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AIRASIA INDIA LAUNCHES NEW IN-FLIGHT DINING BRAND 'GOURMAIR'

PM calls for effective contact tracing, strengthening health infra amid Omicron scare

NEW DELHI: Prime Minister Narendra Modi, chairing a high-level meeting on Thursday to review the public health response measures for containing and managing Covid-19 and strengthening health infrastructure including availability of drugs and oxygen cylinders amid the growing Omicron scare, called for prompt and effective contact tracing, ramping up of testing, and accelerating vaccination.

He was briefed about the emerging scenario globally driven by the new variant, with an overview of surge in cases in countries having high vaccination coverage and presence of Omicron variant. He was also apprised of the technical brief and priority actions recommended by the WHO in the context.

A snapshot of the status of Covid-19 and its Omicron variant in the country, including states reporting a higher number of cases, districts reporting higher positivity, and higher number of clusters was



presented to him. He was also briefed about the actions taken when the first advisory of the Health Ministry was shared with the states. The PM directed the officials to maintain a high level of vigil and alertness at all levels.

He directed the Centre to work in close coordination with the states to support their efforts of public health measures of containment and management under the 'Whole of Government' approach. The strategy of the Centre for proactive, focussed, collaborative

and cooperative fight against the pandemic should guide all our future actions," he said.

In view of the new variant, we should be 'satark' (alert) and 'saavdhan' (cautious). The fight against the pandemic is not over and the need for continued adherence to Covid safe behaviour is of paramount importance even today," he stressed. The PM directed the officials to ensure that the health systems in the states, beginning from the district level, are strengthened to meet any challenge posed by the new variant. It is important

Modi to address Gurburab celebrations in Gujarat's Kutch on Today

NEW DELHI: Prime Minister Narendra Modi will address the Gurburab celebrations of Guru Nanak at Lakhpat Sahib gurdwara in Kutch, Gujarat, on Saturday via video-conferencing, his office said. Every year from December 23 to December 25, Sikhs in Gujarat celebrate the Gurburab of Guru Nanak at Lakhpat Sahib gurdwara, it said, noting that the first

Sikh guru had stayed at Lakhpat during the course of his travels. Lakhpat Sahib gurdwara has his relics, including wooden footwear and palki (cradle) as well as manuscripts and marking scripts of Gurmukhi.

The PMO noted that the gurdwara had suffered damage during the 2001 earthquake, and Modi, the then chief minister, had under-

taken urgent measures to ensure its repair. This step showed the deep reverence of the Prime Minister for the faith, as also reflected in multiple recent endeavours, including the celebrations of 550th Parkash Purab of Guru Nanak Dev Ji, 350th Parkash Purab of Guru Gobind Singh Ji, and 400th Parkash Purab of Guru Tegh Bahadur," the PMO said. **AGENCIES**

for states to ensure that the oxygen supply equipments are installed and fully functional, he said. He also told the officials to work with the states on a regular basis and review the status of preparedness of various components of health infrastructure including training and capacity building of human resources, timely availability of ambulances, readiness of states to operationalise Covid facilities for institutional quarantining, and effective and supervised

monitoring of those in home isolation. Heightened and close monitoring of emerging clusters and hotspots through and active, prompt and effective surveillance should continue, he stated.

He directed for sending a good number of positive samples for genome sequencing to INSACOG labs in a prompt manner, while accelerating the testing to ensure quick identification of cases for timely containment and treatment. The PM said that teams should

be sent to the states with low vaccination, rising cases, and insufficient health infrastructure to assist them improve the situation. Apprised that more than 88 per cent of the eligible population is administered the first dose of Covid-19 vaccine and more than 60 per cent the second dose, he said that states need to ensure that the eligible population is fully vaccinated and to proceed to meet the target in a saturation mode. **AGENCIES**

Hindutvavadis spread hatred: Rahul Gandhi

NEW DELHI: Congress leader Rahul Gandhi on Friday said that all the religions pay a price for the violence propagated by hate-mongers. In a tweet after the Haridwar incident came to light, Rahul said, "Hindutvadis always spread hatred and violence and Hindus Muslims Sikhs and Christians pay the price but not any more." The incident was reported to have taken place in Haridwar during an event held from December 17 to 20.



The video clips circulated on social media say that "Hindus should arm themselves like those seen in Myanmar, every Hindu must pick up weapons and conduct a Safayi Abhiyan." Congress General Secretary Priyanka Gandhi Vadra had sought action against those people who incited hatred and called for 'unleashing violence against followers of a particular religion'. Priyanka said, "Strictest action should be taken against those who incite hatred and violence of this kind. It is despicable that they should get away with making an open call to murder our respected ex-PM and unleash violence against people of different communities." Such acts violate our constitution and the law of our land," she added.

Congress leader Jairam Ramesh said, "Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas, Sabka Vishwas is total Bakwaas as far as the Prime Minister and his drumbeaters are concerned. It's only an empty slogan! Why the thundering silence on the atrocious hate speech made in Haridwar? Why the paralysis from the Home Minister & Uttarakhhand CM?" The three-day event was organised by Yati Narasimhanand, a controversial religious leader who has been accused in the past of inciting violence. The Uttarakhhand police have lodged an FIR in the case against Jitendra Narayan Tyagi, who was former Shia Waqf board chairman and recently converted to Hinduism. **AGENCIES**

Karnataka passes 'anti-conversion Bill' amid uproar



BELAGAVI (KARNATAKA): The contentious "anti-conversion Bill" was passed by the Karnataka Assembly on Thursday amid din, with CM B S Bommai terming it as constitutional and legal, and aimed at getting rid of the menace of religious conversion. Opposing the Karnataka Protection of Right to Freedom of Religion Bill, 2021, the Congress dubbed it "anti-people", "inhuman", "anti-constitutional", "anti-poor" and "draconian". It urged that the Bill should not be passed for any reason. The JD (S) too expressed its opposition to the Bill, which was introduced in the Assembly on Tuesday. The Bill provides for protection of right to freedom of religion and prohibition of conversion by misrepresentation, force, undue influence, allurement or any fraudulent means. **AGENCIES**

India's Omicron tally rises to 415

NEW DELHI: India has reported a total of 415 Omicron cases, the Health Ministry said this morning. At least 115 have recovered, it said.

The 358 Omicron Covid variant cases have been detected across 17 states and union territories so far, it showed. Maharashtra has recorded the highest number of 88 cases of the Omicron variant, followed by Delhi with 67, Telangana 38, Tamil Nadu 34, Karnataka 31 and Gujarat 30.

The ministry data updated at 8 am also showed that India recorded 6,650 new coronavirus infections, taking its tally of cases to 3,47,72,626, while the count of active cases has declined to 77,516. The death toll due to the disease has



climbed to 4,79,133, with 374 daily fatalities being recorded, it showed. The daily rise in new coronavirus infections has been recorded below 15,000 for the last 57 days.

The tally of active cases has declined to 77,516, which

comprises 0.22 per cent of the total infections, the lowest since March 2020. The national COVID-19 recovery rate has further improved to 98.40 per cent, the highest since March 2020, the ministry said. A decrease of 775

cases has been recorded in the active COVID-19 caseload in a span of 24 hours, as per the data. The daily positivity rate was recorded at 0.57 per cent. It has been less than two per cent for 81 days now. The weekly positivity rate was recorded at 0.59 per cent. This has been below one per cent for 40 days now, according to the health ministry.

The number of people who have recuperated from the disease has surged to 3,42,15,977, while the case fatality rate was recorded at 1.38 per cent. The cumulative number of doses administered in the country so far under the nationwide COVID-19 vaccination drive has exceeded 140.31 crore. **AGENCIES**

Former GJM leader Binay Tamang joins TMC

KOLKATA: Months ahead of the Gorkhaland Territorial Administration (GTA) election, former GJM leader Binay Tamang, who had quit the Hills-based party earlier this year, joined the ruling TMC on Friday. Rohit Sharma, an ex-legislator of the Gorkha Janmukti Morcha (GJM), also followed suit. Both of them were handed over TMC flags by state ministers Moloy Ghatak and Bratya Basu.

Asked about his stance on the Gorkhaland issue, Tamang said development of Darjeeling and Kalimpong hills tops the list of his priorities. "Development of hills is my top priority. The BJP is trying to use the statehood issue to fool the people of the Darjeeling and Kalimpong. Since 2009, the party has

been saying that it supports the Gorkhaland demand, but no step was so far taken in this regard.

"They (BJP leaders) have also tried to divide Bengal, but this will not be allowed. We are united. We are joining the TMC to work for the development of the hills," he said. Describing Mamata Banerjee as a "dynamic and visionary leader", Tamang said he would like to see her as a "prime ministerial candidate in 2024". Tamang further said that "if GJM founder Bimal Gurung, former party leader Anit Thapa and others want to join the All India Trinamool Congress, they are most welcome". Gurung had earlier this year pledged his support to the TMC.

Welcoming the two into

the party, Ghatak said the move made by Tamang and Sharma would significantly impact the politics of the hills. Reacting to the development, the BJP said it was on expected lines as Tamang had been working with the state's ruling party for the last few years. The picturesque Darjeeling has repeatedly witnessed violent agitation over the demand for a separate state of Gorkhaland, the latest being in 2017, when a 104-day-long strike over the issue brought the region to a standstill. The strike also led to a split in the GJM, with Binay Tamang, once a deputy to the outfit's supreme Gurung, taking over the party's reins and expelling the boss. Although the GJM faction led by Gurung continued to align

with the BJP, the other camp, headed by Tamang, joined hands with the ruling TMC in the state.

Gurung, who had been in hiding for three years, however, resurfaced in Kolkata in October last year to lend its support to the TMC after quitting the NDA. Polls to the 45-member GTA are likely to be held early next year. The last election to the semi-autonomous council was held in 2012. Tamang's joining the TMC comes at a time when a section of BJP leaders have renewed the demand for Gorkhaland and also sought to carve out north Bengal as a centrally-administered Union territory, citing disparity in development and injustice to the people of the region. **AGENCIES**

CJ expresses shock over Ludhiana court blast

HYDERABAD: Chief Justice of India N.V. Ramana said here on Thursday that he is deeply shocked to hear about the news of explosion that rocked the Ludhiana District Court Complex in Punjab. The blast on Thursday left two persons dead, while at least four persons have been reported injured. Expressing grave concern at the lack of adequate security in court complexes, Justice Ramana hoped that the law enforcing agencies will pay necessary attention to ensure protection for the court complexes and all the stake holders. Such incidents occurring in quick succession across the country is a worrisome trend, he observed. Justice Ramana, who is in Hyderabad, called up the Chief Justice of Punjab and Haryana High Court, Justice Ravi Shankar Jha, and enquired about the development. Justice Ramana offered condolences to members of the bereaved families, and wished speedy recovery of the injured victims. **AGENCIES**

IAF's MiG-21 plane crashes in Rajasthan's Jaisalmer

JAIPUR/DELHI: A MiG-21 plane of the Indian Air Force crashed in Rajasthan's Jaisalmer on Friday night during a training sortie. The plane crashed in the Desert National Park area under the Sam police station, Jaisalmer SP Ajay Singh told PTI. The SP said local police reached the spot and he is also on the way to the crash site. The IAF said on Twitter, this evening, around 8.30 pm, a MiG-21 aircraft of IAF met with a flying accident in the western sector during a training sortie. Further details are awaited. An inquiry is being ordered, it added. The IAF did not comment anything about the pilot's condition. **AGENCIES**

Bajrang Dal threatens stir against 'love jihad' in Bihar's Darbhanga

PATNA: The Darbhanga unit of the Bajrang Dal has threatened to start a movement against 'love jihad' from Friday. This was announced after two cousin sisters from Darbhanga eloped with two youths from the Muslim community and got married in a mosque in Kolkata a few weeks ago.

The family members of the girls registered an FIR against their boyfriends under the IPC section of kidnapping. The Darbhanga police managed to arrest the two youths on December 16 and produced them in the district court which sent them to 14 days judicial custody. Anand Prakash Madhukar, the President of Darbhanga's Bajrang Dal unit, said that the



family members of the two girls started a protest after this incident and the Darbhanga

police arrested the two youths under pressure from the girls' families.

"The mental state of one of the girls is unstable. Still the youth from the other community eloped with the girl. This seems to be done intentionally which comes under love jihad," Madhukar added. "Cases like these are increasing in the country.

We need to have a strong law against them. Under the pretext of love jihad, youths from the other community were involved in affairs with Hindu girls intentionally, indulging in marriages and forcing them to change their religion. The young girls do not know the consequences of such acts. Basically, the idea behind love jihad is to torture Hindu girls after marriage,"

Madhukar said. "We have decided to start a movement in the area to make people aware about the consequences of love jihad. We also want to attract the attention of the state and Central governments to make stringent laws against love jihad," he added. Krishna Nandan Kumar, Darbhanga (Sadar) Sub-Divisional Police Officer, said that an FIR under the IPC section of kidnapping was registered in Singwara police station in the district. "We have arrested the accused and traced the two girls from Kolkata. The girls have changed their religion after marriage with the two accused persons," the official added. **AGENCIES**

NIA files chargesheet in Dera follower's targeted killing case



NEW DELHI: The National Investigation Agency (NIA) on Thursday chargesheeted four Khalistan Tiger Force Operative in connection with the case of targeted killing of 'Dera Sacha Sauda' follower Manohar Lal. The chargesheet was filed before a special NIA court in Mohali under sections 120B, 109, 201 and 302 of IPC, sections 16, 17, 18, 18B, 20 and 23 of Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, and section 25 (1A), 25 (6), 25 (7) and 27 Arms Act against.

Those who are chargesheeted by NIA are Kamaljeet Sharma alias Kamal, Ram Singh alias Sonu, Arshdeep Singh alias Arsh and Hardeep Singh Nijjar. The NIA officials said that Nijjar and Arsh are presently living in Canada. Initially, in November 2020 a case was filed with Dyalpura Police Station of Punjab in connection with the targeted killing of Dera Sacha Sauda follower Manohar Lal by two persons identified as accused Kamaljeet Sharma and Ram Singh alias Sonu. Later on the case was transferred to NIA to further probe the matter.

NIA found in the probe that accused Hardeep Singh Nijjar, self-styled chief of Khalistan Tiger Force (KTF), a designated terrorist, along with his associate Arshdeep Singh alias Arsh had formed a gang and recruited gangsters Kamaljeet Sharma, Ram Singh and others. He chose the Punjab based people. After recruiting them, the persons were given task to go threaten and extorting money from Punjab based businessmen. Later they indulged in target killing of the persons to disturb the communal harmony in Punjab. The NIA collected evidences against the accused. After making a foolproof chargesheet they filed it before the concerned court. Further investigation in the case is continued. **AGENCIES**

Anti-national forces trying to spread anarchy in Punjab: Channi; Oppn leaders condemn Ludhiana blast

CHANDIGARH: Punjab Chief Minister Charanjit Singh Channi on Thursday said as the Assembly polls are drawing near, some anti-national forces are trying to spread anarchy in the state. He said this after a bomb blast in the Ludhiana district courts complex left one person dead and six injured. Meanwhile, Punjab Congress chief Navjot Singh Sidhu, Union Minister Gajendra Singh Shekhawat, former CM Amarinder Singh, Delhi CM Arvind Kejriwal and Shiromani Akali Dal president Sukhbir Singh Badal also condemned the attack. Talking to reporters in Chandigarh soon after the incident, Channi termed the alleged sacrilege bids and the Ludhiana blast a "big conspiracy".

"As the elections are nearing, some anti-national and anti-state forces are trying to commit such disgusting acts and for this, the government is alert and people should also be alert," he said. Channi said earlier sacrilege attempts were made but they did not succeed. Now, this blast has been carried out, the CM said. Later in the

HIGHLIGHT

□ "AS THE ELECTIONS ARE NEARING, SOME ANTI-NATIONAL AND ANTI-STATE FORCES ARE TRYING TO COMMIT SUCH DISGUSTING ACTS AND FOR THIS, THE GOVERNMENT IS ALERT AND PEOPLE SHOULD ALSO BE ALERT," HE SAID. CHANNI SAID EARLIER SACRILEGE ATTEMPTS WERE MADE BUT THEY DID NOT SUCCEED

day, Channi visited a hospital in Ludhiana and enquired about the health of those injured in the blast. Talking to reporters in Ludhiana, he said prima facie, it appears that the person who died in the incident was operating the bomb. He said the body has not been removed from the site so that the crime scene is not tampered with. He expressed fear that an attempt is

being made to "spread anarchy" ahead of the state Assembly polls. Channi later at a public meeting in Ludhiana's Mullanpura Dakhla sought to draw a parallel between the registration of an FIR against Akali leader Bikram Singh Majithia, the blast and the recent alleged sacrilege bids.

He questioned as to why such a horrendous incident took place only after Majithia was cornered by the law. Majithia (46) was on Monday booked under the Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances Act on the basis of a 2018 status report of a probe into the drug racket in the state. Asked if it appears to be a suicide bomber and why would have this particular day been chosen, Channi said, "Sometimes, it appears we are doing political talk. Ever since we started acting against the drug menace, such incidents are surfacing." Meanwhile, former Punjab chief minister Amarinder Singh condemned the blast and reiterated his concerns over the challenges to the state's peace and security.

AGENCIES

Man believed to be carrying explosives killed in Ludhiana blast: Punjab CM

CHANDIGARH: A man, who is believed to be carrying explosives, was killed and five others were injured in a suspected IED blast in the district court complex in Ludhiana on Thursday, Punjab Chief Minister Charanjit Singh Channi said. The state has been put on high alert after the blast. It is learnt that the Home Ministry has sought a report from the Punjab government on the incident. Channi, who reached the spot to assess the situation along with Home Minister Sukhjinder Randhawa and other Cabinet colleagues, told the media that such incidents have seen a rise after the government tightened its noose against the drug traffickers. Channi, who smelt a plot before the Assembly elections slated early next year, also called it a 'conspiracy' by those trying to polarise the voters.

The blast took place at around 12:22 pm in a washroom on the second floor of the court complex when the court was functioning. The court is located close to the district commissioner's office. Putting the state on



alert after the incident, DGP Siddharth Chattopadhyaya said, "We cannot comment on anything. Only the experts can tell the kind of explosives used, but the district, state, and central forensic agencies are on it. Every crowded place is on alert, the public should also be careful."

Condemning the incident, Channi said inimical forces seeking to vitiate the peaceful atmosphere of the state would never succeed in their nefarious designs. "Everybody knows the timing and the handiwork of these forces as the Assembly polls are drawing

near and they are hell-bent upon hatching such conspiracies to disturb the hard-earned peace and harmony in the state. It is the need of the hour to condemn such incidents in the harshest possible words by one and all.

"Ludiana Police Commissioner Gurpreet Bhullar told the media that the explosion might have been executed by a human bomb. "Though not confirmed, the person whose body is inside and is yet to be identified was either carrying the bomb or was very close to the spot. We are investigating the matter," Bhullar said. AGENCIES

CRPF passing out parade: 117 take oath to serve nation

GURUGRAM: A total of 117 Directly Appointed Gazetted Officers (DAGOs) of the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) passed out from the CRPF Academy in Kadarapur on Thursday, officials said. A ceremony was held along with a parade to mark the occasion which also witnessed a roar of oath to serve the nation. Minister of State for Home Affairs Nityanand Rai was the Chief Guest at the event, the CRPF said in a statement. The 52nd batch of DAGOs consists of 117 trainees including 3 woman officers from 21 states of the country. Rai took the salute of the parade that was beaming with pride, and exuded courage and confidence with each step.

Rai, along with the top brass of the CRPF, and the family members of the officers also participated in the ceremony. Praising the display of flawless and exquisite parade, the Minister in his address, extended his best wishes to the new officers for a glorious career, AGENCIES



the statement said. Terminating the CRPF as a symbol of valour, honesty, sacrifice and devotion, the Minister affirmed his trust in the abilities of these newly passed officers for maintaining the internal security of the nation. The academic profile of the batch is technology oriented as it has as many as 91 officers who have engineering-related degrees.

Kuldeep Singh, DG CRPF, extended his gratitude to Rai for his presence at the event. He reaffirmed the steadfast devotion and commitment of the force towards tackling effectively, the new and ever-evolving internal security dynamics, the statement noted. AGENCIES

Punjab cabinet approves one-time settlement for defaulters of industrial plot dues

CHANDIGARH: The Punjab cabinet on Thursday gave its approval for coming out with a one-time settlement scheme for chronic defaulters of dues of principal cost of industrial plots located in the state. The industrial plots were developed by the Punjab Small Industries and Export Corporation (PSIEC) or Punjab Infotech. A decision to this effect was taken during a cabinet meeting chaired by Chief Minister Charanjit Singh Channi here in the evening, an official statement said.

Under this scheme, defaulter allottees have been given an opportunity to clear their long outstanding dues towards PSIEC or Punjab Infotech after availing waiver of 100 per cent component of penal interest and 25 per cent component of normal interest due or maximum up to the current reserve price of the plot (after adjusting already paid amount), as may be chosen by the plot holder. Plot holders would be re-

HIGHLIGHT

□ THE CABINET ALSO GAVE APPROVAL TO EXTEND THE ONE-TIME SETTLEMENT (OTS) SCHEME FOR RESTORATION, TRANSFER, AND CONVERSION TO FREEHOLD OF INDUSTRIAL PLOTS OR SHEDS IN INDUSTRIAL ESTATES DEVELOPED BY THE INDUSTRY DEPARTMENT

quired to deposit their dues under this scheme on or before March 31, 2022. The cabinet also gave approval to extend the one-time settlement (OTS) scheme for restoration, transfer, and conversion to freehold of industrial plots or sheds in industrial estates developed by the industry department. The cabinet also approved setting up the Punjab State

General Category Commission for unreserved classes. This commission would go a long way to safeguard the interests of the unreserved classes besides effective implementation of various welfare schemes for the benefit of the poor belonging to the general category.

Notably, this decision has been taken by the cabinet after acceding to long standing demand of employees belonging to general categories (unreserved classes) that their interests are not being protected and had requested the state government to constitute the General Category Commission on the pattern of Gujarat. Besides, the cabinet gave a go ahead for exemption of motor vehicle tax for stage carriage buses (big and mini buses) and contract carriage vehicles less than 16 seater, thus providing some relief to the transport sector in the wake of huge loss suffered by it amid the COVID-19 pandemic. AGENCIES

Brahmpura rejoins Akali Dal



CHANDIGARH: Former MP Ranjit Singh Brahmpura rejoined the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) in the presence of party stalwart Parkash Singh Badal on Thursday. Brahmpura was the patron of the Sukhdev Singh Dhindsa-led SAD (Sanyukt). He was against an alliance or a seat-sharing arrangement between the SAD (Sanyukt) and the BJP for the 2022 Punjab Assembly polls. Union Home Minister Amit Shah had earlier said the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) was in talks with former chief minister Ama-

rinder Singh and Dhindsa to forge an alliance with their parties.

A few days ago, the saffron party announced its tie-up with Amarinder Singh's party, the Punjab Lok Congress, for the Assembly polls due early next year. Along with Brahmpura, other SAD (Sanyukt) leaders who joined the Akali Dal included Ujjagar Singh Badaali, Mohinder Singh Hussainpur, Ravinder Singh Brahmpura all of whom were appointed as vice presidents of the party and Karnail Singh Peermohammad, who was appoint-

ed as its general secretary. Brahmpura was expelled from the SAD in 2018 after he raised a banner of revolt against the party leadership. Speaking on the occasion, Brahmpura said, "I was on leave from my parent party, just the way a soldier goes on leave before rejoining his battalion."

He recalled the SAD's sacrifices for the "panth" and Punjab and said, "Now, it is our responsibility to strengthen the party. We will go from house to house to usher in a new revolution in the state." SAD patron Parkash Singh Badal said if he had got the opportunity to become the chief minister five times, Brahmpura had a big role to play in it. "Brahmpura sahab is an Akali and will always remain an Akali. Today, I am very happy that two brothers have joined hands again," he added. Meanwhile, the SAD demanded that a high court judge should monitor the probe into the recent cases of "sacrilege bids" in Punjab. AGENCIES

Kejriwal slams Punjab govt over sacrilege, drugs cases

CHANDIGARH: Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) national convener Arvind Kejriwal on Friday alleged a conspiracy behind the recent cases of sacrilege and explosion, and said the weak government ruling Punjab has failed to crack the whip. The Delhi chief minister, who is on a visit to Punjab, also called the drug case against Shiromani Akali Dal leader Bikram Singh Majithia a political stunt. A bomb exploded in the district court complex in Ludhiana on Thursday, killing one person and injuring six others, prompting the Punjab government to declare a high alert in the state.

Police suspect that the man killed in the blast may have been trying to assemble or plant the explosive device. Few days ago, there were cases of sacrilege. Now, there is a blast in Ludhiana. Such incidents before polls are being done under a conspiracy to vitiate the peaceful atmosphere in the

state. It is the handiwork of a few people, Kejriwal said during an interaction with reporters in Amritsar. He said he has full faith in the people of Punjab and that they will defeat the nefarious designs of those trying to foment tension. Hitting out at the Channi-led dispensation, he said, There is a weak government in Punjab. They (ruling party leaders) are fighting amongst themselves. Punjab needs an honest strong government which can act against those indulging in conspiracies. He said the person who attempted sacrilege at the Golden Temple must have been sent by someone influential to foment tension and that there were several cases of sacrilege over the last five years. Such incidents will keep taking place until a strong government takes over, he said. He promised an honest, strong and stable government that will bring the culprits to book. AGENCIES

Akali leader Bikram Majithia moves Mohali court for anticipatory bail



CHANDIGARH: Akali leader Bikram Singh Majithia who has been booked under the NDPS Act moved a court in Mohali on Thursday for anticipatory bail. The bail application was filed by Majithia's counsel D S Sobti. On Monday, Majithia, 46, was booked under relevant sections of the Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances (NDPS) Act on the basis of a 2018 status report of probe into drug racket in the state. The report was filed by anti-drug special task force (STF) chief Harpreet Singh Sidhu in the Punjab and Haryana High Court in 2018.

Majithia, is the brother-in-law of Shiromani Akali Dal chief Sukhbir Singh Badal and brother of former Union minister Harsimrat Kaur Badal. Majithia had earlier denied all charges against him. The Punjab police have been looking for Majithia to arrest him in this case. A lookout circular, which prevents a person from leaving the country, had also been issued against the former Punjab minister. The Shiromani Akali Dal had called the registration of FIR against Majithia as political vendetta. AGENCIES

Five-member committee to take decisions on university appointments: Haryana CM

CHANDIGARH: Haryana Chief Minister Manohar Lal Khattar on Wednesday said a five-member committee will be constituted for taking decisions regarding appointments to different posts in universities of the state. Speaking in the state assembly, he noted that the committee will include chancellor (Governor), principal secretary of Higher Education Department, and vice chancellors of three universities. The chief minister said instructions of the University Grants Commission (UGC) will be complied with. The appointments in universities will be done in a transparent manner and on the basis of merit only, he said. The autonomy of universities will remain intact, he asserted. Khattar was answering questions raised by the opposition during the Winter Session of Vidhan Sabha.

Opposition Congress MLAs had last week alleged that the BJP-led government in Haryana was trying to infringe upon the autonomy of universities and control the institutions by implementing its own ideology. They had said the government's decision to appoint teaching and non-teaching staff at state universities through HSSC and HPSC was a "direct attack on the autonomy of the universities". The government's move will have an adverse effect on education and research work in the universities, seven Congress MLAs had said in their call-

ing attention notice, which was taken up on the opening day of the Haryana Assembly's winter session here on Friday. Meanwhile, during Wednesday's assembly session, Khattar demanded that Congress leader Bhupinder Singh Hooda officially share a copy of the chat after the latter had on Monday cited an unverified communication doing rounds on social media platforms, where two persons are involved in a conversation regarding the recruitments done by HPSC and the role of money in it. The chief minister requested the Speaker to thoroughly investigate the chat document read in the House by the opposition leader two days ago. The opposition Congress had on Monday demanded a CBI probe under supervision of a high court judge and the removal of Haryana Public Service Commission (HPSC) chairman, stating that he cannot be absolved of his responsibility in the alleged scam which has surfaced in the recruitment of dental surgeons. Meanwhile, Khattar said the main goal of the state government is to bring reforms in the system and constant work is being done to resolve every problem being faced by the common man. He said Haryana Law Commission is being constituted which will review those laws which have become obsolete with time. This Commission will study the laws and the outdated laws will be scrapped or modified, he said. AGENCIES

On-line drug licensing system launched in Haryana: Vij

SATISH HANDA
Ambala

Addressing a gathering of all drug manufacturers in the state at the seminar organized by Haryana Pharmaceutical Manufacturers Association Haryana Home & Health Minister Anil Vij said, Haryana state is a right choice for those willing to set up industry in the country having no labour problem, lesser criminal activities by antisocial elements, corruption free assistance provided by the government to entre-



preneurs willing to set up new industry in the state. Among those present at the occasion were Rajeev Arora

Additional Chief Secretary, Rajiv Rattan Commissioner, Food & Drugs Administration Department, State

Drug Controller Manmohan Taneja and office-bearers of Haryana Pharmaceutical Manufacturers Association R.L. Sharma President, Rajeev Aggarwal Senior Vice President, Yogesh Midha & Nitin Gupta Vice Presidents, Raman Kumar Gupta, Rajiv Vaid and Shelly Khanna. Vij said, the prosperity of a country depends upon industry as such government of our country providing full support to those willing to set up industry.

He further added that Haryana state assisting industry in the state famous

for production of pharmaceuticals in past years but large number of pharmaceutical manufacturers had shifted their manufacturing units to neighbouring Himachal Pradesh, Uttaranchal and other states attracted by special packages offered to them, but after implementation of GST large number of such manufacturing units shifted back to Haryana state.

Vij also announced launching of on-line National drug licensing systems and also providing status to applicants of all types of licenses in pharmaceutical sector including licenses required for retail and wholesale of pharmaceuticals products.

Future of 17,208 employees in 12 recruitments in Haryana during Congress rule hanging

SATISH HANDA
Ambala

While raising voice by members of political parties in opposition in present winter Haryana Vidhan Sabha session against large number of embezzlements in recruitment of government jobs by Haryana Lok Sewa Aayog and Haryana Staff Selection Commission in which State Crime Investigation Bureau made several arrests including Deputy Secretary Anil Nagar an HCS officer allegedly collected bribe for amount worth crores of rupees from applicants while offering them jobs. State government faced lot



of controversy after the recent incidents of corruption in recruitments of doctors and HCS officers in Haryana state resulting protests by the political parties in opposition Congress, AAP and INLD and the issue was raised in Vidhan Sabha session accusing ruling government selling govern-



ment jobs in th state. Ruling BJP-JJP alliance Khatter government in Haryana state too prepared a data of 10 years Congress government rule in the state stating that Punjab and Haryana High Court cancelled

as many as 12 recruitments for government jobs filled up by corrupt practices by Congress government then ruling in the state thus spoiling the future career of 17208 youths offered jobs, whereas on the other hand

BJP government presently ruling in Haryana state has already offered government jobs to 84000 youths in past seven years and recruitments for another 20000 jobs to youths in the state is under fast process.

According to ruling government, Haryana state government is taking stern action against those involved in corruption and accepting bribe and prime accuse of recent case of Haryana Lok Sewa Aayog are in police custody. According to ruling state government information 44 persons have already been arrested by the police allegedly involved in Paper Leak case exposed in the state sometime ago.

Almost half the complaints of crime against women in Raj are fake: Gehlot



JAIPUR: Almost half the complaints of crime against women in Rajasthan are fake, said Chief Minister Ashok Gehlot in an email interview to IANS. As per the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) data, Rajasthan recorded the highest number of rape cases in the country last year followed by Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh. The crime data for 2020 released by the NCRB showed Rajasthan reported the highest number of rape cases among the states. A total of 5,310 rape cases were registered in various police stations across the

state. However, the CM in an exclusive interview with IANS, said, "It is a matter of concern that a lot of people are maligning this policy. 45.88 per cent of the FIRs lodged for crimes against women in 2019, 45.23 per cent in 2020 and 47.56 per cent in 2021, till June, were found to be fake. This means that almost half the complaints received for crimes against women are fake. The state is being maligned due to people misusing the law in this manner. And you already know how FIRs are lodged in other states." He further said, "It is written at

the beginning of the NCRB report that crime is a result of various circumstances prevailing in the society. We should avoid comparing states solely on the basis of these figures due to various state specific policies and procedures. Some people make a mistake by assuming that increase in crime and increase in registration of crime are the same thing.

The media and the Opposition are also making the same mistake. "Our government implemented the policy of mandatory registration of FIRs in 2019. Earlier, the police used to write a report on a blank paper and lodged an FIR when they found any evidence. But the women and the marginalised communities used to face trouble a lot of times due to this and they weren't heard. Now everyone's FIR is registered due to which every case is taken to its logical end. This has provided much relief to the common man. "Earlier, 33 per cent FIRs in rape cases were lodged through courts under CrPC section 156(3). Due to a policy of free registration, this figure is now just 15 per cent.

AGENCIES

'Is India still a democracy': Opposition leaders slam alleged 'hate speech conclave'

NRE DELHI: Several Opposition leaders, including those from the Congress and the TMC, on Thursday condemned what they said was a "hate speech conclave" held in Haridwar recently and called for strict action against those involved. All-India Trinamool Congress national spokesman Saket Gokhale demanded immediate action against the organisers and speakers of the Dharma Sansad held recently in Haridwar, where "hate speeches" were allegedly made against Muslims. Gokhale lodged a complaint in this connection at the Jwalapur police station in Haridwar district, asking the Station House Officer to register an FIR within 24 hours.

At the event, several speakers allegedly made inflammatory and provocative speeches, calling for the killing of people from the minority community. Held at Ved Niketan Dham in Haridwar from December 17-20, the Dharma Sansad was organised by Yati Narasimhanand Giri of the Juna Akhada, who is already under police scanner for making hate speeches and inciting violence against Muslims. Jamiat Ulema-e-Hind chief Maulana Mahmood Madani wrote a letter to Home Minister



Amit Shah, Uttarakhand Chief Minister Pushkar Singh Dhami, the National Human Rights Commission and the National Commission for Minorities, over the remarks made at the Haridwar meet, calling on them to take cognizance of the matter and prosecute the perpetrators. Madani said, "They have posed threat to the peace and communal harmony of the country."

"I demand strong actions must be taken against organisers and speakers," he said. The All India Professionals Congress also condemned in the strongest possible terms the "genocidal statements made by Hindutva leaders" in the "hate speech conclave" organised in the holy city of Haridwar. Will the Union of India and other institutions remain mute spectators against Muslims in Haridwar? AGENCIES

HIGHLIGHT

ORGANISERS AND SPEAKERS OF DHARMA SANSAD HELD RECENTLY IN HARIDWAR ALLEGEDLY MADE 'HATE SPEECHES' AGAINST MUSLIMS

to the remarks at the Haridwar meet, senior Congress leader Shashi Tharoor said, "This is bloodcurdling stuff. Is it too much to expect. @CMuttarakhand to take action under the existing hate-speech laws?"

Congress MP Karti Chidambaram said on Twitter, "Narsinghanand Organises 3-Day Hate Speech Conclave in Haridwar... are the Faux Hindutva Nazis planning an holocaust? Will the Union of India & its institutions be a blind/mute spectator?" Congress spokesperson Shama Mohammed said Munawar Faruqi has been relentlessly punished for alleged jokes which he didn't even crack, but there is no action against the "Dharm Sansad" members who openly called for "genocide against Muslims in Haridwar!". AGENCIES

PM Modi has changed working culture in a democracy: Nadda



PANAJI: Prime Minister Narendra Modi has changed the working culture in a democracy, BJP national president J.P. Nadda said here on Wednesday, adding that when the Prime Minister of India speaks on international issues, the world now listens. Nadda, who was speaking at a function organised by the Goa BJP to release its 10-year report card on governance, Nadda also said that under previous regimes, India was known as a corrupt and backward country. "There is a change in working culture in a democracy. You have to understand that this change in working culture has happened because of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. I am not saying this just because I am giving a speech," Nadda said. "The

culture was to just deliver speeches to lure people, talking about nice things, picking on issues in society, which can trigger a sort of a competition in sections of society and giving an emotional edge to issues," he said. "They indulged in vote-bank politics, becoming a champion of one section of society and when you get the votes, then looking after yourself, looking after your family, filling up your home with riches earned through corruption and then awaiting the next elections.

This was the political culture and I am speaking with full responsibility," Nadda added. With the coming of Modi as the Prime Minister, Nadda said that the spotlight has turned on the concerns and well-being of people. AGENCIES

Uttar Pradesh to impose coronavirus night curfew from December 25



LUCKNOW: Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath on Friday issued orders to initiate strict measures, including a statewide night curfew from December 25, in view of a rise in Covid cases in several states. The coronavirus night curfew will be applicable from 11 pm to 5 am, a senior official said here. Chairing a high-level meeting, the chief minister also instructed officials to cap the number of people attending events like marriages to 200. These events have to adhere to Covid-19 guidelines, and organisers will be required to inform the local authorities about these, the of-

ficial said. Adityanath also asked the officials to ensure all traders follow the "no mask, no goods" policy at their establishments, he said.

Masks should be made mandatory for everyone on the streets or in the markets. Police should carry out continuous patrols to ensure the guidelines are followed, the official said. Adityanath directed the officials to ensure that people arriving in Uttar Pradesh from other states or abroad are traced and tested for coronavirus, and extra vigilance is maintained on buses, railway stations and airports, he said. He asked for a close watch

to be kept on the health of those coming from outside the state after testing them, and if required, they should be admitted to hospitals or be quarantined, the senior official said. Monitoring committees did a commendable job in coronavirus management in the past, and directives have been issued to reactivate them in villages and urban wards, he said.

The chief minister said that in view of the possibility of a third wave of Covid-19, the state made systematic preparations in the past which needed to be re-examined. Facilities available at all government and private medical institutions of the state should be examined closely, and the Covid help desk and the day care centre in industrial units should be activated, he said. The situation in the state is under control at present. Forty-nine new cases of the infection were confirmed in the investigation of over 1.91 lakh samples tested in the last 24 hours. In the same time period, 12 people recovered from the infection, and the total number of active cases in the state now stands at 266. AGENCIES

I-T raid at premises of two UP businessmen; Rs 150 cr found



KANPUR (UP): Tax evasion worth crores of rupees has been detected during Income Tax raids on two businessmen in the city. The I-T raid was underway at the house, factory, office, cold store and petrol pump of perfume trader Piyush Jain in Kanpur, Kannauj, Mumbai and Gujarat. Along with the I-T raid, on specific intelligence inputs, officers of the Directorate General of GST Intelligence (DGGI), Ahmedabad initiated searches in Kanpur on Thursday at the factory premises and the premises belonging to a pan masala manufacturer and a transporter (whose identity has not been shared so far) who was involved in transporta-

tion of goods under the cover of fake invoices, without generating e-way bills.

The Income Tax team first reached the Anandpuri residence of Piyush Jain in the city along with the currency counting machine. Similar raids were underway at Jain's establishments in Mumbai and Gujarat. According to officials, a case of tax evasion of about Rs 150 crore has come to the fore. This tax evasion was mainly done through shell companies.

Piyush Jain, a resident of Anandpuri, basically belongs to Chhipatti in Kannauj. He also owns a house, perfume factory, cold store, petrol pump in Kannauj. Piyush Jain also owns a house, head office and showroom in Mumbai. His companies are also registered in Mumbai itself. The raids began on Thursday morning simultaneously in Kanpur, Mumbai and Gujarat and ended late in the night. Cash worth Rs 150 crore was reportedly found during the raids. AGENCIES

Maha govt to issue fresh guidelines to curb crowding in view of spike in COVID cases

MUMBAI: The Maharashtra government has decided to impose fresh restrictions in the state to avoid crowding in view of the rising cases of Covid, and it will issue guidelines regarding these curbs, an official said on Friday. The Chief Minister's Office (CMO) said in a statement on Thursday night that the guidelines would be issued on Friday. Chief Minister Uddhav Thackeray held talks with the members of the state Covid task force. They discussed the ways to avoid crowding during the Christmas and New Year celebrations, weddings and parties at hotels and restaurants, it said.

The statement said the meeting also discussed the restrictions imposed in other states and the spike in Covid in the US and Europe. The daily coronavirus case count in Maharashtra has been rising over the past few days.

The state on Thursday reported 1,179 new coronavirus cases, a day after it saw 1,201 new infections. AGENCIES

Misuse of Ram Mandir Trust money, SC should conduct probe: Priyanka



NEW DELHI: The Congress on Thursday alleged a scam in the Ayodhya land deals and demanded that the Supreme Court order a judicial inquiry to probe the acquiring and selling of lands for the Ram Mandir Trust. Addressing a press conference here, Priyanka Gandhi Vadra said, "Bhagwan Ram is a symbol of honesty and the BJP-backed leaders and officers have profited from the trust meant for the temple construction." She said, "The temple is being built following court orders and the enquiry should be done by the court only as district level officers can't investigate against the leaders."

The Congress alleged that in the sale deeds the signatures of Ram Mandir Trust members are on the papers. She alleged that Champat Rai, the Trust secretary knows about the scam, and Anil Mishra, a member of the RSS and a member in the Trust and Rishikesh Upadhyay Mayor of Ayodhya are witnesses in the sale deeds. "Money of the Trust is being misused to benefit leaders and officials," she said. She said, "Land value of Rs 2 crore was sold to the Trust for Rs 26.5 crore in 2017." Giving details about the deal, she said, "2.33 hectare land was purchased for Rs 2 crore and this was waqf land. An FIR was also registered in this connection in 2018, she said. "On March 18, 2021 at 6.51 p.m. 10.37 sq yard was sold to the Trust for Rs 8 crore through its secretary Champat Rai. The remaining 12,000 sq m was sold at 7.10 p.m. for Rs 2 crore and the same land was sold to the Trust after 5 minutes for Rs 18.5 crore. AGENCIES

11 MPs awarded for work on child rights

NEW DELHI: Eleven parliamentarians - six from the Lok Sabha and five from the Rajya Sabha - were awarded the annual Parliamentarians' Group for Children Awards, in a virtual ceremony on Thursday. The Parliamentarians' Group of Children (PGC) is a platform that convenes, informs and engages MPs on issues of children's rights, and the award recognises the work of MPs who have contributed significantly towards improving the lives of children in India through legislative and

constituency level action. The recipients from the Lok Sabha are Rahul Ramesh Shewale (Shiv Sena), Vishnu Dayal Ram, and Sudhakar Tukaram Shrangre (both BJP), Geetha Viswanath Vanga and Goddeti Madhavi (both YSR Congress Party) and S. Jothimani (Congress).

Those from the upper house are Tiruchi Siva (DMK), Dr Ameer Yajnik (Congress), Dr Ashok Bajpai (BJP), Ravindra Kumar Kanakmedala (TDP) and Dr Fauzia Khan (NCP). AGENCIES

Owaisi alleges part of his speech being quoted out of context

LUCKNOW: All India Majlis-e-Ittehadul Muslimeen (AIMIM) president, Asaduddin Owaisi, said on Friday that a clipped video footage of his speech was being circulated on social media to trigger controversy. The speech he made was in reference to the alleged provocative and communal statements made against minority communities during a three-day 'Dharma Sansad' in Haridwar.



"A clipped one-min video is being circulated from a 45 min speech I gave in Kanpur. I have shared my entire speech on Twitter now. The context to my speech is amply clear. I was talking about cops who torture 80-year-old men. I was talking about cops who watch silently as mobs thrash a rickshaw driver in front of his daughter. Also, cops who rained lathi blows on a man as held his child in his arms," Owaisi said. AGENCIES

Battle Royale in the offing in Goa elections as North/Eastern parties enter fray

DOMINICK RODRIGUES

A political +Battle Royale+ is on the cards in the erstwhile Portuguese territory of the "sun, surf and sand" beach state of Goa, which celebrated its 60th anniversary of independence from colonial rule on December 19 this year.

The sunny State is glittering in preparations for ushering in Christmas and the New Year ahead of the State Legislative Assembly elections which are supposed to be held before March 15, 2022.

The political scenario is witnessing various political parties gearing up to face the electorate in either gaining a foothold—or locking in their stamping grounds -- against all comers.

The ruling BJP is seeking a third term in office on the strength of their performance in the two successive terms so far.

The Congress is holding its cards close to its chest, while tying up with the local Goa Forward party -- which had earlier tied up with the BJP in forming the present Government before its President Vijai Sardesai was sacked as Deputy Chief Minister,

Fresh on the heels of their success in West Bengal, the Trinamool Congress (TMC) is out to prove that its success in West Bengal was not a "flash in the pan", and hope

to ensure this by winning in Goa also where they have put their MP Mahua Moitra and Derek Obrien in charge of the party desk here.

TMCs latest prominent Goan addition -- former Goa Chief Minister Luizinho Faleiro -- who jumped ship from Congress to the TMC to become its Rajya Sabha MP -- described the Congress-Goa Forward tie-up as an "unholy alliance" with "Congress wine in BJP bottle."

The Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) is also seeking to duplicate its success in India's capital -- New Delhi -- by making all out efforts in repeating the same formula in Goa including through offering free electricity (like in the capital -- upto a certain number of power units)

Meanwhile, Prime Minister Narendra Modi made a dash to Goa to celebrate "Liberation Day" -- the State's 60th anniversary of freedom from Portuguese rule -- where he laid a wreath at the martyrs memorial amidst a 100-men tri-service guard of honour as buglers played the "Last Post."

Sailboats of the Indian Navy, Coast Guard and civil agencies, beside a flypast by Indian Navy aircraft, added colour to the celebrations.

Prime Minister Modi noted that "The people of Goa did not allow the movements for liberation and Swaraj to slacken,



but kept the flame of freedom burning for the longest time in the history of India."

"India is a spirit where the nation is above the self and is paramount. Where there is only one mantra -- nation first. Where there is only one resolve -- Ek Bharat, Shreshtha Bharat," he noted.

Earlier before his visit, TMC supreme Mamta Banerjee had visited Goa with a clarion call to all like-minded political parties for defeating the BJP. Her visit had witnessed former Goa Chief Minister and NCP MLA Churchill Alemao and his daughter Valanka Alemao joining the TMC in her presence.

Describing Trinamool's meaning as +Roots,+ The West Bengal chief minister said that the TMC was emphasizing on ensuring justice for people down to the 'grassroots' level including the youth and



fisherfolk. The TMC has formed an election alliance with the local MGP party, while she had met NCP supreme Sharad Pawar in Mumbai for highlighting a united opposition against the BJP.

Meanwhile, the politics of elections have begun. Politicians disillusioned with their leaders are changing sides faster than "rats deserting a sinking ship" as power, money, failures, frustrations etc continue to be some of the drivers engineering change of minds in deserting their original parties.

Many others are however objecting to "negative developments." Prospective independent election candidate Architect Roylea Fernandes of picturesque Benaolim beach in South Goa has petitioned the National Green Tribunal regarding the Goa Govern-

Goa being highlighted as +Startup Capital of India

"Goa should be the +Startup Capital of India+ as it is the ideal destination for promoting startups due to its continuous development and creation of new ideas," according to former Union Minister and six-time MP Suresh Prabhu.

He was speaking recently at a virtual online session comprising around 19 Goa-based startups who showcased and pitched their businesses to potential invest to increase brand recognition.

The Goans' woes are many including industrialists complaining about lack of "Ease of Doing Business" in Goa. Damodar Kochkar of the Goa State Industries Association had expressed 'dismay' in the local daily on December 3, 2021 about lack of online portal, local related auditors and instead heavy charges levied by outstation auditors.

Meanwhile, Goa's Opposition members are in an uproar over allegations against the BJP Goa Government of +selling jobs+ including where a State Minister allegedly gave major chunk of health department jobs to people from his own constituency.

The Congress took out a morcha to the Goa Chief Minister's residence the government 'job scam' that former CM Digamber Kamat described as "BJP leaders being exposed in the government job scam of Rs 70 crore in PWD recruitment." GPCC President Girish Chodankar urged for scrapping all government posts in view of the "exams being manipulated and it being clear that the BJP had sold jobs for a heavy price." The Goa BJP was recently left red-faced for one of their minister's involvement in a sex scandal that involved "threats, harassment and mental torture" of a woman from Bihar.

building the Western Bypass on stilts from Mungul to Comba instead of from Seraulim to Varca -- which is likely to affect the livelihood of farmers and environment through flooding. +

The Congress has tied up with the Goa Forward Party headed by Vijai Sardesai, who was earlier the Deputy Chief Minister for a short while in the BJP-led Goa Government before being ejected by the government. However, its staunch supporter and longtime Congressman Alexio Lourenco Reginaldo has chosen to depart the Congress and join elsewhere.

Probe deeply into Pegasus surveillance

It is difficult to disagree with the argument that there cannot be a parallel probe by any inquiry commission into the allegations of unlawful surveillance using the Pegasus spyware after the Supreme Court ordered an independent inquiry. It is no surprise, then, that the top court has stayed the functioning of the Commission constituted by the West Bengal government and headed by retired judge, Justice Madan B. Lokur. Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee had taken note of the allegations of surveillance that possibly targeted personages in West Bengal, and was on good legal ground when she took the first legal step towards unearthing the truth. It was a step that was warranted by the circumstances then, given the Union government's refusal to acknowledge that it possessed such spyware or whether those identified by an international media investigation as targets were subject to any sort of surveillance in the country. Reports by an international consortium of journalists said that 300 out of 50,000 likely targets of Pegasus spyware were Indians. Subsequently, the Government also refused to cede any ground in the Supreme Court, and declined to give a simple 'yes' or 'no' reply to the Court's questions. The Government inevitably invited an order from the Court for an independent investigation. It is significant that the Bench, headed by the Chief Justice of India, N.V. Ramana, ruled that the bogey of national security was not an adequate reason not to have a credible inquiry into the allegations. A fresh report suggesting that Pegasus was used to target jailed activist Rona Wilson's mobile phone underscores the urgent need to persist with the investigation into the illegal use of the spyware in India. There is much riding on this judicially overseen inquiry, and it behoves the government of the day to extend its full cooperation and not pose any impediment to its independent functioning.



DR ANAND KRISHNAN BELIEVES COMPREHENSIVE NATIONAL SURVEYS WILL HELP MORE THAN OMNIBUS NFHS

Needed, a public health data architecture

In a country perennially thirsty for reliable health data, the National Family Health Survey (NFHS) is like an oasis. It has a large volume of data that is openly accessible. The report of the fifth round of the NFHS was recently released (covering phase 2 States where data collection was delayed due to the novel coronavirus pandemic). Since then, we have had a spate of articles by journalists and scientists covering different aspects (malnutrition, fertility, domestic violence to name a few). It is the go-to source for many researchers and policy makers and is frequently used for various rankings by NITI Aayog.

For the uninitiated, the NFHS is a large survey conducted in a representative sample of households throughout India which started in 1992-93 and is repeated at an interval of about four to five years. It is the Indian version of the Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS), as it is known in other countries. Currently, the survey provides district-level information on fertility, child mortality, contraceptive practices, reproductive and child health (RCH), nutrition, and utilisation and quality of selected health services. The respondents are largely women in the reproductive age group (15-49 years) with husbands included. The fifth round covered 6,36,699 households, 7,24,115 women, and 1,01,839 men across the country. Each survey costs upwards of Rs 250 crore and the funding for different rounds of NFHS has been provided by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the Department for International Development (DFID), the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF), UNICEF, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), and the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, Government of India.

Over the years its scope has been expanded to include HIV, non-communicable diseases, or NCDs (tobacco and alcohol use, hypertension, blood sugar, etc.), Vitamin D3. It has now become an omnibus train where anyone and everyone is free to climb into for a ride. It offers something for everyone. While there is a level of efficiency in adding some questions to an existing survey, this has been lost a long time ago in the NFHS. In NFHS-4, the household questionnaire had 74 questions, the women's questionnaire was 93 pages long with 1,139 questions and the men's questionnaire



was 38 pages long with 843 questions. The NFHS-5 questionnaire was even longer. The size of the survey has obvious implications for data quality.

The NFHS is coordinated by the International Institute for Population Sciences (IIPS Mumbai) and the actual survey is outsourced. There is an entrenched set of agencies which survive on this survey. Issues have been raised on the quality of these agencies and their workers. The NFHS is not the only survey that the Health Ministry conducts. In the last five years, it has conducted the National NCD Monitoring Survey (NNMS), the National Mental Health Survey (NMHS), the Global Adult Tobacco Survey (GATS), the alcohol survey, the Comprehensive National Nutrition Survey (CNNS) and many others. Many of these have been implemented by premier academic institutions at costs below Rs 25 crore, though none of these generated district-level estimates.

Some of these surveys are done to meet the global commitments on targets (NCDs, tobacco, etc.). However, the requirements for the monitoring of NCD targets are not met by the NFHS, as it covers an age group different than that needed for the global set of indicators. Yet, efforts to get the NNMS sanctioned met with stiff resistance as decision-makers felt that the NFHS was enough to answer those questions. As already said, for tobacco we have another vertical survey. Then why do we have questions on these in the NFHS? It is because

we are confusing research with programme monitoring and surveillance needs. Questions on domestic violence and blood collection for vitamin D3 levels are good examples of this lopsided thinking.

There have been previous attempts to align these surveys but they have failed as different advocates have different "demands" and push for inclusion of their set of questions. While the Department of Planning, Statistics and Programme Monitoring is supposed to take a final call, it lacks the technical capacity and the heft to do so and ends up using a "please-all" approach of accepting all requests with some effort at alignment. Everyone is happy, except perhaps the stakeholder with no power of negotiation — the household which is selected for the survey.

Another reason why these questions are not dropped altogether is that the NFHS is the only major survey that India has a record of doing regularly. One does not know if and when the other surveys will be repeated. For example, we do not have any surety that the second round of the NNMS will be conducted, though it is due. So, the general thinking is that "do whatever is possible, as something is better than nothing". Multiple surveys also raise the problem of differing estimates, as is likely, due to sampling differences in the surveys. We noted this for example in tobacco, where differences in tobacco use estimates of the Global Adult Tobacco Survey (GATS) and the NNMS needed a lot of effort at reconciliation and explanation. Another example is the issue of wide divergence in sex ratio at birth reported by the NFHS and the Sample Registration System (SRS). The SRS is a better system for it as it continuously enumerates the population unlike the NFHS which is a cross-sectional survey well known for recall biases.

It is time we questioned this rationale and end the over-dependence on one omnibus survey to provide all public health data for India. The experience of the NFHS and other surveys has conclusively demonstrated our capacity to conduct large-scale surveys with computer-assisted interviews and reasonable quick turnaround and cost. Can we now show that we have the capacity to plan the public health data needs for the country and ensure that these data are collected in an orderly and

regular manner with appropriate budgetary allocation? This requires clarity of purpose and a hard-nosed approach to the issue. Some tough calls will have to be taken including questioning the need for vertical surveys, irrespective of national or international funding.

We have to identify a set of national-level indicators and surveys that will be done using national government funds at regular intervals. I propose just three national surveys — an abridged NFHS focusing on Reproductive and Child Health (RCH) issues, a Behavioral Surveillance Survey (focusing on HIV, NCD, water sanitation and hygiene (WASH)-related and other behaviours) and one nutrition-biological survey (entails collection of data on blood pressure, anthropometry, blood sugar, serology, etc.) done every three to five years in a staggered manner. We need to look at alternate models and choose what suits us best. This does not include data sources on mortality and the health system.

I also propose, as was done for the NNMS, that we take a national-level sample for such surveys and ask States to invest in conducting focused State-level surveys. States have to become active partners including providing financial contributions to these surveys. For a detailed understanding on some issues, each round of survey can focus on a specific area of interest. Other important public health questions can be answered by specific studies (which may or may not need a national-level study), conducted by academic institutions on a research mode based on availability of funding. It is also very important to ensure that the data arising from these surveys are in the public domain. This enables different analyses and viewpoints to be presented on the same set of data enriching the discussion and unlocks the full potential of the survey.

Are we ready to establish a public health data architecture that a country of our complexity needs? We have the technical capacity to do so. All it requires now is the political will.

Dr. Anand Krishnan is Professor at the Centre for Community Medicine, All India Institute of Medical Sciences, New Delhi. He has been involved in many of these surveys in an advisory capacity. Views are personal.

ARUN P.S. BELIEVES FEDERAL FLEXIBILITY WILL PLAY KEY ROLE IN SHAPING FUTURE OF OUR DEMOCRACY.

The sustained attack on federalism

B. Pocker Sahib, a Muslim League member from Kerala in the Constituent Assembly, was prophetic when he outlined his concerns about the possible impact of centralisation of powers. In 1948, he said: "Now after we have won freedom, to do away with Provincial Autonomy and to concentrate all the powers in the Centre really is tantamount to totalitarianism, which certainly ought to be condemned." Today, amid the pandemic, some elements of this statement resonate quite strongly with the States with some of them raising complaints about the Union government's anti-federal moves.

Prior to the pandemic, a series of steps by the Union government undermined the principles of federalism, especially fiscal federalism. This manifested in the increasing monetary share of the States in Centrally Sponsored Schemes (CSS), the terms of reference of the 15th Finance Commission, imposition of demonetisation without adequate consultation with the States, institutionalisation of the Goods and Services Tax (GST), outsourcing of the statutory functions under the Smart Cities Mission, a delay in transfer of GST compensation, 'One Nation One Ration', etc.

Besides tightening the purse strings of States, administrations also witnessed an onslaught on the principles of federalism during the pandemic. States were curtailed in aspects relating to COVID-19 management such as procurement of testing kits, vaccination, the use of the Disaster Management Act, and the unplanned national lockdown. Ironically, Union Ministers used the 'health is a State



subject' argument to counter criticism when the second wave caught the government unprepared.

Several other policies initiated by the Union government in the recent past have also led to the weakening of States' autonomy. These include the farm laws; the Banking Regulation (Amendment) Act of 2020; the Government of National Capital Territory Amendment Act, 2021; the Indian Marine Fisheries Bill, 2021; the Draft Electricity (Amendment) Bill, 2020; the Dam Safety Bill, 2019; the National Education Policy of 2020; and the Draft Blue Economy policy. The creation of the Ministry of Co-operation and the Reserve Bank of India directives on cooperatives are being perceived by the States as measures to strangle a sector that is still struggling to recover from the devastation of demonetisation.

These coercive policies, coming on top of the pandemic-induced economic shock, have worsened the fiscal situation of State governments. The impact of COVID-19 on fiscal federalism deserves to be understood in greater detail, and tax collection is a good place to start. Enlarging the non-divisible pool of taxes in the form of cess in petrol tax and instituting the Agriculture Infrastructure and Development Cess have resulted in a situation where the Union continues to exclusively benefit from tax collection. As the economic commentator Vivek Kaul said, the share of non-divisible pool cess and surcharge in total taxes collected by the Union government jumped from 12.67% in 2019-20 to 23.46% in 2020-21. On December 6, 2021, the Union government informed Parliament that its share in the total contribution of the petroleum sector to the exchequer for 2020-21 was 68%, which left only 32% to the States. In 2013-14, the Union:State share was almost 50:50.

The story is the same with GST. During the pandemic, the Union government repeatedly violated the compensation guarantees to the States under the GST regime. Delay in paying the States their due worsened the impact of the economic slowdown. The crisis was aggravated in July 2020, when the Union government proposed borrowing as an option to address the shortfall in GST compensation. Most States, forced by economic pressure, had to accept the proposal. In effect, this meant that they were not only getting the share of GST collections due to them, but were now forced into debt which they would have to

service. The GST compensation period expires in 2022, and despite multiple requests from the States, the deadline has not been extended. The Comptroller and Auditor General found that the Union government, in 2018-19, wrongly retained Rs 47,272 crore of GST compensation cess in the Consolidated Fund of India — money that was supposed to be transferred to the States. It is also pertinent to recollect that the 2021-22 Budget Estimates indicate that the States' share of Union tax has reduced to 30% against the mandated 41% devolution prescribed by the 15th Finance Commission.

Cash-starved States have been seeking non-tax avenues to generate funds to sustain their programmes. And at this point, the Union government issued a clarification that funding to the Chief Minister's Disaster Relief Funds will not be considered as CSR expenditure, unlike the case with PM-CARES. This was followed by decisions like the suspension and transfer of the Member of Parliament Local Area Development (MPLAD) funds to the Consolidated Fund of India. This led to a major crisis situation for most States and resulted in demands for increasing borrowing limits under the Fiscal Responsibility and Budget Management Act (FRBM), from 3% to 5%.

Arun P.S. is a Kerala-based public policy researcher and a recipient of the Smitu Kothari Fellowship. This article is published as a part of the Fellowship of the Centre for Financial Accountability, Delhi. Views are personal.

FIVE OBSERVATIONS

PM INAUGURATES 22 DEVELOPMENTAL PROJECTS WORTH OVER RS 670 CRORES

1 PORTAL AND LOGO FOR THE CONFORMITY
PM also launched a Portal and Logo dedicated to the Conformity Assessment Scheme of milk products, developed by the BIS with the help of National Dairy Development Board (NDDB)

2 BIOGAS BASED ELECTRICITY GENERATION PLANT
PM also laid the foundation stone for the Biogas based Electricity generation plant for the Milk Producers Cooperative Union Plant, Ramnagar, Varanasi. It will be a key step towards making Milk Producers Cooperative Union Plant energy self-sufficient.

3 URBAN DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS
Prime Minister inaugurated multiple urban development projects in Varanasi. These include six projects of redevelopment of Old Kashi wards, a parking and surface park at Beniabag, beautification of two ponds

4 PROJECTS IN EDUCATION SECTOR
Projects in the education sector that will be inaugurated by the PM include the Union Education Ministry's Inter University Centre for Teachers Education, built at a cost of around Rs 107 crore

5 PROJECTS IN HEALTH SECTOR
In the health sector, project comprising Doctors hostel, a Nurses hostel and shelter home amounting to Rs 130 crore, at Mahamana Pandit Madan Mohan Malviya Cancer Centre will be inaugurated by the PM

LETTERBOX

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BOOKS: REVIEW

Book captures profound moments of life with dogs

Leading writers, debut authors, graphic artists, photographers and animal rescuers have come together to pay tribute to their canine companions through a series of funny, poignant, warm and joyous stories.

"The Book of Dog: An Anthology Celebrating Our Beloved Best Friends" has 45 original pieces and is edited by Hemali Sodhi, founder of A Suitable Agency which represents writers and artists.

Among the contributors are Aanchal Malhotra, Amitava Kumar, Anita Nair, Anuja Chauhan, Arunava Sinha, Ashwin Sanghi, Bulbul Sharma, Cyrus Broacha, Devdutt Pattanaik, Gulzar, Jerry Pinto, Maneka Gandhi, Mark Tully, Ruskin Bond, Shobhaa De, Siddharth Dhanvant Shanghi and Vikas Khanna. Sodhi calls this book, published

by HarperCollins India, a "celebration of the unique bond we have with the canine companions in our lives, an ode to these lovely beings who make our days and nights brighter with their presence".

The book is a project to which the editor and all the authors have contributed for free. All royalties will go to registered animal welfare charities.

A black-and-tan of mixed ancestry — part Terrier, part Spaniel, part street dog, Crazy, was the sole companion of Bond's grandmother after her husband died. According to Bond, Crazy was such a good runner that even Usain Bolt wouldn't have been able to keep up with him.

"Crazy's greatest pleasure was running round and round the house. It was a small bungalow with plenty of open space in front and at the back, and whenever

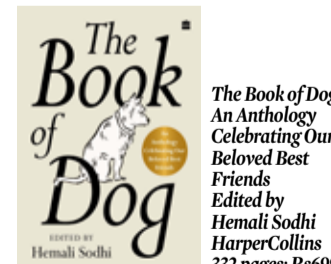
Crazy's greatest pleasure was running round and round the house. It was a small bungalow with plenty of open space in front and at the back

Crazy felt that life was getting a little dull, he would go for one of his sprints," he writes.

In his piece, Gulzar talks about his Boxer called Pali who, to him, was a friend, a companion, and many more things besides ... but not a 'dog'.

Pali was very sensible; he wouldn't let anyone come near Gulzar.

"When I went into the office room for the day's work, he would come there as well, like clock-



work; he would settle himself on a 'durrie' close to me. In the evening, we would shut the office and go back together," he writes.

While Gandhi talks of Bruno, Gudiya and Goofy, De tells stories of Gong Li, Chauhan about Chhabbis, Sanghi of Simba and Sinha about Tingmo.

Broacha turns his humorous gaze on the dogs (and accompanying humans) in his building, while Shanghi pens the experience of his early years as a dog trainer.

Pinto's unnamed dog protagonist takes it upon himself to school a younger pup on the unpredictable ways of the world, while Nair talks about her beautiful pups Sunderapandi and Nachimuthu.

Tully, a devoted dog lover,

reminisces about all the wonderful dogs in his life and Sharma mentions about the loyal Gaddies (mountain dogs) in her piece.

Pattanaik writes about dogs in Hindu myth, while Malhotra comes up with an informative essay on dogs deployed in World War I and Khanna talks about Plum and also gives a recipe for a delicious dog treat. Kumar, on the other hand, turns his gaze at his younger self as he finally finds a chance to say goodbye to a faithful friend.

In the introduction, Sodhi says how dogs teach people some of the most profound lessons of life.

"They teach you to live in the moment, to live for the moment. They teach you unconditional love, given so freely it sometimes makes you tear up and wonder what you did to deserve this. They teach you to love unreservedly, and never let the child die in you. And they teach you kindness," she writes.

She, however, rues that there is a heartbreaking reality that every dog parent is aware of — dogs have short lives.

ALSO READ | DIGITAL PUSH: NDTV'S SHARES ZOOM THREE-FOLD IN 2021 * P7 | DIESEL, PETROL PRICES UNCHANGED SINCE NOV 3 * P7

NEWSBRIEF

HSBC to acquire L&T Investment Management for \$425 mn

NEW DELHI: HSBC Asset Management India has entered into an agreement with L&T Finance Holdings (LTFH) to fully acquire L&T Investment Management (LTIM) for \$425 million. The proposed acquisition is subject to regulatory approval. "Strengthening HSBC's asset management business in India will add to its ability to serve the wealth needs of its customers in India as well as those of its growing non-resident Indian customer base across the world," it said. At present, LTIM is ranked as the 12th largest mutual fund management company in India. It had assets under management (AUM) of Rs 803 billion (\$10.8 bn) and over 2.4 million active folios as of September 2021. LTIM reported a pre-tax profit of Rs 1.85 billion (\$25 million), income of Rs 3.48 billion (\$46.9m) and costs of Rs 1.63 billion (\$21.9m) for the financial year ended March 2021.

AGENCIES

Adani announces annual prize for social enterprise

NEW DELHI: The Adani Group, India's fastest-growing portfolio of companies, will institute the Adani Prize for Social Enterprise — India's biggest annual prize in the social sphere. This was announced by Gautam Adani, Chairman of the Adani Group, at the first-ever Green Talks, an Adani talk-series initiative to provide social entrepreneurs a platform to present their ideas and secure support for their work. Beginning in 2022, the Adani Prize for Social Enterprise will be awarded to five outstanding social entrepreneurs for their impact in India and other parts of the developing world. The Adani Prize will provide a total of Rs 5 crore in funding for the five chosen social enterprises.

AGENCIES

'Unaccounted cash worth crores recovered in raids on industrialist's premises'

KANNAUJ: Unaccounted cash worth over Rs 150 crore has been unearthed in a series of joint raids by various taxation agencies at business and official premises of a Kanpur-based perfume industrialist, sources said on Friday. The residential and business premises of Kanpur industrialist Piyush Jain were raided on Thursday and Friday by sleuths of various anti-tax-evasion agencies, including the Income Tax Department, the Central Board of Indirect Taxes and Customs (CBIC) and the Goods and Services Tax (GST) Intelligence unit, they said. Though there was no official confirmation of raids and seizures, a senior tax-enforcement official said on the condition of anonymity that raids were conducted at Jain's multiple premises in Kanpur, Gujarat and Mumbai began on Thursday.

Some photographs of the alleged raids going viral on various social media platforms showed stacks of cash stuffed in large wardrobes at the residential premises of Jain in Kanpur. Jain runs the perfume-manufacturing



units also in Kanauj district, neighbouring Kanpur. The tax officials also raided a factory manufacturing 'Shikhar' brand of pan masala and other scented tobacco products here in the city. During raids at the residential premises, huge amounts of cash, wrapped in paper, has been found, the official added.

The money was allegedly linked to the dispatch of goods via fake invoices and without e-way bills by a goods transporter, the official said.

Meanwhile, reports coming from Kanauj said that the sleuths at around 3.00 pm reached the Kanauj residence of Jain along with his two sons Molu and Pratyush, and entered the residence. The raids also started a war of words on twitter between the BJP and Samajwadi Party. In a tweet in Hindi, the UP unit of the BJP said, "People of SP, the smell of your sins will not be washed away by the 'perfume of corruption'. More than Rs 150 crore of black money has

been seized. And it is natural for Akhilesh to feel the pain, when action is initiated on the corrupt people." The entire UP knows that SP means corruption," the tweet said. Rebutting the claims of the BJP, Manish Jagan Agrawal, the digital media co-ordinator of SP in a series of tweets in Hindi said, "The raids at the house of Shikhar Pan Masala Group and perfume trader Piyush Jain in Kanpur and the cash recovered is a story of failure of demonetisation. The BJP and the media are defaming SP by forcibly linking Piyush Jain and Shikhar Pan Masala to SP. Piyush Jain has nothing to do with SP MLC Purni Jain."

"Since a few days ago, income tax raids were conducted on people linked to the SP. But, the government and the agencies did not get anything. The people of SP came out clean. Hence, a frustrated BJP immediately conducted a raid, and recovered cash, and also hatched a conspiracy to link their propaganda with the SP, and mislead the people," Agrawal said in another tweet.

AGENCIES

Amazon's plan to acquire Catamaran stake in Prione violates FDI policy: CAIT



NEW DELHI: The Confederation of All India Traders on Thursday said any approval from Competition Commission of India for Amazon to buy shares of Catamaran in Prione Business Services will be a gross violation of the FDI Policy, as it would lead to a complete control over a seller on its marketplace platform. The traders' body said that the approval will convert Amazon from being a marketplace platform to inventory based platform, which is strictly prohibited under

the FDI policy. Amazon on Wednesday announced it would acquire Catamaran's stake in Prione Business Services. Founded in mid-2014, Prione Business Services provides digital and internet services to Indian small and medium sized businesses, while Catamaran is a venture capital and private equity investing firm. However, the acquisition would be subject to requisite regulatory approvals. On August 9, the two firms announced their decision to not continue the joint

venture beyond the current term to be ended in May 2022.

CAIT National President B.C. Bharti and Secretary General Praveen Khandelwal, in a statement, said the global e-commerce firm Amazon's audacity is extremely surprising despite facing multiple investigations by various Indian agencies like the Enforcement Directorate and the CCI. "Amazon has been relentlessly adopting various means to circumvent India's sovereign laws right under the nose of the Indian authorities. Amazon has started considering itself bigger than India now as they have also challenged and sued the Enforcement Directorate," the statement said.

The CAIT said it will write to the CCI to ensure that Amazon does not succeed in their "sinister design" of vitiating India's e-commerce market which in turn will end up destroying India's vast retail market beside the CAIT will also take up the matter with the Commerce and Finance Ministries.

AGENCIES

Why no action against Essel Group for bank loan default, Cong asks Centre

NEW DELHI: The Congress alleged on Friday that there is a nexus between the Centre and its "corporate friends", and questioned why action has not been taken against Dish TV promoters Essel Group, which defaulted on repayment of loans to the Yes Bank. Congress spokesperson Pawan Khera asked the Centre why it continues to support Dish TV promoter Subhash Chandra, even when he has a minority stake of less than 10 per cent in the company, and why an administrator has not been appointed for the

firm, as has been done in many similar cases. He alleged that the Centre has not acted against Chandra, a BJP-supported Rajya Sabha MP, and that rules were bent and laws ignored in the case "to protect the vested interests" of the "favourite businessmen" of Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

There was no immediate comment on the allegations either from the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) or the Essel Group. "The brazen nexus between the Modi government and a few of the prime minister's corporate friends is now

known not just to the country, but to the entire world. Laws are ignored, misused, not used, twisted, turned, made flexible to help the vested interests of the favourite businessmen and friends of the prime minister," Khera told reporters here.

AGENCIES

In Dish TV's case, he alleged that Yes Bank, which is a private bank, incurred huge losses in 2020 for loans amounting to Rs 6,789 crore given to Chandra's Essel Group, which were outstanding when it was placed under a moratorium.

AGENCIES

Data Patterns lists with 46 per cent premium, settles 28 pc up on listing day

NEW DELHI: Shares of Data Patterns (India) saw a strong debut on Friday, the listing day, rallying with a premium of 46 per cent over its issue price. The company is a defence and aerospace electronics solutions provider catering to the indigenously developed defence products industry. Shares of the company listed at Rs 856, against the issue price of Rs 585 per share. However, they pared some of its intra-day gains and settled at Rs 755, up over 28 per cent from its issue price, NSE data showed.

The listing of the firm comes at a time when the Centre is planning to ramp up indigenously-made defence equipment under its 'Atma Nirbhar Bharat' initiative. "Its demanded valuations was on higher



side, but has the ability to expand the business and earnings. We have given a 'Subscribe' rating for the issue.

Today, the company got listed at 47 per cent premium to the offer price. We feel that there is limited upside in the share price, thus investors are recommended to book profit," said Rajnath Yadav, Research Analyst at Choice Broking. The company's market capitalisation

is currently Rs 3,894 crore, NSE data showed. "Seeing strong fundamentals and orderbook over the years and government initiatives such as Make In India may provide a boost to the company's growth. We advise investors to hold the stock for the long term," said Mohit Nigam, Head, PMS at Hem Securities. Besides, new investors can buy the stock around Rs 750 levels, Nigam said.

AGENCIES

IPO fund raising all-time high at Rs 1.18 lakh crore



NEW DELHI: Sixty three Indian corporates raised an all-time high Rs 1.18 lakh crore through main board IPOs in calendar 2021. This was nearly 4.5 times Rs 26,613 crore raised through 15 IPOs in 2020 and almost double of the previous best year 2017 in which Rs 68,827 crore was raised. IPOs from new age loss-making technology startups, strong retail participation and huge listing gains were the key highlights, according to Pranav Halde, Managing Director, Prime Database Group. Overall public equity fundraising crossed the Rs 2 lakh crore mark to reach Rs 2.02 lakh crore in calendar 2021 which was higher than the previous highest amount of Rs 1.76 lakh crore in the preceding year.

The overall response from the public was very good. Of the 59 IPOs for which data is available as of now, 36 IPOs received a mega response of more than 10 times (of which 6 IPOs more than 100 times) while 8 IPOs were oversubscribed by more than 3 times. The balance 15 IPOs were oversubscribed between 1 to 3 times. The year witnessed tremendous response from retail investors as well. The average number of applications from retail was 14.36 lakh, in comparison to 12.77 lakh in 2020 and 4.05 lakh in 2019.

AGENCIES

HP begins manufacturing laptops, multiple PC products in India

NEW DELHI: PC and printer major HP Inc on Wednesday said it has started local manufacturing of multiple PC products including laptops in India, as the government renews its thrust on the 'make in India' initiative. The company has begun manufacturing multiple models of laptops, desktop towers, mini desktops at the Flex facility in Sriperumbudur near Chennai, Tamil Nadu. HP is also manufacturing display monitors in India. Some of these products qualify under public procurement order of the government and will be available on the Government e-Marketplace (GeM) portal to meet the demands of the government departments and other customers, according to the company.

"We will be expanding our portfolio in manufacturing across multiple products within India in order to make sure that we play a meaningful role in building the country as a global manufacturing hub,"



Ketan Patel, Managing Director, HP India Market, told IANS. "We have been working with the Central and state governments in the mission to empower the lives of millions of citizens and enhance the community's quality of life. This announcement will further solidify our commit-

ment to India," he added. HP Inc maintained its lead in the overall PC category in India, as it reported the third consecutive quarter (Q3) with over a million shipments in the country. It led both commercial and consumer segments with a 28.5 per cent share in the overall PC category, ac-

ording to the IDC. This is the first time HP is manufacturing such a wide range of laptops in India, with products such as HP EliteBooks, HP ProBooks and HP G8 series notebooks. The company has also expanded its locally-manufactured commercial desktops by adding various models of desktop mini towers (MT), mini desktops (DM), small form factor (SFF) desktops and a range of All-in-One PCs. These products have both Intel and AMD processor options and cater to a wide range of customer segments.

HP partnered with Flex to manufacture commercial desktops in the country from August 2020. "The last one year of significant growth is a great testimony of the fact that computing is powering hybrid work, hybrid learning and hybrid playing. Computing is now becoming mainstream and this is a very good indicator to expand our footprint," Patel emphasised.

AGENCIES

IndianOil to invest Rs 9,028 cr for new crude oil pipeline system



NEW DELHI: Indian Oil Corporation will invest Rs 9,028 crore for setting up of a new crude oil pipeline system, with a capacity of 17.5 MMTPA, from Mundra (Gujarat) to Panipat (Haryana). Under this project, IndianOil would also build nine crude oil tanks of 60,000 KL each

at Mundra, which, apart from meeting operational requirements, would also help in enhancing crude oil storage capacity in the country.

"The total estimated cost of the project is Rs 9,028 crore. The IndianOil Board, at its meeting held on 20th December 2021, has approved

the investment proposal," IndianOil said in a statement. "IndianOil is implementing a project for capacity expansion of Panipat refinery from 15 MMTPA to 25 MMTPA along with the installation of Polypropylene Unit and Catalytic Dewaxing Unit with targeted completion in 2nd quarter of FY 2024-25."

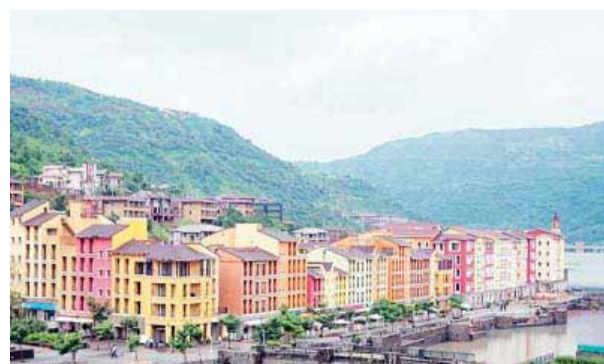
As per the company, the new pipeline system and crude oil tank storage would help in meeting the enhanced need of crude oil requirement due to the expansion of the Panipat refinery. "The crude oil pipeline project is expected to be completed in synchronisation with the commissioning of Panipat refinery expansion."

AGENCIES

Mumbai's Darwin Platform Infra Ltd wins bid for Pune's Lavasa city

MUMBAI: Mumbai-based Darwin Platform Infrastructure Ltd (DPIL) has bagged the bid for Lavasa Corporation, India's first privately-built smart city near the Lonavala hillstation in Pune, officials said. The Committee of Creditors (CoC) of Lavasa Corporation voted and accepted a Rs 1,814 crore final Total Resolution Plan to revive the city. Darwin Platform Group of Companies Group Chairman Ajay H. Singh said that his company has an ambitious and long-term plan for Lavasa smart city.

"DPCIL has capabilities and resources to meet the expectations of the CoC. We are committed to executing the Plan as per the schedule proposed to the CoC," he said, lauding the CoC move



expressing full confidence in the company. Last month, the DPIL had submitted a revised bid on its Resolution Plan and this month the CoC initiated the process to finalise the deals submitted by various applicants, including DPIL. CoC sources said that among other things, the DPIL has

proposed payment plan and schedules that include upfront payment of around Rs 100 crore, payment to home buyers (RERA) within two years of receipt of EC, construction and delivery of homebuyers' properties, redemption of the secured NCDs at the end of 108 months, and as these would

Mumbai-based Darwin Platform Infrastructure Ltd (DPIL) has bagged the bid for Lavasa Corporation, India's first privately-built smart city near the Lonavala hillstation in Pune, officials said

incur a cost of Rs 1,466.50 crore, adding working capital, repairs/refurbishment and other works, the company had offered a total plan of Rs 1,814 crore for the project. Vineet Tulsyan of R3 Corporate Advisors, which guided the Darwin Group for its winning bid, said af-

ter considering all the complexities and hurdles to the projects, they negotiated a well-balanced plan with the lenders. "Homebuyers are the biggest sufferers here besides the secured financial creditors and we will understand their concerns and involve them in the revival process," he said. The first challenge before the new entity would be securing various environment clearances once the NCLT approves the revival plan, but the DPIL is confident of getting the same. The Lavasa, work on which was started by Hindustan Construction Company Chairman Ajit Gulabchand in the early 2000s, was billed as India's first privately developed hill station coming upon over 25,000 acres of land near Pune.

AGENCIES

Space industry hopes for exciting 2022 after a forgettable 2021

CHENNAI: The Indian space industry is eagerly looking forward to 2022 hoping that it could be an active year as compared to 2021 that is largely a forgettable one. Speeding up the space sector reforms with final policies and activating the regulator for the private players, finalising the foreign direct investment (FDI) norms and passing of the Space Activities Bill and others are the expectations of the industry players for 2022. The global space market is expected to grow to \$1 trillion by 2040.

However, India's share in the global pie is about two per cent, offering good potential for the new players. Till now, the Indian space sector was



a monopoly of the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) - the country's space agency - and private participation was in the form of component supplies to the former. "The realisation of the uncrewed rocket flight part of India's human space mission Gaganyaan will be a major boost, a source of inspiration in

the hearts of the people. There will be a lot of excitement with two uncrewed rocket launches," Dr Chaitanya Giri, Founder, DAWON Advisory & Intelligence told IANS.

He added that the Rs 9,023 crore Gaganyaan has a lot of strategic importance for the country apart from being a scientific achievement mission. "The year 2022 will also see some progress in the Aditya-L1 mission to study the Sun. There are also two moon mission projects -- the country's own Chandrayaan-3 and the Indo-Japan moon mission (Lunar Polar Exploration Mission-LUPEX) and the Indo-US collaborative NASA-ISRO Synthetic Aperture Radar (NISAR) Mission," Giri said.

AGENCIES

ALSO READ | BCCI THANKS HARBHAJAN SINGH FOR HIS SERVICE TO INDIAN CRICKET * P8 | US TO LIFT OMICRON-LINKED TRAVEL BAN ON SOUTHERN AFRICA * P8

No confidence in govt's ability to fathom new crypto order: Ex Fin Secy Garg

NEW DELHI: With the government once again failing to table the (much-expected) Cryptocurrency and Regulation of Official Digital Currency Bill, 2021, in the Winter Session of Parliament, former Finance Secretary Subhash Chandra Garg said on Thursday that he had no confidence in the ability of government to figure out the complexities of this new crypto phenomenon. "I expressed serious doubts when the government had expressed its intent to present the bill, about the introduction of the crypto-assets/currencies bill in the Winter Session of Parliament. I am, therefore, not surprised to see the present situation where there is zero clarity over what is the Bill," Garg told IANS.



This was the second time that the Crypto Bill 2021 was listed on the Parliament's agenda but did not see the light of the day. It was also deferred during the Budget Session of Parliament in February this year. Garg, a pioneer in formulating policies around crypto, headed the inter-ministerial committee (IMC) that drafted the cryptocurrency bill entitled "Banning of Cryptocurrency and Regulation of Official Digital Currency Bill, 2019".

According to him, the government has been buffeted by two forces in this matter. First, "the Reserve Bank of India (RBI), believ-

ing that crypto-technology and businesses are only in the currency business, has been constantly hammering the government to ban the crypto-currencies and statutorily empower RBI to issue digital bank-notes," said Garg.

"The crypto-currency exchanges, applying the force from the other side, want the government to treat crypto-currencies as

assets and statutorily create a regulatory mechanism for the same," he added. The government seems to be caught up in this crypto storm unable to make up its mind, he noted. Adding to the government's problems are several critical issues spawned by this new crypto technology phenomenon. More than addressing the issue of legitimising cryptocurrencies in India in the upcoming bill, the government is now facing deeper challenges like crypto being potentially misused for hawala and money laundering, investments worth billions of dollars escaping to abroad and capital gains tax being avoided by the trade exchanges as well as investors.

With an estimated 15 to 20 million crypto investors, and no clarity on the size of the Indian crypto market, a blanket ban is set to shake up the entire crypto ecosystem and affect millions who have put in their hard-earned money into various crypto trading exchanges. **AGENCIES**

RBI extends card tokenisation deadline till June 30

NEW DELHI: The Reserve Bank of India on Thursday extended card tokenisation deadline by six months till June 30, 2022, from the earlier deadline of December 31, 2021. "The timeline for storing of CoF (card-on-file) data is extended by six months, i.e., till June 30, 2022; post this, such data shall be purged," it said in a notification. "In addition to tokenisation, industry stakeholders may devise alternate mechanism(s) to handle any use case or post-transaction activity that currently involves or requires storage of CoF data by entities other than card issuers and card networks." The RBI's card tokenisation guidelines mandated replacing the actual card data with encrypted digital tokens, which are then used to facilitate and authenticate transactions.

The devaluation of sensitive card details would have alleviated risk and reduced vulnerability of sensitive data. However, industry bodies urged the RBI to



extend card tokenisation deadline beyond December 31, 2021.

The Merchant Payments Alliance of India (MPAI) and the Alliance of Digital India Foundation (ADIF) had recently urged the central bank to extend the CoF tokenisation deadline of December 31 for merchants. Citing several operational challenges that will hinder the transition to the token-based payments ecosystem, the industry bodies voiced their concerns over industry readiness on

the RBI directive on card-on-file tokenisation. The MPAI and ADIF said that 'ecosystem readiness' is a sequential process of going live with stable API (application programming interface) documentation for tokenised transactions. The digital payments ecosystem is a long way from consumer-ready solutions and unless regulated entities are compliant, merchants will not be able to successfully process tokenised transactions, they said in the joint letter. **AGENCIES**

World Bank program to benefit over 12 mn children in Tanzania



DAR ES SALAAM: The World Bank has approved \$500 million that will benefit more than 12 million children in pre-primary and primary education in Tanzania's mainland, the bank has said in a statement. The programme called 'BOOST Primary Student Learning Program for Results' is aimed at making pre-primary and primary education better and more accessible across the east African country, Xinhua news agency reported citing the statement released on Wednesday.

The statement said the education programme supported by World Bank will help make Tanzania primary schools safer, more inclusive, child friendly and enhance teachers' subject content knowledge. **AGENCIES**

NEWS BRIEF

DHFL case: Yes Bank's former business head gets bail

MUMBAI: A special CBI court here on Thursday granted bail to Rajiv Anand, a former business head of Yes Bank, in a cheating and corruption case involving the private sector lender DHFL. Anand's bail plea was allowed by special judge for CBI cases S U Wadgaonkar. The detailed order was not available yet. The bank's co-founder Rana Kapoor and his family are co-accused in the case. Rana Kapoor is in judicial custody in a related case being probed by the Enforcement Directorate. He was arrested in March 2020. As per the CBI, Yes Bank invested Rs 3,700 crore in debentures of DHFL, which, in return, allegedly paid kickbacks of Rs 600 crore to DoIT Urban Ventures, a firm controlled by Kapoor's wife and daughters. **AGENCIES**

Rupee strengthens for sixth day, up 28 paise to 75.26 per USD

MUMBAI: Rising for the sixth straight session, the rupee climbed 28 paise to close at 75.26 against the US dollar on Thursday as abating concerns over the Omicron variant improved risk appetite globally. At the interbank forex market, the local unit opened at 75.43 against the greenback and witnessed an intra-day high of 75.22 and a low of 75.44. On Wednesday, the rupee had appreciated by 5 paise to close at 75.54 against the US dollar. Meanwhile, the dollar index, which measures the greenback's strength against the basket of six currencies, rose 0.03 per cent to 96.10. Brent crude futures, the global oil benchmark, fell 0.20 per cent to USD 75.14 per barrel. **AGENCIES**

'Sri Lanka's official reserves to double by year end to above USD 3 billion'

COLOMBO: Sri Lanka's official foreign reserves, which dropped to USD 1.58 billion in November, will double to remain above USD 3 billion by the end of this year, the Central Bank here has said, asserting that the country's economy showed resilience throughout 2021 despite the headwinds of the economic impact of COVID-19. The bank said Sri Lanka has successfully met its debt obligations by repaying foreign loans, including the payments of the International Sovereign Bonds. Progress is being made in negotiations other arrangements to bring in inflows, the Central Bank of Sri Lanka (CBSL) said in a statement on Wednesday. Although no details of the expected inflows are given, the officials said a USD 1.5 billion swap with China was in the offing. **AGENCIES**

Centre cuts over 25,000 compliances for 'Ease of Living', 'Ease of Doing Business'



NEW DELHI: To promote 'Ease of Living' as well as 'Ease of Doing Business', the Centre has reduced more than 25,000 compliances. The figure was furnished by the Ministry of Commerce and Industry after the valedictory session of the "National Workshop on the next phase of reforms to reduce Compliance Burden" which was held here. Addressing the session, the Minister of Commerce and Industry, Consumer Affairs, Food and Public Distribution and Textiles Piyush Goyal said India's compliance systems for citizens must be based on the basis of trust, while calling for a focus on initiatives which can reduce

the compliance burden to provide timely delivery of services.

Goyal said that infinite possibilities in technology should aid the Centre's initiatives and not just further complicate the system. He also stressed the need for indigenous solutions to problems facing the country. "The Minister asked policy makers to consider the wide disparity in income, literacy level and the gaps in infrastructure, especially connectivity, while planning the delivery of services, especially if technology is involved," the ministry said in a statement. Goyal spoke of the need to combine various services like the 'Digi locker' and the 'National Single Window System', so that repetitive processes are rationalised, gaps are bridged and redundancies are eliminated when it comes to applying for approvals and permissions. **AGENCIES**

FM concludes pre-Budget meetings with stakeholders



NEW DELHI: Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman on Wednesday concluded a week-long series of pre-budget consultation meetings with various stakeholders for the upcoming Budget for FY23. All held in virtual mode, the first meeting was held on December 15 with agri and allied industry members. More than 120 invitees representing seven stakeholder

groups participated in eight meetings during the period, a Ministry of Finance statement said.

The stakeholder groups include representatives and experts from agriculture and agro processing industry, industry, infrastructure and climate change, financial sector and capital markets, services and trade, social sector, trade union and labour organisations, and economists. "The stakeholder groups made several suggestions on various issues that included increased R&D spending, infrastructure status for digital services, incentives to hydrogen storage and fuel cell development, rationalisation of income tax slabs, investments in online safety measures etc., among others," the statement said. Sitharaman assured that suggestions will be carefully considered while preparing the Budget document, which is slated to be tabled in Parliament on February 1, 2022. **AGENCIES**

Axis Bank emerges top bidder for Citi business



NEW DELHI: Private sector lender Axis Bank has emerged as the highest bidder to buy Citi's consumer banking business, according to sources. American banking major Citibank in April announced its plan to exit from the consumer banking business in India as part of a global strategy. The business comprises credit cards, retail banking, home

loans and wealth management. The bank has 35 branches in the country and employs about 4,000 people in the consumer banking business. The final valuation will be linked to the number of variables, including the quantum of deposits, customers, assets and liabilities once all regulatory clearances come through, the sources added. **AGENCIES**

IDBI Bank-diamantaire group issue: 'Disturbed' AIBOA seeks RBI probe

MUMBAI: In a significant development, the powerful All India Bank Officers Association (AIBOA) on Wednesday demanded a probe by the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) into the IDBI Bank Ltd's recent disclosure of a diamantaire groups loan default.

AIBOA General Secretary S. Nagarajan has said that bank officers are "seriously disturbed" over the public notices issued by the IDBI Bank Ltd vis-a-vis the wilful defaulter diamantaire, Sanghavi Exports International Pvt Ltd, its group companies,



factories, office, besides promoters/directors/guarantors. In a letter to the RBI Governor, it has been pointed out how the IDBI Bank Ltd's

first public notice (dated December 19) mentioned a huge amount of over Rs 6,700 crore, plus a foreign currency (USD) loan equivalent

to around Rs 1.20 crore. Earlier, the Bank of India, as the leader of a consortium, had taken over possession of the diamantaire's property for failure to repay loans worth Rs 468 crore in 2018, said Nagarajan, on the issue that was first highlighted by IANS (December 20-21).

"The wilful defaulter should not be a repeat action of the infamous Nirav Modi of Punjab National Bank. It is also intriguing that in 2018 itself, there was a recovery step made by another public sector bank, so how come the IDBI Bank was unknown of

the developments," Nagarajan asked. The senior banking professional pointed out that later, IDBI Bank informed the BSE and NSE that there are inaccuracies and that the loan account is fully provided with the NPA of only Rs 16.72 crore.

"The contradictory stand by IDBI Bank Ltd before various authorities is certainly intriguing and requires reporting of factual position to the public at large, who are directly or indirectly involved in the share market operations," urged Nagarajan. **AGENCIES**

ED attaches assets of businessman who duped bank of Rs 112cr



NEW DELHI: The Enforcement Directorate (ED) on Thursday said it has provisionally attached movable and immovable assets worth Rs 100 crore belonging to a businessman Rebbha Satyanarayana and his family

members in connection with a Rs 112 crore money laundering case

The accused cheated the IDBI Bank by taking fraudulent fish tank KCC (Kisan Credit Card) loans. "We have attached the agri-

culture lands, fish ponds, commercial sites, plots and flats in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, and bank balance," said an ED official. Earlier, a case against the accused was lodged by the federal probe agency CBI. The ED initiated its inquiry on the basis of the FIR of the CBI.

Satyanarayana and others were accused of fraudulently availing KCC fish tank loans in the name of 143 benami borrowers from IDBI Bank, Rajahmundry Branch to the tune of Rs 112.41 crore. The ED found during the probe that Satyanarayana was the aggregator and end-beneficiary of all the KCC loans sanctioned to the borrowers. "The said KCC Loan

amounts were firstly transferred to the Borrowers' Savings Accounts (opened by Rebbha Satyanarayana in their name) and later on, most of the said loan amount was withdrawn in cash and handed over to him which he utilised for various things," said an ED official.

The official said that the accused utilised the funds for the repayment of earlier loans which he took in the name of other entities. He was controlling all the benami entities. The accused also purchased a lot of properties in the names of his relatives. "Lastly, he invested in his import and export businesses. This business was being run by his relatives and others,"

said an ED official. The ED found that properties purchased by Satyanarayana in his relatives' and benami names were again used to mortgage for getting other loans in their other business entities.

"He is a habitual offender who is taking cyclical loans to repay old loans and divert portions of the sanctioned loans to run his various benami ventures. He was indulged habitually and continuously in fraudulently availing loans from banks by pledging/mortgaging properties and for repayment of the same, either he used to avail fresh loans or used to settle said loan under OTS in a cycled manner," said the ED official. **AGENCIES**

Global risk-on sentiment buoys indices; PSU banks' stocks rise



MUMBAI: Positive global cues along with rising risk taking sentiment buoyed India's key equity indices S&P BSE Sensex and NSE Nifty50 during Thursday's late-hour trade session. Initially, both the indices opened with an upgar and rose for the third consecutive session. Globally, Asian shares were modestly higher on Thursday after stocks advanced on Wall Street with encouraging reports about the potential impact of the Omicron variant of coronavirus and stronger US economic data. Similarly, European stock markets had a higher but fairly cautious opening on Thursday, building on gains late in Wednesday's session. Consequently, at 3.15 p.m., the S&P BSE Sensex traded at 57,368.79 points, up 0.77 per cent from its previous close.

Similarly, the broader 50-scrip Nifty at the National Stock Exchange

(NSE) rose to 17,085.45 points, up 0.77 per cent from its previous close. "Volumes on the NSE continue to be lower than normal due to holiday mood. Advance decline ratio remains positive," said Deepak Jasani, Head of Retail Research, HDFC Securities.

"Among sectors, Realty, Oil & Gas, Power and FMCG have gained the most while Telecom and Metals have lost the most." According to Gaurav Garg, Head of Research, CapitalVia Global Research: "Domestic Sentiments are impacted as the risk sentiment improved globally after a study showed hospital stay risk for the Omicron variant of Covid-19 is lower than the Delta strain." "Among sectors, Realty and PSU banks up 2 per cent each while bank, financial services and FMCG up by 1 per cent each." **AGENCIES**

Bengal advisor seeks urgent GST council meet to scrap tax hike in textile

MUMBAI: Amit Mitra, the advisor to West Bengal Chief minister Mamata Banerjee, on Friday requested Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman to hold an urgent meeting of the GST Council and rescind the seven per cent tax hike in the textiles sector to prevent job loss and closure of small units. The union government had notified to increase the tax on natural fibre products from 5 per cent to 12 per cent, including apparels in the lower tax bracket with effect from January 1, 2022. If the tax is not reversed then the impact will be huge with job loss to 15 lakh people, including those engaged in ancillary industry and closure of one lakh small units. A lot of units will revert to the informal sector, Mitra told reporters in a virtual media meet. He accused the Centre of not discussing the issue in the GST council before announcing the hike in tax.

Mitra, who is the former finance minister of the state, said that at a time when wholesale inflation in the country is already 14 per cent, the additional burden of seven per cent tax on textile will push it up and cause loss of job. The sector engages 39 million people. He said that the government is hurting 80 per cent of the textile industry to correct the inverse tax issue in the man made textile sector. Natural fibre segment constitute 80 per cent of the Rs 5.4 lakh crore textile sector and its net profit margin is between one and three per cent making them vulnerable to any kind of cost impact. The cotton sector is already reeling under 70 per cent inflation, he said.

AGENCIES

'India can generate USD 813 billion in revenues from agri, food sector by 2030'



MUMBAI: With an investment of USD 272 billion in agritech and allied segments by 2030, India can generate USD 813 billion in revenue creating 152 million jobs, making it the largest private sector industry in the country, according to a report.

With agriculture continuing to remain the mainstay of economy for the country, investment in agritech and allied segments can transform the face of Indian agriculture with far-reaching implications for food security and

sustainable farming solutions, according to a report, titled 'Investing for Impact: Food, Agri and Agritech', by Aspire Impact. In the past decade, India attracted about USD 9 billion in FDI investments in the agriculture sector, said Amit Bhatia, founder of Aspire Circle and creator-Impact Future Project. He added that this decade brings an opportunity for India Inc to take advantage of the massive untapped potential of this sector holds and transform it to be sustainable and future-ready. "With smart

HIGHLIGHT

IN THE PAST DECADE, INDIA ATTRACTED ABOUT USD 9 BILLION IN FDI INVESTMENTS IN THE AGRICULTURE SECTOR

innovations, infrastructure and policy support and newer business models, the top-10 ideas researched by the IFP community can attract USD 272 billion in investments and generate USD 813 billion in revenue, impacting 1.1 billion lives," he added.

The report has been authored by leading agritech experts, industry leaders, academics and thinkers. The report further said India has its share of challenges when it comes to agricultural practices, including mechanisation levels, which is at 40-45 per cent unlike 90 per cent in the developed economies. **AGENCIES**

Centre imposes stock limits on soyameal till June 2022 to check price rise

NEW DELHI: The Centre on Friday imposed stock holding limits on soyameal, which is used as a raw material in the poultry feed industry, till June 2022 to curb hoarding as well as check price rise. The limits will be in place till June 30, 2022 and an order in this regard was issued with effect from December 23, an official statement said. Besides, the government has notified an order under the Essential Commodities Act to declare 'soyameal' as an essential commodity up to June 30, 2022 by amending the Schedule of the Essential Commodities Act, 1955. Soyameal processors, millers and plant owners can hold a maximum stock of 90 days production and they are required to declare the storage location.

Government-registered trading companies, traders and private chaupals can hold a maximum stock of 160 tonne with a defined and declared storage location. If stocks held by legal entities are higher than the prescribed limits, then they have to declare the



same on the food ministry's portal 'http://evegoils.nic.in/soya_meal_stock/login' and bring it to the prescribed stock limits within 30 days of the issue of the notification. It should be ensured that soyameal stock is regularly declared and updated on the portal, the statement said. The data on the portal will be regularly monitored and any follow-up action will be taken by the Department of Animal Husbandry and Dairying.

"The above measures are expected to stop any unfair practices (like hoarding, black marketing etc) in the market having the potential to hike the prices of soyameal," the statement said. The stock limits have been set in consultation with the Department of Animal Husbandry and Dairying. **AGENCIES**

India's series of interventions arrest domestic spike in palm oil prices

NEW DELHI: Even though the prices of Malaysian crude palm oil shot up sharply, the price of the Indian product did not follow the same trend in 2021 due to the government's intervention. Widely used in edible oil blending, cosmetics, processed food products, and even in bio-fuel, palm oil's prices on Bursa Malaysia Derivatives is considered to be the global benchmark among trade circles. Crude palm oil prices on the BMD rose 27 per cent during the year-to-date period in 2021 to around 4,949 ringgits (Rs 88,443), while on Multi Commodity Exchange of India, it rose just over 10 per cent to Rs 1,115 rupees per 10 kg. The steady and inconsistent rise in prices on the MCX, to an extent, can be attributed to the Indian government's slew of interventions.

In June, the Central government removed import restrictions on refined bleached deodorised palm oil, refined bleached deodorised palmolein, and another variant (palm oil and its fractions, whether or not refined, but not chemically modified) till December 31, 2021, which has now

Even though the prices of Malaysian crude palm oil shot up sharply, the price of the Indian product did not follow the same trend in 2021 due to the government's intervention

been extended till the end of 2022. Besides, it on Monday reduced the basic customs duty on refined palm oil from 17.5 per cent to 12.5 per cent till March 2022 as part of the measures it is taking to bring down edible oil rates in the Indian markets. With this duty cut, net effective duty comes down to 13.75 per cent against 19.25 per cent earlier, according to industry players.

In addition, the government on Monday suspended trade in futures contracts of several agricultural commodities, including of crude palm oil, for one year. **AGENCIES**

Digital Push: NDTV's shares zoom three-fold in 2021

NEW DELHI: In line with the benchmark equity indices, share prices of NDTV have almost increased three-fold in the year-to-date period of 2021. Notably, the Nifty media index has risen 40 per cent to 2,248 points in 2021 so far. The index value provides an indication to the investors about the performance in a certain sector.

Founded in 1988, New Delhi Television (NDTV) was the first private TV news channel in India. Keeping pace with changing technologies, the asset-light media house has ramped up



its footprints in digital and online space. The media outlet's share prices have risen from Rs 41 on January 1, 2021 to Rs 121 at Thursday's

close, up over 192 per cent during the period. Just in the past one-month, it's shares rose 46 per cent, thereby hitting multi-year highs. **AGENCIES**

On December 1, 2021, the company entered into a 10-year deal with Taboola, a global leader in powering recommendations for the open web. The decade-long deal is expected to bring in revenue of Rs 750 crore. The company's current market capitalisation is worth Rs 782 crore, NSE data showed. Ndtv.com, the online version of the news provider, has reportedly garnered nearly 200 million "unique views" and is one of the fastest growing online news portals in the country. **AGENCIES**

Diesel, petrol prices unchanged since Nov 3



NEW DELHI: Oil marketing companies have kept the prices of diesel and petrol unchanged across major Indian cities since November 3, when the Centre and some states reduced duties

on them. Accordingly, diesel and petrol prices in Delhi stood at Rs 86.67 per litre and Rs 95.41 per litre on Friday, respectively.

In the financial capital Mumbai, the rates were

Oil marketing companies have kept the prices of diesel and petrol unchanged across major Indian cities since November 3, when the Centre and some states reduced duties on them

unchanged at Rs 94.14 and Rs 109.98 respectively. The diesel and petrol prices also remained static in Kolkata at Rs 89.79 and Rs 104.67 respectively. In Chennai too, they remained untouched at Rs 91.43 and Rs 101.40. Across the country as well, the price of the fuel remained largely unchanged on Friday but the retail rates varied depending on the level of local level taxes. **AGENCIES**

Flights resumption will boost people to people contact: Swiss diplomat



MUMBAI: SWISS airline, which is expected to connect Indian cities soon, will facilitate greater people to people contact and improve trade, help tourism and cultural exchange, a diplomat of the country said on Friday. The Switzerland-India relation is strong and will strengthened with greater bilateral trade between the two countries, increased tourism and cultural exchanges, Ambassador of Switzerland to India Ralf Heckner said on the sidelines of an interaction with members of Indian Chamber of Commerce. We are one of the

first countries to open tourism as early as June-July. We are ready to operate flights, he said. Supply chain issues have been resolved with the joint effort of both the countries helping bilateral trade, the diplomat said. SWISS airlines will begin their operation soon in India which will boost people to people contact and greater exchanges. Trade is improving after Covid disruptions. The flights will begin with Mumbai and then to Delhi, Heckner said. The airlines is expected to start operating direct flights between Zurich and Mumbai

from January 10. Two weekly flights will be operated on the route. Heckner said in the pre-COVID year Switzerland had issued 1.8 lakh visas to tourists and businessmen, while 50,000 Swiss nationals came to India. But COVID had disrupted tourism and the number is now less than normal.

The Indian government had rolled back plans to resume scheduled international flight operations from 15 December after the emergence of the Omicron coronavirus mutant. India had suspended international flight op-

erations, effective 23 March 2020. This was periodically extended every month till November 30, before the government on 26 November announced plans to resume scheduled international flight services. Prior to 26 November, international flights operated between India and other countries under bilateral air bubble agreements. Switzerland is the twelfth largest foreign investor in India, with the cumulative investment of USD 9.3 billion from April 2000 to June 2021.

Traditional sectors of Swiss excellence such as engineering, industrial equipment, services, precision instruments, chemicals, pharmaceuticals continue to maintain top positions. Recent reform initiatives towards 'Atmanirbhar Bharat' and the drive towards 5 trillion dollar economy have enhanced the potential for Swiss businesses in sectors like clean technology, lifesciences, medtech, financial services, fintech, construction materials and equipment and railways among others. **AGENCIES**

Assam's growth rate dips, fiscal deficit, debts rise: CAG

GUWAHATI: Assam has recorded a decline in its growth rate while its fiscal deficit, outstanding debt and public debt have increased significantly at the end of 2019-20, a Comptroller and Auditor (CAG) report on state finance for the period said on Friday. The report, laid in the state Assembly on the last day of the Winter Session, said the GSDP of the state grew from Rs 2,27,959 crore in 2015-16 to Rs 3,51,318 crore (quick estimates) in 2019-20 with Compounded Annual Growth Rate (CAGR) of 11.42 per cent against the national CAGR of 10.37 per cent. However, there was a decline in the growth rate from 16.47 per cent in 2015-16 to 11.22 per cent in 2019-20, it added. It further said the state could achieve revenue surplus only during two years in the five year period from 2015-16 to 2019-20, and in containing the fiscal deficit below 3 per cent of GSDP in three out of five years in the same period. **AGENCIES**

For making TN plastic-free state, Stalin govt to go for buyback policy

CHENNAI: The Tamil Nadu government is developing a strategy to buyback plastic products and to be set up Reverse Vending machines in association with FMCG companies. Chief Minister on Thursday inaugurated a campaign to make Tamil Nadu plastic-free and to promote cloth bags in large volumes. The government is also in talks with a major corporate company for construction of 1,000 toilets in the state made of non-recyclable plastic waste.

To reduce the stress caused by the overuse of plastic in the environment, the government is planning a strategy to improve Extended Producers Responsibility (EPR) for the manufacturers. The Chief Minister's office has already



directed all the district administrations to have a discussion with the companies in their respective districts to evolve strategies regarding buy-back plans of plastics and for use of this material in the construction industry.

Sources in the Tamil Nadu environment department told IANS that the Hindustan Coca Cola Beverages (HCCB) is in talks with the Tiruvallur district administration for use of construction materials from

plastic waste. The company under its CSR initiative has already adopted eight villages in and around Nemam where the factory of HCCB is located and has already got approval for building a model toilet at Nemam in the district of Tiruvallur. The HCCB has entered into an association with Ricron Panels, a company that has specialised in the business of converting plastic waste into eco-friendly construction material.

The state environment department in a study found that on an average a person in the state is using and discarding a plastic bottle a day. This would lead to installing 5,000 to 6,000 Reverse vending machines in the state for safe deposit of plastic material. **AGENCIES**

Indian engineering exports to China doubles in Nov 2021

NEW DELHI: Engineering goods shipments to China have more than doubled in November, 2021 to USD 434.6 million (Rs 3,260 crore approximately) as compared to USD 205.3 million (Rs 1,540 crore) in the same month last year, sector export promotion body EEPC said on Friday. The US, however, remained the top importer of Indian engineering goods at USD 1196 million during this period, registering a growth of 36.6 per cent over USD 875 million in November, 2020.



USD 404.4 million in the previous month. India's engineering exports continued to grow in November 2021 but a decline was observed in the value of shipment, EEPC said. However, total engineering goods exports slowed down to USD 7.7 billion (Rs 57,000 crore approx)

in November from 9.03 billion (Rs 67,000 crore) in October 2021. However, the growth was still substantial at 37.12 per cent over the exports of November 2020 at USD 5.62 billion.

"The slowdown seems to be indicating the distress exporters are facing given volatility in world demand and the uncertainty regarding the pandemic which has been triggered by the new variant Omicron. Experts around the globe have already predicted that while the global trade growth is remarkable it is not even across the countries," EEPC India Chairman Mahesh Desai said. **AGENCIES**

China condemns US law banning imports from Xinjiang

BEIJING: China on Friday expressed firm opposition to the new US law that restricts imports from its volatile Xinjiang province over the allegations of forced labour against Uyghur Muslims, saying it violated international laws and interfered in its internal affairs. US President Joe Biden on Thursday signed the Uyghur Forced Labour Prevention Act which prohibits American businesses from importing goods from Xinjiang unless they can be proven not to have been made by forced labour.



China is battling allegations of human rights violations against Uyghur Muslims in the last few years from the US, the UK and the European Union. The allegations include incarceration of thousands of Uyghurs in mass detention

camps and forced labour in manufacturing units of the resource-rich Xinjiang, where mass migration of the dominant Han-Chinese is also taking place. Researchers have accused Chinese officials of forced abortions, and mass indoctrination and other such crimes. Beijing

has already announced a diplomatic boycott of the Beijing Winter Olympics which is to be held in February next year. Reacting to the latest development, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian said, in a statement, that the American act maliciously denigrates the human rights situation in China's Xinjiang in disregard of facts and truth. It seriously violates international law and basic norms governing international relations and grossly interferes in China's internal affairs."

He asked the US government to immediately correct its mistakes and stop using Xinjiang-related issues to spread lies, interfere in China's internal affairs and contain the country's development. "China will make further responses de-

pending on the development of the situation," he said. Noting that Xinjiang-related issues are not about human rights at all, but about fighting violence, terrorism and separatism, he said conspiring and scheming on Xinjiang-related issues cannot stop China's development. "What the US has done runs counter to market rules and business ethics. It will only destabilise the global industrial and supply chains and disrupt the international trade order," he said.

State-run Global Times said the US legislation hurts the interests of US companies as China produces 22 per cent of the world's cotton of which 84 per cent comes from Xinjiang and many American firms are bound to face shortage. **AGENCIES**

AirAsia India launches new in-flight dining brand 'Gourmair'

MUMBAI: Offering the most diverse and exclusive range of hot meals in domestic skies, AirAsia India today unveiled its new in-flight dining brand and menu, 'Gourmair', with a choice of 21 regional and international favourites. Guests can pre-book their Gourmair meals on airasia.co.in, the AirAsia India mobile apps or with preferred travel partners, up to 12 hours before their flight. The new menu offers a wide range of hot meals in distinct sections including MasterChef Specials, World's Finest, Regional Favourites, All-Day Breakfast, Healthy and Diabetic options, Seasonal Fruits; Lite Bites (Sandwiches and Rolls) and Delectable Desserts.



in collaboration with the chefs of TajSATS, a joint venture between the Indian Hotels Company Limited (IHCL) & SATS Limited, catering to AirAsia India across its four hubs - Bengaluru, Delhi, Kolkata and Mumbai.

AirAsia India's new Gourmair menu features signature exclusives like a marinated herb grilled fish fillet with French velouté sauce, served with creamy mashed potato and sautéed vegetables; or the All-Day Breakfast cheddar and chives omelette with

potato rosti, braised baked beans and hara bhara kebab. The MasterChef Specials section is curated exclusively for AirAsia India by MasterChef Kirti Bhoutika. It features an innovative Vegan Moilee MasterCurry, a unique take on the famous Kerala-style moilee curry prepared with tofu, cherry tomatoes, and zucchini, served with raw mango and coconut rice. The MasterChef Specials also include an innovative fusion dessert - Shôndesh Tiramisu, with hints of espresso and dark choco-

late, layered with mascarpone cheese. The menu also introduces a Mysore Pak Cheesecake, amalgamating modern desserts with classic Indian sweet recipes; and features a wide range of vegetarian, pescetarian, poultry, eggitarian, vegan, Jain, healthy and diabetic options.

Speaking about the launch, Siddhartha Butalia, Chief Marketing Officer, AirAsia India said, "Our new dining brand and in-flight menu 'Gourmair' has been curated as a tour de force for the tastebuds. Catering to diverse culinary preferences and palates, Gourmair encourages diners to begin their travel experience in the sky and discover the diversity of cuisines from different cultures as they fly. Having convection ovens in all our flights enables us to offer hot, healthy and fresh food, making for a wholesome and memorable travel experience. Being guest-obsessed drives us to deliver differentiated experiences, inspire new possibilities in every aspect of aviation, and delight guests at every touchpoint in their journey". **AGENCIES**

'83' is not a film, but an emotion, says Deepika Padukone

MUMBAI: Deepika Padukone, who has co-produced the cricket drama "83" and will be seen in the film essaying the role of Romi Dev, wife of the 1983 World Cup-

winning team's skipper Kapil Dev, has shared on social media what the film means to her.

More than anything, Deepika said in an Instagram story,

"83" is an emotion, an emotion that words will fall short to describe.

The actress said: "It's incredible and this is how I define '83'. For me, '83' is not a film, it's an emotion. It's an experience. I don't think you can define what you feel when you come out of the cinema halls watching this film."

She added: "They (the audience) are laughing with joy, they are crying, they are speechless. I don't think anyone's really being able to articulate what they feel or what this movie makes you feel when you come out of the theatres."

In addition to "83", Deepika has several projects in the pipeline, including "Mahabharata", where she'll be seen playing Draupadi; Telugu star Nag Ashwin's next "Project K"; the Hindi remake of the Anne Hathaway, Robert De Niro-starrer "The Intern"; "Pathan" with Shah Rukh Khan; "Fighter" with Hrithik Roshan; and Shakun Batra's "Gehraiyaan". **AGENCIES**



ARJUN KAPOOR'S HILARIOUS BIRTHDAY WISH FOR ANIL KAPOOR GOES VIRAL



MUMBAI: Actor Arjun Kapoor has shared a rib-tickling birthday message for his uncle and actor Anil Kapoor's birthday and has called him 'a storehouse of youth' and an 'everlasting beauty'.

The 'Sandeep Aur Pinky Daraar' actor took to his Instagram and shared a string of pictures hilariously comparing his and Anil's age progression with the senior actor staying youthful throughout.

He captioned the pictures: "Youth ka Khazana Joshila Jawaani ka Namuna Sirf Evergreen hi nahin, Aisi Everlasting beauty kabhi dekhi hi nahin, He ages like fine wine And makes all other actors whine Din-b-din young hote rehte hain toh inka kya kasoor, It's the curious case of Anil Kapoor! P.S.: Happy birthday to my Jhakkas chachu. What a playa!"

Arjun's other uncle, Sanjay Kapoor reacted with laugh emojis in the comment section. Casting director of the YRF camp, Shanoo Sharma also commented "Best".

Arjun and Anil are known for their brilliant camaraderie as they don't refrain from taking a friendly jibe at each other, the reason their chemistry came out so well in 'Mubarakan', which marked their first on-screen collaboration. **AGENCIES**

Harbhajan Singh: A pure passionate match-winner and fierce competitor

NEW DELHI: Veteran India off-spinner Harbhajan Singh, who on Friday bid adieu to cricket after a glorious career spanning 23 years, was a pure passionate match-winner and played the game on his own terms whenever he stepped into a playground.

Born in Jalandhar, Punjab, the 41-year old represented India in 103 Tests, 236 ODIs, and 28 T20Is, picking up 417, 269, and 25 wickets respectively. His overall tally of 711 international wickets is the second-highest for India, behind Anil Kumble's 953. He was also a handy contributor with the bat, scoring 3,569 runs with two centuries and nine fifties.

Bowling with a windmilling, whiplash action, remodeled after he was reported for throwing, Harbhajan deals by varying his length and pace, and can turn it the other way too. His deadliest ball, however, is the one that climbs wickedly from a length, forcing a hurried jab.

Three years after making his debut, it seemed like the off-spinner's career was going downhill. However, Sourav Ganguly, then India captain, was firm in his backing for getting 'Sardar' in the squad for the historical 2001 home series against Australia. Harbhajan didn't let his skipper down and took the series by storm with



32 wickets from three Tests including a hat-trick, the first by an Indian.

From there, he never looked back and played regularly and won matches for India until the emergence of R Ashwin.

In an international career that lasted from 1998 to 2016, the veteran cricketer had some memorable moments and was a part of the 2007 T20 World Cup and 2011 World Cup-winning squad.

A look into the best moments/achievements of Harbhajan Singh's cricketing career.

HATTRICK: Harbhajan's 32-wicket effort in the historic 2001 Test series against Australia, is one of the finest performances ever by an Indian spinner.

In the second Test of that series, the off-spinner etched his name in the history books by becoming the first Indian to claim a Test hat-trick. Harbhajan dismissed Ricky Ponting (6), Adam Gilchrist (0), and Shane Warne (0) in the 72nd over of Australia's first innings at Eden Gardens in Kolkata to achieve the feat. **AGENCIES**

BCCI thanks Harbhajan Singh for his service to Indian cricket

NEW DELHI: The Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) expressed gratitude to prolific off-spinner Harbhajan Singh who ended his 23-year glittering cricket career on Friday.

The BCCI president Sourav Ganguly congratulated Harbhajan on his remarkable career.

"I congratulate Harbhajan Singh on a remarkable career. He has faced several challenges in his life, but Bhajji is not the one to give up. He has overcome many hurdles and put many setbacks behind him to rise every time. What inspired me the most about him was his hunger to perform. His strength was his guts and courage," Ganguly said in a release.



"He was always very passionate, and his immense self-belief meant he never shied away from a fight. He also kept the dressing room atmosphere light and that is something really important," Ganguly added.

"His first full Test series against Australia in 2001 is the greatest that I have seen where one bowler single-handedly won the series. He was a captain's

delight. As a bowler, he hated putting fielders in the deep. Bhajji has been an absolute match-winner. He should be proud of what he has achieved. I want to tell him that the new innings in his life will be as exciting," the BCCI president said.

"Harbhajan Singh has had a phenomenal career with Team India. He has been a part of many memorable victories both

at home and away. He played his cricket with grit and passion and wore his heart on his sleeve. His fighting spirit and his zeal to perform for India when the team was under pressure is something that always stood out. His presence on the field lifted everyone's morale," said Jay Shah, BCCI secretary, in a statement.

"While he played a major role with the ball, picking up wickets aplenty, it must be remembered that he has also played some crucial knocks with the bat, helping us get over the line. I wish him the best for all his future endeavours and wish to see him being closely associated with the game," Shah said. **AGENCIES**

UN official voices concerns over alleged sexual violence in Sudan protests

KHARTOUM: A UN official has voiced grave concerns over alleged acts of sexual violence by the Sudanese security forces during demonstrations in Khartoum earlier this week and called for accountability for those responsible.

Pramila Patten, the UN secretary-general's special representative on sexual violence in conflict, was deeply concerned about "credible reports of serious human rights violations, including the use of rape and gang rape of women and girls to disperse protesters", Xinhua news agency quoted her office as saying.

"I demand the immediate and complete cessation of all human rights violations and abuses including sexual vio-

lence. I call on the authorities to take effective measures to ensure ease of access to medical, legal and psychosocial support to the survivors, and put in place accountability mechanisms to prevent recurrence of such violence," she was quoted as saying.

"The perpetrators of these human rights violations must be identified and prosecuted. I join the call of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights for a prompt, independent and thorough investigation into the allegations of rape and sexual harassment." Patten called on the international community, including members of the Security Council, to use their good offices with leaders



of Sudan to demand an end to all forms of violence and intimidation against civilians, including sexual violence.

With further protests planned, it is crucial that security forces act in full re-

spect for international law and standards regulating the use of force, her office added.

On Sunday, thousands of Sudanese protesters managed to break a security cordon and reach the presidential

palace in capital Khartoum, demanding a civilian rule on the third anniversary of the December revolution, which toppled the regime of former President Omar al-Bashir.

The huge crowd managed to cross three bridges linking cities of Khartoum, Bahri and Omdurman despite the intensive security presence. The security forces fired tear gas, forcing the majority of the demonstrators to retreat.

The country has been suffering a political crisis after General Commander of the Sudanese Armed Forces Abdel Fattah Al-Burhan declared a state of emergency on October 25 and dissolved the sovereign council and government. **AGENCIES**

US to lift omicron-linked travel ban on southern Africa



WASHINGTON: The US will lift travel restrictions on eight southern African countries that it imposed to try to blunt the spread of the Covid omicron variant, the White House announced on Friday.

The variant, which was first detected by scientists in South Africa, has since spread around the world. The World Health Organisation and leaders in southern Africa criticised the travel ban as ineffective and unfairly damaging to local economies.

The November 29 ban barred nearly all non-US citizens who had recently been in South Africa, Botswana, Eswatini, Namibia, Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique and Zimbabwe. The restrictions will be lifted on New Year's Eve.

White House spokesman Kevin Munoz said on Twitter that the decision was recommended by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Munoz said the temporary travel bans bought scientists necessary time to study the new virus variant and conclude that the current vaccinations are effective in blunting its impact.

Omicron is now spreading rapidly throughout the US, including among the vaccinated, but a huge majority of those being hospitalised are unvaccinated.

"The restrictions gave us time to understand Omicron and we know our existing vaccines work against Omicron, esp boosted," Munoz tweeted.

Much about the omicron coronavirus variant remains

unknown; scientists say omicron spreads even easier than other coronavirus strains, including delta.

The government reports that 73% of new infections nationwide are from the omicron variant. But while breakthrough infections among vaccinated people have become common, they have rarely led to severe illness or hospitalisation.

The rapid advance of omicron, along with more people gathering indoors during winter, has led to a major infection spike. The seven-day rolling average for US Covid-19 cases climbed past 1,60,000 this week, according to data collected by Johns Hopkins University. That's more than double the average in late November.

The rapid spread of the new variant hasn't overwhelmed most domestic hospital systems yet, but it has roiled businesses, sports leagues and Christmas travel plans across the country.

Multiple NBA and NFL games have been rescheduled due to Covid outbreaks, and the Hawaii Bowl, scheduled for Friday, was cancelled outright after Hawaii was forced to withdraw. Three major airlines have cancelled dozens of domestic and international flights, citing staffing shortages. **AGENCIES**

Biden signs bill banning goods from China's Xinjiang over forced labour

WASHINGTON: US President Joe Biden on Thursday signed into law legislation that bans imports from China's Xinjiang region over concerns about forced labor, the White House said, provoking an angry Chinese condemnation.

The Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act is part of the



US pushback against Beijing's treatment of the China's Uyghur Muslim minority, which Washington has labeled genocide.

The bill passed Congress this month after lawmakers reached a compromise between House and Senate versions.

Key to the legislation is a "rebuttable presumption" that assumes all goods from Xinjiang, where Beijing has established detention camps for Uyghurs and other Muslim groups, are made with forced labor. It bars imports unless it can be proven otherwise.

Some goods - such as cotton,

tomatoes, and polysilicon used in solar-panel manufacturing - are designated "high priority" for enforcement action.

China denies abuses in Xinjiang, a major cotton producer that also supplies much of the world's materials for solar panels.

Its Washington embassy said the act "ignores the truth and maliciously slanders the human rights situation in Xinjiang." "This is a severe violation of international law and norms of international relations, and a gross interference in China's internal affairs. China strongly condemns and firmly rejects it," embassy spokesperson Liu Pengyu said in an emailed statement.

He said China "would respond further in light of the development of the situation," but did not elaborate.

Nury Turkel, Uyghur-American vice chair of the US Commission on International Religious Freedom, told Reuters this month the bill's effectiveness would depend on the willingness of Biden's administration to ensure it is effective, especially when companies seek waivers.

U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken said Biden's approval of the law "underscores" the "United States' commitment to combatting forced labor, including in the context of the ongoing genocide in Xinjiang." **AGENCIES**

A complete **KNOWLEDGE CAPSULE**

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