identified from his Facebook page, you are directed to take this accused man into custody and interrogate him to know his role and the role of other attackers seen in the photographs," the DMC said. DCP (North East) Ved Prakash Surya has been asked to submit the details to the commission by March 26.

The panel has also sent a notice to the DCP claiming that it has received several reports of haphazard arrests of youth in the age group of 20-30 in the district without any charges or warrants and that they are being pressured to own up or to implicate others in crimes they have apparently not committed.

"We are getting information that in some cases such arrested youth are forced to pay huge bribes and if they do, they are let off. We take all this as a serious violation of the human and civil rights of the people arrested. You are directed to issue clear instructions to all SHOs under your jurisdiction to desist from such illegal practices," DMC Chairman Zafarul Islam Khan said in his notice to the DCP. AGENCIES

NRIs may own 100% stake in Air India

"Foreign investments in Air India including that of foreign airlines shall not exceed 49 per cent either directly or indirectly except in case of those NRIs, who are Indian Nationals, where foreign investment is permitted up to 100 per cent under automatic route"



NEW DELHI: The Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade (DPIIT) has notified a decision of the union cabinet to allow non-resident Indians (NRIs) to control up to 100% stake in disinvestment-bound Air India.

The FDI policy earlier permitted NRIs to take only 49% stake in the airline.

In its press note, the DPIIT said: "Foreign investments in Air India including that of foreign airlines shall not exceed 49

per cent either directly or indirectly except in case of those NRIs, who are Indian Nationals, where foreign investment is permitted up to 100 per cent under automatic route".

On March 4, the cabinet had taken a decision in this regard.

The decision came at a time when the government has sought preliminary bids for 100% stake sale in the national carrier.

It also said that the condition that substantial ownership and effective control (SOEC) of Air India shall continue to be vested in Indian nationals.

An official statement has earlier stated that in light of the proposed strategic disinvestment of 100% of Air India by the govern-

ment, it has been decided that foreign investment in Air India be brought on a level-playing field with other scheduled airline operators.

The national carrier will have no residual government ownership and will be completely privately owned.

Under the SOEC framework, which is followed in the airline industry globally, a carrier that flies overseas from a particular country should be substantially owned by that country's government or its nationals.

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GOVT RESTRICTS FUNCTIONING

CORONAVIRUS SCARE: MALLS, WEEKLY KISAN MANDIS CLOSED TO PROHIBIT PUBLIC GATHERINGS; LOWER COURTS TO LIMIT OPERATIONS

CHANDIGARH: In a bid to prohibit public gathering in the wake of COVID-19 scare, the Punjab government on Tuesday issued directions to close down all shopping complexes, malls, museums, local weekly 'kisan mandis' till March 31.

An advisory has been issued to all religious institutions, Dera (sect) heads to postpone their religious congregations. The decision was taken at a meeting of the Group of Ministers held under the chairmanship of Local Bodies Minister Brahm Mohindra here.

As per the advisory issued by the Centre, the GoM has also decided to restrict the gathering at marriage functions, said an official statement. Directions have been issued to Deputy Commissioners (DCs) to ensure that the gathering at any function in marriage halls must not increase beyond 50 persons.

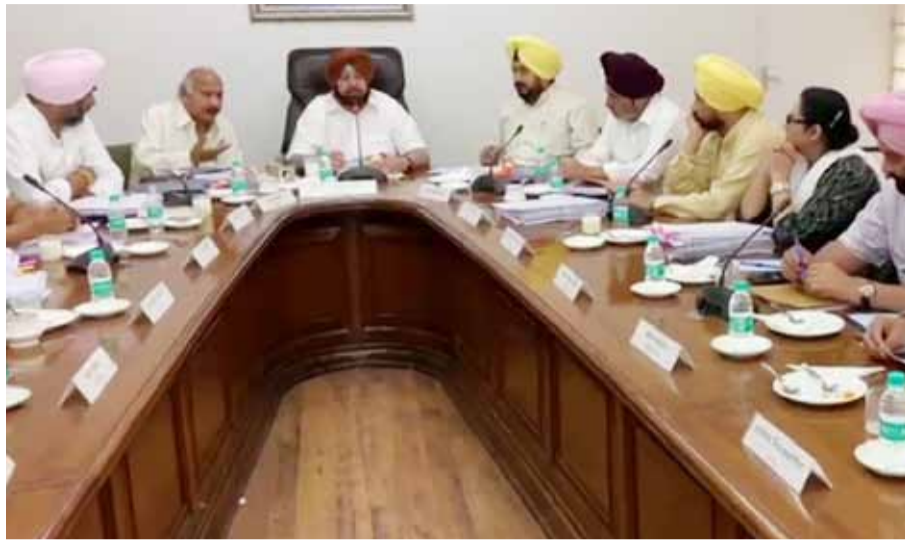
The DCs will also ensure that all restaurants, hotels, dhabas and food courts are implementing hand washing protocol and proper cleanliness of frequently touched surfaces, besides ensuring physical distancing of 1 metre between persons and tables, it added.

"All shopping complexes and malls, cinemas would be closed in the State till March 31, but chemists and grocery shops in malls have been exempted from the shutdown"

The DCs will also ensure that all restaurants, hotels, dhabas and food courts are implementing hand washing protocol and proper cleanliness of frequently touched surfaces, besides ensuring physical distancing of 1 metre between persons and tables, it added.

"All shopping complexes and malls, cinemas would be closed in the State till March 31, but chemists and grocery shops in malls have been exempted from the shutdown. All the local weekly kisan mandis have been closed in a bid to restrict people to gather in large numbers at one place," said the statement.

The GoM also directed the School Education department and administrative bodies of other private educational institutes to postpone the examinations. "In case there is dire need of conducting the examinations, the particular



"All shopping complexes and malls, cinemas would be closed in the State till March 31, but chemists and grocery shops in malls have been exempted from the shutdown"

institute and school would inform the district administration and would also ensure that one metre distance is maintained between two students," according to the statement.

As a precautionary measure in the wake of COVID-19 outbreak, the Punjab and Haryana High Court on Tuesday directed all courts at district and sub-divisional level in Punjab, Haryana and Union Territory of Chandigarh to restrict their functioning to urgent cases till further order.

The High Court, in continuation of its earlier order issued with regard to precautionary

Fake COVID-19 messages flood social media

CHANDIGARH: After the detection of first COVID-19 patient here, the social media was flooded with fake messages, suggesting a "lockdown" and more confirmed cases of the deadly infection in Chandigarh.

The Chandigarh administration had to come out with a clarification, saying the messages were fake and advised people not to circulate the false information.

Meanwhile, people thronged markets in Chandigarh and Mohali markets fearing a shortage of essential items. A 23-year-old woman, who recently returned from London, has tested positive for the novel coronavirus, the first confirmed case of the deadly infection in the union territory.

In a fake message, it was claimed that three more cases of coronavirus were detected in Sector 19 of Chandigarh. Another fake message said, "Emergency meeting announced. May be going to lockdown Chandigarh by evening."

On Wednesday, another fake message citing health authorities was circulated on social media.

It asked people not to come out of their homes from 10 pm to 5 am as a medicine was being sprayed to tackle the infection. A shopkeeper at Mohali said he saw an unusual jump in the number of customers at his shop on Thursday as people were purchasing more than the requirement.

A huge rush could be seen at shops and people seemed to be indulging in panic buying, shopkeepers said.

measures against COVID-19, has directed all courts at district and sub-divisional level in Punjab, Haryana and Chandigarh to take up only bail matters and matters requiring urgent stay-injunction, till further orders. The remaining

matters shall be adjourned.

However, the court can proceed to hear any matter in which counsel for both the sides give sufficient reasons for urgency to hear the matter. The matter fixed for final argument, including time-bound

Fresh case reported in Punjab; total is three

CHANDIGARH: A fresh case of COVID-19 was on March 20 reported in Punjab, taking the total number of positive cases in the State to three, according to an official.

A 69-year-old woman, who recently returned from the United Kingdom, tested positive in Punjab's Mohali town of Sahibzada Ajit Singh Nagar district. Mohali civil surgeon Manjit Singh told The Hindu that the condition of the patient was 'stable'. "She is under treatment at Civil Hospital," he said. The woman is a resident of Mohali and was admitted to a private hospital here after she complained of fever and cold. She was later shifted to Civil Hospital. Her samples were sent to the Post Graduate Institute of Medical Education and Research (PGIMER), Chandigarh. "The report confirmed the woman is COVID-19 positive," said Dr. Singh. In Punjab, of the two previous patients, one died.

Allow private hospitals to conduct tests: CM

CHANDIGARH: Warning of a worsening COVID-19 crisis in the country, Punjab Chief Minister Amarinder Singh has urged the government to allow private hospitals and labs to conduct tests in order to ensure access for all the people, even as the state reported its first case of novel coronavirus death.

Calling for a national level fight against the pandemic on a war footing, Singh said he would take up the issue of testing by private hospitals and labs with the Prime Minister on Friday during the latter's proposed video conference with all the Chief Ministers.

With the number of coronavirus cases increasing, the Centre has to consider reviewing its policy, stressed the Chief Minister, making it clear that he did not agree with the current policy of the government of India in this regard.

Given the fact that Punjab had private labs in all the major cities, it was not logical for a corona suspect to have to travel to Chandigarh or some other place to get himself tested from a government facility only, said Amarinder Singh, adding that only in case of doubt should such a person be required to go elsewhere for a second test.

The Chief Minister was speaking at a summit conclave to mark the third anniversary of his government.

While he was not a pessimist, the way things were happening around the world it was obvious that India had to be prepared for the worst, said Amarinder Singh.

matters shall be adjourned to a date beyond March 31, said the order.

The court also said that no undertrial prisoner would be produced before the subordinate courts and facility of videoconferencing be utilised for the said purpose.

The Chandigarh Judicial

Academy would suspend all its institutional training programmes.

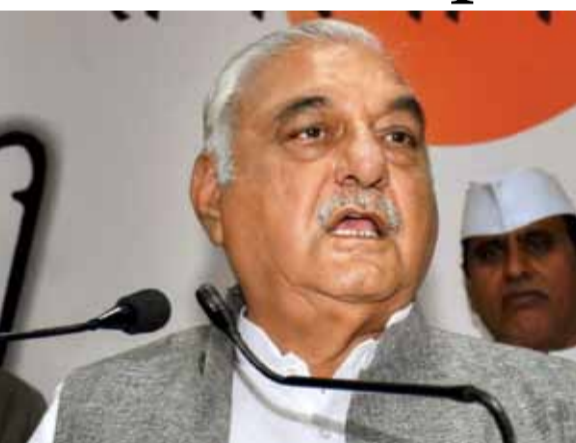
Earlier, the Bar Council of Punjab and Haryana had unanimously resolved to request the advocates to abstain from work in all the courts and quasi judicial tribunals till March 31. **AGENCIES**

'BJP-JJP regime pushing Haryana into debt trap'

CHANDIGARH: Leader of Opposition in the Haryana Assembly and former Chief Minister Bhupendra Singh Hooda on Tuesday questioned the fiscal management of the State, saying the official data indicated that Haryana was being pushed into a deep debt trap by the ruling BJP-JJP government.

"We demand that the government issue a White Paper on the increasing debt, which has reached 1.81 lakh crore and tell the State where all this money has been spent. When the BJP came to power in 2014, it had raised a massive hue and cry on the debts taken by the previous governments," said Mr. Hooda, talking to journalists.

"Haryana was earlier counted among the rich States, today it is in the list of States in deep debt. The proportion of total government expenditure on loan and interest payments is increasing due to rising debt. In 2016-17, 18.51% of the total debt was used to repay the debt, which has now increased to 28.61%. The government is walking



the dangerous road of partying with borrowed money," he said.

The former Chief Minister said the government should come up with a time-bound plan to control the ever-increasing revenue deficit and cut fiscal deficit. Comparing the fiscal discipline during his term, Mr. Hooda said the fiscal deficit was 2.07% during his term in 2013-14 but has increased to 2.82% in 2019-20. Similarly, the revenue deficit which was only 0.97% in 2013-14 has

increased to 1.76% in 2019-20.

Mr. Hooda added that farmers in the State were falling into a debt trap due to the government's indifference. "The government should compensate the damage caused by hailstorms and unseasonal rain at the earliest. The government should assess the loss suffered by farmers and compensate them by output and MSP of crops, not by the size of the landholdings as the farmers have lost standing crops," he said. **AGENCIES**

'Half of Punjab cannot show birth certificates'

CHANDIGARH: Terming the Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA), the National Register of Citizens (NRC) and the National Population Register (NPR) as absurd and unconstitutional, Punjab Chief Minister Amarinder Singh on Thursday said half of Punjab, including himself, could not produce birth certificates to prove their Indianness.

Pointing out that most people in Punjab came from Pakistan, Captain Amarinder asked if the Centre expected them to go to Pakistan to look for proof of birth.

"Even I don't have a birth certificate. These things did not exist when I was born," said the Chief Minister, quipping that this would make him too a "doubtful character" under the government of India's new census system.

Speaking at an event here, he made it clear that his government was totally opposed to these

"The reaction of the people, especially the youth, clearly shows that this will not work in this country, the Centre could not possibly put everyone in a box and take them back more than seven decades

exercises. He said while a routine census would be conducted in Punjab, it would not be based on religion, caste and creed.

"The reaction of the people, especially the youth, clearly shows that this will not work in this country," said Captain Amarinder, adding that the Centre could not possibly put everyone in a box and take them back more than seven decades. **AGENCIES**

Ludhiana robbery: 10 kg of gold recovered from one of accused

CHANDIGARH: The Punjab Police has claimed to have recovered from an accused a portion of the 30-kg gold robbed at gunpoint from a branch of a financial services company in Punjab's Ludhiana last month.

Kunwar Vijay Pratap Singh, IG, Organised Crime Control Unit of the Punjab Police, said 10 kg of gold was recovered from a hideout of gangster Amritpal Singh in Mohali.

Amritpal was nabbed by an OCCU team on Tuesday, he said, adding that a pistol and two rifles were recovered from him. Amritpal is the brother of notorious gangster Jaipal Bhullar and was one of the six people who were involved in the case.

The accused had targeted a branch of India Infoline Finance Limited (IIFL) on Gill Road in Ludhiana last month, robbing the gold worth Rs 13 crore at gunpoint. Police have so far arrested four people in the case.

The remaining gold and other two accused, Jaipal and Gursewak Singh, will be arrested very soon, said the IG. The police on March 12 had



The accused had targeted a branch of India Infoline Finance Limited on Gill Road in Ludhiana last month, robbing the gold worth Rs 13 crore at gunpoint. Police have so far arrested four people in the case

nabbed gangster Gagan Judge from Chandigarh for his involvement in the robbery. The police had recovered around Rs 31 lakh, a pistol, two magazines and 50 live cartridges from Judge.

Following questioning, two more accused, Pardeep Singh of Gardiwal village in Hoshiarpur; and Harpreet Singh, a resident of Peer Mohammad village in Ferozepur, have also been arrested. **AGENCIES**

Punjab mulls giving bail for minor offences

CHANDIGARH: Amid the COVID-19 scare, the Punjab government is mulling giving bail to those convicted of minor offences and parole to those who had spent considerable time in jail.

Punjab Chief Minister Amarinder Singh, while disclosing this, pointed out that the Supreme Court had talked about decongesting the prisons. "The final decision would, however, depend on the courts. State Advocate General Atul Nanda is taking up the matter with the Chief Justice of the Punjab and Haryana High Court," he said here. In an attempt to check the spread of COVID-19, the State government has also decided to launch a door-to-door awareness campaign from March 19 across

the State. Capt. Amarinder also appealed to religious organisations and Dera heads to keep gatherings under 50 in support of the government's efforts to check the spread of the virus.

The Chief Minister said, after a series of review meetings with the Health and other concerned departments, that while Punjab, with one confirmed case, was so far safe, it could not afford to be complacent in the face of the spreading pandemic. "The State government is taking all possible measures to stop the disease from spreading further. Strict monitoring is being done of all those arriving from high-risk countries and so far, 116 suspected cases had been tested," he said. **AGENCIES**

Amarinder seeks tough stance against Pak-sponsored terrorism

"IF THE AKALIS THINK WE ARE SITTING QUIETLY AND WON'T TAKE ACTION AGAINST THOSE BEHIND THE SACRILEGE INCIDENTS AND OTHER SERIOUS ISSUES, THEY ARE SADLY MISTAKEN," SINGH SAYS, ADDING THAT HE WILL NOT ENGAGE IN A WAR OF WORDS WITH THE OPPOSITION AS HE WAS FOCUSED ON ISSUES RELATED TO THE STATE'S WELFARE

CHANDIGARH: Asking the Centre to take a tough stance against Pakistan sponsored terrorism, Punjab Chief Minister Amarinder Singh on Thursday reiterated that his government will punish those responsible for the 2015 sacrilege incidents.

Speaking at a conclave here on the completion of his government's three years in office, Singh said his focus was on tackling the menace of drugs, crime and political killings - all of which were rampant under the SAD-BJP rule.

"If the Akalis think we are sitting quietly and won't take action against those behind the sacrilege incidents and other serious issues, they are sadly mistaken," Singh said, adding that he will not engage in a war of words with the opposition as he was focused on issues



related to the state's welfare.

Asserting that his government will not allow Pakistan-backed terrorists to foment trouble in Punjab, the chief minister said he has been urging the central government to be tough on Pakistan.

Punjab is not Kashmir and

is well equipped to fight back. The Army can continue fighting terror in Kashmir but in Punjab, in addition to the BSF as the first line of defence at the borders, the 85,000 strong police force will deal with any threat, he said.

Singh said terror attacks

like the one in Pulwama or the chopping of heads of Indian soldiers at the border was not acceptable.

"This cannot go on... We have to be tough with Pakistan, they do not understand any other language," he said, adding that he did not really understand the policy of the neighbouring country, which was fighting everyone on all fronts.

On a lighter note, the chief minister recalled how former Pakistan Prime Minister Pervez Musharraf had released 500 Indian prisoners after he shared their list with the then Pakistan President who was visiting India.

Pointing out that drugs were being pushed into Punjab from nearby states as well as countries including Nepal and Burma via Delhi, Singh

said the state has become a hub for narco terrorists and the fight to eliminate drugs completely was continuing on war footing.

He said large quantities of China-made drones along with weapons and drugs from across the border were seized through the collective efforts of Punjab Police and the Special Task Force (STF).

Blaming movies and television for popularising "gang culture" in the state, Singh said he had instructed the police force to show no mercy to criminals and gangsters.

Gangsters had a free reign during the Akali rule and were going around shooting anyone including the police. But the police have now got the better of them with nearly 2,500 being arrested and 11 neutralised, he said. **AGENCIES**

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Bengal political parties suspend their activities



KOLKATA: In the wake of the novel coronavirus outbreak, political parties across the board have suspended activities in West Bengal and have asked their activists to take precautions and generate awareness to prevent the spread of the disease.

An 18-year-old youth, who recently returned to Kolkata from England, tested positive for the novel coronavirus on Tuesday, making it the first confirmed case in the state.

Ruling Trinamool Congress, opposition BJP, Congress and the CPI(M) have suspended all political gatherings and meetings for the time being.

"All major programmes and gatherings have been suspended for the time being. At present, we are meeting people but fewer in numbers and are always taking precautions," TMC secretary-general and state Education Minister Partha Chatterjee said.

CPI(M) state secretary Surya Kanta Mishra said the party has cancelled all its scheduled rallies, marches and programmes.

"We have told our party leaders not to conduct any major rally, march or programme. All the events that demand mass gathering have been cancelled," Mishra told reporters.

The novel coronavirus threat has forced the BJP and Congress to cancel their events scheduled in the next few days and scale down their activities.

Party offices, however, continued to function. Leaders of the political parties also continued to hold small meetings and media briefings.

The coronavirus outbreak has thrown a spanner in the campaign plans of the political parties for the upcoming municipal polls in the state, which too has been postponed due to the pandemic. **AGENCIES**

Resignation of former Madhya Pradesh ministers accepted

THEY WERE EARLIER EXPELLED ON CHIEF MINISTER KAMAL NATH'S RECOMMENDATION

BHOPAL: Madhya Pradesh Assembly Speaker NP Prajapati has accepted the resignations of six former ministers in the state who were expelled on the recommendation of Chief Minister Kamal Nath, PTI reported.

As many as 22 Congress MLAs in the state had resigned from the Assembly on Tuesday, sending the Congress government in the state into a crisis.

The six ministers, along with 16 other MLAs, resigned after long-time Congress leader Jyotiraditya Scindia, whom they were loyal to, quit the party on Tuesday. They were expelled by Madhya Pradesh Governor Lalji Tandon on Friday. Ahead of Scindia's exit, the MLAs were allegedly flown to Bharatiya Janata Party-ruled Karnataka in a bid to keep them together.

The legislators had earlier sent their resignations to the Speaker but were asked to



verify in person that they had submitted their resignations independently and under no duress. The portfolios of the expelled ministers were restructured and distributed among other party leaders.

Meanwhile, the BJP on Saturday wrote to Madhya Pradesh governor demanding an immediate floor test in the Assembly, The Indian Express reported.

A delegation of BJP leaders comprising former Chief

Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan and Leader of Opposition Gopal Bhargava accused Chief Minister Kamal Nath of trying to pressurise the rebel MLAs as the Congress government, it alleged, is already in minority after their resignations.

"It has become public [knowledge] that the chief minister is constantly trying to put pressure or offer alluresments to not just the 22 legislators but also others," the party said in a letter to

the governor, according to the newspaper. "Any further delay in holding the trust vote would lead to more horse trading."

The party added: "The government should prove its majority first. Any Assembly proceeding other than the trust vote, or for the government to continue in office, would be undemocratic and unconstitutional." It demanded that a floor test be held possibly on Sunday ahead of the budget session, which begins on Monday, so that the government proves its majority before undertaking any other official business.

It further asked Tandon to ensure the "minority government" does not cancel or postpone the trust vote on the pretext of an excuse.

On the process of conducting the floor test, the BJP said that the exercise should be undertaken by ordering a "division" and pressing the button instead of voice vote. It demanded the entire pro-

ceedings of the floor test be recorded.

Earlier on Friday, Nath met the governor in Bhopal and told him that the BJP had indulged in "horse-trading" of legislators and had held 19 of them captive.

Nath told the governor that the party was ready to take the floor test during the Budget Session beginning from March 16. After the meeting, Nath said: "Floor test will happen but it will be possible only when there is freedom. Where is the freedom when 22 MLAs are held captive? Some say that they are coming back. When are they coming back?"

Before the resignations, the government had a wafer-thin majority – the party had 114 MLAs of its own in the 230-seat state Assembly, and seven others supported it. Two seats are vacant. If the 22 resignations are accepted, the Congress would be reduced to 92 MLAs and the government would collapse. **AGENCIES**

PM Modi appreciates bipartisan support to his 'Janta curfew' call

NEW DELHI: Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Friday appreciated the "bipartisan" support from politicians cutting across party affiliations to his call for a "Janta curfew" on Sunday as part of the efforts to check the spread of the coronavirus, saying all of us have to fight the menace together.



Responding to tweets by leaders on his call for a "Janta curfew", he said a "bipartisan support in such efforts is deeply appreciated. We have to fight this menace together". Nationalist Congress Party's (NCP) Supriya Sule had tweeted, saying as a responsible citizen of the country, she pledged her support to the "Janta curfew" announced by Modi.

The prime minister also referred to tweets by Telugu Desam Party leader N Chandrababu Naidu, who said these were testing times for the nation and everyone must fight with resilience and social distancing.

Modi also referred to tweets in support of the

"Janta curfew" by personalities from various fields, including sports, media and the Bollywood.

He also shared a video posted by these personalities.

Pitching for "social distancing" in his address to the nation on Thursday, Modi called for a "Janta curfew" from 7 am to 9 pm on March 22, saying no citizen, barring those in essential services, should get out of their houses and asserted that it will be a litmus test to show India's readiness to take on the challenge of the coronavirus outbreak.

This experience will serve the nation well, he added. **AGENCIES**

Speaker rejects Gujarat Congress demand to put off budget session

GANDHINAGAR: Opposition Congress MLAs staged a walkout from the Gujarat Assembly on Monday after the Speaker refused to accept their demand to postpone the ongoing budget session in the wake of the novel coronavirus threat.

The ruling BJP had opposed the demand claiming the Congress was running scared due to five of its MLAs quitting ahead of the March 26 Rajya Sabha polls.

Congress MLA from Ahmedabad's Danilimda, Shailesh Parmar, requested Speaker Rajendra Trivedi to put off the budget session, scheduled to end on March 31, and resume it when the virus scare dies down.

Backing Mr. Parmar's demand, Leader of Opposition Paresh Dhanani said the session could be postponed as discussions on the budget had been completed, adding that the government had already ordered closure of schools, colleges, cinema halls, and other places attracting foot-



fall. He also cited the example of neighbouring Maharashtra where the budget session ended ahead of the schedule.

However, Chief Minister Vijay Rupani opposed the demand saying such a move would send a wrong message to people amid the coronavirus threat.

Mr. Rupani claimed the Congress was more concerned about the crisis arising from five of its MLAs resigning ahead of the RS polls, and, therefore, was making the postponement demand.

"We should stay back here and worry about the people of the State. If we run away scared, then what will happen to citizens? This is why, as public representatives, we should not be scared, but care about people," the CM said.

"Their demand for suspension is more due to todona (break up) (play on the word corona and a reference to the quitting of MLAs) scare because of the upcoming RS elections. If you want to go to Jaipur, its your will" he said. **AGENCIES**

When will you release Omar Abdullah, apex court asks Centre

NEW DELHI: The Supreme Court has asked the Centre and the Jammu and Kashmir administration to clarify within a week whether it proposes to release former Chief Minister Omar Abdullah, who is in detention since August 2019.

"If you are releasing him, then release him soon or we will hear the matter on merits," a Bench led by Justice Arun Mishra told the lawyers on the government side on Wednesday.

The observation came after counsel for the Centre and the J&K administration said Solicitor General Tushar Mehta, who is appearing in the matter, was arguing in another court.

The court was hearing a plea by Sara Abdullah Pilot, sister of Mr. Abdullah, challenging his continued detention under the Public Safety Act.

Mr. Abdullah was already under detention — from August 5 last year when the Centre removed the special rights of the



Kashmiri people under Article 370 — when the PSA was slapped on him on February 5, 2020.

Ms. Pilot had explained that Mr. Abdullah's detention from August 5 2019 under Section 107 CrPC (security for keeping the peace) was to have ended on February 5, 2020. He had served the maximum period of detention. But on February 5, the Executive Magistrate, instead of releasing him, ordered his further detention under Section 8 of the Public Safety

Act of 1978 in an "arbitrary exercise of power."

She said there had been no effort by the authorities during the past six months to verify the truth behind the "information" that Mr. Abdullah was a threat to peace. In fact, on the other hand, there were reams of material in the form of tweets and public statements vouching for his exemplary conduct to maintain peace. Ms. Pilot has claimed that there was danger to her brother's life. **AGENCIES**

Four politicians go into self-quarantine

NEW DELHI: Trinamool Congress MP Derek O'Brien self-quarantined himself after BJP MP Dushyant Singh, who sat beside him in Parliament, revealed that he attended a party by singer Kanika Kapoor, who has tested positive for COVID-19.

Singh and his mother, former Rajasthan Chief Minister Vasundhara Raje, have also gone into self-quarantine after attending Kanika Kapoor's party in Lucknow, Vasundhara Raje tweeted on Friday.

Ms. Kapoor has become the first Bollywood celebrity to test positive for COVID-19 in the country and says she's under complete quarantine and medical care.

Apna Dal president and MP Anupriya Patel also said she was present in a programme with parliamentarian Dushyant Singh and will go under self-isolation as a precautionary measure.

There were reports that the singer landed in Lucknow from the United Kingdom and was admitted in a city hospital after she showed signs of flu.

"This government is putting us all at risk. The PM says self isolate yourself but the Parliament is on. I was sitting next to Dushyant the other day for 2.5 hours.

There are two more MPs who are in self isolation. The session should be deferred," Mr. O'Brien said earlier when news of Mr. Singh broke. **AGENCIES**

All five RS candidates in Bihar elected unopposed

PATNA: All five candidates for as many Rajya Sabha seats in Bihar were on Wednesday declared elected unopposed as no other nominations were filed, an official said.

Bihar Assembly Secretary-Retiring Officer Bateshwar Nath Pandey told PTI that certificates were handed over to all the five candidates after the deadline for withdrawal of nomination papers at 3 p.m.

Two candidates each were from the Janata Dal (United) (JD(U)) and the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD), and one from the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

Since no other candidate had filed nomination papers, the voting, which was scheduled on March 26, was done away with.

Elections were necessitated for the seats as they were falling vacant next month upon the expiry of term of the sitting Members all of whom belonged to the JD(U)-BJP combine in the state.

The JD(U) candidates were Harivansh, who is currently the Deputy Chairman of the Rajya Sabha, and Ram Nath Thakur. They will be serving a second consecutive term.

Harivansh is a veteran journalist, who has edited the Prabhat Khabar for long, and is considered a confidant of Chief Minister Nitish Kumar, who is also the JD(U)'s national president.



son of former chief minister Karpooi Thakur, arguably the tallest OBC leader from Bihar who Mr. Kumar and other socialist leaders of his generation consider their political guru.

BJP candidate Vivek Thakur, a former MLC who makes his parliamentary debut, is the son of former Union Minister C P Thakur, whose Rajya Sabha tenure ends next month.

The RJD candidates are Prem Chand Gupta and Amarendra Dhari Singh.

Mr. Gupta, who is a close aide of RJD supremo Lalu Prasad, hails from Haryana and had served as a Minister in the UPA-I government at the Centre.

Mr. Singh, who is an entrepreneur, is not known for prior involvement in politics.

His candidature had caused much bewilderment in the five-party grand alliance headed by the RJD, one reason being that he is a Bhumihar, the upper caste known to be most vocally opposed to Lalu Prasad in Bihar. **AGENCIES**

BJP leader arrested for hosting cow urine party

KOLKATA: A BJP activist has been arrested for organising a cow urine consumption event in Kolkata, claiming that it will protect people from coronavirus or cure those already infected, leading to a civic volunteer falling ill after drinking it, police said on Wednesday.

He was arrested late Tuesday night following a complaint filed by the victim, they said. According to police officials, 40-year-old Narayan

Chatterjee, a local party worker of Jorasakho area in North Kolkata, had on Monday organised a cow worship programme at a cowshed and distributed cow urine.

He vouched for its "miraculous" properties while offering gaumutra to others. A civic volunteer, who was on duty near the cow shed also consumed gaumutra and fell sick on Tuesday, following which he lodged a complaint with



the police against Chatterjee. Reacting to the arrest, the state BJP leadership criti-

cised the state government. "Chatterjee had distributed cow urine, but he didn't fool people in consuming it. When he distributed it he clearly said it was cow urine, he didn't force anyone to drink it. It has not been proved whether it is harmful or not. "So how can just police arrest him without any reason. This is completely undemocratic," state BJP General Secretary Sayantan Basu said.

West Bengal BJP chief Dilip Ghosh has said there is no harm in drinking cow urine and he has no qualms in admitting he consumes it. His party colleague and MP Locket Chatterjee, however, differed, terming it an "unscientific belief" that should be shunned. The cow urine distribution as a cure for coronavirus had drawn sharp criticism from the ruling TMC and opposition Congress. **AGENCIES**

Opposition walks out as ex-CJI Gogoi takes oath in RS

NEW DELHI: Former Chief Justice of India (CJI) Justice Ranjan Gogoi on Thursday took oath as a Rajya Sabha member amidst protests and walkout by Opposition parties. The Congress said his appointment had disgraced the Indian judiciary.

The ruckus began as soon as Chairman Venkaiah Naidu called out Justice Gogoi's name. Opposition parties, including the Congress, Left parties, DMK and the MDMK, started raising slogans- "Shame on You" and many screamed "Deal". Mr Naidu ordered that the sloganeering would not go on record. He attempted to bring order to the House but without avail. The Opposition parties staged a walkout even as Justice Gogoi was taking oath.

"We know the constitutional position; we know the precedents; we know the powers of the President of India. We should not do anything like this in the House. Whatever views you have, you can express them outside; you are at liberty"



to nominate Justice Gogoi citing the tradition of choosing eminent persons from diverse fields, including former Chief Justices by Congress governments in the past. Former Chief Justice of India Ranjan Gogoi arrives at Parliament House to take oath as Rajya Sabha member on Thursday.

"Hon'ble member Ranjan Gogoi, who has taken oath

today will surely contribute his best as a nominated member. It was grossly unfair on their part to do like that," Mr. Prasad told the Opposition.

Minutes later, Congress leaders Anand Sharma and P. Chidambaram addressed a press conference outside the House. Mr Sharma said Justice Gogoi's appointment raised bona fide questions about quid pro quo.

Mr. Sharma said, "It has lowered the very dignity of the office that he had or rather disgraced judiciary. The constitutional scheme of things is very clear that the distancing between the Executive, Parliament and the judiciary."

He said that examples like Rangnath Mishra, the 21st Chief Justice of India who gave a clean chit to the Congress in the 1984 anti-Sikh riots, serving as a Rajya Sabha member of the Congress

between 1998 and 2004 could not be compared to Justice Gogoi's appointment because there was a time lag between his appointment to the House and retirement. In the case of Justice Gogoi, the difference between his retirement and entry to the Rajya Sabha was just four months, he noted.

The Congress pointed out that Justice Gogoi himself had said that post retirement appointment or accepting any position will be a scar on the independence of the judiciary.

During Justice Gogoi's 13-month tenure, the Supreme Court delivered landmark judgements in the Ayodhya case, on the decriminalisation of homosexuality, the entry of women into Kerala's Sabarimala temple and the Rafale jet deal along with Assam's National Register of Citizens (NRC). **AGENCIES**

Firms advised to adopt 'Work from Home' policy

MOVE AIMS AT ENCOURAGING 'SOCIAL DISTANCING' TO CURB CORONAVIRUS SPREAD

NEW DELHI: The government has advised companies to implement 'Work from Home' policy for their staff to encourage "social distancing" to curb spreading of coronavirus infections.

As part of relaxations in compliance requirements, the

corporate affairs ministry has allowed companies to conduct board meetings through video conference and other audio visual means till June 30.

In an advisory on Thursday, Corporate Affairs Secretary Injeti Srinivas said the ministry is examining relaxations under the companies law that could be implemented in the wake of the coronavirus outbreak.

It would also come out with a web form for companies/LLPs to confirm their readiness to deal with the coronavirus threat. This is aimed at collecting details of companies and LLPs that adopt 'Work from Home' policy.

Since companies/LLPs



(Limited Liability Partnerships) are major employers, especially in urban areas, their full participation and cooperation is most essential to fully realise the objective of social distancing as a means to contain the spread, morbidity and mortality due to the disease, he said in the advisory.

They have been strongly advised to put in place an im-

mediate plan to implement the 'Work from Home' policy as a temporary measure till March 31.

"All companies/LLPs are advised to implement the 'Work from Home' policy in their headquarters and field offices to the maximum extent possible, including by conduct of meetings through video conference or other electronic/telephonic/ computerised means," he said.

Even with the essential staff on duty, Srinivas said staggered timings may be followed so as to minimise physical interaction.

"The web form named CAR (Company Affirmation of

Readiness towards COVID-19) should be filed by an authorised signatory of companies and LLPs concerned," as per the advisory.

CAR-2020 would be deployed on March 23 and all companies/LLPs are requested to report compliance using the web service on the same day, it added.

On Friday, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman's office tweeted the advisory as well as the notification regarding relaxation in board meeting norms. She is also the Corporate Affairs Minister.

"The government has decided to relax the requirement of holding board meetings with

physical presence of directors in view of #COVID19," the minister's office said in the tweet.

On Thursday, a senior official told PTI that CAR-2020 would be a way of persuading companies to join hands in containing the disease and the web service would have CIN, PAN, DIN and OTP validation.

It would also encourage a movement towards social distancing, the official added.

CIN is Corporate Identification Number, PAN (Permanent Account Number), DIN (Director Identification Number) and OTP (One Time Password).

According to the advisory,

the ministry has relaxed the rules with respect to board meetings and has dispensed with the necessity of holding physical meetings on matters relating to approval of financial statements, board report, restructuring etc till June 30.

"We are also examining any other relaxations under the Companies Act, 2013, that may be necessitated on account of COVID-19," it noted.

The corporate affairs ministry is implementing the Companies Act as well as the LLP Act.

In India, more than 190 people have been infected by coronavirus and four people have died. **AGENCIES**

NEWSBRIEFS

Singapore Airlines to cut flight capacity by 50 per cent

SINGAPORE: Singapore Airlines has said it is cutting flights across its network by half as countries around the world impose border controls in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Given the growing scale of the border controls globally and its deepening impact on air travel, the Singapore Airlines (SIA) said it expects to make further cuts to its capacity.

"Make no mistake — we expect the pace of this deterioration to accelerate. The SIA Group must be prepared for a prolonged period of difficulty," SIA Chief executive officer Goh Choon Phong said in a release on Tuesday.

The SIA, he said, has lost a large amount of traffic in a very short time, and it will not be viable for the airline to maintain its current network. Today's suspensions mean that the SIA will operate only 50% of the capacity that have been originally scheduled up to the end-April, the airline said. The SIA said it is actively taking steps to build up liquidity.

The group will also consult the unions (of employees) once again as it urgently takes steps to further cut costs. Additional measures will be announced when they have been firmed up. **AGENCIES**

Tata Motors JLR suspends production in UK amid pandemic

LONDON: Tata Motors owned Jaguar Land Rover (JLR) on Friday announced a temporary production suspension at its UK plants in light of the social distancing underway to combat the coronavirus pandemic, which has led to 144 deaths in Britain.

The UK's largest carmaker said the suspension would come in place from next week and last at least until April 20, when it will be subject to a review of the "rapidly-changing circumstances".

"As a responsible business, Jaguar Land Rover is operating in line with advice from the NHS and Public Health England to minimise the spread of the coronavirus, whilst implementing plans to safeguard its business continuity. The company will work towards an orderly return to production once conditions permit," JLR said in a statement.

It confirmed that the company's manufacturing plants in India and Brazil remain operational and a joint venture plant in China had also reopened late last month, as life there "begins to get back to normal". "Although the company's focus must be on its business and responsibilities to employees, Jaguar Land Rover is doing whatever it can to support its communities through the current situation. The company's thoughts are with those directly affected by COVID-19 and with the healthcare professionals, whose role in combating this virus is appreciated by all," the company said.

JLR has plants across the UK, including Castle Bromwich, Solihull, and Halewood in the West Midlands and northern regions of England. **AGENCIES**

90 days extension for Jet Airways to complete insolvency process

MUMBAI: The National Company Law Tribunal (NCLT) on Wednesday allowed 90 days' extension for the corporate insolvency resolution process of Jet Airways.

Jet Airways' resolution professional had last week filed an application in NCLT seeking 90 days' extension for the insolvency process of the grounded airline after it failed to attract any bidder.

The NCLT bench, comprising Bhaskara Pantula Mohan and Rajesh Sharma, granted



the extension as the Committee of Creditors (CoC) voted for the same, with 70 per cent votes in favour.

The CoC had on February 18 set a new deadline of March 10 for submission of bids for the grounded airline after South American conglomerate Syn-

ergy Group and New Delhi-based Prudent ARC failed to meet the previous deadline.

Later, Synergy Group had backed out of the bidding process over slot issues. The March 10 deadline was set after Russia's Far East Asia Development Fund also evinced interest in Jet Airways. The cash-strapped airline, which was grounded in April 2019, owes more than Rs 8,000 crore to banks, with public sector lenders having significant exposure. **AGENCIES**

Capacity to make 1.5cr masks a day: Minister

NEW DELHI: India has a capacity to manufacture 1.5 crore masks a day and production has already started to ensure no crisis-like situation arises amid coronavirus outbreak, the government said in Rajya Sabha on March 20.

Besides, there is no dearth of gloves, medicines and sanitisers, Chemical and Fertiliser and Shipping Minister Mansukh Lal Mandaviya told the Upper House during the Question Hour.

"We have more than 100 mask manufacturing units in the country. We have done a survey... per day 1.5 crore mask manufacturing capacity is in



the country. Production has already started. There is no shortage of masks. There is no dearth of gloves. Sanitiser is available in the country as per requirement," Mr. Mandaviya said.

Replying to a query, he said,

"We are taking initiatives to prevent any crisis-like situation in the country."

Besides, the government has taken adequate steps to contain the deadly disease, he said, adding a Group of Ministers was working on ways to contain the spread of.

"There are three routes through which the virus can enter the country — air, sea and land — through Bangladesh and Nepal border. Strict initiatives are taken at all places. Compulsory quarantine for all travellers coming to India from affected countries has been implemented," Mr. Mandaviya said. **AGENCIES**

Don't lay off employees, industry body advises firms

NEW DELHI: Industry body CII has asked its member companies not to lay off their employees, its president Vikram Kirloskar said on Thursday amid the coronavirus outbreak causing economic slowdown globally.

His remarks come against the backdrop of mounting concerns that companies, including in India, could resort to retrenchment due to sluggish demand and various restrictions in place to curb spreading of the coronavirus infection.

Observing that "times are challenging", Kirloskar said the industry has sought a moratorium on all loan repayments and urged the Reserve Bank to cut interest rates and increase liquidity in the system.

"We are requesting our members to hold on to their staff and not do layoffs as far as possible and take care of small service providers as far as possible," Kirloskar said.

The Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) had 9,325 companies as members at the end of 2019. Among other sectors, the airline industry is one of the worst hit by the outbreak. GoAir has asked many employees to go on leave without pay on a rotational basis and has also terminated services of expat pilots. Country's largest carrier IndiGo has announced pay cuts and debt-laden Air India too is considering a similar step.

"If I compare with the rest of the world, I think our government has done a wonderful job," he said, and suggested that the government should do more to support the economy as India's supply chains have been hit, impacting exports.

The coronavirus outbreak has impacted the whole world, and S&P Global Ratings on Wednesday said the global economy has entered into a

recession, while lowering the growth forecast for major countries, including India.

Elaborating on what the industry wants from the government, Kirloskar said: "We have requested for support such as moratorium on loan repayments".

Besides, both central as well as state governments should clear pending dues to micro, small and medium enterprises as fast as possible.

He also said the Reserve

"We are requesting our members to hold on to their staff and not do layoffs as far as possible and take care of small service providers as far as possible"

Bank needs to have a "re-look" at the short-term lending rate, and relax the cash reserve ratio (CRR) requirements for banks so as to increase liquidity into the system.

Earlier this week, RBI hinted at a rate cut but stopped short of a decision, belying market expectations at a hurriedly called presser, even as it announced some liquidity enhancing measures to contain the economic fallout of coronavirus.

The central bank has started selling US dollars to banks through swap auctions to augment liquidity in the forex market amid the Indian rupee sliding significantly in comparison to the greenback.

Kirloskar further said to deal with the contagious virus, industry has started talking about virtual board meetings so that business could go on without taking any health risk. **AGENCIES**

Hero Electronix unit acquires UK's chip design service provider

NEW DELHI: Hero Electronix on Tuesday said its group company Tessolve has acquired UK-based chip design services provider Test & Verification Solutions (T&VS) for an undisclosed amount.

The acquisition will bolster Tessolve's chip design capabilities, and take its overall employee strength to over 2,000 engineers, Hero Electronix CEO Nikhil Rajpal told PTI.

He added that the transaction will firmly cement Tessolve's position as an end-to-end provider of semiconductor engineering services, and help it reach the USD 100 million revenue by March 2021.

"The addition of T&VS talent and technologies will enable us to provide more integrated and optimised chip design solutions. Design verification and validation is an important phase in the design and production cycle of every semiconductor product and accelerates taking products to market," he said.

Founded in 2008 by Mike Bartley, T&VS is a provider of Design Verification solutions to semiconductor companies and offerings solutions for Design for Test (DFT) and Embedded Software with its over 400-people team across multiple markets including the UK, India (Chennai), Japan, the



"These strategic acquisitions have put Tessolve in a unique position to offer a comprehensive spectrum of services to semiconductor companies"

US and Singapore. While Rajpal declined to comment on the deal size, he said T&VS has annual revenues of about USD 10 million.

"Tessolve has been growing at a strong pace and we expect to close this fiscal at about USD 70 million. With this acquisition and the strong momentum, we are hopeful of crossing the USD 100 million milestone by March

2021," he said.

T&VS is the fifth acquisition by Tessolve in the past four years. Tessolve acquired TES DST in July 2016, Spectrum Integrated and Test lab business of Lynxemi Pte in August 2017, and Analog design business of Analog Semiconductors in November 2017.

"These strategic acquisitions have put Tessolve in a unique position to offer a comprehensive spectrum of services to semiconductor companies. The latest acquisition adds a strong team and capability depth in a critical area like chip design and expands Tessolve's presence into the UK and Japan markets," he added. Rajpal said this is the largest acquisition by Tessolve till date and a critical addition in building Tessolve into the largest semiconductor engineering services player in the world.

"We are extremely delighted and proud to be part of the Hero Electronix and Tessolve family. Tessolve has a global footprint with deep relationships and the most extensive capabilities in semiconductor engineering. It is a unique opportunity for the entire team at T&VS to integrate and aspire for larger opportunities both individually and collectively as a team," Mike Bartley, CEO and Founder of T&VS, said. **AGENCIES**

Former SBI chief quits Crisil board

NEW DELHI: Crisil has said Arundhati Bhattacharya, the past chairman of State Bank of India, has submitted her resignation as independent director of the company effective April 15.

In her resignation, Bhattacharya has indicated that the reason for her resignation is her decision to accept a full time role as chairperson and CEO in another company, the filing said. "Bhattacharya, an Independent Director of the company, has submitted her resignation as a director of the company, which will take effect on April 15, 2020," Crisil Ltd said in a filing to BSE.

She has confirmed that there is no other material reason, other than the reason stated in her resignation, it added. "I wish to advise that I have decided to accept a full time executive role as chairperson and CEO for the India operations of Salesforce, USA. Accordingly, I need to discontinue my existing non-executive assignments," Bhattacharya said in her resignation letter to the board of directors.

I sincerely regret that I will have to step down as non-executive Independent Director from the board as well as from the committees of Crisil board, from April 16, 2020," the letter said. **AGENCIES**

Supreme Court pulls up Centre, telcos over AGR

NEW DELHI: The Supreme Court on Wednesday slammed the government and telecom majors for doing "self-assessment or reassessment" of the Adjusted Gross Revenue (AGR) dues worth lakhs of crores of rupees as determined by the apex court in its verdict of October 24.

"How can there be self assessment or reassessment of payable dues? Who has permitted this? How is this not sheer contempt?" a visibly angry Justice Arun Mishra asked lawyers in the case.

Almost five months after winning its legal battle in the Supreme Court against telecom majors including Voda-

fone Idea and Bharti Airtel for the payment of AGR dues, the Centre recently did a virtual u-turn by filing an urgent application in court to give the companies a 20-year window to pay the money.

In the application, the government said it had — after "detailed and long-drawn deliberations" — devised a "formula" to soften the blow from the October 24, 2019, judgment of the Supreme Court directing the companies to cough up the AGR dues within three months.

"Do companies feel they are more powerful on earth? If anyone feels they are more powerful or try to influence



us they are wrong. Bills were raised and CAG had audited... How can self-assessment be done now?" Justice Mishra asked, before adjourning the

case for two weeks.

Justice Mishra said the court could not allow a third round of litigation over the AGR dues. The court said the

Department of Telecommunications (DoT) had fought for its dues for the past two decades.

"These dues are public money that were not paid for 20 years. Government had fought tooth and nail," the court observed.

A document annexed to the application shows that the total demand of the DoT as in October 2019 was ₹1,69,048.65 crore from 16 major telecom service providers (TSPs). The payments received till March 6 from these companies is ₹25,901.56 crore. Dues in excess of ₹1.43,000 crore are still outstanding. **AGENCIES**

Moody's cuts outlook for shipping to negative

MUMBAI: In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and deteriorating global economic outlook, ratings agency Moody's has changed its forecast for the shipping industry to negative for the next 12-18 months from stable.

"We have changed our outlook for the global shipping industry to negative from stable. This outlook reflects our expectations for the fundamental business conditions in the industry over the next 12 to 18 months," the agency said in a statement.

Sectors reliant on trade and the free movement of people are most exposed, such as passenger airlines, shipping, and lodging and leisure, says a statement from Moody's. | File

Coronavirus to hit movement-driven sectors, disrupt supply chains: Moody's

According to Moody's, the earnings before interest, tax, depreciation and amortisation (EBITDA) of shipping companies will decline in 2020 amid sharply reduced demand for shipping services in the wake



of the coronavirus. "This is because of the expected impact of the outbreak on Chinese manufacturing output and demand for coal and iron ore in China, especially during the first half of 2020, as well as related economic disruption. As a result, we have changed the outlook for the global shipping industry to negative from stable," it said.

Moody's expects the EBITDA of rated shipping companies to decline by around

6-10% in 2020 compared with EBITDA growth of almost 40% in 2019.

The EBITDA of shipping companies globally could decline by 25-30%, similar to levels last seen in 2016 when Hanjin Shipping Co went bankrupt in one of the largest recent failures in the sector, it said.

The agency had maintained a stable outlook for the global shipping industry since May 2017.

"We expect the supply-de-

mand balance to tilt toward oversupply for the container shipping and dry bulk segments, especially in the first half of this year. The situation is more positive for tankers at the moment given the recent sharp drop in oil prices. We had previously expected demand and supply growth to be largely balanced across these three key shipping segments in 2020," Moody's said.

It further noted that the revised supply and demand forecasts reflects its expect-

tations for the conditions in the specific industry sectors taking into account historical industry trends as well as the likely effect of the coronavirus.

The agency had recently revised down its 2020 baseline growth forecasts for all G-20 economies because it expected the coronavirus to hurt economic growth in many countries through first half of 2020 and to hamper trade.

Even if it has maintained a negative outlook for container segment, the recent drop in oil prices is a positive sign as it will help offset fuel costs, especially in light of the IMO 2020 low sulphur fuel regulations that came into effect in January, Moody's said.

According to the agency, some container liners have indicated that the activity in China is picking up, which is a positive, but it is also mindful of the potential for reduced commercial activity in Europe and North America as these regions battle the coronavirus. **AGENCIES**

ALSO READ | BUDGETARY PROPOSALS PASSED FOR J&K, LADAKH * P7 | S&P LOWERS INDIA'S GROWTH FORECAST TO 5.2% * P7

NEWSBRIEF

Use net banking, mobile app: Axis Bank

NEW DELHI: Private sector lender Axis Bank on Thursday urged its customers to avoid visiting branches in the wake of the coronavirus outbreak and instead, use internet banking, mobile app and chatbot for banking services. In an e-mail sent to its customers, Axis Bank MD & CEO Amitabh Chaudhry said the bank is constantly monitoring the evolving situation around the pandemic and taking "proactive steps" to safeguard all employees and customers visiting offices, branches and ATMs. "While we are always 'Dil se Open' for you at all our branches, you may want to avoid going to a branch at this juncture. This is a great time for you to try our best-in-class digital solutions. **AGENCIES**

iGTB partners with Middle East bank

NEWDELHI: Intellect Global Transaction Banking (iGTB), part of Intellect Design Arena, on Friday said it has partnered with a Middle East bank to enhance the lender's liquidity management capabilities.

The liquidity management solution from iGTB empowers corporate treasurers with pooling, sweeping, inter-company loans and virtual accounts, as well as policy-driven automated investment sweeps, cash flow forecasting and real-time funds checking, as per a regulatory filing. "... Middle East's second-largest bank has expanded its relationship with iGTB to enhance the bank's liquidity management capabilities," Intellect Design Arena said in the filing. iGTB is in corporate liquidity management and partners banks worldwide. **AGENCIES**

No decision on ₹2,000 notes' printing

NEW DELHI: The government on Monday said no decision has been taken to discontinue printing of ₹2,000 banknotes.

"No indent was placed with the presses for printing of ₹2,000 denomination notes for 2019-20. However, there is no decision to discontinue their printing," Minister of State for Finance Anurag Singh Thakur said in a written reply in Lok Sabha.

The Minister was replying to a question whether the government has stopped printing of new ₹2,000 currency notes and if the public sector banks had issued any circular to stop circulation of ₹2,000 notes through ATMs. "In view of the higher circulation of currency notes of ₹500 and ₹200 denominations and the inconvenience faced by customers in exchanging ₹2,000 notes, two of the public sector banks, namely State Bank of India and Indian Bank, have issued instructions to the field functionaries to re-configure the ATMs for currency notes of ₹500 and ₹200 denominations," Mr. Thakur said. **AGENCIES**

MP, Rajasthan farmers yet to get ₹4,213 crore crop insurance

NEW DELHI: The Centre in Rajya Sabha on Friday urged the states to release their share of premium under crop insurance to benefit farmers, citing the examples of Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan that have not released Rs 2,731 crore and Rs 1,482 crore respectively. The premium subsidy sharing pattern between the Centre and the states has been 50:50. Replying to a query during the Question Hour in the Upper House, Minister of State for Agriculture and Farmers Welfare Kailash Choudhary said the Centre was in touch with states for early release of their share so that it can release the premium to farmers. "The states which have not given premium for crop insurance include Madhya Pradesh which owes Rs 2,731 crore and Rajasthan which owes Rs 1,482 crore," Choudhary said. **AGENCIES**

RBI injects ₹10k crore liquidity into market

MOVE AIMS TO ENSURE FINANCIAL STABILITY IN SYSTEM IN WAKE OF COVID-19



NEW DELHI: The Reserve Bank has injected liquidity of ₹10,000 crore through open market operations on Friday to maintain financial stability in the system in the wake of coronavirus outbreak in the country.

"With the heightening of COVID-19 pandemic risks, certain financial market segments have been experiencing a tightening of financial conditions as reflected in the hardening of yields and widening of spreads.

"It is important to ensure that all market segments remain liquid and stable, and function normally," RBI said in a release on Wednesday.

Accordingly, the Reserve

"It is important to ensure that all market segments remain liquid and stable, and function normally"

Bank has decided to conduct open market operations on March 20, 2020 (Friday) in the form of purchase of an aggregate amount of ₹10,000 crore of government securities through a multi-security auction using the multiple price method, it said.

It will purchase securities with coupon rate of 8.20% (maturity February 15, 2022);

Enough policy tools to help the economy tide over the crisis: Das

RBI Governor Shaktikanta Das has said the regulator has "enough policy tools and stands ready to take any measures" needed to help the economy tide over the impact of the coronavirus pandemic.

In two liquidity enhancing measures, Mr. Das announced another round of \$ 2 billion dollar-rupee swap on March 23, and in another measure he said the RBI will continue to conduct the long-term repo operations (LTROs) of up to ₹1 lakh crore as and when the market needs it.

On March 16, the RBI conducted the first dollar-swap for \$ 2 billion under which the central bank buys rupee from the market by selling the dollars.

On the LTROs, it has already conducted four rounds worth ₹1 lakh crore operations since February 14, after announcing it at the February 6 policy review.

OMO are money market tools to suck or inject liquidity into the system. When there is enough liquidity, the RBI resorts to selling of government securities to take out money supply, while it purchases the same when the market needs the money.

7.37% (April 16, 2023); 7.32% (January 28, 2024) and 7.72% (May 25, 2025).

RBI said there is no notified amount against any of these securities within the aggregate ceiling of ₹10,000 crore set for the operation.

The result of the auction will be announced on the

same day and payment to successful participants will be made during banking hours on March 23, 2020 (Monday).

Successful participants should ensure availability of requisite amount of securities in their SGL accounts by 12 noon on March 23, 2020 (Monday), it added. **AGENCIES**

Banking body slams purported verbal attack on SBI chief

NEW DELHI: The All India Bank Officers' Confederation (AIBOC) has condemned the purported "unsavoury attack" on SBI Chairman Rajnish Kumar by Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman during a banking event last month in Guwahati.

The association claimed that an audio clip has gone viral on social media that revealed the finance minister coming down heavily on SBI chief, accusing him of poor credit uptick, during an outreach programme in late February.

The AIBOC is the largest bank officers' organisation having membership of around 3,20,000 officers.

The AIBOC "vehemently condemns the direct and unsavoury attack on the Chairman of State Bank of India, Rajnish Kumar by the Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman recently in Guwahati as revealed in an audio clip, which has gone viral on social media", it said in a statement dated March 13.

It appears that on February 27, 2020, while attending the SBI Financial Inclusion Outreach programme at Guwahati, the finance minister came down heavily on



State Bank of India and its chairman Rajnish Kumar in presence of finance minister of Assam and other officials of DFS, state government, heads of various other banks, the AIBOC said.

"She launched a vituperative verbal tirade at Rajnish Kumar and accused him of being responsible for all the failures of extending loans, especially to tea garden workers in Assam," it added.

She even went on to brand SBI as a "heartless bank" and literally humiliated Rajnish Kumar, chairman of the largest bank of the country in the forum, it claimed.

"On the top of all, it is disheartening to observe that the entire episode has been

recorded by someone and it has been ensured that the same goes viral on social media.

"We deem it nothing but an unfortunate deliberate attempt on part of certain unidentified miscreants who can unauthorisedly can go to the extent of recording and spreading the humiliation of SBI Chairman at the hands of the finance minister at an official conclave," the banking officers' union said.

It said the intent to make the audio and letting it go viral on social media is has the only possible motive of demeaning and tarnishing the image of the largest public sector bank in the eyes of public at large. **AGENCIES**

Insurance cover sought for coronavirus-hit businesses

THE CORONAVIRUS HAS BEEN DECLARED A PANDEMIC BY THE WORLD HEALTH ORGANISATION (WHO) AND IT IS NECESSARY THAT INDIAN CITIZENS PROTECT THEMSELVES AGAINST THIS VIRUS. THIS POLICY HAS BEEN DESIGNED TO COVER THOSE WHO TEST POSITIVE, WHETHER OR NOT THEY HAVE TRAVELLED BEYOND THE COUNTRY'S BORDERS. IT WILL HELP PROVIDE A LUMP-SUM PAY OUT FOR THOSE AFFECTED TO MEET THEIR HOSPITALISATION EXPENSES

NEW DELHI: Traders' body CAIT has appealed to Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman to direct regulator IRDAI to mandate insurance firms to introduce coverage for disruptions to businesses on account of the coronavirus outbreak.

In a letter to Sitharaman, CAIT suggested that insurance companies may be mandated to introduce 'disruptions due to coronavirus' as an additional cover to fire and materials damage policies, and the existing policyholders may be offered an option to add the additional cover.

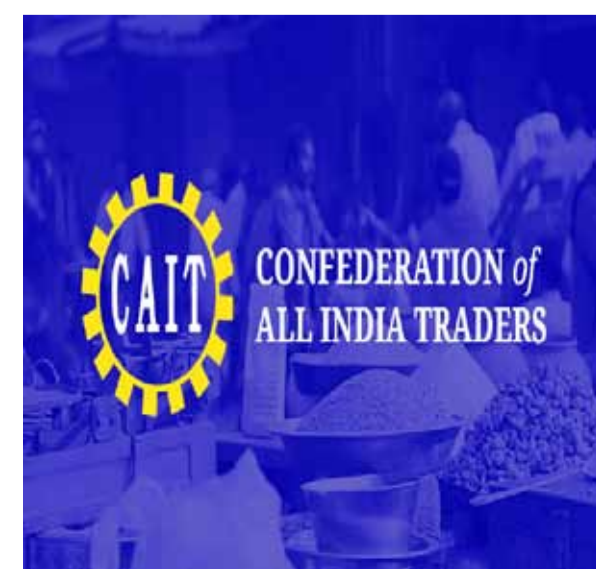
Confederation of All India Traders (CAIT) Secretary General Praveen Khandelwal highlighted the need for insurers to come up with need-based policies like cover against mosquito-borne diseases and vector-borne diseases, which can cover hospitalisation expenses due to coronavirus or fixed benefits upon its diagnosis.

CAIT has also sent a similar representation to Commerce Minister Piyush Goyal to take up the matter with Finance Ministry. Separately, DBS Bank

India has tied-up with Bharti AXA to roll out a complimentary insurance plan covering all medical conditions, including Covid-19.

The plan would cover all medical conditions, including Covid-19, and up to 10 days of hospitalisation, with a cover of Rs 5,000 per day, for a 30-day period, DBS Bank India said in a release.

Additionally, all DBS customers can purchase health



Yes Bank transfers Puri Jagannath Temple's ₹389 cr FD account to SBI

NEW DELHI: Yes Bank on Thursday said it has transferred a ₹389-crore fixed deposit account of Shree Jagannath Temple Administration, Puri, to State Bank of India.

The fixed deposit (FD) account of the temple has accrued a total interest of ₹8.23 crore.

"As per the term of condition of FD placed with us, Yes Bank Ltd has fully paid all the quarterly interest on time up to December 31, 2019. The remaining interest that has accrued till March 19, 2020, has been remitted along with the principal amount of ₹389 crore to SBI account of Jagannath Temple Corpus Fund," Yes Bank on Thursday said in a letter, accessed by PTI.

In the letter addressed to Chief Administrator Krishan Kumar of the famous temple shrine in eastern India, Yes



Bank said it has two more FDs of ₹156 crore which will be transferred by the end of this month. These FDs of ₹156 crore are also under non-premat option which does not allow the bank to pay prematurely, the letter said.

"As the extended guidelines of the regulator, we shall remit the principal amount of ₹156 crore and interest up to date on the date of maturity

that is March 30, 2020, to the designated account of Jagannath Temple Corpus Fund...to SBI Main Branch Puri," Yes Bank said in the letter undersigned by its Senior Vice-President Jaydev Das.

Yes Bank resumed its full banking services from Wednesday evening and customers started visiting the branches from the morning of Thursday. **PTI**

Indian Bank's NPA likely to soar

KOLKATA: Indian Bank's board will remain unchanged following its merger with Allahabad Bank on April 1, but its non-performing assets will soar.

The coronavirus outbreak also poses new threats to the amalgamated entity to clock around 12 per cent loan growth at the end of the next fiscal. "The existing Indian Bank board will not change from April 1 post amalgamation and the headquarters will remain at

Chennai," Indian Bank MD & CEO Padmaja Chundurur said asserting that amalgamation is on schedule amid coronavirus outbreak.

She said net NPA of Indian Bank was 3.4 per cent while that of Allahabad Bank is 5.1 per cent. However, what will be the net NPA of the amalgamated entity needs to be worked out. The merged entity is likely to tap capital markets for growth capital during the second half

of 2020-21, she said. The combined entity's capital to risk-weighted assets ratio (CRAR) will be around 13 per cent.

"We have done our projection that it should be well enough to take care of the growth for at least the initial period. We have a plan to tap the markets for the second half of the next fiscal. But both the quantum and the timing will depend on the market conditions, she said. **AGENCIES**

Rana Kapoor sent to judicial custody; lawyer fears he may get coronavirus

MUMBAI: Yes Bank founder Rana Kapoor, arrested in a money laundering case, is "easily susceptible" to getting infected by the coronavirus in prison, his lawyer told a court here on Friday.

Kapoor, arrested by the Enforcement Directorate (ED) under the Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA) earlier this month, was custody till April 2 as the investigation agency did not seek his further remand.

The CBI, meanwhile, obtained a production warrant against him in another case.

As his earlier remand ended, the ED produced the 62-year-old Kapoor, former MD and CEO of the beleaguered Yes Bank, before the court here. When the judge asked if he had any complaints, Kapoor said he has been suffering from asthma for the last six-seven years, has low immunity, and he was in acute depression.

Advocate Abbad Ponda, his lawyer, said a person with low immunity is "easily susceptible" to catching coronavirus. "The virus is



"The virus is spreading very fast... It is a very precarious situation. If he goes there (to the jail) he might catch something which is very very serious"

spreading very fast....It is a very precarious situation. If he goes there (to the jail) he might catch something which is very very serious," the lawyer said, requesting that Kapoor should be kept in a larger cell. The court asked the jail authorities to take proper care and provide him medicines as per the advice of the medical officer.

As the ED did not want his further custody, judge

Parashuram Jadhav sent Kapoor in judicial custody till April 2. According to the ED, loans of ₹30,000 crore were given by Yes Bank when Kapoor was at its helm, and of these, advances of ₹20,000 crore became bad loans. The central probe agency also claimed that over ₹202 crores of loans given to a joint venture company of the HDIL group were used to repay previous dues of the real

estate company which has now become bankrupt.

The Reserve Bank of India earlier this month put the bank under moratorium, restricting withdrawals to ₹50,000 per account. The ED has accused that Kapoor, his family members and others got benefits worth ₹4,300 crore through companies controlled by his family as kickbacks for sanctioning huge loans. He is also accused of receiving bribes for going easy on loans given to a few big corporate groups that had turned into non-performing assets (NPAs).

Meanwhile, the Central Bureau of Investigation, which is also conducting a probe against Kapoor, has obtained a production warrant against Kapoor to produce him before CBI court and seek his custody, its lawyer said. Last week, the CBI had registered a case against Kapoor and his wife Bindu for allegedly obtaining ₹307 crore bribe through the purchase of a bungalow in an upscale Delhi area from a realty firm at half the market price. **AGENCIES**

It includes surety of payments for hassle-free hospitalization and arrangement of emergency medical evacuation for NRIs with dependents in the country

insurance products that

are currently offered on the digibank app through their general insurance partners.

The bank is conducting periodic meetings with its insurance partners to ensure seamless and end-to-end online access to these facilities and improvisation to the products, it said.

This includes guarantee of payments for hassle-free hospitalization and arrangement of emergency medical evacuation for NRIs with dependents in the country.

It is also offering an Emergency Global Medical Assist Program that provides 24x7 access to medical support.

Also, Star Health and Allied Insurance have launched a benefit policy to cover all those who test positive for novel coronavirus (Covid-19) and require hospitalisation.

The "Star Novel Coronavirus" policy will provide a lump sum payment to any insured between age 18 to 65 years, who is declared positive by a government accredited test and is hospitalised for the same, the private health insurer said in a release here.

Importantly, the policy does not have any international travel history related exclusions, it added.

The policy is available under two sum insured options of Rs 21,000 and Rs 42,000 at premiums of Rs 459 plus GST and Rs 918 plus GST, respectively.

Anyone up to the age of 65 years can purchase the policy online or through the company's network of agents without having to undergo any pre-medical screening.

"The coronavirus has been declared a pandemic by the World Health Organisation (WHO) and it is necessary that Indian citizens protect themselves against this virus. This policy has been designed to cover those who test positive, whether or not they have travelled beyond the country's borders. It will help provide a lump-sum pay out for those affected to meet their hospitalisation expenses," Star Health and Allied Insurance Managing Director Anand Roy said. All its regular health insurance plans cover for treatment against Covid-19, he added. **AGENCIES**

Will hanging of convicts deter rapists in India?

The recent hangings of four convicts of the gang rape and murder of a 23-year-old woman may have brought a semblance of closure to her parents, prompting her mother, to say, “Women will now feel safe.” But is India any closer to guaranteeing safety for women? In 2012, the government of the day, reacting to the clamour on the streets for justice, set up the Justice J.S. Verma Committee to look into rape laws. The report, filed in a month, led to stringent changes through the Criminal Law (Amendment) Act, 2013, but several recommendations were simply not considered, including those relating to marital rape and police reform. On the imposition of the death penalty, the government went against what the Verma report had suggested — that seeking such a punishment “would be a regressive step in the field of sentencing and reformation”. Now, repeat offenders in rape cases, even those that unlike the Nirbhaya case did not involve murder, can be awarded the death sentence. The Verma Committee had argued instead for rigorous imprisonment of a convict for life. It is a fact that sexual crimes against women have not come down since the Delhi case. The death penalty could actually encourage the rapist to kill the victim. Going by data in the National Crime Records Bureau report, released in January 2020, a total of 3.78 lakh cases of crimes against women were recorded across India in 2018 compared to 3.59 lakh in 2017 and 3.38 lakh in 2016. This raises the key question — what does India need to do to protect its girls and women? It is apparent that laws may have changed, but not mindsets. A society that endorses a preference for the male child has already condemned the girl child to an unequal world. Until Indian policy-makers and society shed the gender bias, there will be no stopping crimes such as rape and sexual assault.



FAIZAN MUSTAFA HIGHLIGHTS THAT IT'S TIME TO RESTORE THE CONFIDENCE OF MINORITIES OF THE COUNTRY

Judgement that goes against the law

Protection of minorities is the hallmark of a civilisation. Lord Acton added another dimension to this when he said: “The most certain test by which we judge whether a country is really free is the amount of security enjoyed by minorities.” The minorities in general, and Muslims in particular, accepted the pledge of Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel that “our mission is to satisfy every interest and safeguard the interests of all the minorities to their satisfaction”. Accordingly, special safeguards were guaranteed to the minorities and incorporated under Article 30 with a view to instil in them a sense of confidence and security. However, due to recent developments in Delhi and elsewhere, this confidence stands eroded even though, in the Kesavananda Bharati case (1973), minority rights were held to be the part of basic structure of the Constitution.

In the last one year, a new trend has emerged in the Supreme Court. Smaller benches now do not hesitate to overrule larger benches' decisions. Increasingly, judicial discipline is losing its charm. In the latest judgment on minority rights, a two-judge bench of Justice U.U. Lalit and Justice Arun Mishra upheld the West Bengal Board of Madrasah Education Act, 1994, and the West Bengal Madrasah Service Commission Act, 2008, both of which take away the autonomy of madrasas in the State. The appointment of teachers in these theological institutions shall now be made by a board nominated by the government.

What is the importance of minority rights? Why is the judgment per incuriam, i.e. contrary to law?

As per Section 10 of the West Bengal Madrasah Service Commission Act, 2008, all appointments of teachers to the religious schools are to be recommended by the commission and the management committee shall be bound by such recommendations. Section 11 says that anyone appointed in contravention of this Act shall not be considered a teacher and such an appointment shall be invalid. Section 12 empowers the government to deny grants to the schools that refuse to make appointments in accordance with such recommendations. Further, government recognition and affiliation of such schools can be withdrawn.

A single judge of Calcutta High Court in March 2014 struck down the above provisions as violative of Article 30 that guarantees religious and linguistic minorities the right to establish and administer educational institutions of their choice. In December 2015, a Division Bench of the High Court upheld that decision.

Interestingly, the latest judgment notes that in Chan-



dana Das (2019), a three-judge bench gave the Sikh minority institutions of West Bengal the right to appoint teachers. In less than four months, a right given to Sikh minority institutions by the apex court has been denied to Muslim minority religious institutions.

Framers of the Constitution in their wisdom did not include any restrictions under Article 30 (unlike in the case of other fundamental rights). Hence, the Article 30 right is absolute though minority institutions are very much subject to health, sanitary and municipal regulations.

The expression ‘administer’ in Article 30 has been interpreted by the larger benches of the court such as those of judges in Ahmedabad St. Xaviers College (1974) and 11 judges in T.M.A. Pai Foundation (2003). The apex court has been consistent in holding that the term includes rights of minority institutions to select their governing bodies, teachers and staff and exercise disciplinary control over them and a right to fix reasonable fees and admit students in a fair and transparent manner.

In Rev. Sidharjibhai (1963), a six-judge bench of the Supreme Court observed that every government regulation in respect of a minority institution shall be valid only when it satisfies the dual test, i.e., it is regulative and not destructive of the organisation's minority character and it makes the minority institution an effective vehicle of minority education.

Justice Lalit, who authored the latest judgment, did refer to the Kerala Education Bill case (1957) of the Supreme Court but he overlooked the fact that a seven-judge bench headed by Chief Justice S.R. Das had held that “the dominant word in Article 30 is ‘choice’ and the content of the right under that Article is as wide as the choice of a particular minority community will make it.” Every minority community can thus make a choice in respect of its relationship with the government, the

courses taught and the day today administration, including the right to select its teachers. The government, under reasonable restrictions, can certainly prescribe the minimum qualifications. Thus UGC regulations prescribing qualifications and experience are very much applicable. But the government cannot impose its own selection of teachers on the minority institutions.

Justice Lalit himself noted several judgments on the right to choose teachers such as Rev. Father W. Proost (1969), where a five-judge bench had struck down Section 48-A of Bihar State Universities Act, 1960 that had provided that no appointment, dismissal or reduction in the rank of any teacher could be made by any governing body of a minority institution without the recommendation of University Service Commission. Similarly, in Very Rev. Mother Provincial (1969), appointment of a principal was held to be a component of a minority group's right to administer the institution.

In Ahmedabad St. Xaviers (1974), Section 33A(1) (b) of Gujarat University Act, 1949 that required that a nominee of the affiliating university must be part of the selection committee of principal and teachers was also struck down. A nine-judge bench of the Supreme Court explicitly held that minority institutions have the right to choose their teachers. In T.M.A. Pai (2003), an 11-judge bench reiterated that the management of minority institutions should have freedom in day-to-day affairs of the institutions, for example, in appointment of teaching and non-teaching staff and administrative control. However, minimum qualifications, experience and other conditions may be fixed by the government.

Justice Lalit overlooked the striking down of provisions where State governments had tried to take over or interfere with the selection of teachers and based his judgment on the broad and general observations in the earlier verdicts where the court had said government regulations are permissible. It would have been much better if the learned judge had relied on Bihar State Madrasa Education Board (1990), which he did cite, and where the court had observed that “under the guise of regulating educational standards to secure efficiency in institution, the state is not entitled to frame rules or regulations compelling the management to surrender its right to administration”.

The Chief Justice of India has now referred this judgment to a larger bench and one hopes that the apex court will restore the confidence of the minorities.

Faizan Mustafa is an expert on constitutional law. Views are personal



RAMANAN LAXMINARAYAN ADVISES TO STAND TOGETHER INSTEAD OF APPORTIONING BLAME FOR COVID-19

Display humanity in tough times

As the COVID-19 pandemic fells country after country, many in India are wondering if we are somehow different. Globally, it took roughly 45 days for the first 100,000 cases. It is likely to take nine days for the next 100,000. The global death count is now doubling every nine days and stands at 8,248, with 207,518 confirmed cases. That is how epidemics work — they gather steam as infected individuals go on to infect even more people. Confirmed cases in India, as of today stand at 169, much lower than small countries such as Iceland (around 250). Could this really be the case that we have fared better than everyone else?

Probably not. Testing in India remains abysmally low. Only about 10 in a million people in India have been tested, compared to say nearly 120 in a million in Thailand or 40 per million in Vietnam. The stated explanation is that the limited number of test kits are being conserved for when they are truly needed but when is the need greater than right now? There are probably shortages even in being able to procure adequate supplies given that many countries are seeking to buy the limited stocks. Testing is the most important thing we could be doing right now. As the Director General of the World Health Organization,



Dr. Tedros Ghebreyesus, said recently about the need for more testing, “You cannot fight a fire blindfolded.”

We need to identify coronavirus-infected patients in a timely manner in order to increase our chances of preventing secondary infections. There is no shame in saying that we have far more cases than what we have detected so far. Even the United Kingdom, which has a far better health system than India, has admitted that it is probably undercounting its true infections by a factor of 12, and is likely have about 10,000 cases. Is it possible that India with 20 times their population has only 169 cases?

If widespread testing were to commence in India, the number of confirmed cases would likely climb to the thousands very

quickly. This is something we have to be prepared for without panic or fear-mongering. This is how epidemics move and the real numbers should spur us into positive action. At some stage, it is possible that the government may have to put in place very strict measures on quarantining and closures, much like what China had to do to control the epidemic in Wuhan.

From a disease perspective, I often get asked how bad things could get. There is no easy answer. If we escape the worst, either because this virus mutates to a less virulent form or because there is something about its temperature or geographical sensitivity that we know nothing about, then we should count our blessings. Viruses do mutate and generally to be less lethal. If the projections from Europe are applicable in India, our ‘namastes’ and clean hands notwithstanding, the prevalence in India would be upwards of 20%. In other words, we should expect to see about 200-300 million cases of COVID-19 infections and about four and eight million severe cases of the kind that are flooding hospitals in Italy and Spain at the moment. More importantly, these cases are projected to appear in just a two to four-month window.

In the current scenario, we are not ready. India has somewhere between 70,000 and 100,000 intensive care unit beds and

probably a smaller number of ventilators. That is simply inadequate. The next two weeks should be spent on planning for large, temporary hospitals that can accommodate such numbers. If we are lucky, we will not need them but as Dr. Anthony Fauci, Director, U.S. National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, has said, “we should get criticized for over-reacting” rather than being under-prepared.

This all sounds doomsday-like. But we have known for decades now that of all catastrophic events to befall humanity, between an asteroid hit and a nuclear war, a disease pandemic has always been the highest on our list of impact and probability. My community of infectious disease epidemiologists have spent years warning governments to prepare for such an eventuality, and have written countless articles and hosted many meetings on this subject. There were some changes after the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) but not nearly enough. Pandemic preparedness always took a backseat to the crisis of the moment. And in fairness, there is truly no amount of preparation that can fully mitigate such an occurrence.

Prof. Ramanan Laxminarayan is Director, Center for Disease Dynamics, Economics & Policy, and Founder, HealthCUBE. Views expressed are his own

FIVE OBSERVATIONS

ON HOW COVID-19 IS AFFECTING THE LIVES ACROSS THE WORLD

- 1 ALL ARE UNITED TO FIGHT IT OFF**
Few events have united people, communities, and countries across the world as the raging coronavirus disease (Covid-19). Everyone is cooperating with everyone in fighting coronavirus.
- 2 HOW LONG WILL IT LAST IS UNCLEAR**
There is still a lot that is not known about it — how much it will spread; how many people may die; when it will subside. Though the social media and TV channels are flooded with info about the disease
- 3 GLOBAL RECESSION IS IMMINENT**
A recession can't be ruled out as Covid-19, besides testing health systems across the world, will severely contract the global economy. Some say it will dip by 50 basis points.
- 4 POOR REMAIN WORST AFFECTED**
In India, a large section of the population operates in the informal economy. Daily wage workers have no financial cushion. The social security net is almost non-existent. Covid-19 will hurt them more.
- 5 GOVT MUST ACT TO CURB IMPACT**
The government needs to, urgently, come up with a comprehensive coronavirus contingency economic plan — to keep businesses viable — including through tax relief among other measures.

LETTERBOX

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BOOKS: REVIEW

Preserving India's strategic autonomy remains crucial

The landmark India-US nuclear deal of 2008 marked a tectonic shift in international politics but it took a lot of hard bargaining to ensure the country's strategic autonomy was not compromised, says a top scientist who was at the centre of the negotiations — and received the full backing of then Prime Minister Manmohan Singh.

The euphoria in the build-up to the deal “appeared to create an impression that the ‘nuclear weapon status’ for India was around the corner. There were, however, serious pitfalls in the formulations that were being floated,” Anil Kakodkar, the then Chairman of the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC), writes in.

“Thus, even though I was in favour of developing this cooperation from the energy perspective, I was more concerned with preserving and ensuring protection

of India's strategic autonomy, which was under serious threat. The issue of strategic autonomy was crucial for both our weapons programme and sustained development of our three-stage nuclear programme,” Kakodkar writes in the book, which has been co-authored by Suresh Gangotra, the senior technical advisor to the AEC Chairman.

“I was carefully looking at every word in the proposed formulations from this perspective. Ironically, thus, I myself had to apply brakes on what I had been patiently working on for many years as there could be no compromise on our strategic autonomy,” the author maintains.

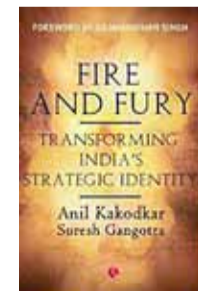
Noting that there was a section which felt this was a lifetime opportunity for India which should not be missed at any cost, Kakodkar says he began to “look like a villain coming in the way of a great deal”, adding: “We had

defined red lines that nobody should be allowed to cross.”

Colleagues from the PMO, especially Sujata Mehta, then a joint

“I was carefully looking at every word in the proposed formulations from this perspective. Ironically, thus, I myself had to apply brakes on what I had been patiently working on for many years as there could be no compromise on our strategic autonomy”

secretary, and Venkatesh Varma, then a director, were a great help through these negotiations. “In-



Fire And Fury
By Anil Kakodkar;
Rupa;
194pp; Rs 500

ternally, I was convinced that the Americans needed us much more than we needed them, and that the deal would go through,” Kakodkar states.

Referring to a brainstorming session in Washington in July 2005 on the evening before the summit between Manmohan Singh and then US President George Bush, attended by the Prime Minister and officials from the PMO and the MEA, to discuss the draft of the statement to be issued after the summit, Kakodkar says: “I had to bring out inherent risks. I explained that we couldn't open up cooperation in certain areas of the nuclear programme that impacted our strategic programme as well as the three-stage programme and risk their becoming vulnerable

to external constraints.”

“I did not support the text and expressed the need for further changes to make it satisfactory from our point of view. I was in favour of the cooperation but the proposed draft was not acceptable,” Kakodkar writes.

The clincher came from Manmohan Singh: “If Kakodkar says no, the we can't go ahead.”

Natar Singh, then the External Affairs Minister, asked him for the formulation that would be acceptable and he “scribbled it on a paper napkin lying on the table”. At lunch the next day, MEA officials showed him the latest draft separating India's civil and military nuclear facilities and placing all the civil nuclear facilities under International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) safeguards “which was now acceptable”.

“After the draft was finalised, news broke out about the Joint Statement” issued after the summit that laid down the framework for the nuclear deal. It then took more than three years for it to conclude as it had to go through several complex stages, including changes in Indian and US laws.

NEWSBRIEFS

MP draws attention to unemployment levels

NEW DELHI: A student holding a post-graduate degree in mathematics was getting the job of a sweeper at the Municipal Corporation in Chennai, a Lok Sabha member said on Monday, as he sought to know steps taken by the government to deal with the unemployment situation in the country. During the Question Hour, DMK leader A. Raja also referred to a person, who had trained as a mechanical engineer and held an MBA, getting the job of a 'khalasi' (helper) in the Railways. **AGENCIES**

New definition of MSMEs soon: Gadkari

NEW DELHI: Union Minister for Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSME) Nitin Gadkari told the Rajya Sabha on Thursday that the government would come out with a new definition of MSMEs, which are currently defined on the basis of investment in plant and machinery, by the end of the ongoing session. Concluding the discussion on the working of his Ministry that started on Wednesday, Mr. Gadkari said the government was working on the new definition. Congress member Jairam Ramesh had suggested that MSME units should be defined on the basis of turnover as it would increase compatibility with the Goods and Services Tax (GST) system. **AGENCIES**

SC dismisses pleas against State govt. steps for quota

NEW DELHI: The Supreme Court on Thursday dismissed as "not maintainable" several applications seeking directions to the Karnataka government to apply post-based reservation and creamy layer principle at entry level with regard to promotions to SC and ST employees. The verdict had come on a batch of petitions challenging the validity of the Karnataka Extension of Consequential Seniority to Government Servants Promoted on the Basis of Reservation (to the Posts in the Civil Services of the State) Act, 2018. The petitioners had contended that providing the reservation would affect the efficiency of administration, was at odds with the principle of meritocracy and would lead to creation of a creamy layer status. **AGENCIES**

Lok Sabha passes Appropriation Bill

NEW DELHI: The Lok Sabha on Monday passed the Appropriation Bill 2020-21 that empowers the government to draw over ₹110 lakh crore from the Consolidated Fund of India for its working, as well as for the implementation of its programmes and schemes. Now, with only the Finance Bill that pertains to the government's taxation proposal awaiting passage, questions are being asked if the government would go in for an early adjournment because of the spread of coronavirus. Both Speaker Om Birla and Parliamentary Affairs Minister Pralhad Joshi have so far said there is no plan to cut short the session ahead of its scheduled date of April 3. **AGENCIES**

Budgetary proposals passed for J&K, Ladakh

SITHARAMAN LISTS POSITIVE DEVELOPMENTS IN THE UNION TERRITORIES

NEW DELHI: Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman on Wednesday told the Lok Sabha that corruption had ended and things had become more transparent in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) after the region's special status under Article 370 was diluted on August 5 last year.

Responding to the debate on Budgetary proposals and the demand for grants for the Union Territories (UTs) of Jammu and Kashmir and Ladakh, she listed the positive developments, including a rise in exports, and informed that soon the Centre would hold a special conclave on start-ups, with experts from Bengaluru, Hyderabad and Gurugram sharing their expertise with



Kashmiri youth.

In a discussion that went on for close to seven hours, most Opposition members attacked the Modi government for the political detentions in J&K and demanded the immediate release of former chief ministers Omar Abdullah (National Conference) and Mehbooba Mufti (Peoples Democratic Party).

Opposition members also asserted that the Budget for

J&K should be discussed in its State Assembly and not in the Parliament of India.

Ms. Sitharaman pointed to several past instances between 1991 to 1996, when the Parliament passed the J&K Budget with the then State being under Central rule.

Participating in the discussion, Minister of State in the Prime Minister's Office Jitendra Singh claimed that J&K had not seen a more

"New dreams, new hopes and new aspirations have taken birth there under the leadership of Modi"

peaceful eight-month period in the militancy-hit region than since August 6, when its special status under Article 370 was abrogated.

"New dreams, new hopes and new aspirations have taken birth there under the leadership of Modi," he said, while stating that Prime Minister Narendra Modi would be going to the newly created UT of Ladakh to celebrate International Yoga Day on June 21.

Dr. Singh hit back at the Opposition by saying that while they [the Opposition] were concerned "about two-three families", they were not worried about the over 40,000 people who have lost

their lives in the last 30 years of militancy in J&K.

When Dr. Singh said that a section of people believed J&K had been peaceful because "potential troublemakers" had been kept inside, Opposition members protested at his comment.

The Minister asserted that construction under the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojna has "massively gone up", fund utilisation had increased by as much as 48%, over 50,000 new jobs would be created, and several medical colleges have come up, including two All India Institute of Medical Sciences' (AIIMS).

Initiating the discussion, Congress leader Manish Tewari said that the economy had collapsed as trade and tourism were adversely affected because of restrictions imposed in J&K over the past eight months. "The government should open its ears and listen to the voices of people as a dangerous situation is developing there," he said. **AGENCIES**

Exporters need help, says FIEO

HYDERABAD: The Federation of Indian Export Organisations (FIEO), Southern Region, has said the situation arising from COVID-19 pandemic for exporters is grave and many factories across sectors will be forced to slow down or even stop production.

Seeking urgent intervention of State and Central governments, FIEO-SR chairman Israr Ahmed there was a possibility of large-scale cancellation of orders, supply chain disturbance, delayed or even non-payment by the buyers, which would seriously affect cash flow of all exporters.

This put the export sector, especially MSMEs, in a very serious spot, he said. On their part, industries were trying to provide all possible help to employees and co-operate with the government for containing this serious issue.

Mr. Ahmed said this while urging the govern-



ment to initiate measures for the benefit of exporters, including relaxation of NPA (non-performing asset) norms to accommodate delay in getting payment.

Figuring in the list of such measures sought by FIEO-SR are instructions to banks to facilitate faster clearance of credit applications and extend up to 25% automatically the existing credit, extension of export realisation period from 270 to 360 days, instant provision of all ITC/IGST refunds to exporters and deferring

ESI payments for three months as well as Advance Tax payment till at least September 30. **AGENCIES**

Board meeting norms eased

NEW DELHI: As part of precautionary measures against the spread of coronavirus outbreak, the Ministry of Corporate Affairs (MCA) has relaxed several norms including board meeting obligations and physical official meetings for financial reports and restructuring.

In a letter to all companies and LLPs (limited liability partnership), Corporate Affairs Secretary Injeti Srinivas said: "Taking cognizance of the gravity of the public health situation, the Ministry of Corporate Affairs has relaxed the ruled with respect to meeting on board and dispensed with the necessity of holding physical meetings on matters relating to approval of financial statements, board report, restructuring etc, up to 30th June 2020."

He also said that the government is examining the necessity of other relaxations under the Companies Act, 2013.

The ministry has also advised all companies and LLPs to adopt the "work from home" policy till March 31, as these organisations are major employers, especially



in urban areas.

"As part of disaster management to meet this urgent and severe health exigency all companies/LLPs are expected and strongly advised to put in place an immediate plan to implement the "work from home" policy as a temporary measure till 31st March, 2020, after which the position will be reviewed by the appropriate authorities as per the evolving situation," the letter dated March 19 said.

It said that the work from home policy should be implemented in all company headquarters and field offices to the "maximum extent possible".

The Ministry is also in the

process of developing and deploying simple web form for companies and LLPs to confirm their readiness to deal with the threat of the deadly virus.

The companies have to report compliance using the web service on March 23, the letter said.

As part of the exercise to sensitise the corporate sector and allow them flexibility of operations while maintaining social distance, markets regulator SEBI has also relaxed compliance norms for listed companies and allowed them to file their fourth quarter and annual financial results by June 30.

In general, companies have to report their earnings within one month of a quarter ending and if results get delayed, the companies have to inform the exchanges.

So far, over 200 cases of coronavirus infection have been confirmed in India, and four deaths have been reported so far. Corporate sector, on its part, is also taking numerous initiatives to see that they become responsible citizens and prevent the spread of the virus. **AGENCIES**

S&P lowers India's growth forecast to 5.2%



NEW DELHI: Standard & Poor's (S&P) on Wednesday lowered India's economic growth forecast to 5.2 per cent for 2020, saying the global economy is entering a recession amid the coronavirus pandemic.

The agency had earlier projected a growth rate of 5.7 per cent during the 2020 calendar.

Asia-Pacific economic growth in 2020 will more than halve to less than 3 per cent as the "global economy enters a recession", S&P said in a statement.

"An enormous first-quarter shock in China, shut-downs across the United States and Europe, and local virus transmission guarantees a deep recession across Asia-Pacific," said Shaun Roache, chief Asia-Pacific economist at S&P Global Ratings. By recession, S&P meant at least two quarters of well below-trend growth sufficient to trigger rising unemployment.

"Our estimate of permanent income losses is likely to at least double to more than USD400 billion," said Roache.

"We lower our forecasts for China, India, and Japan for 2020 to 2.9 per cent, 5.2 per cent and -1.2 per cent (from 4.8 per cent, 5.7 per cent, and -0.4 per cent previously)"

As per the statement, external shocks from the fallout of the global viral spread add a new dimension. People flows from the US and Europe will be decimated for at least two quarters, heaping more pressure on the tourism industry.

If lingering uncertainty results in a strong preference for US dollars, policymakers in Asia's emerging

markets may be forced into a damaging round of pro-cyclical policy tightening, Roache said. Interactive map of confirmed coronavirus cases in India

The countries most vulnerable to capital outflows remain India, Indonesia, and the Philippines, he added.

"We lower our forecasts for China, India, and Japan for 2020 to 2.9 per cent, 5.2 per cent and -1.2 per cent (from 4.8 per cent, 5.7 per cent, and -0.4 per cent previously)," S&P said in the statement.

The global policy response, including the Federal Reserve's policy-rate cut to zero and the Bank of Japan's scaled-up asset purchases, will help cushion but not quickly reverse these shocks, it said.

Local measures aiming to support vulnerable sectors and workers may help but their effect will "wane the longer the crisis lasts". It further said the timing of a recovery depends, most of all, on progress in containing the viral spread. Even if major progress is made during the second quarter, after a sustained period of stressed cash flow many firms will be in no position to resume investing quickly, the S&P said.

Households that have either lost their jobs or have worked fewer hours will spend less and banks will be busy managing the deterioration in asset quality, it said.

On Tuesday, Moody's Investors Service had lowered India's economic growth forecast for 2020 to 5.3 per cent (from 5.4 per cent), on coronavirus impact on the economy. **AGENCIES**

25 million jobs may be lost due to coronavirus: UN

"IF WE SEE AN INTERNATIONALLY COORDINATED POLICY RESPONSE, AS HAPPENED IN THE GLOBAL FINANCIAL CRISIS OF 2008/9, THEN THE IMPACT ON GLOBAL UNEMPLOYMENT COULD BE SIGNIFICANTLY LOWER"

UNITED NATIONS: Nearly 25 million jobs could be lost worldwide due to the coronavirus pandemic, but an internationally coordinated policy response can help lower the impact on global unemployment, according to a UN agency.

In its preliminary assessment report titled "COVID-19 and world of work: Impacts and responses", the International Labour Organization (ILO) calls for urgent, large-scale and coordinated measures across three pillars — protecting workers in the workplace, stimulating the economy and employment, and supporting jobs and incomes.

The ILO said these measures include extending social protection, supporting employment retention (i.e short-time work, paid leave, other subsidies), and financial and tax relief, including for micro, small and medium-sized enterprises.

It also proposes fiscal and monetary policy measures, and lending and financial support for specific economic sectors.

The economic and labour crisis created by the COVID-19 pandemic could increase global unemployment by almost 25 million, the ILO said.

"However, if we see an internationally coordinated policy response, as happened in the



global financial crisis of 2008/9, then the impact on global unemployment could be significantly lower," it added.

The report provides different scenarios of how unemploy-

ment and underemployment will be impacted due to the coronavirus.

Based on different scenarios for the impact of COVID-19 on global GDP growth, the ILO es-

timates indicate a rise in global unemployment of between 5.3 million ("low" scenario) and 24.7 million ("high" scenario) from a base level of 188 million in 2019. By comparison, the 2008-09 global financial crisis increased global unemployment by 22 million.

Underemployment is also expected to increase on a large scale, as the economic consequences of the virus outbreak translate into reductions in working hours and wages.

Self-employment in developing countries, which often serves to cushion the impact of changes, may not do so this time because of restrictions on

the movement of people (e.g. service providers) and goods, it said.

The note said that falls in employment also meant large income losses for workers to the tune of between \$860 billion and \$3.4 trillion by the end of 2020. This will translate into falls in consumption of goods and services, in turn affecting the prospects for businesses and economies.

Working poverty is expected to increase significantly too, as "the strain on incomes resulting from the decline in economic activity will devastate workers close to or below the poverty line," the ILO said. **AGENCIES**

Global situation will not affect India's defence procurement

NEW DELHI: Defence Minister Rajnath Singh said on March 20 that the global economic situation would affect all nations, but ruled out any impact on India's defence procurement.

Speaking at the launch of the draft Defence Procurement Procedure, 2020, Mr. Singh said the global economy could improve in the next two-five months.

"There would certainly be impact of global economy's condition on all nations. I feel there would be hardly any impact of global economy's condition on India's defence procurement," Mr. Singh said when asked if the global economy's condition and the

coronavirus pandemic would affect Indian defence procurement.

"We can't rule out a possibility that global economy will improve in next 2 to 5 months," he said.

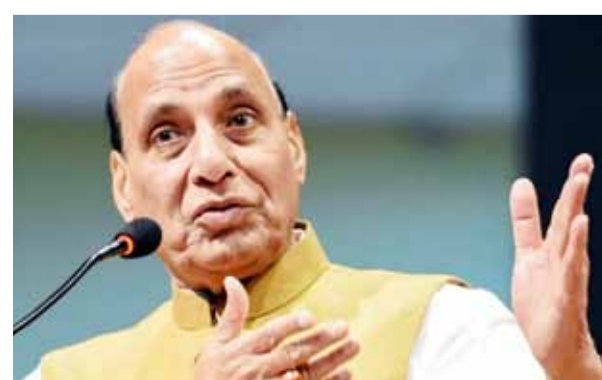
From warships to transport aircraft, India now can formally take military equipment on lease from a friendly country. Ministry of Defence has come up with a new Defence Procurement Procedure (DPP) 2020 wherein "leasing" provision has been introduced as a new category for acquisition to existing "buy and make" categories.

Unveiling the Draft Defence Procurement Procedure 2020 on Friday, Singh said, "I had

constituted a review committee in August 2019 to revise the present DPP-2016. It gives me satisfaction to announce that the draft of DPP 2020 has been prepared."

Last changes in DPP were made in 2016. The draft Defence Procurement Procedure (DPP) 2020 has been put in public domain. This is a draft DPP which will be circulated to all stakeholders for comment within four weeks. Further refinement will be carried out based on suggestions and feedback.

"In new Draft Defence Procurement Procedure 2020, we have simplified the procedure and reduced the timeline to ensure probity, transparency and



accountability," Singh said.

The minister said that life cycle support of procured equipment and platforms in this new procedure has been taken up strongly.

The minister said introduc-

tion of a strategic partnership model to progressively build capabilities of private sector and a new category with highest priority became a defining feature in DPP 2016," said Singh, adding that under

this model several projects of national importance such as production of 111 naval utility helicopters and construction of six P-75 (I) submarines have shown considerable progress.

Singh said, "The DPP 2020 is aligned with the vision to empower private industry through Make in India initiative with ultimate aim of turning India into a global manufacturing hub."

He also stressed that indigenous content stipulated in various categories of procurement has been enhanced to support Make in India initiative.

The draft DPP also talked of aligning capital with revenue budget related to sustainment

of weapons and equipment in the long run.

Defence Secretary Ajay Kumar stressed that in the new DPP, there is special provision for startups and Ministry of Micro, Small & Medium Enterprises to enter the defence sector.

"It will provide grants and funding and other support to carry out research and development to start up which has a good potential for future adoption for Indian defence needs," Kumar said.

Giving details about the changes made, Director General (Acquisition) Apurva Chandra said for the first time leasing is introduced as another category for acquisition

as it provides for an innovative technique for financing of equipment.

"Leasing provides means to possess and operate the asset without owning it and is useful to substitute huge initial capital outlays with periodical rental payments," said Chandra, adding that leasing would be permitted in two sub-categories that Lease (Indian) and Lease (global).

Earlier India took various equipment on lease from friendly countries, especially Russia, on personal request. For instance, Indian Navy has taken nuclear-powered submarine INS Chakra into its fleet in 2012 on lease. **AGENCIES**

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NEWSBRIEF

Hindustan Unilever merges with GSK Consumer Healthcare

NEW DELHI: FMCG major Hindustan Unilever Ltd (HUL) on Wednesday said the Chandigarh bench of National Company Law Tribunal (NCLT) has approved the scheme of amalgamation for the merger of the company and GlaxoSmithKline Consumer Healthcare (GSKCH). On November 6, 2019, the Mumbai Bench of the NCLT had sanctioned the scheme and the order was subject to sanction of the Chandigarh Bench of NCLT. "In this regard, we wish to inform you that the scheme has now received the sanction of the Chandigarh NCLT," HUL said in a regulatory filing. The effective date of the scheme will be communicated upon being finalised in accordance with the procedure specified by the Mumbai NCLT and Chandigarh NCLT, it added.

AGENCIES

Ashok Leyland to hike stake in NBFC arm

NEW DELHI: Commercial vehicle maker Ashok Leyland on Wednesday said it will acquire up to 19 per cent additional stake in its subsidiary Hinduja Leyland Finance Ltd (HLFL) from existing shareholders for up to Rs 1,200 crore. The company's board, at a meeting held on Wednesday, has approved to acquire up to 19 per cent additional equity shares in HLFL from the existing shareholders in tranches for a consideration not exceeding Rs 1,200 crore subject to sanctions and permissions of the appropriate authorities. Ashok Leyland said in a regulatory filing. The agreement to acquire equity shares in HLFL from the existing shareholders will be entered by the company in due course, it added.

AGENCIES

Man penalised for violating market norms

NEW DELHI: Markets regulator Sebi on Friday levied a fine of Rs 5 lakh on an individual for violating market norms while trading in the scrip of Multi Commodity Exchange of India (MCX).

The individual, Sumesh Parasrampuria, was an officer as defined under the code of conduct formulated by MCX. The order follows an investigation conducted by Sebi in the scrip of MCX between April 2012 and July 2013. Sebi noted that the individual and his father had sold shares of the MCX and the individual failed to obtain pre-clearance for the transaction done by his father.

AGENCIES

Sebi sets new norms to control volatility

NEW REGULATIONS WILL BE EFFECTIVE FROM MARCH 23 FOR ONE MONTH

MUMBAI: Markets regulator SEBI has announced measures to control the high volatility which has plagued the country's stock markets.

The Sebi said that these new norms will be effective from the beginning of trade on March 23 for a period of one month.

These measures include limits on positions that can be taken up by investors in the F&O segment.

Furthermore, the regulator set certain conditions under which mutual funds or foreign investors can place bets on the index futures. The regulator's norm to introduced limits on open positions for going short or long in index derivatives is expected to have a major affect on volatility.

The norm mandates that short positions in index derivatives shall not exceed the "Mutual Funds/FPIs/Trading Members/Clients" holding of stocks. Similarly, long positions in index derivatives shall not exceed the "Mutual Funds/FPIs" holding of cash, government securities, T-Bills



and similar instruments". Sebi said that these measures will be implemented to ensure orderly trading and settlement, effective risk management, price discovery and maintenance of market integrity. Additionally, the new measures are expected to reduce liquidity in the market.

Lately, stock markets globally have been quite volatile due to the spread of Covid-19 pandemic and the resultant fear of an economic slowdown. "The movement in the Indian stock market has

been broadly in tandem with the other global markets," Sebi said in a statement.

"Sebi and stock exchanges will continuously monitor the market developments and review the position and take any further suitable actions as may be required." Snapping its four-day losing streak, equity benchmark Sensex rallied over 1,627 points on Friday in line with global stocks as governments across the world took drastic measures to combat the economic blowback of COVID-19.

Domestic sentiment

HIGHLIGHTS

- COVID-19 task force may come out with concrete proposals very soon.
- The huge oil bounty from the crude crash can be used for this
- World over, market sentiments improved as governments stepped up measures to cushion the financial blow of the pandemic

turned positive on hopes of a stimulus package after Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced a financial task force to help sectors battered by the pandemic, experts said. After starting on a volatile note and swinging over 2,485 points, the BSE barometer ended 1,627.73 points or 5.75% higher at 29,915.96. It hit a high of 30,418.20 and a low of 27,932.67. Similarly, the NSE Nifty zoomed 482 points, or 5.83%, to close at 8,745.45.

ONGC was the top gainer in the Sensex pack, rallying around 18%, followed by HUL, UltraTech Cement, RIL, TCS, HDFC, ITC and

Asian Paints.

Only HDFC Bank and IndusInd Bank settled in the red. Mr. Modi on Thursday announced setting up of a task force under Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman which will take necessary actions "in the near future" after analysing the coronavirus pandemic situation. COVID-19 cases in India rose to 209 on Friday after fresh cases were reported from various parts of the country, according to the Health Ministry. Experts were of the view that the Covid-19 task force may come out with concrete proposals very soon.

AGENCIES

Sebi bans Paramount Printpackaging from markets for five years



NEW DELHI: Regulator Sebi has barred Paramount Printpackaging and its officials from the capital markets for five years for diverting the proceeds of initial share-sale and failing to make true and adequate disclosure in the IPO papers.

The officials that have been restrained are the company's chairman and managing director Divyesh Ashwin Sukhadia, whole time director Dharmesh Ashwin Sukhadia and former whole-time director Anuj Vipin Sukhadia.

Paramount came out with its Rs 46-crore initial public offer (IPO) in April 2011 and its shares got listed on the exchanges in May, 2011.

Sebi noted that Paramount was owned by Sukhadia family and they collectively held 79.38 per cent shares of the company before IPO and post initial share-sale, they owned 40.45 per cent stake. These three officials were in charge of the affairs of the company before and after the shares of the company got listed.

A probe by the regulator found that Paramount misutilised the proceeds of the IPO and also diverted the funds to entities that did not provide any service and goods as contracted.

"It is concluded that the noticees had a pre-determined plan where under it first raised money from the public through the IPO route by concealing material information, making false/wrong and

It is concluded that the noticees had a pre-determined plan where under it first raised money from the public through the IPO route by concealing material information, making false/wrong

inadequate disclosures regarding vendors, then transferred the IPO proceeds to pre-decided vendors within a few days and thereby misutilised and diverted the proceeds of the IPO.

"I therefore find that the noticees in the present case had misutilised Rs 35 crore and had diverted Rs 34.5 crore," Sebi Whole Time Member Madhabi Puri Buch said in a 64 page order passed on Monday.

Accordingly, the Securities and Exchange Board of India (Sebi) has barred Paramount from the capital markets for five years.

This is subject to the direction of Bombay High Court or official liquidator appointed by the court in pursuance of the the liquidation or winding up proceedings pending in respect of the company.

Further, the regulator had prohibited these three official from the markets for five years. They have also been barred from being associated with any listed company in any capacity.

AGENCIES

Bank merger taking place through video meetings

NEW DELHI: As the process of merger between Indian Bank and Allahabad Bank entered its last leg, a senior official of the city-based lender on Tuesday said it is avoiding physical meetings with field staff and arranging video-conferences in the wake of the coronavirus outbreak.

The board meetings of the lender are currently being held through video-conferences, they said. "The merger process is going on smoothly and there has been no disruption due to the coronavirus outbreak. The only difference is that instead of having physical meetings with the field staff we are now having video conferences as the process has entered its last leg," a senior official of Allahabad Bank told PTI.

He said physical meetings are now being avoided following the government advisories to prevent the spread of the disease. "Online training programmes are being arranged so that the merger process does not get derailed," the official said.

After completion of the merger process, the new



"Online training programmes are being arranged so that the merger process does not get derailed"

entity will start functioning from April 1, 2020. Indian Bank is the acquirer while Allahabad Bank is the transferor in the process. "Even the board meetings are being held through video-conferences," the official said. He also said, "Now we are training the field staff regarding the products and processes,

service charges and interest rates which are now being harmonised. This information is being disseminated to the field-level functionaries."

The government in August last year had announced four major mergers of public sector banks, a move aimed at making state-owned lenders global sized banks. Another city-based lender United Bank of India (UBI) and Oriental Bank of Commerce will also be amalgamated with Punjab National Bank. "In view of coronavirus pandemic, meetings are being conducted through video conferencing for smooth running of operations," an UBI official said.

AGENCIES

Firms get more time for Q4 results

MUMBAI: In a bid to provide relief to companies amid the coronavirus pandemic, security markets regulator SEBI has relaxed compliance norms for listed companies and allowed them to file their fourth quarter and annual financial results by June 30.

In general, companies have to report their earnings within one month of a quarter ending and if results get delayed, the companies have to inform the exchanges.

In a statement on Thursday, the Securities and Exchanges Board of India (SEBI) said: "It has been declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO). Developments arising due to the spread of the virus have warranted the need for temporary relaxations in compliance requirements for listed entities."

The regulator also extended the date of filing quarterly corporate governance report by one month

and for releasing quarterly shareholding pattern by three weeks. Corporate governance report for January-March quarter was originally due by April 15, and the deadline has been extended to May 15. The deadline for releasing the shareholding pattern was April 21, which has been extended to May 15.

Market experts have welcomed the steps and have said that these are proactive decisions by the regulator in the wake of the limit on movement and growing concerns of a deepening crisis.

Regulators have sprung into action to pacify the markets and companies. The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) on Wednesday announced it would purchase government securities worth Rs 10,000 crore through open market operations in a bid to increase liquidity and enhance confidence in the market amid the coronavirus crisis.

AGENCIES

Rules may be eased for gap between two QIPs

NEW DELHI: Capital market regulator Sebi on Monday proposed to relax the mandatory requirement of a six-month-gap between two successive issuances of shares to qualified institutional investors by listed companies requiring urgent funds, if they meet certain conditions.

As per the Securities and Exchange Board of India (Sebi) regulations, a listed company cannot make any subsequent qualified institutions placement until the expiry of six months from the date of the prior qualified institutions placement made pursuant to one or more special resolutions.

Floating a consultation paper for relaxation with



respect to QIP issues, Sebi said it has been receiving requests from listed companies with regard to the stipulated cooling off period between two QIP issues.

Sebi said the companies have been seeking exemptions or waiving off for this

requirement of six-month cooling off period between two successive QIP issues.

The reasons cited for such an exemption include an urgent need of funds and the fact that other fund raising mechanisms such as public issue or rights issue are time taking in

comparison to a QIP issue.

Sebi said its primary market advisory committee (PMAC) has suggested seeking public comments in this matter.

Accordingly, Sebi has proposed that to address concerns of the issuer companies and to support the raising of capital, it is initiating a public consultation on whether relaxation can be provided for successive QIPs within six months of previous QIP issue, in cases where terms of placement for the subsequent tranches/issue are disclosed upfront in the special resolution.

Sebi has sought public comments on this proposal till April 15, 2020.

PTI

Rupee drops by 8 paise to fresh life-time low of 75.20 vs US Dollar

MUMBAI: Rupee dropped 8 paise on Friday, after day's gain and settled at a fresh life-time low of 75.20 against the US dollar. The global forex market is grappling with economic uncertainties due to fast-spreading coronavirus pandemic across the world, and India.

At the interbank foreign exchange market, the domestic currency opened higher at 74.82 and gained more

strength as the day progressed. It went on to hit a high of 74.72 before succumbing to weakening sentiments due to the virus scare.

"The progression of fast-spreading coronavirus pandemic has created havoc ... This uncertainty and hysteria have grappled the forex market, depreciating all emerging market currencies and taking rupee to record low of 75.30 zone," Rahul Gupta, Head of



Research - Currency, Emkay Global Financial Services, said. Meanwhile, all central banks including RBI are trying to reduce the risk and address

the liquidity crunch. However, the increasing number of coronavirus cases in India will keep the rupee on an edge.

The dollar index, which gauges the greenback's strength against a basket of six currencies, was down 0.79 per cent to 101.95, helping the rupee trade higher.

On the equity front, The BSE Sensex ended 1,627.73 points or 5.75 per cent higher at 29,915.96.

AGENCIES

Market crash wipes out ₹15.72 lakh cr investor wealth in 3 days

NEW DELHI: Indian equities declined for a third day in a row on Wednesday, making investors poorer by a whopping Rs 15.72 lakh crore in the three-day crash since Monday.

Intense selling engulfed the equity market for yet another day, with the benchmark index Sensex plummeting 1,709.58 points or 5.59 per cent on Wednesday.

Since Monday, the index has plunged 5,233.97 points to hit a one-year low of 28,613.05 as fears of global recession due to coronavirus pandemic hit investor sentiment. The market capitalisation of BSE-listed companies eroded by Rs 15,72,913.52 crore in three days to reach

Rs 1,13,53,329.30 crore on Wednesday.

Barring ONGC and ITC, all 30 Sensex stocks dived. IndusInd Bank, Power Grid Corporation of India, Kotak Mahindra Bank, Bajaj Finance and HDFC Bank were among the major losers, tumbling up to 23.90 per cent.

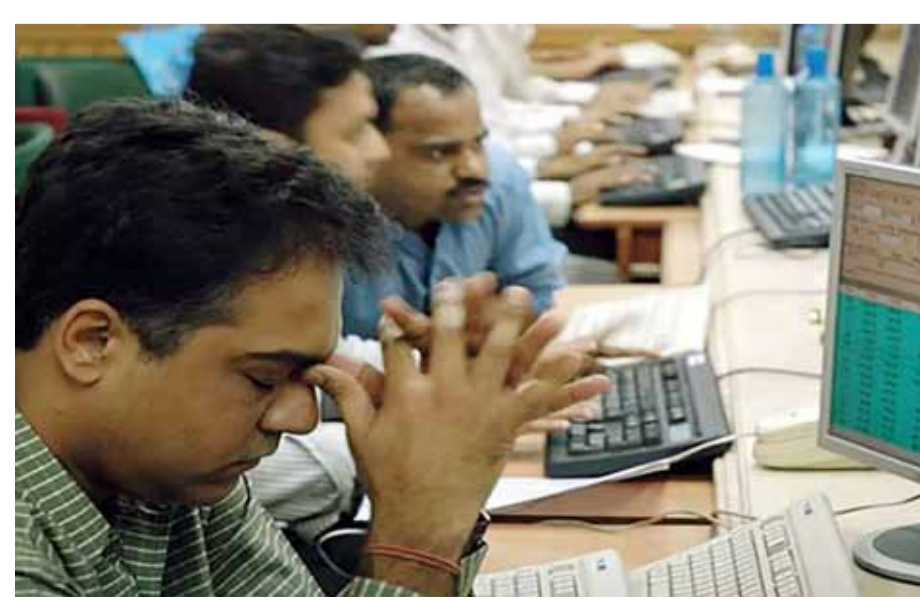
Banking shares were hit the most following the Supreme Court directive to telecom firms to clear AGR dues in full as mentioned in its judgement.

"Indian equity markets witnessed yet another sharp fall, as the increasing number of coronavirus cases and tough stance by the Supreme Court on AGR dues continued to spook the markets," Siddhar-

tha Khemka, Head - Retail Research, Motilal Oswal Financial Services Ltd, said.

"Worries of greater disruptions in businesses rose due to the rising number of new coronavirus cases in India. Many states have shut restaurants, malls, gyms and movie theatres as a precautionary measure"

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to the rising number of new coronavirus cases in India. Many states have shut restaurants, malls, gyms and movie theatres as a precautionary measure," he added.

Further, the Supreme Court held that no further objections to its orders would be allowed against telecom's AGR dues payable.

Banks shares slipped as a collapse of a telecom operator could add to lenders' bad loan pile, Khemka observed. BSE Telecom, Bank, Finance and Utilities were hit hard the most and plunged up to 9.48 per cent.

At the BSE, 1,882 companies declined, while 963 advanced and 186 remained unchanged.

In the broader market, the BSE mid-cap and small-cap tumbled 4.84 per cent and 6.09 per cent, respectively.

"The frontline indexes were down by close to 5.50 per cent, in a market hit by the likely adverse impact of the pandemic, at a time when it was negotiating a critical juncture in the already existing economic sluggishness."

"Markets will continue to mirror the developments overseas till some comfort on the spread of the pandemic is received," according to Joseph Thomas, Head of Research - Emkay Wealth Management.

More than 1,056 companies hit their one year low mark on Wednesday.

AGENCIES

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NEWSBRIEF

Mass escape in at least 4 Brazilian prisons amid outbreak

SAO PAULO: Hundreds of inmates escaped from at least four prisons in the state of Sao Paulo after local officials canceled their temporary exits because of fears they could bring the new coronavirus back with them upon their return. Sao Paulo state's penitentiary administration secretariat said in a statement on Monday night that 174 inmates have already been recaptured. Brazilian media said more than 1,000 inmates could be on the loose. Reports also say inmates were complaining about restrictions to visitations this weekend, also aimed at containing the virus. **AGENCIES**

Thai govt office bombed

BANGKOK: A bombing of a major government office in Thailand's insurgency-plagued far south Tuesday wounded at least 20 people. Col. Pramote Prom-in said a grenade and a car bombing were used to attack the Southern Border Provinces Administration Center in the capital city of Yala province. It was crowded with hundreds of people at the time because many local officials had been invited to a meeting about COVID-19, he said. A hospital reported 20 people were hurt. Col. Pramote said none of those wounded were badly injured. There were no initial claims of responsibility. Thailand's three southern-most provinces have been the scene of a Muslim separatist insurgency since 2004. About 7,000 people are estimated to have been killed in the violence. The center coordinates government policy in the region. **AGENCIES**

US, Pakistan reaffirm security partnership

WASHINGTON: U.S. Defence Secretary Mark Esper on Thursday held a telephonic conversation with Pakistan Army chief General Qamar Javed Bajwa, and reaffirmed America's commitment to a long-term, mutually beneficial security partnership, the Pentagon said. Mr. Esper expressed his appreciation for Pakistan's support to the Afghanistan reconciliation process following the February 29, U.S.-Islamic Republic of Afghanistan Joint Declaration and signing of the U.S.-Taliban Agreement, Chief Pentagon Spokesperson Jonathan Hoffman said. During the call, Mr. Esper reaffirmed the department of defence's commitment to a long-term, mutually beneficial security partnership with the government of Pakistan, Mr. Hoffman said in a readout of the call. The U.S.-Taliban peace deal, aimed at bringing lasting peace in war-torn Afghanistan and allowing American troops to return home from America's longest war, was signed in Doha on Feb. 29. **AGENCIES**

5.9-magnitude quake hits Tibet near Nepal border

BEIJING: A 5.9-magnitude earthquake struck China's remote Himalayan region of Tibet close to Nepal on Friday, authorities said. The epicentre of the quake was located 28.63 degrees north latitude and 87.42 degrees east longitude, with a depth of 10 km, according to the China Earthquake Networks Centre. Tremors were felt in Tingri county of Xigaze city in Tibet near Mount Everest at 9:33 AM, the local government said, adding that no house collapse or disruption of traffic and communications were reported. The county government has sent officials to villages and towns to collect more information, state-run Xinhua news agency reported. Tingri borders Nepal to the south. Most areas of the county belong to the Mount Everest National Nature Reserve, it said. In the meantime, nine firefighters and three fire tenders were dispatched to the epicentre. More than 100 firefighters and dozens of vehicles are on standby. **AGENCIES**

COVID-19: Global toll crosses 10,000

TENS OF MILLIONS STAY AT HOMES AS THE VIRUS MARCHES WESTWARDS

PARIS: More than 10,000 people have now died in the COVID-19 pandemic that has swept throughout the world, forcing the confinement of tens of millions in their homes.

As the virus has marched westwards, the severity of the outbreaks and the focus of concern has shifted from Asia to Europe, with increasingly tough restrictions being imposed by national governments.

The U.S. State of California, among the worst hit in the country, has told its 40 million residents to stay at home, the most drastic move yet in the United States to combat the pandemic.

However, the California measures will not be enforced by police unlike in France, Italy, Spain and other European countries where people face fines if they break the rules.

Germany's biggest state Bavaria on Friday became the first region in the country to order a lockdown for two weeks, imposing "fundamental restrictions" on going out.

The strict measures follow the template set by China, where a lockdown imposed



in Hubei province where the COVID-19 first emerged, appears to have paid off.

The country is now reporting on a handful of new infections each day, apparently from overseas visitors.

Italy is battling the single most deadly outbreak on the planet with 3,405 deaths, followed by 3,248 in China and Iran with 1,433, according to an AFP tally of official data.

Europe now accounts for half of the 10,000 fatalities

linked to the COVID-19 disease around the world.

However, accurate figures are difficult to come by as many of those who die are suffering from other illnesses and infection rates are uncertain because of a lack of testing in many countries.

The United States is showing signs that it is ramping up its efforts on all fronts, fast-tracking antimalarial drugs for use as a treatment against the virus and promising a \$1

trillion emergency relief package to combat the economic turmoil. The package — coupled with a European Central Bank plan to buy 750 billion euros in bonds — saw stock markets rebound on Friday with exchanges up throughout Asia and Europe.

U.S. President Donald Trump, who has come under fire for his response to the crisis, said on Thursday that U.S. officials would make antimalarials chloroquine and

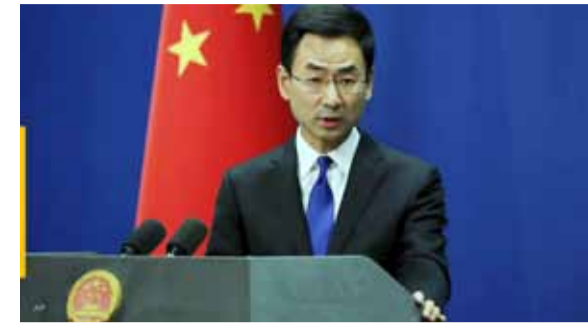
The package — coupled with a European Central Bank plan to buy 750 billion euros in bonds — saw stock markets rebound on Friday with exchanges up throughout Asia and Europe

hydroxychloroquine available "almost immediately."

Experts are divided over whether the drugs are suitable though, having undergone only the briefest of clinical trials. German and American drug firms are frantically trying to synthesise treatments for the disease and Chinese scientists are also carrying out clinical trials, though no studies have yet been published.

Trump also sparked an international row after he accused the Chinese of being secretive over its initial spread and severity, saying the world is now "paying a big price." **AGENCIES**

13 US journalists face expulsion from China



BEIJING: At least 13 American journalists stand to be expelled from China in retaliation for a new limit imposed by the Trump administration on visas for Chinese State-owned media operating in the U.S.

The Chinese government announced on Wednesday that Americans working at three major U.S. newspapers would have to surrender their press cards within 10 days. They will all but certainly have to leave the country, as their visas are tied to their media credentials.

The number of affected journalists at the three papers — The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal and The Washington Post — is at least 13 and could be higher depending on how broadly the group is defined, said the Foreign Correspondents' Club of China, or FCCC.

It would be by far the largest expulsion of foreign journalists from China in recent memory. "There are no winners in the use of journalists as diplomatic pawns by the world's two preeminent economic powers," the FCCC said in a statement.

The U.S. announced earlier this month that five State-controlled Chinese media outlets would be restricted to

100 visas, the de facto expulsion of about 60 journalists. It cited increasingly harsh surveillance, harassment and intimidation of American and other foreign journalists working in China.

The Chinese outlets employ about 160 Chinese citizens in the U.S. and include the official Xinhua News Agency and China Global Television Network, the overseas arm of state broadcaster CCTV. The foreign ministry announcement said that American citizens working for the three newspapers with credentials expiring this year must surrender their press cards within 10 days. They will also be barred from working in the semi-autonomous territories of Hong Kong and Macao, the ministry said.

Until this announcement, China had expelled nine foreign journalists since 2013, the FCCC said. The dramatic step, which shocked foreign journalists in China, is the latest retaliatory move in a series of disputes between the two governments. They remain enmeshed in a tariff and trade war despite a recent truce and have traded angry words over the coronavirus pandemic that first emerged in China and has spread worldwide. **AGENCIES**

Netanyahu rival Benny Gantz may form govt

JERUSALEM: Opposition leader Benny Gantz will be asked to form a new government, Israel's president said on Sunday, March 15, boosting his chances of ousting veteran Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

It was a blow to Mr. Netanyahu, who is fighting for his political life amid unprecedented political deadlock and a criminal indictment for corruption, which he denies. But it remains unclear whether Mr. Gantz's centrist Blue and White Party can break a stalemate that has been marked by three inconclusive elections in less than a year. Mr. Netanyahu, 70, is Israel's longest-serving leader and has been heading the country's efforts to combat the coronavirus.

But last year he twice tried unsuccessfully to put together a ruling coalition.

And on Sunday Mr. Gantz won support from two key



parties, leading President Reuven Rivlin to say that he would get the first chance at forming a government after the latest election on March 2.

"Tomorrow, around midday, the president will assign the task of forming the government to head of (Blue and White party) Benny Gantz," Mr. Rivlin's office said in a statement. The announcement came at the end of a day in which Mr. Rivlin held

consultations with all parties in the 120-seat Israeli parliament, the Knesset.

"At the end of the consultations, 61 Members of Knesset had recommended... Benny Gantz, as opposed to 58 Members of Knesset who had recommended the current prime minister and head of Likud, MK Benjamin Netanyahu," the statement said. One member of parliament gave no recommendation.

As things stand, a Gantz coalition would likely have to be underpinned by two bitter enemies, who have both endorsed him.

One is the Joint List, a coalition of lawmakers from Israel's 21% Arab minority, and the other is hawkish former defence minister Avigdor Lieberman's far-right Yisrael Beiteinu. Mr. Netanyahu, 70, was due to go on trial this Tuesday, but the coronavirus emergency has promoted restrictions of gatherings that delayed the start of proceedings for alleged bribery, fraud and breach of trust charges. He has denied any wrongdoing, accusing his enemies of a witch-hunt. Mr. Netanyahu proposed a six-month "national emergency" government, led by him, to confront the coronavirus crisis.

Mr. Rivlin has voiced support for a unity government to break the deadlock. But Mr. Gantz, who made

an issue of Mr. Netanyahu's character during the election campaigns, has been cool on teaming up with his rival.

Mr. Lieberman said on Sunday: "We recommend Benny Gantz for a very, very simple reason. In the previous election, we said the most important thing was to prevent a fourth election."

And Joint List head Ayman Odeh said his Arab coalition's voters had said "an emphatic 'no' to a right-wing government and Benjamin Netanyahu". Mr. Odeh said his bloc would not join a government led by Mr. Gantz, but could potentially provide it enough votes to govern. About a fifth of Israeli citizens are Arabs, Palestinian by heritage but Israeli by citizenship. No Israeli government has ever included an Arab political party.

Mr. Netanyahu's office announced on Sunday that he had tested negative for coronavirus. **AGENCIES**

Fire hits refining complex in Malaysia

KUALA LUMPUR: A fire and explosion occurred at the Pengerang refining and petrochemicals complex in southern Malaysia, state news agency Bernama reported on Monday, citing the Petronas-Saudi Aramco joint venture that runs the operation.

The incident occurred on Sunday night and an emergency response team has been activated, Bernama reported. "The situation is under control," Bernama said, citing a statement. The news agency did not report any injuries or damage.

Petronas directed queries to the joint venture company Pengerang Refining and Petrochemical (PRefChem), which has not responded to a Reuters request for comment.

This is the second fire at the Pengerang Integrated Com-



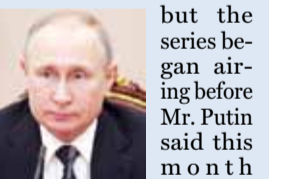
plex (PIC) in less than a year. In April 2019, an explosion and fire occurred at the plant's atmospheric residue desulphurisation unit (ARDS), a unit that removes sulphur from fuel oil, which is then used to produce gasoline in a residue fluid catalytic cracker.

There were no casualties in the April fire, and Petronas said commercial operations at the refinery would start on

time by end-2019. The ARDS has been scheduled for operation by mid-2020, Petronas has said. The refinery, which will process around 300,000 barrels per day of crude oil once fully operational, is expected to sell fuel to customers in Malaysia and across Southeast Asia. The PIC also includes a petrochemical complex with annual production capacity of 3.3 million tonnes. **AGENCIES**

Putin says he's not a 'Tsar' after 20 years in power

MOSCOW: Russian President Vladimir Putin dismissed comparisons to a Tsar on Thursday, arguing he "works every day" and listens to what people want. "Well, this is not true," Mr. Putin said when asked about being described as a Russian imperial-era ruler.



but the series began airing before Mr. Putin said this month that he wants an opportunity to run for president again, as part of his constitutional reforms.

"Maybe someone else can be called a Tsar. But in my case, I don't reign, I work every day," he told the state-run TASS news agency. The interview aired on Thursday as part of a series rolled out by TASS this month to mark 20 years since the 67-year-old President, took the helm of Russian politics.

It was not clear when the segments were recorded,

The reforms proposed in January include granting more power to Parliament and strengthening the role of the State Council. An amendment approved last week would allow Mr. Putin to run for another six years in the Kremlin in 2024 and again in 2030. The reforms will be subject to a public vote. **AGENCIES**

Syria war rumbles into 10th year, still fuelling global chaos

BEIRUT: In a world gripped by a pandemic, global unrest and a fast-moving news cycle, it can be difficult to remember that the war in Syria is still happening.

Even before the coronavirus outbreak took over daily lives around the globe, the conflict, which began in early 2011, had largely fallen off the world's collective radars — reduced to a never-ending fight involving an ever-more complex web of players and refugees that few remember once lived in a country they called home.

But as it enters its tenth year, the war — which gave rise to the Islamic State group and triggered the worst humanitarian catastrophe of the 21st century — has shown it is still

creating new tragedies that can have an outsized impact on global politics.

Earlier this month, Turkish and Syrian troops were clashing in Syria's northwest. That brought NATO-member Turkey and Russia, which back opposing sides of the war, to the brink of direct confrontation, and produced an unprecedented wave of displaced people. Arguing that it faces a potential new influx of refugees from Syria, Turkey announced it would no longer stop its vast migrant and refugee population from illegally entering Greece, touching off a new crisis for the European Union.

More than half of Syria's pre-war population of 23 mil-



lion people have been driven from their homes, and a staggering 80% of the population live beneath the poverty line, according to the United Nations. Half the country lies in ruins. A political process

does not exist. Contrary to what some may hope, the Syrian war is nowhere near its end-game.

A cease-fire brokered by the Turkish and Russian presidents in Moscow last week

"Even if Idlib is somehow retaken and an estimated 3 million people are accommodated in Turkey or elsewhere"

may have put the brakes on the Syrian government's devastating military campaign to retake the northwestern Idlib province. But the halt is not a long-term solution, and the war's final and most devastating chapter is yet to come.

In the three months before it was paused, the Syrian offensive triggered the largest single wave of displacement of the entire war. That may be dwarfed by the flight of humanity toward Turkey if

Syrian President Bashar Assad resumes the assault to retake Idlib, home to some 3 million people. The area is the last remaining rebel-controlled area in Syria, and from Assad's perspective, the only place standing in the way of complete military victory.

"Even if Idlib is somehow retaken and an estimated 3 million people are accommodated in Turkey or elsewhere, it is unlikely that Damascus has the capacity or even the tools to rule over formerly

opposition-controlled areas for long periods of time without trouble," said Danny Makki, a London-based Syrian journalist.

Similarly, a Turkey-Russia deal brokered in October ended a Turkish military campaign against U.S.-allied Syrian Kurdish fighters in the country's northeast. But the oil-rich region is still contested. There are hundreds of American troops there, ostensibly on a mission to protect Kurdish-controlled oil fields from remnants of the Islamic State group.

Both U.S. and Russian troops patrol the tense area separately, and thousands of Iranian-backed militias are stationed nearby. **AGENCIES**

ALSO READ | I WON'T JUMP BUT I WILL STROLL: IRRFAN KHAN ON LIFE AND CINEMA * P12 | JENNIFER LOPEZ SAD ABOUT HUSTLERS SNUB * P12

Cash awards hiked for Deaflympics

LONG-STANDING DEMAND OF THE NATIONAL SPORTS BODY FINALLY MET

NEW DELHI: The Union Sports Ministry has recognised the Deaflympics and the World championships in this category, on par with elite sports, in its scheme of cash awards, as per an amendment executed last week.

It has been a long-standing demand of the All India Sports Council of the Deaf to treat the achievement of its athletes on par with sportspersons who compete in the Olympics and Paralympics.

As per the circular dated March 11, the gold, silver and bronze medals in the Deaflympics will be awarded Rs. 75 lakh, Rs. 50 lakh and Rs. 25 lakh respectively. Moreover, World Championship medals, for events held in the four-year cycle, will fetch Rs. 40 lakh, Rs. 25 lakh and Rs. 15 lakh respectively for deaf athletes. Over the years, there have been remarkable achievements in the Deaflympics by Indian athletes.

In the last Deaflympics held in Samsun, Turkey, Virender Singh won the men's 74 kg wrestling gold. Diksha Dagar won the golf silver,



while wrestlers Ajay Kumar and Sumit Dahiya had won the bronze medals. In tennis mixed doubles, Prithvi Sekhar and Jafreen Shaik had won the bronze. Prithvi, who was part of the gold-winning team in the World Railways tennis championship, had won the individual gold and doubles bronze with Prashanth Dasharath Harsambhavi, in

the World Deaf tennis championship in Antalya last October.

"I am very happy with the government's announcement. I am applying for the cash award for my medals," said Prithvi, who trains in Chennai with coach Sureshkumar Sonachalam. Prithvi also noted that the Asian championships had not yet been listed for the

cash awards for deaf athletes. Incidentally, wrestler Virender Singh had won two golds and a bronze in the earlier editions of the Deaflympics from 2005.

He had also won gold, silver and bronze medals in the World championships. The AISCD had also sought in the past, the Rajiv Gandhi Khel Ratna award for athlete P.K. Jaison of Tamil Nadu who had

“I am very happy with the government's announcement. I am applying for the cash award for my medals”

won a gold and two silvers in long jump and triple jump in the Deaflympics in Bulgaria in 1993 and in Denmark in 1997. Coaches at the grass-root, developmental and elite levels would also be given cash awards, at the rate of 30% to 40%. The cash award for the coaches would be 50% of the cash award for the athlete, for individual medals. However, the government order categorically states that spouse, father, mother, brother and sister of sportspersons would not be eligible for cash awards, as coach. To avoid delay, the Sports Authority of India will accept applications directly from the medal-winning sportspersons in the prescribed format, along with attested copies of certificates wherever available apart from bank account details for money transfer. **AGENCIES**

South African cricketers told to self-isolate

JOHANNESBURG: The South African cricket team has been asked to self-quarantine for the next 14 days after returning midway from an ODI tour of India due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Cricket South Africa's chief medical officer, Dr Shuaib Manjra, was quoted as saying that the players have been told to isolate themselves and will be tested for the deadly virus in case any symptoms show up. "We have recommended the players social distance themselves from others and self-isolate for a minimum of 14 days. I think that is proper guidance to protect themselves, people around them, their families and their communities," he was quoted as saying by the media here.

"In that period, if any of them have symptoms or any other factors that is cause for concern, we will ensure this is investigated appropriately and managed accordingly with the protocols that are in place," he added. South Africa were to play three ODIs during the tour that was aborted after the washed out opening game in Dharamsala. India's tally of



COVID-19 patients has crossed 100, including three deaths. The global death count is nearing 8,000 while the number of infected is close to 200,000. "Some of the players wore masks while we were travelling. Others decided not to wear masks - that was up to them. We were pretty isolated during travel and largely immunised from the outside world," said Dr. Manjra while describing the journey back. The Proteas halted in Kolkata before heading back home.

"We have looked at the recommendations made for different countries by the World Health Organisation and other authoritative bodies. We have since educated the players about the disease - what it is, what it means, what its symptoms are," Dr. Manjra said. "We have educated them on how to monitor themselves about temperature and the other symptoms that come with COVID-19. Our experts remain available to them, even after the tour," he added. **AGENCIES**

Janani, Vrinda named in Int'l Panel of ICC Development Umpires



India umpire S. Venkatraghavan. Janani has been umpiring in Indian domestic tournaments since 2018. "It feels great to know that Vrinda and I have been inducted into the ICC's development panel. This gives me the chance to learn from seniors on the circuit and improve in the years to come. Cricket has become part of my daily routine since the 90s, and I look forward to being associated with the sport at a higher level," said Janani.

CHENNAI: Tamil Nadu's Janani Narayanan and Vrinda Rathi of Mumbai were named in the International Panel of ICC Development Umpires on Wednesday. The announcement comes soon after the launch of 100% Cricket, a 12-month campaign to build on the momentum of the ICC Women's T20 World Cup 2020. A software engineer, Janani wrote her umpiring exams in 2015 before officiating in the TNCA league.

Speaking to The Hindu, she said, "I have not played cricket but always wanted to be associated with the game. I could write my exams only in 2015 because women were not allowed before that."

The 34-year-old said she idolises the late David Shepherd of England and retired

Vrinda, 31, a former varsity player who has kept scores in international matches, has also been umpiring in Indian domestic cricket from 2018. She was inspired to take up umpiring after watching retired woman umpire Kathy Cross of New Zealand at the Women's World Cup 2013.

"I feel privileged to be named in ICC's development panel as this opens new avenues for me. I am sure I will get to learn a lot from other members of the panel and look forward to future assignments," said Vrinda. "Having played cricket and also officiated as a scorer, this was a natural progression for me and I am happy at the way things unfolded." **AGENCIES**

OLYMPICS SHOOTING SELECTIONS

Saurabh chalks up his best in air pistol

NEW DELHI: Saurabh Chaudhary asserted his class as he topped the 10m air pistol event with a score of 588 in the Olympic shooting selection trials at the Dr. Karni Singh Range here on Wednesday.

This was the best score for the 17-year-old, who had won the Asian Games gold in 2018 and had followed that up with two individual gold medals and four mixed team gold medals with Manu Bhaker in the World Cups last year. Abhishek Verma, who was equally impressive winning two gold medals in World Cups last year, was second with 585.

In the scores that are counted for the Olympic selection prior to the current trials, Saurabh has had an impressive string of 585, 581, 587, 580, 586, 584 and 583.

The National Rifle Association of India (NRAI) has decided that it would consider the scores in the Asian Games, World Championship, World Cups and the Asian championship while finalising the team for the Tokyo Olympics.

Since the World Cup in Delhi has been postponed this season, the national federation opted to have a trial to fill the scores.



With only a handful of shooters in each event, it was decided not to have the finals in any of the events.

In women's air pistol, Olympian Annu Raj Singh topped with 579, one point ahead of Esha Singh, while Olympic quota winners Manu and Yashaswini Deswal had scores of 574 and 570 respectively.

In the 50-metre rifle 3-position event, the top four slots in the combined scores of men and women were occupied by Olympic quota winners, Aishwary Pratap Singh Tomar (1178), Anjum Moudgil, Tejaswini Sawant and Sanjeev Rajput, in that

order. Anjum, who had won the

In women's air pistol, Olympian Annu Raj Singh topped with 579, one point ahead of Esha Singh, while Olympic quota winners Manu and Yashaswini Deswal had scores of 574 and 570 respectively

air rifle Olympic quota with a silver in the World Championship, is eligible to shoot the rifle 3-position event as well in Olympics. **AGENCIES**

THE RESULTS

Men

- 10m air pistol: 1. Saurabh Chaudhary 588, 2. Abhishek Verma 585, 3. Dharmendra Singh 579, 4. Om Prakash Mitharval 577, 5. Gaurav Rana 576.
- 50m rifle 3-position: 1. Aishwary Pratap Singh Tomar 1178, 2. Sanjeev Rajput 1169, 3. Chain Singh 1169, 4. Swapnil Kusale 1169.

Women

- 10m air pistol: 1. Annu Raj Singh 579, 2. Esha Singh 578, 3. Manu Bhaker 574, 4. Yashaswini Deswal 570.
- 50m rifle 3-position: 1. Anjum Moudgil 1174, 2. Tejaswini Sawant 1170, 3. Ayushi Podder 1168, 4. Sunidhi Chauhan 1163, 5. Gaayathri Nithyanandam 1158.

ECB suspends recreational cricket



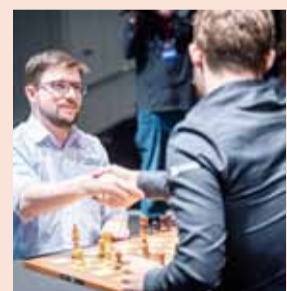
LONDON: The England and Wales cricket Board has discussed "contingency plans" to save the upcoming county season amid the rapidly-growing COVID-19 pandemic and suspended all recreational cricket, including pre-season friendlies and training. According to a report in 'ESPNcricinfo', the ECB had a video call with county chief executives to discuss ways to ensure that the event's April 12 start can be stuck to.

The meeting will resume on Thursday "to make decisions about inevitable postponements and cancellations due to the COVID-19 pandemic which is certain to have a significant effect on the shape of the English home season". According to the report, measures such as scaling down the championship, have it behind closed doors and shrinking the duration were discussed during the call. The county season runs till September. In a statement issued on Wednesday, the ECB said "it is with sadness and reluctance that we recommend that all forms of recreational cricket are for now suspended." "This extends to training, pre-season friendlies and any associated cricket activity," it added.

England is now among the worst-affected by the coronavirus spread, which has led to more than 8,000 deaths and has left over 200,000 infected. In the United Kingdom, the number of dead is above 100 with over 50,000 infected. "Sport plays an absolutely vital role in the nation's mental and physical wellbeing, and it helps people find meaning where there is fear and uncertainty, so one of our goals in the coming weeks will be to explore ways that we can support some levels of physical activity in communities - particularly at junior levels," the ECB stated. **AGENCIES**

Vachier-Lagrave hands Ding another defeat

YEKATERINBURG: Second seed Ding Liren of China slumped to his second shock defeat, going down to Frenchman Maxime Vachier-Lagrave in the second round of the Candidates chess tournament. He was beaten by compatriot Wang Hao in the first round.



The top seed, Fabiano Caruana of the USA, is looking in fine form though. The odds-on favourite scored a fine victory over Kirill Alekseenko of host Russia. One of the day's most interesting

games saw Anish Giri of the Netherlands showing superb fighting spirit against Wang. The Dutchman drew from a difficult position, thus avoiding what would have been a second straight loss. The day also saw Russians Ian Nepomniachtchi and Alexander Grischuk splitting the point. That left Caruana, Wang, Nepomniachtchi and Vachier-Lagrave as the early leaders, with 1.5 points each.

Twelve rounds remain. The winner of this eight-player tournament will become eligible to challenge World champion Magnus Carlsen later in the year. **AGENCIES**

Indian football legend P.K. Banerjee dies aged 83

KOLKATA: Legendary India footballer P.K. Banerjee died here on Friday after battling a prolonged illness. He was 83.

Banerjee is survived by daughters Paula and Purna, who are renowned academicians, and younger brother Prasun Banerjee, who is a sitting Trinamool Congress MP.

The 1962 Asian Games gold-medallist, whose best days as a striker coincided with Indian football's golden era, was suffering from respiratory problems due to pneumonia. He also had an underlying

history of Parkinson's disease, dementia and heart problem.

He was on life support at a hospital here since March 2 and breathed his last at 12:40 p.m., according to a family member.

Born on June 23, 1936 in Moynaguri on the outskirts of Jalpaiguri in West Bengal, Banerjee's family relocated to his uncle's place in Jamshedpur before partition.

He scored 65 international goals in 84 appearances for the national team. Besides winning the gold

medal at the Jakarta Asian Games in 1992, Banerjee led India in the 1960 Rome Olympics, where he scored the equaliser against a formidable French team in a 1-1 draw. Before that, Banerjee represented India in the 1956 Melbourne Olympics and played a key role in their 4-2 win over Australia in the quarterfinals.

Banerjee's contribution to Indian football was duly recognised by the world governing body FIFA that awarded him the Centennial Order of Merit in 2004. **AGENCIES**



Captain and coach 'understand' importance of Pujara's style

NEW DELHI: Cheteshwar Pujara finds the constant fuss over his strike rate a tad unfair and wants to clarify once and for all that he has got full backing of the team management which understands the "importance" of his style of play.

In the age of slam-bang cricket, Pujara brings delicacy to the purists of the game by batting on and on without worrying too much about the strike-rate. But to appreciate someone who epitomises patience in Test cricket is may be asking for too much from

the "millennials". Last week, the soft-spoken 32-year-old from Rajkot found himself at the receiving end again on social media as he laboured his way to 66 off 237 balls in the Ranji Trophy final against Bengal. To his credit, he overcame fever and throat infection to share a game-changing stand with Arpit Vasavada, helping Saurashtra to their maiden title on the basis of first innings lead. Whether it is playing for Saurashtra or India, Pujara is used to constant chatter around his strike-rate. "I don't

think there is too much talk (on the inside). In media, it is described differently but the team management has been backing me on this completely. There is no pressure from the captain, coach or anyone else," Pujara, who is currently getting much-needed family time due to the COVID-19 outbreak, told PTI.

"I just want to clarify that when it comes to strike rate people start pointing towards team management's take on it but there is no pressure on me at all. The team management understands my style of



play and its importance." For someone who averages 48.66 in 77 Tests, perception counts for little. "The question that

was asked on social media (during Ranji final) was 'why am I taking so long to score X number of runs?' Whether

I pay attention to that, no, I don't. My job is to make sure that the team wins at all times.

"People have this tendency to pinpoint one person but it is just not about me. If you look at any Test series where I have scored runs and taken little bit of time, the opposition batsmen, most of them, have consumed same number of balls. "I know I can't be a David Warner or Virender Sehwag but if a normal batsman takes time there is nothing wrong in that." The entire batting unit had a tough time in New

Zealand with the 0-2 loss in Tests marking the end of the international season. Pujara collected five half centuries this season, including one in New Zealand, but could not add to his 18 hundreds.

"People expect big knocks from me. I always challenge myself to score a 100 but to average close to 50 in Tests means you are scoring a half-century almost every second innings. "My standards are always high and I am not satisfied with the season that I had but I would not call it a bad one at all."

It may be boring and exhausting for majority of the fans, batting time and wearing out the opposition excites Pujara the most. Asked why they don't make it like him any more, Pujara gave a practical response. "I don't think it is on the decline (art of batting time). There is value for it. May be the youngsters are not inclined towards this format. It is a fact that there are more games in white-ball cricket. A youngster would want to play shorter formats because it is financially better. **AGENCIES**

Disney Plus roll-out
in India put on hold

MUMBAI: The roll-out of Disney Plus, the streaming platform from Disney, in India through Hotstar has been put on hold, the company said on Friday.

Some of the Disney Plus content, including Star Wars series "The Mandalorian", that became available to Hotstar users ahead of the streaming service's launch in India on March 29, is no longer available on the app.

We recently announced that Disney+ would launch in India through the Hotstar service in conjunction with beginning of the Indian Premier League cricket season. Given the delay of the season, we have made the decision to briefly pause the roll-out of Disney+ and will announce a new revised premiere date for the service soon, Uday Shankar, President - The Walt Disney Company APAC and Chairman, Star & Disney India, said in a statement.

Though he did not specify, the IPL season was put on hold due to coronavirus scare, which has led to cancellations and delay in events, movies and film festivals across the globe. **AGENCIES**

Microsoft, Reliance
Jio to launch Project
xCloud gaming
service

NEW DELHI: Technology giant Microsoft has reportedly confirmed that it is collaborating with India's 4G only telco, Reliance Jio, to launch its Project xCloud cloud gaming service in India later this year. Both Microsoft and Jio are already cloud-partners in the country.

In a statement to Mako-Reactor, which first reported this, Microsoft confirmed its plans to bring Project xCloud to Indian gaming industry in collaboration with Reliance Jio.

Project xCloud is Microsoft's online gaming streaming service which enables the users to stream games anywhere, on their electronic devices. The games are streamed directly from Microsoft's servers.

Although the Project xCloud is scheduled to release this year in India, however, no telecom partners were mentioned earlier. The statement said that the intention to launch this service in India was announced at X019 London in November.

It is interesting to note that Reliance Jio has previously partnered with the developers of PUBG Mobile and Pokemon Go in the past, with the aim of providing Indian gamers with Indian servers, in an effort to enhance the gaming experience.

The xCloud game streaming service competes directly with Google Stadia. However, Google Stadia has not yet made any announcements regarding its launch in India.

The recommended specifications for smooth gameplay are as follows-- an internet connection with 10 mbps down bandwidth and 5GHz connection if using WiFi, which is where Jio intends to promote its Jio Fiber service. However, it is still not clear if the service will be exclusive to Jio customers in the country. **AGENCIES**

Honor 9X Pro soon without Google suite

THE PHONES WILL START SELLING IN THE COUNTRY IN THE LAST WEEK OF THIS MONTH

CHENNAI: As the US has barred Huawei from the country and prevented it from working with US companies such as Google, the Chinese smartphone and telecom equipment maker is set to release the Honor 9X Pro Android-based phone without the Google suite.

The move is likely to dissuade prospective buyers of the phone who were awaiting its launch. The phones will start selling in India in the last week of this month with a Huawei Mobile Service suite.

Huawei had invested \$1 billion to create an alternative to Google apps, president of Huawei & Honor India Consumer Business Group Charles Peng was quoted as saying by PTI.

The company claims to have



attracted 1 million app developers for Huawei AppGallery.

"Honor 9X Pro is the first Honor smartphone that will be independent of Google Play store and will feature Huawei's AppGallery. We launched the smartphone at a global livestream event last month

and are all set to bring the device to India in the month-end," Peng said.

Honor will continue using the Android operating system, which is an open source platform and free for any company to use as well as develop their own operating systems.

"We launched the smartphone at a global livestream event last month and are all set to bring the device to India in the month-end"

The United States government barred its companies from supplying software and hardware to Huawei in May last year. However, it has been extending a temporary licence to supply restricted products and services to the Chinese telecom equipment major.

Huawei, along with Honor, has the second highest market share after South Korean technology giant Samsung in

telecom hardware.

Peng said that Huawei is in talks with Indian companies as well to persuade them to switch to its AppGallery instead of Google's Play Store, and that many of the frequently used apps have already come on board.

When asked about Honor's plan to attract users of leading social media apps, especially US-based Facebook and WhatsApp, Peng said most third-party apps provide an open source to download the mobile version and they are already available for quick download on any Android phone.

Peng said that Honor would prefer to work with Google, but the company will continue to expand Huawei Mobile Services (HMS) as an alternate option. **AGENCIES**

Realme to launch
new Narzo series

NEW DELHI: Chinese handset maker Realme is preparing to launch its latest Narzo series which will feature budget and high-end flagship smartphones, a move to take on its arch rival Xiaomi, which will also launch its mid and high range phones under the Mi brand.

It will also be competing with Poco smartphone brand. The new series with budget and flagship smartphones will be customized for Gen Z. The new smartphone series will support designs created by the Japanese designed Naoto Fukasawa.

Besides the Narzo series, Realme already has a Realme Pro series, X series, C series and U series and the company recently launched the Realme 6 series of smartphones, which includes

Realme 6 and Realme 6 Pro. Realme recently launched the realme 6 series in India which includes realme 6 and realme 6 and is available in two variants-- the 4GB RAM + 64GB storage available at Rs 12,999 and the 6GB + 128GB variant available at Rs 15,999. The Pro version is available in three pricing and storage variants-- the Realme 6 Pro version with 6GB RAM + 64GB storage is priced at Rs 16,999, the 6GB RAM + 128GB storage variant at Rs 17,999, and the 8GB RAM + 128GB storage variant at Rs 18,999. The Realme 6 Pro comes equipped with NavIC, a GPS system developed by India. Realme is also expected to launch the Realme 6i smartphone outside Myanmar soon. **AGENCIES**

Ropax ferry plies between
Mumbai and Mandwa

MUMBAI: A roll on-roll off cum passenger ferry service, also called "Ropax", between Mumbai and Mandwa near Alibaug, was launched on Sunday in the presence of Union Minister of State for Shipping Mansukh Mandaviya and Maharashtra port and maritime board officials.

The launch ceremony was a low-key one due to state government restrictions on such mass gatherings in view of the novel coronavirus outbreak,



said officials. The vessel, built in Greece, can carry 200 cars and 1000 passengers, and is capable of

plying even during monsoon, officials said.

"It can reach speeds of 14 knots and will complete the 18-kilometre sea journey in 45 minutes to one hour. The road distance between Mumbai and Mandwa is 110 kilometres and can take anything between three to four hours," an official said.

While Mumbai Port Trust built the jetty facilities at Ferry Wharf in the metropolis at a cost of Rs 31 crore, the ropax jetty and terminal at Mandwa has been built by Maharashtra Maritime Board at a cost of Rs 135 crore, said officials. **AGENCIES**

New Dzire's price starts from ₹5.89 lakh

NEW DELHI: Maruti Suzuki on Friday announced the launch of new Dzire compact sedan priced between Rs 5.89 lakh and Rs 8.80 lakh.

The new Maruti Suzuki Dzire compact sedan gets a revised front fascia with a new grille that is similar to the Swift hatchback. The sedan gets updated K-Series dual-jet, dual-VVT BS-VI petrol engine with first-in-segment idle start-stop function, claims the automaker.

Inside the cabin, the sedan gets new modern wood finish on the dashboard. Apart from that, new features like cruise



control, Smartplay Studio infotainment system, coloured TFT MID display, auto foldable ORVMs etc. It also gets electronic stability program

with hill hold assist, which will be as standard in AGS variants.

Commenting on the launch of the new version of Dzire,

"The 2020 Dzire will help us to continue with our brand promise to offer products with state-of-the-art design & advanced technology to delight our customers"

Shashank Srivastava, Executive Director (Marketing & Sales), Maruti Suzuki India Limited said, "With over 55% market share in its segment,

Dzire is the preferred sedan of over 20 lakh customers. Building on overwhelming customer response, 2020 Dzire offers next-generation K-series engine with segment-first idle start-stop technology (ISS), upgraded premium exterior design, refreshed interiors and advanced features."

He also said, "As a Company, we have believed in bringing technologies that benefit the customers. The 2020 Dzire will help us to continue with our brand promise to offer products with state-of-the-art design & advanced technology to delight our customers. **AGENCIES**

Adidas unveils 'FasterThan' campaign

NEW DELHI: Sports brand Adidas has launched "#FasterThan" campaign to celebrate the women in sports and inspire other women to participate and celebrate sports in their daily lives, the company said in a statement.

With this campaign, the brand aims to highlight the inspirational stories of real women, influencers and athletes from different age groups and fields through the medium of a film, said the company. For this campaign, Adidas has collaborated with Padma Shri awardee Saikhom Mirabai Chhanu, who holds the title of world champion in weightlifting, Himanshi Goyal, a proponent of body-positivity, and Nishriin Parikh, a 53-year-old professional



body-sculptor.

"In our society, weightlifting has always been perceived as a male-dominated sport, it took a lot of courage to break this stereotype. My success at

the international level clearly showcases that sport doesn't care about gender or stereotypes and for me FAST is all about pushing my limits and unleashing my potential in the

"Faster Than' is the extension of this thought, bringing it to life by focusing on three inspiring stories to break various stereotypes"

quest of becoming the best," said Chhanu, at the launch of the film.

The campaign reframes 'Fast' away from the traditional concept of speed, towards that of a personal feeling and empowerment of being faster than challenges that might hold one back from fulfilling their potential.

"At Adidas, sport is in our DNA and we believe that

"Through Sports, we have the power to change lives'. As part of our 2020 strategy, we will be focusing on 'Women in Sport' to inspire more women in India to take to a healthier life through sport and fitness. We feel sport doesn't discriminate between genders and the playing field is the same for all. 'Faster Than' is the extension of this thought, bringing it to life by focusing on three inspiring stories to break various stereotypes," said Manish Sapra, senior brand marketing director, Adidas India.

Adidas India is a part of the Adidas-Group AG and has over 400 stores across the country. In addition to retail stores, the brand's products are also available at their website shop.adidas.co.in. **AGENCIES**

Third edition of
'Plugin' unveiled

BENGALURU: The Department of Science and Technology (DST), Intel India, and Society for Innovation & Entrepreneurship (SINE) - IIT Bombay announced the third edition of Plugin, a one-year collaborative accelerator programme for hardware and systems software startups.

Eleven startups have been selected from over 200 entries from across the country in the areas of artificial intelligence (AI), machine learning (ML), security and platform to receive mentoring and coaching, access to labs for tools and platforms, technical and financial support, local and international ecosystem connect and visibility.

"Intel continues to be committed to advancing the systems startups (hardware and software) ecosystem in the country in collaboration with the government and academia. Our Intel India Maker Lab incubation programme has so far supported over 70 startups in accelerating their innovation journey and scaling their businesses," Nivruti Rai, Country Head, Intel India and VP - Data Platforms Group, Intel Corp, said in a statement this week.

"We have also seen tremendous success with the last two editions of Plugin, with several participating startups having taken their products to market and generating revenue," Rai added.

According to Rai, in its

"We have also seen tremendous success with the last two editions of Plugin, with several participating startups having taken their products to market and generating revenue"

third year, Plugin is supporting startups that are using data-centric technologies to drive innovation in the healthcare, manufacturing, industrial, retail, automotive and banking domains.

Plugin aims to address challenges that hardware and systems software startups face with respect to product design, development, commercialisation, and scaling their business. The collaborative programme facilitates infrastructure and technical support, prototyping, product development and manufacturing connect from Intel India Maker Lab and SINE-IIT Bombay.

In the final phase, the startups will be able to showcase their solutions to investors and ecosystem players at a demo day, with the top performing startups also qualifying for post-program funding support. A total of 20 startups were shortlisted from over 200 entries from across India for an initial four-day bootcamp. **AGENCIES**

Toyota Kirloskar's limited edition of Innova Crysta out

NEW DELHI: Toyota Kirloskar Motor (TKM) on Tuesday launched a limited edition of its popular multi purpose vehicle Innova Crysta priced at Rs 21.21 lakh.

The Leadership Edition, a refreshed Innova Crysta has been introduced to commemorate 15 years of undisputed leadership of the Innova in India, TKM said in a statement. This edition is powered by a 2.4 litre Diesel BS-VI compliant engine mated to a 5 speed manual transmission in 7-seater configuration. It comes in dual-tone exterior colour - combination of white pearl crystal shine with attitude black, and wildfire red with attitude black, it added.

Commenting on the launch, TKM Senior Vice President,

Sales and Service, Naveen Soni said the Innova Crysta had over 50 per cent market share in the MPV segment

"...we believe the Leadership Edition of Innova Crysta comes at an opportune time, enhancing the overall experience for our customers with an upgraded offering," he added.

Launched way back in 2005, Innova has maintained a leadership position and it continues to be one of the most preferred MPVs in the country having sold over 9 lakh units cumulatively, the company said.

In a separate development, Toyota Motor Corp. will launch a Prius plug-in hybrid vehicle in Indonesia as the Southeast Asian nation promotes eco-friendly cars.



Its Indonesian dealer, PT. Toyota-Astra Motor, said in a statement Tuesday that it will initially offer the Prius PHEV for corporate use.

The dealer said the vehicles will be used for ride-hailing service GoFleet, a joint venture between Toyota-Astra's parent

company, Pt Astra International Tbk, and ride-hailing firm Gojek Group.

Japan's top automaker plans to expand its electrified vehicle lineup in Indonesia, where it has sold more than 2,600 hybrid vehicles since the launch of its Prius model in 2009.

"...we believe the Leadership Edition of Innova Crysta comes at an opportune time, enhancing the overall experience for our customers with an upgraded offering"

The latest announcement comes after Toyota said earlier this month that it will start local production of hybrid vehicles in Indonesia in 2022.

Last month, The Toyota Vellfire luxury MPV had launched in India. Priced at Rs. 79.50 lakh (ex-showroom, India), the MPV measures

4,935 mm in length, 1,850 mm in width, and 1,895 mm in height, while featuring a wheelbase of 3,000 mm. The Toyota Vellfire also comes with features like - LED headlamps with cornering function, two sunroofs and a 17-speaker JBL system.

As far as safety is concerned, the Vellfire gets 7 airbags along with ABS and EBD, panoramic view monitor and parking assist alert as well. Inside, it gets a well-laid-out, luxurious cabin with electrically operable luxury captain seats, with sliding function, in the second row. Draped in leather interior, and the seats offer a bunch of different seating configurations, which can be accessed at the press of a button. **AGENCIES**

“Ayalaan will be an interesting film to watch out for because in the film we are using VFX quite interestingly. In fact, that is why the film will take more time than any regular film in post-production”



RGV made cult films: Isha Koppikar

Actress Isha Koppikar reunites with filmmaker Ram Gopal Varma in an upcoming untitled web series. She feels although the filmmaker is going through a bad phase in career right now, no one can downplay his contribution to Indian cinema for the cult films he once made.



Isha shot to fame for her dance number “Khallas” in Varma’s 2002 film “Company”, which is till date considered one of the most powerful films about the underworld that Bollywood has ever made. Later, she also worked in Varma produc-

tions such as “Darling” and “Shabri”.
Varma’s last few Hindi releases like “Veerappan” and “Sarkar 3” fared below expectation and the filmmaker has also courted controversy for his comments on socio-political issues. Isha hopes with his upcoming show, RGV will get out of his rough patch.
“Ram Gopal Varma is a genius. Look at the kind of films he has made, those are cult films of Indian cinema. The first Hindi horror film that I watched and loved was “Raat”. Then all the other films, whether it is “Bhoot”, “Rangeela”, “Satya” -- you name the film and the genre -- horror, romantic-musical, gangster-action -- and he has made a cult film in that genre,” she said.
Isha continued: “In our lives, at times we go through a low phase but that does not mean that the person

is finished. It is true that in the entertainment industry, every Friday could be a ‘good Friday’ or a ‘bad Friday’, she laughed, adding: “I hope with the upcoming web series, RGV claims his space back again.”
Apart from the web series, Isha is also working on the Tamil science fiction film “Ayalaan”. Directed by R. Ravikumar, the film also features Rakul Preet and Sharad Kelkar.
According to the actress, the film will offer a unique experience to the audience.
“Ayalaan will be an interesting film to watch out for because in the film we are using VFX quite interestingly. In fact, that is why the film will take more time than any regular film in post-production. Most of the time we use prosthetic but in this one, we are focusing on VFX,” Isha said. **AGENCIES**

Ranveer’s tryst with the stage

“I REALLY TOOK IT VERY SERIOUSLY AND I GAVE IT EVERYTHING. I USED TO WEAR SOME OF MY OWN CLOTHES AND MOST OF THE PEOPLE WHO CAME TO WATCH THE PLAY WERE JUST FRIENDS AND FAMILY WHOM I HAD INFORMED THAT I AM DOING THIS PERFORMANCE AND TO COME AND SEE IT”

Bollywood’s livewire star Ranveer Singh recently shared a major throwback image that disclosed that he had tried his hands at theatre before his Bollywood debut role in “Band Baaja Baaraat”.
Before Bollywood, Ranveer had worked in an English play called “Carry On At The Keyhole”. It was a comedy directed by Dinkar Jani.
Sharing a poster of the play on social media, the actor said: “This is a poster for a small play in which I had a small part and the story goes that I used to be a struggler and I used to sit at Prithvi theatre with two or three others like me. We used to just sit there every day, look for odd jobs. One of them got the information that an audition is happening in a college in Andheri for a small role in a small play and nobody wanted to go -- I said I’ll go because I

didn’t have anything at that time!”
Ranveer added: “I thought to myself -- ‘acting acting hoti hai, koi bada chhota kya hota hai’ (acting is acting, nothing big or small about it). I went for the audition, I got the part and they were very impressed by my acting. When we put up the performance - I remember one was at St Andrews and even then I felt proud when I was performing at St Andrews stage as a student when I was in school.”
“So, you know, we had a few performances, I had the role of an interior decorator who was posing to be a homosexual man in order to attract more business and it was an old English double-meaning comedy play that was headlined by Darshan Jariwala and directed by Dinkar Jani,” Ranveer recalled.



Ranveer claimed whoever came to watch the play used to be impressed by his performance.
“I really took it very seriously and I gave it everything. I used to wear some of my own clothes and most of the people who came to watch the play were just friends and family whom I had informed that I am doing this performance and to come and see it, he said, adding: “I remember meeting Yogesh Sanghvi (the producer of the play) at an awards show last year which is when we reconnected and it was a very emotional moment for him

and for me - to meet after all those years - just to see his moist eyes, the pride in his eyes - ‘tu kahan se kahan pahuch gaya mere dost’ and I was also getting a bit emotional when I met him because he used to really like me, he used to be very kind to me.”
Ranveer recalled there wasn’t much money in theatre but whatever the producer made, he would give to him very generously.
“He was always very fair and kind to me. So it’s a very, very fond memory of mine from my struggling days,” he summed up. **AGENCIES**

SAIF refuses to LOOK OLD, at least for a while



When Saif Ali Khan’s son Ibrahim called him and “old man”, the actor had the right retort in place. It all started when Ibrahim shared a snapshot on Instagram in which he is seen posing with his dad.
“Me and my old man,” the young boy captioned the photograph.
Saif was asked about Ibrahim’s assertion in a recent interview, and his reply was precious. “Yeah, it was quite funny. Being older doesn’t bother me and the fact is that I am Ibrahim’s old man. But I’m keen to be fit and look my best. I’m not going to be looking like an old man for a while, but I understand the irony of it,” said the actor, according to the website news18.com.
Now that Saif’s daughter Sara Ali Khan is a star, the talk then shifted to whether Ibrahim is gearing up for his Bollywood debut. Would Saif uphold timetested Bollywood tradition and launch his son into the industry as a lead actor?
“I don’t know if I will launch him. It’s an option and films are certainly a viable career choice for him. He’s sporty and likes the idea of being in the movies rather than pursuing an academic job. No one in the family with the exception of his sister (Sara) have been interested in the latter anyway,” Saif replied. **AGENCIES**

Richa Chadha, Ali Fazal postpone wedding

Actors Richa Chadha and Ali Fazal have postponed their wedding to the later half of the year amid the coronavirus pandemic, the spokesperson for the couple has announced.
Richa and Ali were scheduled to tie the knot in April, with reportedly many of their guests flying in from the US and Europe for the ceremony. “Given the current scenario and the unfortunate turn of events owing to the COVID-19 pandemic globally, Ali Fazal and Richa Chadha have decided to postpone their wedding functions to the later half of 2020 tentatively. They wish for everyone to be healthy and safe and at no cost would want their friends, families and well wishers to be affected,” the spokesperson for the actors said in a statement.
The number of novel coronavirus cases in India rose



to 169 on Thursday.
The pandemic has led to the cancellation of various events, award functions, interviews and shooting schedules in the country.
To contain the spread of the novel coronavirus, film bodies in India decided to put shootings of films, TV shows and web series on hold till March 31. **AGENCIES**

Aishwarya’s lookalike wows SOCIAL MEDIA



Marathi actress Manasi Naik has been enjoying social media attention for her resemblance to Bollywood superstar Aishwarya Rai Bachchan. Several of Manasi’s pictures are doing the rounds on the Internet and, looking at the snapshots, many netizens feel that they are reminded of Aishwarya in her early days in the film industry.
“Aishwarya’s duplicate,” a user commented.
Another user wrote: “Aishwarya’s carbon copy.”
Earlier in 2005, actress Sneha Ullal, who was paired opposite superstar Salman Khan in “Lucky: No Time For Love”, made similar headlines for her striking resemblance to Aishwarya.
However, “Lucky” fared way below expectations at the box office, and Sneha could not quite make her mark in Bollywood in the years to come. Will the resemblance with Aishwarya work for Manasi? Time will tell. **AGENCIES**



Ananya praises Suhana’s dancing and acting skills

Ananya Panday opened up about her stance on the nepotism debate, her rapport with BFF Suhana Khan and her first ever audition on an episode of Zee Cafe’s talk show Starry Nights GEN Y.
Talking about the one thing she wouldn’t mind swapping with Suhana and things that she would like to learn from her, the Student Of The Year 2 actress said: “I would like to learn her dancing and acting skills, and would love to swap my closet.”
In previous interviews, Ananya is always known to have raved about Suhana’s acting skills. Shah Rukh Khan’s daughter Suhana and Chunky Panday’s daughter Ananya went to Mumbai’s Dhirubhai Ambani International School together. Sanjay Kapoor’s daughter Shanaya completes their BFF trio. Suhana currently studies film at New York’s Columbia Uni-



versity.
Meanwhile, here’s what Ananya said about her competition in Bollywood: “Janhvi Kapoor is my biggest competition in this film industry.” Ananya made her Bollywood debut with Student Of The

“There are so many examples of such talented people who have not come from the film background like Ranveer Singh and Anushka Sharma and then there are actors like Ranbir Kapoor and Alia Bhatt who have come from film families and done so well. So, it all comes down to the audience”

rejected,” Ananya said.
The 21-year-old actress also opened up about her comments on nepotism on Rajeev Masand’s talk show The Newcomers Roundtable 2019 and said: “I still agree that we have an advantage and we get to meet people. We have easier access to people from the industry as we have grown up around them. But now that I’ve got that chance, it’s unfair for me to waste it. I want to make my father proud.”
“There are so many examples of such talented people who have not come from the film background like Ranveer Singh and Anushka Sharma and then there are actors like Ranbir Kapoor and Alia Bhatt who have come from film families and done so well. So, it all comes down to the audience,” she added.
Last year, Ananya featured in headlines for equating “struggle” in Bollywood with getting a Dharma movie or an appearance on Koffee With Karan. Siddhant Chaturvedi’s response to Ananya’s comments was the Internet’s favourite: “Everybody has their own struggle. The difference is where our dreams come true, their struggle begins.” **AGENCIES**