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Will Queen Elizabeth II abdicate? 'Sensitive' planning underway for Prince Charles' coronation



(SAI Bureau) Queen Elizabeth II became the first British monarch to reign for seven decades after she had acceded to the throne on February 6, 1952, after the death of her father King George VI. She received greetings and wishes from all over the world as she marked the historic date quietly at Sandringham, her estate in eastern England where her father died.

the 70th anniversary of her reign, the Queen said that she wants Camilla, Duchess of Cornwall, to be known as 'Queen Consort' when Prince Charles becomes King. The announcement further quantifies the speculations that whether the longest-serving British monarch will abdicate to let her son take over. On the day when the entire country was celebrating, there were reports that the Queen might step down in favour of her son Prince Charles. Important to note that Queen has said in the past that she will never abdicate and will stay in the role her entire life.

(Contd on page 29)

US strike framed to spare civilians after mounting criticism



(SAI Bureau) Facing criticism for civilian deaths in US airstrikes, President Joe Biden targeted the leader of the Islamic State group on Thursday in an approach — a ground raid by special forces that was riskier for American troops but intended to be safer for the innocent. Dozens of US commandoes

landed outside Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurayshi's Syrian hideout and warned people in nearby homes to stay inside, US officials said. As one of their first moves, they called out to families living inside the same building as al-Qurayshi. By the time the operation ended, the officials said, 10 civilians had been led to safety.

(Contd on page 32)

Retired Pope Benedict XVI asks forgiveness over handling of abuse cases



(SAI Bureau) Responding to a report that he had mishandled four cases involving the sexual abuse of minors while he was an archbishop in Germany decades ago, retired Pope Benedict XVI acknowledged Tuesday that "abuses and errors" had taken place under his watch, and asked for forgiveness, although he denied any misconduct. "I have had great responsibilities in the Catholic Church," Benedict said in a written response to the findings in the report commissioned by the Roman Catholic Church in Munich.

(Contd on page 30)

French, German leaders to visit Russia, Ukraine amid tension



(SAI Bureau) The French president and the German chancellor will head to Moscow and Kyiv in the coming weeks, adding to diplomatic efforts to try to deter Russian President Vladimir Putin from launching an invasion of Ukraine and find a way out of the growing tensions. France's Emmanuel Macron is scheduled to visit Moscow on Monday and Kyiv on Tuesday, while Germany's Olaf Scholz will travel to Kyiv on Feb 14 and Moscow

on Feb 15. The high-level visits come as China has backed Russia's demand that NATO be precluded from expanding to Ukraine, and after the US accused the Kremlin on Thursday of an elaborate plot to fabricate an attack by Ukrainian forces that Russia could use as a pretext to take military action. The US has not provided detailed information backing up the claims, which Moscow has vehemently denied.

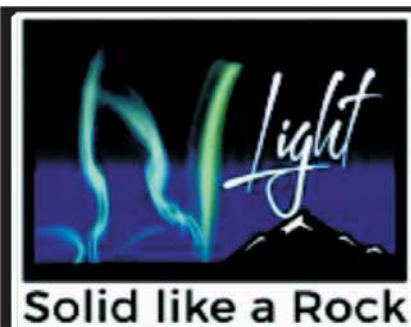
(Contd on page 33)

UP polls: Samajwadi Party promises 33% reservation to women in govt jobs



(SAI Bureau) The Samajwadi Party (SP) on Tuesday released its poll manifesto -- Samajwadi Vachan Patra -- for the coming Assembly election in Uttar Pradesh. The SP released its manifesto on the same day as its rival Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). In 'Samajwadi Vachan Patra', the Samajwadi Party has promised big on freebies and sops for farmers, while promising a 33 per cent reservation to women in government jobs.

(Contd on page 29)



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Situation tense after 17-year-old killed in clash in Jharkhand's Hazaribag; internet snapped in 4 districts

Internet services have been snapped in four districts after a 17-year-old boy was killed in a clash between members of two communities in Jharkhand's Hazaribag.

(News Agencies) An irate mob torched six vehicles in Jharkhand's Hazaribag district after a boy was killed during a clash between members of two communities. Protesters also blocked National Highway No 2 near Barhi - GT road, demanding R 5 lakh in compensation for the family of the teenager besides action against culprits under Mob Lynching Act 2021. However the blockade was lifted late in the day after repeated requests by the authorities. Rupesh Kumar Pandey, 17, died after being assaulted on Sunday evening at Kariyadpur village in Barhi police station area of the district during immersion procession after Saraswati Puja, Hazaribag Superintendent of Police. "A named FIR has been lodged against 27 persons besides many unknown people. So far four

arrests have been made while a hunt is on for others. Prohibitory orders under section 144 has been imposed in Barhi. "Adequate deployment of forces have been done to maintain law and order," Superintendent of Police, Hazaribag Manoj Ratan Chothe told PTI. The youth was allegedly assaulted near Dulmuha Devi Mandap resulting in his death at Sub Divisional Hospital, Barhi where he was taken in an unconscious condition. After the killing, an angry mob torched five two-wheelers and one four wheeler at the spot. Chothe, however, insisted that the clash was a fallout of an "old rivalry" and no communal ill-will was involved in it. "One person was thrashed and another killed during the fight. Incidentally, both of them belonged to two different communities. The police are looking into the matter," the SP told PTI. Given the communally sensitive



nature of the district, internet services have been debarred in the district as also in Koderma, Giridih, Chatra, Ramgarh and Bokaro for the time being to prevent rumour-mongering, Chothe said. He also said the situation at Kariyadpur village was under control. Some people are trying to link the incident with Sunday's idol immersion ceremony of Goddess Saraswati, the procession for which was taken out just 30 minutes before the clash broke out, but the two are not connected, the SP maintained. Both

the SP and the Deputy Commissioner, Hazaribag, Aditya Kumar Anand are camping at the spot. The relatives of the boy have demanded action under the provisions of the Prevention of Mob Violence and Mob Lynching Bill, 2021, which aims at providing "effective protection" of constitutional rights of people and the prevention of mob violence. The Hazaribag district administration has announced an immediate compensation of Rs 20,000 to the kin besides lifetime pension of Rs 6,000 each to the

mother and the father of the boy. Meanwhile BJP Vice President and former Jharkhand Chief Minister Raghubar Das demanded immediate arrest of all the culprits charging that such incidents have increased manifold during the current Hemant Soren regime. Those named in the FIR include Md Aslam, Md Anis, Md Kaif, Md Gufran, Md Chand, Md Osama, Md Ehtam, Md Nahid. All the shops under Barhi police station area besides other commercial establishments remained closed to protest the killing.

Indian-American Body Asks US President To Reject Pak's Ambassador-Designate

The Foundation for India and Indian Diaspora Studies on Wednesday urged Joe Biden to reject the appointment of the "Jihadi-terrorist-sympathizer" Masood Khan as Pakistani Ambassador to the United States

(News Agencies)\Washington: A top Indian diaspora group urged US President Joe Biden to reject the appointment of Masood Khan as Pakistan's Ambassador to the United States, alleging that the diplomat is a sympathizer and supporter of terrorist groups. The Foundation for India and Indian Diaspora Studies (FIIDS), in a statement, on Wednesday urged Joe Biden to reject the appointment of the "Jihadi-terrorist-sympathizer" Masood Khan as Pakistani Ambassador to the United States.

"We also request Secretary of State Antony Blinken and members of the Senate and House committees on foreign relations to support this rejection," it said.

"Masood Khan has repeatedly demonstrated a soft spot for Jihadi-terrorists, including Aafia Siddiqui, a convicted terrorist operative known as 'Lady Al-Qaeda'. His support to designated terrorist organisations under the US law

such as Hizbul Mujahideen, Harkat-ul-Mujahideen (HuM), and Jamaat-e-Islami, is not only inimical to US Interests, but also to global peace," FIIDS said.

FIIDS is a US-based institute for US-India policy studies and awareness.

"Masood Khan's diplomatic role in the United States may open an avenue for access for terrorist organisations to US institutions. Furthermore, his former active role as president of Pakistan Occupied Kashmir will complicate US relations with its strategic partner India. His support to the Taliban will also adversely affect US interests in Afghanistan," it said.

In a detailed statement, FIIDS added that Masood Khan is a supporter of Aafia Siddiqui and had tweeted on May 7, 2020, "@AmbassadorJones: The US Government can find a way to free Aafia Siddiqui. Washington has negotiated a peace deal with the Taliban, once considered inveterate enemies. Room must

now be created for Aafia's freedom. Long overdue." The group also alleged that in 2019, Khan shared stage with Fazlur Rehman Khalil, global terrorist and founder of Harkat-ul-Mujahideen (HuM), designated as a terrorist organisation under the US law.

"Masood Khan is also a supporter of Jamaat-e-Islami, whose killing squads helped the Pakistani military carry out acts of genocide against Bangladeshis in 1971 when hundreds of thousands of minorities were raped, killed and millions were displaced," it said.

"On the fifth death anniversary of dreaded terrorist Burhan Wani, a former commander of Hizbul Mujahideen - a designated terrorist organisation under US law, Khan had called out Wani a 'role model for freedom fighters across the globe'," the statement

said.

FIIDS added that Mr Khan served as president of Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (PoK) until

support and praise for terrorists such as Junaid Sehrai and Tariq Ahmed Hizbul. Khan said they are martyrs and called



August 25, 2021, with Human Rights Watch reports stating that the Pakistani government represses democratic freedoms, muzzles press and practices routine torture in POK.

"During his rule, various press releases published by Khan's presidential office included

their terrorist acts as sacrifices. His firm support of terrorists and separatists in Kashmir will create uneasiness and unwarranted complications in US-India relations when the US may need India's active involvement in the India Pacific region, Afghanistan and Eurasia," the group added.



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Five-year-old girl trampled to death by elephant in Kerala's Thrissur

A five-year-old girl was trampled to death by a wild elephant in Kerala's Thrissur district. Two others were injured in the elephant attack



(SAI Bureau) A five-year-old girl was trampled to death by an elephant in Kerala's Thrissur district. The wild tusker ventured into a residential area in Puthenchira, killing the girl and injuring two others.

On Monday, five-year-old Agnimiya and her family spotted the wild elephant close to their home. The family ran but the girl was attacked by the elephant. Her father Nikhil and another relative, Jayan, tried to rescue her and suffered injuries. The girl was trampled to death. All three were taken to a private hospital in Chalakkudy. Agnimiya succumbed to her injuries before reaching the hospital.

PM CARES Fund corpus triples to Rs 10,990 crore in FY 2020-21; disbursement rises to 3,976 crore

(SAI Bureau) An audited statement of the Prime Minister's Citizen Assistance and Relief in Emergency Situations (PM CARES) fund in response to an RTI filed by activist Commodore (Retd) Lokesh Batra showed that around one-third of the funds was spent in 2020-21 fiscal. According to the RTI response, the amount received by the



PM CARES funds is in billions. (Rs 1,09,90,17,32,873). Rs 10,990 crore was received in 2020-21. More than Rs 7,183 crore was received as "voluntary contributions". More than Rs 494 crore was received from foreign contributors. The expenditure amounted to Rs 3,976 crore in 2020-21. As much as Rs 1,311 crore was spent on 'Made in India' ventilators for government

schemes. The PM CARES Fund was set up to deal with emergencies such as the Covid pandemic. Opposition parties

have, however, criticised the PM CARES fund, claiming its contributions and expenses are not transparent, a charge denied by the government. According to the latest audited statement, it disbursed Rs 1,311 crore for 50,000 made-in-India ventilators to government hospitals, Rs 50 crore for the establishment of two 500-beds Covid hospitals in Muzaffarpur and Patna, and 16 RT-PCR testing labs in nine states. Further, Rs 201.58 crore was spent on oxygen plants at public health

facilities, while Rs 20.4 crore was disbursed for the upgradation of labs working on Covid vaccines.

While Rs 1,000 crore was allotted to states and Union territories for the welfare of migrants, Rs 1,392.82 crore was spent on the procurement of 6.6 crore doses of Covid vaccines. The fund also spent Rs 1.01 lakh as bank

charges. The fund's closing balance as of March 31, 2021, stood at Rs 7,013.99 crore, more than double of the Rs 3,076.62 crore a year ago. A total of Rs 10,990.17 crore was received during the 2020-21 fiscal, including through interest income and refund of unspent balance from NDMA, while Rs 3,976.17 crore was dispersed during the period, according to the audited statement prepared by Chartered Accountants SARC and associates.



No information on number of Covid bodies dumped in Ganges, govt tells Rajya Sabha

Not only did it raise doubts about data on real Covid death toll in the country but also caused concerns regarding possible water contamination and further spread of virus

(Staff Reporter) The sight of dead bodies floating in River Ganges had shocked the nation during the peak of second Covid-19 wave in India. Not only did it raise doubts about data on real Covid death toll in the country but also caused concerns regarding possible water contamination and further spread of virus. Ten months later, the government has told Parliament that it has no information on how many dead bodies were dumped in the Ganges. Answering a question asked by TMC MP Derek O'Brien, Jal Shakti Ministry said that 'information regarding number of Covid-19 related dead bodies estimated to have been dumped in the River Ganges is not available'. In his two part question, the TMC MP had also asked about the measures taken to remove these bodies and dispose off them as per Covid-19 protocols. To this, the ministry replied that the Centre had coordinated with states to ensure proper disposal of bodies with Covid-19 protocols. "The incidents of "unclaimed/ unidentified, burnt or partially burnt dead bodies, found floating in river or on grounds, in the shallow depth, on the banks of the river Ganga", were reported from certain districts in the States of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, in the media," the ministry's response said. "National Mission for Clean Ganga (NMCG) and Ministry of Jal Shakti (MoJS) sought from concerned state governments, a report on the dead bodies found floating and action taken or contemplated for ensuring proper handling, management and disposal of dead bodies by the state authorities for ensuring the protection of the River Ganga," it said. The government said that several advisories were issued by both NMCG and the ministry to concerned officials in of Uttarakhand, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand and West



Bengal and District Ganga Committees for ensuring proper handling, management and disposal of dead bodies by the State authorities following Covid-19 protocol and ensuring the protection of the River Ganga. "All the actions taken has led to coordinated action at state level towards cremation of dead bodies as per Government of

India protocols, providing necessary financial assistance to deserving families for cremation of dead bodies, regular patrolling of river channel and river banks," it said. The ministry said that the state bodies also undertook necessary community awareness drives to raise awareness among the river-side communities on do's/ don'ts

for the use of river water to prevent the spread of infection in current scenario of Covid-19 surge. Apart from this, the ministry said, the Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB) is carrying out water quality assessment of the River Ganga at 97 locations in five main stem states through the respective State Pollution Control Boards (SPCBs).

Karnataka hijab row: BJP leader and college committee vice president says Muslim students not interested in education

(Staff Reporter) BJP OBC Morcha General Secretary and Udupi College Development Committee Vice-president, Yashpal Suvarna alleged that protesting Muslim students are not interested in education and are against the development of the country. Yashpal Suvarna said, "They [Muslim students] aren't interested in education, they can't tolerate development of the country. They were against the New Education Policy. There are a lot of colleges, they can go there. Hindu Rashtra is our main agenda." The remarks come amid a row over wearing 'hijab' (headscarf) by some students at a government pre-university college at Udupi.



In another incident, Muslim girl students of the Kundapur PU college, who reached the institution today wearing the hijab, were stopped at the gate by the principal. They were informed that they are not allowed to wear the headscarf inside the

classrooms and asked to remove it before entering. The protesting students were allowed inside the campus today but were asked to follow a uniform policy to attend classes. According to the new policy, students have to wear the dress chosen by the College Development

Committee or the appellate committee of the administrative board of the pre-university colleges, which come under the pre-university education department. Karnataka Education Minister BC Nagesh too said students who are unwilling to follow a

uniform dress code can 'explore other options'.

Meanwhile, Karnataka Home Minister Araga Jnanendra said children should neither wear hijab nor saffron shawls at schools and he has asked the police to keep watch on religious organisations that are trying to undermine the

country's unity in this regard.

The state government has invoked 133 (2) of the Karnataka Education Act-1983, which says a uniform style of clothes has to be worn compulsorily. The private school administration can choose a uniform of their choice, the order stated.



Telangana police busts Maoist ammunition dump, recovers explosives

Telangana Police has been working hard to identify the land mines set up by banned Maoist outfits to deactivate, capture them and provide security to the people

(Staff Reporter) A Police has pieces of equipment. According leaders Bade Chokkarao alias Committee members busted a Maoist ammunition to reports, the Maoists wanted Damodar and Koyyada Kankanala Rajireddy dump in Mulugu district and to target the police and a major Sambaiiah under the direction of Venkanna, Kursam Mangu the JMWP Divisional alias Bhadra, Muchaki Ungal recovered explosives and other attack was averted. Maoist the

alias Raghu were reportedly planning to attacks on police party coming for combing the area.

They planted land mines and concealed the explosives and equipment in the reserve forest near Penugolu village.

The police along with Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) personnel recovered land mines and diffused them.

The security forces also recovered a pressure cooker, cordtex wires, detonators, capacitors, batteries, electrical wires, a camera flash among other things. The police also recovered two-wheeler security systems and car lock system keys from the spot.

Recently there has been a number of incidents in which innocent people and cattle have died due to the explosion of landmines allegedly set up by the Maoists.

In March 2019, Soyam Pentayya, a resident of Mukunur Palem, was killed in a landmine blast planted by Maoists. Telangana Police has been working hard to identify the land mines set up by banned Maoist outfits to deactivate, capture them and provide security to the people.

AIMIM chief Asaduddin Owaisi refuses to accept Z security again

Union home minister Amit Shah on Monday urged Owaisi to accept Z category security and said that a detailed investigation of the attack is underway and a report has been sought from the state government

(Staff Reporter) All India Majlis-e-Ittehadul Muslimeen (AIMIM) chief Asaduddin Owaisi again refused to accept Z category

people who died during the CAA Protest in Uttar Pradesh," Owaisi said.

This came after Union home state government. "Two persons have been arrested and police recovered a car and two pistols.



security offered by the Centre after a recent attack on his convoy.

"I want to appeal to the Union home minister that I don't want Z security. My life is not as precious as that of those 22

minister Amit Shah on Monday urged Asaduddin Owaisi to accept Z category security.

In his statement in Rajya Sabha, Amit Shah said a detailed investigation is underway and a report has been sought from the

"But due to his unwillingness to avail security, Delhi and Telangana Police's efforts didn't succeed." According to reports from the Telangana Assembly, Owaisi, in writing, refuses to take security every year.

'Special stuff available in Himalayan caves?'



(Staff Reporter) Trinamool Congress (TMC) leader Mahua Moitra criticised Prime Minister Narendra Modi's reply to the President's address in Lok Sabha, saying the government that organised the Howdy Trump event, asked people to bang thalis, light diyas is now blaming the Opposition for spreading Covid virus. "Is a government that organised a Howdy Trump event, then asked people to bang thalis, light diyas now blaming Opposition for spreading Corona?

Is this special stuff available only in Himalayan caves? Just wondering," Mahua Moitra tweeted. Moitra further commented on PM Modi's laughter during his attack on Congress saying, "Is it just me but does his sinister laugh be like Mogambo Khush Hua."

Prime Minister Narendra Modi launched a scathing attack on Congress, saying that the party let coronavirus spread and caused chaos by provoking migrants to defy Covid curbs.

Rains, snowfall to continue in North India; cold day warning in UP

(News Agencies)The India Meteorological Department (IMD) on Monday predicted more rainfall in some states for the next two days under the influence of a fresh western disturbance. In its daily bulletin, the IMD predicted that a fresh Western Disturbance and its induced cyclonic circulation are very likely to affect Northwest India from the night of February 8. The weather agency also predicted severe cold conditions in parts of Uttar Pradesh in the next 48 hours. Rainfall in Northwest, East India According to the IMD, scattered to fairly widespread light/moderate rainfall/snowfall with thunderstorm and lightning over Western Himalayan Region (over Jammu, Kashmir, Ladakh, Gilgit-Baltistan & Muzaffarabad, Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand) is expected during the night of February 8 and 9. Fairly widespread rainfall with thunderstorm and lightning are likely over Punjab, Haryana, Chandigarh, Delhi, West Uttar Pradesh and isolated rainfall over East Uttar Pradesh and North Rajasthan on February 9. Isolated hailstorm is also likely



The IMD has predicted more rainfall in some states for the next two days under the influence of a fresh western disturbance

over West Uttar Pradesh on February 9, the IMD stated. Cold day warning: According to the IMD, cold day to severe cold day conditions are very likely in

isolated pockets over East Uttar Pradesh during the next 48 hours. Cold day is also likely over West Uttar Pradesh during the next 24 hours and will abate

thereafter. Dense fog in eastern India: Dense fog conditions are very likely in isolated areas over Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, sub-Himalayan West Bengal,

Assam, Meghalaya and Tripura in the night/morning hours during the next two days. The dense fog conditions are also likely over Odisha on February 9.

Gold smuggling case: Govt likely to seek explanation from Kerala IAS officer over book

Senior IAS officer M Sivasankar, who is an accused in the Kerala gold smuggling case, came out with an autobiographical book narrating his version of events

(News Agencies) The Kerala opinion will also be sought the foundations of the left government may seek an before seeking an explanation. government during its first tenure.



explanation from Sivasankar, the principal secretary of sports and youth affairs, for writing a book on his version of events in the gold smuggling case, without prior government approval. Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan's

Sivasankar had allegedly received an unofficial nod from the state government to write the book earlier. The book pertains to the gold smuggling case through a diplomatic channel that shook

informed of the situation. The government is evidently not happy that some of the controversies have now resurfaced. What decision will be taken against the bureaucrat remains to be seen.

BJP MP Pragya Thakur blackmailed using obscene videos on WhatsApp, files complaint



(News Agencies) Bhopal BJP MP Pragya Thakur has filed a complaint with the city police claiming she is the victim of an ongoing nude video call blackmailing racket that has targeted numerous people across the country. In her complaint, Thakur said that on February 6 around 7 pm she received a video call on her WhatsApp. A woman who video called her took off her clothes, after which the MP disconnected the call, she alleged in the complaint. Thakur further said that after sometime, she received a call from another number in which

the person at the other end demanded ransom and threatened her to make the video of the MP's interaction with the girl go viral if she failed to pay the amount. She alleged that the online gang tried to extort money from her through the 'nude video call' trick. Following the incident, the BJP MP informed the TT Nagar police in Bhopal. "The police have registered a case under section 354 (a), 507, 509 of the Indian Penal Code (IPC) and section 57 (a) of the Information (IT) Act. We are investigating the matter," he said.



Today I will only talk about Nehru ji. Enjoy: PM Modi takes swipe at Congress in Parliament

(SAI Bureau) Hitting out at the Congress in the Lok Sabha on Monday, Prime Minister Narendra Modi invoked the name of former Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru on multiple occasions. PM Modi was replying to the debate on the Motion of Thanks to the President's address in Lok Sabha. "You keep complaining that I don't take the name of

Nehru ji enough. Today I will only talk about Nehru ji. Enjoy," PM Modi said. Taking a veiled dig at Congress leader Rahul Gandhi, PM Modi said, "Your leader will also say 'maza aa gaya'." Attacking the Congress for criticism over the Centre's economic policies, PM Modi

went back to Nehru's address from Red Fort as the first prime minister of the country.

"Pandit Nehru said from the Red Fort that sometimes war in Korea can impact us and so price of commodities increase in India. The first PM of the country was helpless. Imagine then he was saying that the inflation problem was so serious. How the country's first prime minister threw up his hands in front of the country," PM Modi said. PM Modi further said, "Pandit Nehru also said if something happens in America, it affects the price of our commodities. If you [Congress] were in power today, you would have blamed inflation on Covid pandemic and run away. The country is fortunate that you are not in power." PM Modi also hit out at Rahul Gandhi's allegation that the government was favouring only a handful of industrialists. "During the governments of Pandit Nehru and Indira Gandhi, people used to say Tata-Birla ki Sarkar. You are now speaking their tongue," PM Modi said.

Kerala Guv Arif Mohammed Khan signs ordinance to amend Lokayukta Act

With this, the authority held by Lokayukta has decreased considerably. Now, the government can hold a hearing after Lokayukta gives a verdict and decides to accept or decline the decision



(SAI Bureau) Kerala Governor Arif Mohammed Khan signed the Lokayukta ordinance on Monday. With this, the authority held by Lokayukta has decreased considerably. Now, the government can hold a hearing after Lokayukta gives a verdict and decides to accept or decline the decision. Before the ordinance, any person in a position of power would have had to be removed from the position if the Lokayukta found them guilty of the accusations made. The new ordinance also allows retired High Court judges to be part of Lokayukta. Earlier, it was only open to retired Supreme Court judges or High Court chief justice. Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan visited the Governor at Rajbhavan on Sunday to explain the need for the ordinance. The meeting is also said to be an official ice breaker between the government and the Governor after the issues that started following the vice-chancellor's appointment of Kannur University.

Doesn't suit PM to indulge in politics over people's suffering: Kerjwal hits back at Modi



Delhi CM Arvind Kejriwal termed PM Narendra Modi's statement as "false" about the city government asking the people to leave Delhi during the Covid pandemic

(SAI Bureau) Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal on Monday termed as "false" Prime Minister Narendra Modi's statement in Parliament about the city government asking the people to leave the national capital during the coronavirus pandemic. Replying to the debate in Lok Sabha on Motion of Thanks to President Ram Nath Kovind's address to the Parliament, Modi accused the Delhi government of using microphones and going to residential areas telling people to leave. Tagging a clip of Modi's Lok Sabha address, Kejriwal called his statement "completely false". "The Prime Minister's statement is completely false. The country hopes that the Prime Minister will be sensitive towards those who bore the pain of the Covid-19 pandemic and those who lost their loved ones at that time. It doesn't suit the PM to indulge in politics over the suffering of the people," he tweeted in Hindi.

ED files chargesheet against Pinki Irani who introduced conman Sukesh to Jacqueline Fernandez

Pinki not only helped Sukesh in laundering money but also facilitated meetings of certain people, including celebrities, inside Delhi jail when the conman was lodged inside

(SAIL Bureau) The Enforcement Directorate on Monday filed a chargesheet against Pinki Irani, an alleged associate of Suresh Chandrasekhar who was tasked by the conman to introduce him to actor Jacqueline Fernandez. This is a second chargesheet by the financial probe agency in connection with the case.

Pinki Irani has been charged under the Prevention of Money Laundering Act, officials said. Pinky Irani was arrested by the Enforcement Directorate on December 9, 2021 for her alleged role in the Rs 200 crore extortion case. Sources said, Pinki not only helped Suresh in laundering money but also facilitated meetings of certain people, including celebrities, inside Delhi jail when the conman was lodged inside.

The ED has charged Pinki for introducing Bollywood actor Jacqueline Fernandez by giving false information about conman Suresh Chandrasekhar. Pinki allegedly also introduced Suresh to other Bollywood celebrities and passed expensive gifts to them on his behalf. She was earlier confronted with actor Jacqueline Fernandez, who is still under probe by the ED for receiving gifts worth Rs 10 crore from Suresh Chandrasekhar.

Pinki was paid in crores by Suresh for arranging meetings with celebrities, including Jacqueline Fernandez.

The ED has also detailed some bank accounts of Pinki Irani which were used in the alleged crime.



Cold wave to intensify in Himachal, snowfall likely in some areas

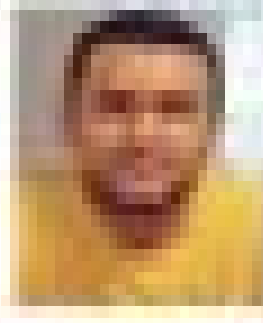
Over the next three to four days, the cold wave in Himachal Pradesh is expected to intensify, with snowfall possible in some areas.



(SAI Bureau) The cold wave conditions in Himachal Pradesh is expected to intensify in the next three to four days, the India Meteorological Department said on Wednesday. The weather department expects snowfall in places like Lahaul-Spiti, Kinnaur, as well as higher reaches of Kullu and Sirmour in the next 12 hours. "Cold wave will intensify in Himachal Pradesh during the next 3-4 days. Light to moderate snowfall is likely to occur in Lahaul-Spiti, Kinnaur and higher reaches of Kullu and Sirmour during the next 12 hours," the IMD said in its latest weather update on Wednesday. The Met department had previously forecasted scattered rainfall or snowfall over Jammu, Kashmir, Ladakh, Gilgit-Baltistan and Muzaffarabad. The IMD expects fairly widespread rainfall or snowfall in Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand, while thunderstorms and lightning are expected over Uttarakhand on February 9. Intense cold conditions have persisted in Himachal Pradesh as minimum temperatures stayed below normal in many parts of the state. As per local reports, tribal areas like Keylong received 8 cm of snow and Kukumseri 2 cm on Monday.

FBI TEN MOST WANTED FUGITIVE

**BHADRESHKUMAR
CHETANBHAI PATEL**



Indian Union Budget 2022-23: Gallant move, no traditional way of populist politics

By Susmita Ghosh

The Union Budget of India is equipped with a practical approach, looking at the future. Along with the revival of large-scale private investment in the economy, it deals with the development goals set for the coming years. As presented by Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman with massive support from the ruling party MPs, the budget focuses on sectors that will have a major impact in this decade. Amidst the Covid pandemic, which is pulling the country's economy in a downward spiral, there were high hopes riding on the budget for FY 2022-23. As inspired by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the Finance Minister kept the tax slabs and rates unchanged, providing a glimpse of relief to the working class of the country.

The budget has the potential to make the lives of the lower-income sector of the country easier while focusing on development in the coming years. The Indian PM hailed the budget as a step towards a self-reliant modern India. The opposition, on the other hand, dubbed the budget as disappointing and accused it of having no substantial value, as it does not have any immediate solution to a cache of problems bugging the country.

The Indian Union budget focused and discussed on the importance of wide-ranging growth. It proposes an increase in public investment, help open up vast opportunities for complete development. As Finance Minister, Sitharaman, stated, that the goal is the preparation for 'India at 100', which will take decades to reach the targeted objective.

The Union Budget avoided a direct approach to the development of the Fast Moving Consumer Goods (FMCG) sector. However, there are several planned government development projects in the infrastructure, mobility and connectivity, especially in the rural areas, help boost the local economy. The National Highways network is set to expand up to

25,000 kilometers by 2023. Simultaneously, the PM Gati Shakti National Master Plan focuses on railways, ports and airports, mass transport, logistics development and waterways. The Government has a target of providing villages' e-service access like the urban areas. Hence, the Bharat Net project will award the contract for laying optical fibres across the villages. How it dealt with the cryptocurrency issue, is the major aspect. The cryptocurrency got legal status, while it is dubbed as a digital asset only. Around 30 percent of hefty tax rate is levied on them, which will dishearten the crypto-enthusiasts in India. On the other hand, the Indian Government is going to launch a blockchain-based Central Bank Digital Currency (CBDC). It will be a virtual version of the Indian currency and its launch in the 2022-23 fiscal year will further boost the digitalization of the economy in India.

In a holistic approach, the Indian budget is lauded as a bold move by industrialists and pundits alike. The traditional automobile sector and the rising Electric vehicle market, will benefit from the 'PM Gati Shakti Master Plan' which will provide improved infrastructure and connectivity. Besides battery swapping policy and a lower tax bracket for Indian production of EV components, India is going a step ahead towards a renewable energy-rich country.

The budget, in all its aspects, looks to the future with a proper and sustainable growth rate. Even though there are several state legislative elections knocking at the door, the budget was not used as a pawn of populist politics. Avoiding the way of cheap gimmicks and giveaways, which will hurt the country's economy, the finance minister focused on wealth creation and development. If India wants to be amidst the superpowers when the nation is in its 100th year, this kind of approach in a budget can be used as a proper tool to achieve that target.

Factors that led to digital lending boom in India

The FinTech ecosystem has offered by fintech companies skyrocketed in popularity in recent years, especially after the outbreak of the pandemic. The banking, financial services, and insurance (BFSI) sector, particularly, soared with digital lending experience.

There is an upsurge in the contactless process from diverse customers, which has resulted in a huge variety of digital lending models, each dealing with financial inclusion in unique ways. As per latest government data, the popular and safest digital payment mode of UPI has seen monthly transaction volumes rise from 115 crore in 2019 to over 400 crore in 2021, a whopping 3.5 times.

Consumers are actively becoming digital savvy and knowledgeable in the realm of technology. With everyone moving towards e-everything, including digital payments, the digital transformation has onboarded reluctant or first-time digital payment users and has pushed the banking industry to adopt & embrace new-age digital banking.

Digital lending has emerged as an effective alternative to traditional lending (by financial institutions) for people who are new to credit or are underserved by the financial system.

Consumers have embraced the idea of digital financial services or new-age banking by moving away from physical touch and access to cashless and online financial journey.



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Editor in Chief & Publisher :**Sharanjit Singh Thind****Editor (Political Affairs-India) :****Aruna Singh****Dy Managing Editor India :****Susmita Ghosh****(Legal Columnist) Anusha Syed****Special Correspondents:****Gagandeep Singh (India)****(Insider Show Host) Geeta Saxena****Chief Photographer : Vijay Shah****Editorial Intern: Roubin Singh Thind****Web Coordinator : Harpreet Singh****A Publication of Media Partners Capital, Inc.****REGD & MAILING OFFICE :****P.O Box 7005 Hicksville New York 11801****Phone: 917 612 3158****editor@thesouthasianinsider.com, thesouthasianinsider@gmail.com****www.thesouthasianinsider.com**

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WWF rings alarm over plastic pollution in oceans, calls for international treaties to curb menace

Global environment advocacy and wildlife preservation group World Wide Fund for Nature has said that plastic pollution has affected every part of the ocean and there is an urgent need for the international community to sign treaties to curb the menace

Plastic has infiltrated all parts of the ocean and is now found "in the smallest plankton up to the largest whale" wildlife group WWF said on Tuesday, calling for urgent efforts to create an international treaty on plastics. Tiny fragments of plastic have reached even the most remote and seemingly-pristine regions of the planet: it peppers Arctic sea ice and has been found

poles to coastlines of the most remote islands and is detectable in the smallest plankton up to the largest whale". 'Saturation point' According to some estimates, between 19 and 23 million tons of plastic waste is washed into the world's waterways every year, the WWF report said.

This is largely from single-use plastics, which still constitute more than 60 percent of marine

Once in the water, the plastic begins to degrade, becoming smaller and smaller until it is a "nanoplastic", invisible to the naked eye.

So, even if all plastic pollution stopped completely, the volume of microplastics in the oceans could still double by 2050.

But plastic production continues to rise, potentially doubling by 2040, according to



inside fish in the deepest recesses of the ocean, the Mariana Trench.

There is no international agreement in place to address the problem, although delegates meeting in Nairobi for a United Nations environment meeting this month are expected to launch talks on a worldwide plastics treaty.

WWF sought to bolster the case for action in its latest report, which synthesises more than 2,000 separate scientific studies on the impacts of plastic pollution on the oceans, biodiversity and marine ecosystems.

WWF said the pollution affects creatures across the marine food web, like this sea urchin (Olivier Morin, AFP/File)

The report acknowledged that there is currently insufficient evidence to estimate the potential repercussions on humans. But it found that the fossil-fuel derived substance "has reached every part of the ocean, from the sea surface to the deep ocean floor, from the

pollution, although more and more countries are acting to ban their use.

"In many places (we are) reaching some kind of saturation point for marine ecosystems, where we're approaching levels that pose a significant threat," said Eirik Lindebjerg, Global Plastics Policy Manager at WWF.

In some places there is a risk of "ecosystem collapse", he said. Many people have seen images of seabirds choking on plastic straws or turtles wrapped in discarded fishing nets, but he said the danger is across the entire marine food web.

It "will affect not only the whale and the seal and the turtle, but huge fish stocks and the animals that depend on those", he added. In one 2021 study, 386 fish species were found to have ingested plastic, out of 555 tested.

Separate research, looking at the major commercially fished species, found up to 30 percent of cod in a sample caught in the North Sea had microplastics in their stomach.

projections cited by WWF, with ocean plastic pollution expected to triple during the same period.

Enduring risk Lindebjerg compares the situation to the climate crisis - and the concept of a "carbon budget", that caps the maximum amount of CO2 that can be released into the atmosphere before a global warming cap is exceeded.

"There is actually a limit to how much plastic pollution our marine ecosystems can absorb," he said.

Those limits have already been reached for microplastics in several parts of the world, according to WWF, particularly in the Mediterranean, the Yellow and East China Seas (between China, Taiwan and the Korean Peninsula) and in the Arctic sea ice. "We need to treat it as a fixed system that doesn't absorb plastic, and that's why we need to go towards zero emissions, zero pollution as fast as possible," said Lindebjerg.

NDA is 'No Data Available' govt: P Chidambaram



Taking a dig at the Centre for not furnishing information on deaths due to oxygen shortage during the second wave of Covid-19 pandemic, or data on members of the purported "tukde-tukde" gang, Congress Rajya Sabha MP P Chidambaram on Tuesday said the NDA stands for "No Data Available" government.

"I am a member of the 'tukde-tukde' gang, which means 'disruption'," he said. "I am worried because in this Parliament a question was asked: 'who are members of the tukde-tukde gang. The honourable minister said, 'we have no data available on tukde-tukde gang'."

"No data is also available on oxygen shortage deaths, corpses floating in rivers, migrants walking back to their homes, and doubling farmers income, which was supposed to happen in 2022," he said.

This, Chidambaram then said, is a 'no data available government'...

Initiating the discussion on the Union Budget, he said, "I am happy (that) I am speaking in the council of states, otherwise known as the Rajya Sabha under the Constitution. Had the Congress not been there, this (Rajya Sabha) would still (have been) under the Government of India...the council of the princes; and instead of us, it would have been bejewelled rulers sitting..."

"Thank God for the Congress, we have a Rajya Sabha and I am able to speak to you," he said, addressing the Deputy Chairman. Stating that unemployment is on the rise in the country, Chidambaram said Prime Minister Narendra Modi spoke of employment but left out key statistics. Chidambaram spoke immediately after Prime Minister Modi's reply to the debate on the Motion of Thanks to the President's Address. Opinion | No

work, no welfare, only wealth The Congress leader said: "Before we were obliged to walk out, the Prime Minister was speaking eloquently about jobs and employment. I want to humbly submit to him a statistic which he should use in his next speech. As on March 31, 2021, there were 8.72 lakh vacancies in the Central government. And the almighty Government of India recruited 78,264 persons to fill vacancies, leaving nearly 8 lakh vacancies vacant as of today." He said, "The thing I liked about the Finance Minister's Budget speech is that it was the shortest speech of 90 minutes. I will also keep my reply very short."

Last year, he said, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman projected 2021-22 fiscal deficit at 6.8 per cent. "I had cautioned and said it will not be contained at 6.8 per cent and said we would do better than it," he said. "They have done better than 6.8 per cent — they have done 6.9 per cent."

Chidambaram also said the Railways Ministry had said 151 passenger trains on 109 routes would be bid out to the private-sector but it got zero bid. "Why do you make these announcements which you do not have capacity to execute," he asked.

He said: "In 2016-17, India's GDP grew by 8.3 per cent. In 2019-20, it slid down year-by-year to 3.7 per cent, and in 2020-21, the pandemic year, we hit a recession. I would leave out that year, but in four years, this government has brought down the growth rate — pre-pandemic — from 8.3 per cent to 3.7 per cent." "In 2019-20, GDP in constant terms was Rs 145 lakh crore. In 2020-21, the pandemic year, it came down to Rs 135 lakh crore. We are growing only when we go back to Rs 145 lakh crore," he said.

Upsetting the Centre-state balance



India is a quasi-federation, with its executive organised between the Centre and the states. Under Article 309 of the Constitution, the Centre and states are empowered to erect and maintain services for running their administration. Both the Centre and the states exercise full control over their services independently of each other. However, to preserve unity between them, Sardar Patel envisioned the creation of the All-India Services. Unlike a central service or state service, an All-India Service is compositely administered under Article 312. While recruitment and allotment to a cadre (state) are determined by the Centre, the states determine the work and posting. Hence, All-India Services are carefully balanced between the Centre and the states. The Indian Administrative Service (IAS), Indian Police Service (IPS), and Indian Forest Service (IFS) are the three All-India Services.

The IAS is popularly seen as the crown jewel of all services, occupying the highest bureaucratic berths in the district (district magistrate), the state (chief secretary), and the centre (cabinet secretary). Being an All-India Service, officers of the IAS are posted to the states, from where they are deputed to the Centre with the tripartite consent of the officer, the state government and the central government. However, the proposed amendment to Rule 6 of the IAS (Cadre) Rules 1954, seeks to do away with the consent of both the officer and the state government and has drawn a sharp wedge between the Centre and the states along political lines.

At the outset, stripping away the consent of the state government is a move towards greater

centralisation in the IAS, bringing it functionally closer to a central service. This has the potential to disrupt the delicate balance between the Centre and states and the sui generis character of the IAS as a composite service, and render Article 312 as a dead letter law.

The reason for the amendment, as declared by the central government, is to ensure adequate availability of IAS officers for central deputation, which at present is “not sufficient to meet the requirement at the Centre”. Therefore, the states have been mandated to ensure adequate availability of IAS officers under the Central Deputation Reserve. However, the central government has gone beyond its declared reason and stretched the cadre rules to also allow for appropriation of IAS officers “in public interest”. Bereft of any limitation on what constitutes “public interest”, the Centre has virtually conferred upon itself the plenipotentiary power to pull out any number of IAS officers from the states.

Because the top bureaucratic brass is composed almost entirely of IAS officers, the states — especially the opposition states — fear losing their key officers to conscribed central deputation. To protect their administration from becoming paralysed, states may resort to altering their Transaction of Business Rules to divest IAS officers of key posts in the state, and vesting the same with the state officers. Alternately, states may conjure provisional berths for retired bureaucrats to re-enter administration as special appointees, outside the cadre rules. As it is, the implementation of cadre rules is left to the mercy of the states, with the Centre

showing a disinclination to enforce them. Some states openly flout the cadre rules with

impunity in matters of postings and transfers. The Civil Services Board has been rendered

impotent, non-cadre officers are being unilaterally appointed to IAS cadre posts, and the minimum tenure guarantee is openly flouted.

The proposed amendment to the IAS cadre rules portends ill for Sardar Patel’s vision of the All-India Services as a unifying link between the Centre and the states. Not only could it allow distrust to fester in Centre-state relations, it would also result in the functional depreciation of the IAS in the states. It is important for the states to be reassured that they are in control of their administration, and for the service to not lose its relevance.

The symbolism of inter-caste marriages

Surrounding the anti-caste movement, a topic remains hotly contested. It is about inter-caste marriages as a way towards the annihilation of caste. Activists, thinkers and leaders are divided over this. Dr Ambedkar’s famous quote from *Annihilation of Caste*, wherein he stated that inter-caste marriages were “the real remedy for breaking caste”, is often cited. Ambedkar thought “fusion of blood” would create the feeling of kith and kin. Ambedkar’s advice remains unheard. The Indian Human Development Survey reported that 95% of Indians still find partners within their subcastes. What is the situation of the rest 5%, who have braved the odds against tradition and caste? There isn’t data or satisfying coverage of them.

Many a time second- or third-generation educated Dalits who have managed to access quality education, and landed respectable (elite) jobs, find the prospects of marriage outside caste available to them. What then happens to their inter-caste marriages? Their union is unlike any other marriage. It is a political act — an achievement of love over caste. The Dalit person marrying outside caste, say to an upper caste, finds himself or herself duelling between the struggle of their community,

and the culture of their spouses and in-laws. It’s akin to getting a good job in a company surrounded by oppressor castes. Rarely does one get a chance to balance both, and what is the outcome if they do?

The children of mixed-caste

to appreciate and promote the “socially bold step” of the couple. When countries worldwide are now integrating rapidly across color, racial, ethnic boundaries, the Indian government has to offer incentives for couples to marry



parents also grow up amidst profound misunderstanding of their complicated backgrounds. They are brought up in a caste-neutral or a-caste environment, which essentially means being subjected to the dominant caste parent’s identity. The closest they come to caste is while availing caste reservations or visiting their Dalit family. If they align themselves with the identity of the oppressed caste parent, which is need-based, they risk a backlash.

The Government of India launched a scheme in 2013 to encourage inter-caste marriages. It offers Rs 2.5 lakh if one of the partners is a Dalit. One of the requirements is a recommendation from a sitting MLA / MP and government officer concerned. The scheme wants

outside rigid boundaries. Does inter-caste marriage then result in the anticipated social change and abolish untouchability? I can share my experiences. Of a savarna woman in the US who married a Dalit man and joined the Dalit community’s network. Often, during interactions, the savarna woman wouldn’t parse her background. The Dalit community’s culture, religion and festivals were different from hers. Unknowingly, the savarna woman would privilege her experiences. At some point, she forgot about her caste identity and started to claim Dalit identity passively. Since she was a student and an activist, she profited from the networks offered by her Dalit compatriots.

How to create a better power distribution network



Launched in July 2021, the Revamped Distribution Sector Reform Scheme (RDSS) is the latest of many central government grant-based programmes towards electricity distribution network investments. Others include urban loss reduction schemes such as the Accelerated Power Development Programme and rural connections and network expansion focussed schemes such as SAUBHAGYA. These have played a significant role in increasing access and improving performance.

RDSS's outlay of Rs 3 lakh crore for five years can enable financially-strained electricity distribution companies to get similar support. Half of the outlay is for better feeder and transformer metering and pre-paid smart consumer metering. The remaining half, 60 per cent of which will be funded by central government grants, will be spent on power loss reduction and strengthening networks.

But RDSS has inherited several design issues from its predecessors. These include complex processes and conditions for fund disbursement. Only 60 per cent of the total Rs 2.5 lakh crore grants allocated in past schemes were disbursed. Lack of public review and regulatory oversight

in states is another issue. The prescriptive approach of the scheme design impedes effective implementation. For example, RDSS emphasises loss reduction investments over system strengthening. However, high losses are typically connected to sustained poor quality service which, in turn, is affected by inadequate investment in system strengthening. RDSS stipulates universal pre-paid metering but post-paid options may be suitable in many contexts. Similarly suggested measures in RDSS such as privatisation and franchisee adoption should be critically examined.

As required, states are submitting action plans detailing their contexts, commitments and interests. Despite the challenges, there are opportunities for discoms under RDSS.

It is important to strengthen rural networks to meet growing demand. In the past decade, 4.9 crore poor households have been electrified and more than Rs 50,000 crore has been invested in rural networks. However, actual investments have been much less than planned. Moreover, connections given to rural homes were for 250 or 500 watts, assuming few lights, fan and TV. This does not account for use of

appliances such as refrigerators and mixers. Transformer and sub-station capacities were designed to meet this minimal demand. Increased supply hours, appliance usage and the needs of rural enterprises will need more network investment. Without this, the risk of power outages is high. The RDSS system's strengthening plans can focus on this challenge.

About 25 per cent of electricity sales is to highly subsidised, agricultural consumers who also receive erratic, poor quality supply. Under the national KUSUM scheme, day-time, low-cost supply can be provided to a large number of farmers by installing megawatt scale solar plants, which supply eight hours of quality power directly to dedicated agricultural feeders. This would address farmers' demand for reliable supply and almost halve the discom's cost and subsidy requirements. For this to work, separate feeders for agricultural consumers are needed. RDSS prioritises investments and grants towards dedicated agricultural feeders to accelerate feeder solarisation. States must leverage this grant support to provide reliable supply and reduce subsidy requirements.

Third is the need for "automatic" metering of distribution feeders.

Despite efforts, unmetered consumers and non-functional meters at the consumer and feeder level persist. Without functioning meters, accurate energy accounting and loss monitoring is a challenge. Often, discoms under-estimate losses by over-estimating unmetered consumption in a bid to demonstrate loss reduction. For greater veracity, all feeders must be equipped with meters capable of communicating readings without manual intervention. States should leverage RDSS's emphasis on automatic meter reading for this.

So far, the experience with smart metering and pre-paid metering has been limited. RDSS prescribes a phase-wise roll-out of consumer smart meters, starting with commercial and industrial consumers and urban areas. Such an approach provides states with an opportunity to understand implementation issues, adopt suitable strategies for metering and evolve frameworks for assessing benefits vis-a-vis the costs. This is possible if discoms, the state regulator and consumers play an active role in designing the roll-out to suit state realities, address implementation issues and assess benefits. In their action plans, states should emphasise the need for this

flexibility and allow the discoms to make an informed choice between pre-paid and post-paid metering. To realise benefits, the state regulator must stipulate a framework to evaluate cost reduction and performance improvement due to smart meters and protect consumers from undue tariff impacts due to such investments.

Next, the network can be prepared for charging electric vehicles. Discoms can avail 60 per cent of grants under RDSS for network investments required to address the demand of charging infrastructure for electric vehicles. This can accelerate a shift away from petrol and diesel fuels.

To leverage various opportunities, states must emphasise the need for flexibility in prioritising investments in their action plans. This should be accompanied by state-level commitments towards accelerated but deliberate implementation. Central government agencies should also be flexible in the monitoring, tracking and fund disbursement mechanisms. Without these efforts, despite its potential, RDSS will likely be important but limited in its impact, like its predecessors.

(Contd on page 15)



A preponderance of politicians with fickle loyalties. A battle of false claims and empty promises to entice voters. Entertainment, Sidhuisms and theatrics garnished with the Delhi model of governance. The Punjab election has everything in it, except seriousness, to bring about an urgently needed paradigm shift in the state's development path.

The election will see a three-cornered contest between the Congress, the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD)-Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), and the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-Punjab Lok

Congress (PLC)-Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD Sanyukt) putting up some semblance of a fight in some targeted constituencies. The entry of the Sanyukt Samaj Morcha (SSM), a conglomerate of 22 farm organisations, may change the architecture of Punjab elections.

The new electoral alliances have ironically liberated the political parties and leaders from the shackles of ideology, principled positions and consistent normative behaviour. The BJP has entered into a pre-election alliance with the breakaway parties, the PLC and the SAD (Sanyukt). It has elevated itself

as a dominant partner by contesting 65 seats — the PLC has 37, and SAD (Sanyukt) 15 seats. This alliance may not improve the BJP's electoral performance but may adversely affect the chances of the Congress.

The SAD has not entered into an alliance with its traditional ally, the BJP, due to their disagreement on the three Acts on agriculture. It has allied with the BSP after two and a half decades. This may give an advantage to the SAD, as in the previous elections, the BSP had acted as a mega-spoiler for the SAD in over 15 seats.

There are blatant efforts to

The blurred battle-lines in Punjab

polarise Punjab on religious and caste lines, with arguments that say Punjab can only have a Sikh Chief Minister or a Scheduled Caste Chief Minister. On the contrary, multi-cornered contests and demographically different electoral alliances have evolved to place the urban Hindus and Dalits as game-changers. There are only 10 Jat-majority, two Dalit-majority and three non-Jat general category majority constituencies in Punjab. The composition of more than 102 constituencies is diverse. As a result, historically, religious and caste fault lines have tended to blur in Punjab's electoral politics, unlike other states.

The appointment of Charanjit Singh Channi who belongs to the Ravidassia sub-caste has posed a question: Will the 32 per cent Schedule Castes continue to vote for all the political parties as in earlier elections? The answer is, perhaps, yes. Caste has been weakened at the behavioural level by the Sikh religion. Among Scheduled Castes, sub-castes like

Mazhabis, Valmikis, Ravidassias and Adharmis may continue to respond differently from each other. These sub-castes are also intermeshed with the deras associated with babas or saints. For instance, a majority of the Ravidassias are affiliated with the Dera Ballan, and a section of the Mazhabis are affiliated with the Dera Sacha Sauda. So, it would be the Dera establishment that may continue to barter its support in elections. Channi may only exercise a limited influence.

Unfortunately, elections have been reduced to a ritual of democracy, as political parties promise freebies and doles and selectively target political adversaries. A party's menu card offers something for everyone — from farmers, traders, students, Dalits, industrialists to women. The "menu-festo" replaces the manifesto which is, by definition, a declaration of principles, policies, intentions and ideological commitment. The credit for this infamous invention goes to the AAP.

How to create a better power distribution network

(Contd from page 14)

As if responding to the promises made by its political rivals, the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has made it a point to focus much attention in its manifesto to the larger well-being of farmers and women of Uttar Pradesh, where the first round of the seven-phased state Assembly election commences two days from now. The manner in which Samajwadi Party (SP) seemed to follow suit within hours of BJP's manifesto release reflected how it was out to display its upmanship over the ruling dispensation. However, it goes without saying that both were partly influenced by a politically insignificant Congress party's manifesto that was released about a month ago by its leader Priyanka Gandhi.

The release of BJP's manifesto "Lok Kalyan Sankalp Patra" was made into a mega event with the party's high profile campaigner and the country's Home Minister Amit Shah air-dashing from New Delhi to preside over.

"Hum ghoshna-patra nahi,



sankalp-patra jaari kar rahe hain", was the emphasis of the chief minister who went all out to convey that he means business and that he does not believe in just making announcements and tall promises.

However, what remained amply visibly throughout the hour-long show, attended by all BJP bigwigs, was that the party had picked up most of its points from the carts of its rivals, including

the Congress and SP.

The ruling party did try to show its generosity by offering two free gas cylinders on Holi and Diwali to beneficiaries of the Ujjwala scheme under which they received a free cylinder. With the government slashing the subsidy on cylinders from about Rs 300 to a paltry Rs 30 over the past five years, it has become extremely difficult for poor people to get a refill. Critics view that by

excluding the festivals of other religious communities, the party has expressed its much-voiced preference for the Hindu majority community.

The same approach seemed to reflect in BJP's announcement about 10-year imprisonment for those involved in 'love-jihad' which is the other name for 'Hindu-Muslim' marriages, allegedly carried out through deception or inducement. This

announcement appears to have been done as a part of the party's messaging to the majority community. Fact, however, remains that police investigation in most 'love-jihad' cases, registered during the Yogi Adityanath regime, had revealed how the charges were false and trumped-up. Most such alleged 'love-jihad' marriages turned out to have been solemnised with mutual consent and without any kind of inducement or deception. Significantly, both BJP and SP manifestos devoted much focus towards farmers issues. While it became a natural compulsion for the BJP to do so as the ruling dispensation had consistently angered the farming community by trying to force new farm laws on them. Thanks to the onset of elections that Prime Minister Narendra Modi chose to announce complete roll-back of those very laws. Since that too failed to assuage the hurt farmers, some taller and louder promises were imminent.

PM Modi takes swipe after Mamata's show of support for Akhilesh; reaches out to Muslim women

Prime Minister Narendra Modi took a jibe at the SP for inviting a leader who had called the people of UP "goondas" (goons) to campaign in the UP Assembly elections

After the public show of support for assembly seats in Rampur, by West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee for Samajwadi Party president Akhilesh Yadav here, Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Tuesday took a jibe at the SP for inviting a leader who had called the people of UP "goondas" (goons) to campaign in the UP Assembly elections.

With campaigning coming to an end for the first phase of polls covering 58 seats in 11 western Uttar Pradesh districts this evening, Modi, while addressing a virtual rally, said that the rival parties are daydreaming about the division of votes in the region but people will defeat them again like in the past.

Touching on the issue of triple talaq, Modi also reached out to Muslim voters, especially women, saying they gave him the strength to end this practice and will vote for the 'lotus', BJP's poll symbol.

Modi was addressing the rally

for assembly seats in Rampur, Badaun and Sambhal that will go to vote in the second phase of polling on February 14.

"Leaders of other states, who have termed people of UP as 'goondas' (goons), they are being called by them (Samajwadi Party) to campaign for them," he said without taking any names hours after a press conference by Banerjee and Yadav. "Had they cared for the honour of the people of UP, they would have not called them. But, they do not care for UP and the honour of the people of UP," Modi said,

launching a scathing attack at the SP and the Trinamool Congress. Banerjee, a vocal critic of Prime Minister Modi, had during the West Bengal polls last year accused the BJP of trying to capture power in her state with the help of "goons from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh". The Trinamool Congress had defeated a spirited bid by the BJP to gain power in the state where the saffron party



was catapulted to the position of the main challenger after the 2019 Lok Sabha election.

"I want to ask that if any daughter comes back home (following triple talaq), will the father, mother or the brother not feel pained. I ended the triple talaq, and assured lakhs of fathers, mothers and Muslim brothers that their daughter will not come back home all of a sudden.

"It was out of concern for the entire family, and not for votes. I have thought about your happiness. Despite facing criticism of the work I have done, I have worked for your welfare," he said Modi said he was happy that some wise people from the Muslim community stood by him.

"My Muslim mothers and sisters gave me immense courage and

strength. And, it was because of that, I was able to free you from this problem," Modi said. Muslims are present in large numbers in Western UP. He added that bringing the marriageable age of the girls on a par with that of boys will benefit the Muslim girls significantly. "Now, when such work is done, the Muslim girls opt for the lotus (BJP)", he said.

A normal supply chain? It's 'unlikely' in 2022

For those who keep tabs on the global supply chain, the very concept of a return to normalcy has given way to a begrudging acceptance that a new normal may be unfolding

With the havoc at ports showing no signs of abating and prices for a vast array of goods still rising, the world is absorbing a troubling realization: Time alone will not solve the Great Supply Chain Disruption.

It will require investment, technology and a refashioning of the incentives at play across global business. It will take more ships, additional warehouses and an influx of truck drivers, none of which can be conjured quickly or cheaply. Many months, and perhaps years, are likely to transpire before the chaos subsides.

"It's unlikely to happen in 2022," said Phil Levy, chief economist at Flexport, a freight forwarding company based in San Francisco. "My crystal ball gets murky further out." For those who

keep tabs on the global supply chain, the very concept of a return to normalcy has given way to a begrudging acceptance that a new normal may be unfolding. Cheap and reliable shipping may no longer be taken as a given, forcing manufacturers to move production closer to customers. After decades of reliance on lean warehouses and online systems that monitor inventory and summon goods as needed — a boon to shareholders — manufacturers may revert to a more prudent focus on extra capacity. The deepening understanding that the supply chain crisis has staying power poses a daunting challenge to policymakers. Mayhem at factories, ports and shipping yards, combined with the market dominance of major companies,

is a key driver for rising prices. Spooked by the highest rates of inflation in decades, the Federal Reserve has resolved to tighten credit, while the Bank of England and other central banks have already lifted interest rates, sowing alarm in stock markets from New York to Tokyo. Public anger over rising consumer prices — especially for food and fuel — helps explain why Democrats may be in danger of losing control of Congress. Record beef prices, along with rising costs for pork and poultry, have prompted the Biden administration to pursue the prospect of antitrust enforcement against the four companies that dominate the U.S. meat supply. But whatever the politicians and central bankers unleash in the name of taming inflation,

businesses continue to struggle to manufacture and distribute their products.

Whirlpool recently warned that customers who purchased its washing machines, refrigerators and other household appliances would continue to experience delays as the company contended with supply chain problems.

Even as Tesla last week announced record profits amid overwhelming demand for its electric cars, the company said that sales would be hurt by difficulties in the supply chain — not least due to continued shortages of computer chips.

A gas station in San Francisco on Nov. 18, 2021. The rising cost of fuel risks stoking public anger, which some political analysts believe could cost Democrats seats in the midterm elections. (Jason Henry/The New York Times) The chip shortage has limited the production of cars

worldwide, while stymying makers of medical devices and a vast range of electronic gadgets. US Commerce Secretary Gina Raimondo recently described persistent chip shortages as an "alarming" threat to American industry.

The International Monetary Fund last week cited supply chain woes among other factors as it downgraded its forecast for global economic growth for 2022 to 4.4% from 4.9%. The breadth and persistence of supply chain troubles in part result from how the coronavirus pandemic has accelerated trends that have been unfolding for decades, especially the growth of e-commerce.

Whereas major brands traditionally ship goods from factories around the world to central warehouses that supply retail outlets, e-commerce demands a far more complicated endeavor: Retailers must deliver individual orders to homes and businesses.

How China got blue skies in time for Olympics



The blue skies greeting Olympic athletes here this month are a stark change from just a decade ago when the city's choking air pollution was dubbed an "Airpocalypse" and blamed for scaring off tourists. Beijing's air still has a long way to go, but is measurably better than past years when smog often made it difficult to see nearby buildings and people wore masks to protect

Tougher emissions standards were imposed on coal-fired plants and the number of cars on the road was curbed to cut vehicle emissions. Local officials were given environmental targets, and coal-fired boilers in homes were replaced with gas or electric heaters.

The government's reporting of air quality data also improved.

Jia Pei, a 30-year-old Beijing resident who enjoys exercising

and difficulty breathing.

"You could hear people coughing all over because of it," said Myllyvirta, who was living in Beijing until 2019.

Children, older adults and people with health conditions including asthma are more likely to feel the effects. The very fine particles that make up air pollution can get deep into people's lungs and have been linked to health problems

At this month's Beijing Games, the air is clear enough for athletes to see the mountains surrounding the city. A look at what's behind the transformation

themselves from pollution, not Covid-19. The city's notorious pollution also made news in 2016, when Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg posted a photo of himself jogging in the haze through Tiananmen Square with a smile on his face. Some mused on social media that he was trying to ingratiate himself with Chinese authorities.

What changed?

After pollution hit record levels in 2013 and became a source of international attention and widespread public discontent, China launched an ambitious plan to improve its air quality and said it would fight pollution "with an iron fist," according to a recent report from the Energy Policy Institute at Chicago. That was also around the time the country bid on this month's Winter Games.

The ensuing efforts were similar to the measures China had previously taken to ensure clear skies for the 2008 Summer Games in Beijing, but on a larger scale, the report notes.

outside, said the improved air quality puts him in a better mood. "In the past when there was smog, I would feel that I was inhaling dust into my mouth," he said.

Is Beijing air clean now?

Despite the progress, Beijing's annual average air pollution last year was still more than six times the limit laid out by the World Health Organization's guidelines. And the concentration of coal-burning industries that still surrounds the city means it remains susceptible to bad air days, said Lauri Myllyvirta at the Center for Research on Energy and Clean Air in Helsinki, Finland. When those happen can depend on factors like car traffic or how much wind there is to blow away smog.

Still, Chinese officials hail the country's achievements. Last year, they say there were 288 days of good air quality days in Beijing, compared to 176 days in 2013.

How is health affected?

The effects of air pollution can be visceral and include irritated eyes

including irregular heartbeats and decreased lung function.

Poorer people might also be more vulnerable if they can't afford air purifiers or need to work outdoors, said Guojun He, a researcher at the University of Hong Kong and co-author of the report from the Energy Policy Institute at Chicago.

What next? China has committed to being carbon neutral by 2060. And though the country still relies heavily on coal for electricity, He said it has made significant progress in curbing emissions and is rapidly developing clean energy from sources like wind and solar.

"When it's possible, I think in general, the transition is going to be happening and it's actually happening right now," He said. In the meantime, he noted the government can also take short-term measures when it wants, such as temporarily shutting down factories. That can help ensure clearer skies for big political or social events, like the Olympics.

Everest's 2,000-yr-old highest glacier to disappear in middle of this century

Researchers in Nepal on Tuesday warned that the highest glacier on the top of Mount Everest could disappear by the middle of this century as the 2,000-year-old ice cap on the world's tallest mountain is thinning at an alarming rate. The International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD) here said that Everest has been losing ice significantly since the late 1990s, citing a latest research report issued here.

The Everest Expedition, the single most comprehensive Scientific Expedition to Everest, conducted trailblazing research on glaciers and the alpine

glacier could disappear by the middle of this century.

The rate of ice loss measured is more than 80 times faster than the 2,000 years it took to form this thickness of ice. "The long-term effect on the availability and stability of these water towers which will impact downstream communities is of major concern," the ICIMOD said in the statement.

Glaciers in the Himalayas make a significant contribution to water resources for millions of people.

The research finding states that the change in ice cover



environment, the ICIMOD said. A recent article published in the Nature Portfolio journal reported that the ice on Everest has been thinning at an alarming rate.

The multidisciplinary team comprised scientists from eight countries, including 17 from Nepal. Three of the co-authors of the study were affiliated with the ICIMOD.

It has been estimated that the ice in the South Col glacier located at an elevation of 8,020 metres is thinning at a rate of nearly two-metre per year, the report said.

The findings were based on data from a 10-metre-long ice core obtained from South Col Glacier (in the Nepalese side of the Everest) at an elevation of 8,020 metre and meteorological observations from the two highest automatic weather stations in the world located on the southern slopes of Everest at 7,945 and 8,430metre. The researchers, on the basis of radiocarbon dating, estimated the age of ice in the glacier to be 2,000-year-old.

They warned that the highest

in the Everest could have been triggered by climate change.

In December 2002, China and Nepal announced that the world's highest peak is now taller by 86 centimetres after they remeasured Mt Everest at 8,848.86 metres, over six decades after India conducted the previous measurement in 1954.

The revised height of Mt Everest put an end to the decades-long dispute between the two neighbours on the height of the world's tallest mountain that straddles their shared border.

The exact height of Mt Everest had been contested ever since a group of British surveyors in India declared the height of Peak XV, as it was initially called, to be 8,778 metres in 1847.

Mt Everest stands on the border between China and Nepal and mountaineers climb it from both the sides.

Mt Everest is known as Sagarmatha in Nepal while in China it is called Mt Qomolangma, the Tibetan name for the world's highest peak

Avalanche in mountainous east Afghanistan kills at least 12

At least 12 people were killed and nine others were injured in an avalanche in northeast Afghanistan

(SAI Bureau) An avalanche in a remote mountainous corner of northeast Afghanistan killed at least 12 people, a provincial spokesperson said Monday. Another nine were injured. One person was missing after the late Sunday avalanche near the Pakistani border, said Najibullah Hanif, who heads Kunar province's information and culture department. The landslide followed a day of heavy snow. Afghans from nearby villages rushed to help and were followed by officials, said Hanif, noting that district officials sent rescue teams to the remote area early Monday. Pakistan closed its border with Afghanistan after the Taliban swept into Afghanistan in mid-August hoping to head off a rush of refugees. The country already hosts nearly 2 million



Afghans who fled four decades of relentless war. Unofficial border crossings are frequent, even as Pakistan has almost completed a fence along length of the border separating the two nations.

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Kabul airport attack in August 2021 was undertaken by single suicide bomber, finds US probe

(Staff Reporter) An attack that killed at least 173 people including 13 US service members during the chaotic Kabul airport evacuation last year was undertaken by a single suicide bomber, a Pentagon investigation concluded Friday. The investigation ruled out more than one perpetrator or anyone using firearms in the August 26 attack, which was claimed by the Islamic State group.

BOMBING AT KABUL AIRPORT
At least 160 Afghan civilians and the 13 US troops were killed by the bombing, which came during the final days of the US military's withdrawal after two decades of war, according to the investigation.

The bomb exploded in a dense crowd just outside the airport's Abbey Gate as thousands of people pushed to try to get inside and leave the country in the US-managed airlift. Although some

gunfire erupted after the bombing, US officers said they were warning shots and none of those who died in the event were killed by them.

'NO GUNSHOT WOUNDS'

"There were no gunshot wounds" among the victims, said Brigadier General Lance Curtis, who presented the investigation findings Friday. He said that the deaths were from shrapnel including ball bearings from the bomb, the wounds of which can look like gunshot wounds. Curtis admitted that on the day, the US military thought the attack was "complex," involving an Islamic

State gunman as well as the bomber. "We now know that the explosive fired ball bearings causing wounds that looked like gunshots. When combined with a small number of warning shots, that led many to assume that a complex attack had



occurred," Curtis told reporters. **'INSTANT CHAOS, SENSORY OVERLOAD'** Also adding to the confusion was the fact that the shrapnel from the blast punctured tear gas canisters carried by the US troops for crowd control. That created "instant chaos and

sensory overload," said one of the officials who briefed reporters on the investigation. The bomb also left 45 US service members injured, some with brain injuries from the concussive force of the blast. The black-garbed perpetrator, shown in the

investigator's sole video of the bombing, was later identified by Islamic State as Abdul Rahman Al-Logari, who was released from a government prison by the Taliban after they took control of Kabul on August 15.

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Myanmar villagers accuse junta troops of burning hundreds of homes



(Staff Reporter) Myanmar villagers and anti-coup fighters have accused troops of burning hundreds of homes in the country's restive northwest, as the junta seeks to crush resistance to its rule. Mass protests against last year's coup have been met with a brutal military crackdown, and violence has flared across Myanmar as civilians form "people's defence forces" (PDF) to oppose the junta. A woman from Bin village in the Sagaing region, which has seen recent clashes, said troops had arrived in the early hours of Monday. "They shelled artillery and fired guns before coming in," she said on Friday, adding that the sound had sent villagers fleeing. Troops then set fire to around 200 houses, including her own, she said, requesting anonymity. "We could not bring anything with us. We took some warm clothes only, and then we

just ran away." Troops also torched houses in nearby Inn Ma Hte village after a local pro-junta militia was attacked by anti-coup fighters who then fled, according to one of the rebels. "When the PDF left the village, the army burnt it down," the fighter said, adding that 600 houses had been torched. Local media also reported that hundreds of homes had been razed in the two villages, and images obtained by AFP purporting to be of Bin village showed the remains of dozens of burnt-out buildings. AFP could not independently verify the reports from the remote region. The fires consumed properties, motorbikes and carts, said another local who was helping to coordinate aid for those displaced from Inn Ma Hte. "For them, it will be difficult to regain their livelihoods," he said, requesting anonymity. State-run

TV ran a report on Thursday accusing PDF fighters of starting the fires, and published images it claimed showed burnt-out buildings destroyed by "terrorists". The Southeast Asian country has been in chaos since a coup last February, with more than 1,500 people killed in a crackdown on dissent, according to a local monitoring group. In August the junta said it was considering raising village militias to combat opposition to its rule, as it struggles to assert control over swathes of the country. Sagaing has seen regular clashes and bloody reprisals. In mid-December the United States and United Nations condemned the junta over what Washington described as "credible and sickening" reports of the killing of 11 villagers, including children, in the Sagaing region.

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Opposed to 'unilateral actions' on Kashmir: China after Xi-Imran meeting



(Staff Reporter) China on Sunday pledged closer cooperation with Pakistan under the USD 60 billion CPEC investment programme and called for resolving the Kashmir issue properly and peacefully while opposing any "unilateral actions" that could complicate the situation as Prime Minister Imran Khan held talks with the top Chinese leadership, including President Xi Jinping.

Khan called on President Xi on the last day of his four-day visit to China to discuss a host of issues including the slow pace of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and increasing concerns of Beijing over recurring attacks on Chinese personnel working in its various projects in Pakistan.

In his meeting with Khan, Xi said China firmly supports Pakistan in safeguarding national independence, sovereignty, dignity and fighting terrorism, state-run Xinhua news agency reported. He said China is willing to join hands with Pakistan to push forward the in-depth development of the CPEC and ensure the implementation of key projects.

"Both sides reiterated that a peaceful and prosperous South Asia is in the common interest of all parties," said a joint statement issued at the end of Khan's visit to China to attend the opening ceremony of the Beijing Winter Olympics. "They emphasised the importance of pursuit of dialogue and resolution of all

outstanding disputes to promote regional cooperation and advance the goals of lasting peace, stability and shared prosperity in the region," it said. "The Pakistan side briefed the Chinese side on the latest developments on the situation in Jammu & Kashmir, including its concerns, position and pressing issues at the moment. The Chinese side reiterated that the Kashmir issue was a dispute left from history, and should be properly and peacefully resolved based on the UN Charter, relevant Security Council resolutions and bilateral agreements. China opposes any unilateral actions that complicate the situation," it said.

In the past, India strongly rejected references made to Jammu and Kashmir in a previous joint statement by Pakistan and China and asserted that the union territory as well as Ladakh have been and will remain its integral and inalienable part.

In July 2021, External Affairs Ministry spokesperson Arindam Bagchi had objected to reference made to the so-called China-Pakistan Economic Corridor in a statement by the two countries, saying it is in Indian territory that has been illegally occupied by Pakistan. "As in the past, India categorically rejects any reference to Jammu and Kashmir. The union territory of Jammu and Kashmir and the union territory of Ladakh has been and will remain an integral and inalienable part of India,"

Bagchi had said. The spokesperson had said that India has consistently conveyed to both China and Pakistan that the so-called CPEC is in India's territory. "We resolutely oppose any attempts by other countries to change the status quo in areas illegally occupied by Pakistan as also to Pakistan bringing up any material change in Indian territories under its illegal occupation. We call upon

cooperation between Pakistan and China was an important factor of peace and stability in the region," it said. In his meeting with Khan, Xi while calling for "firmer confidence" between China and Pakistan relations said that "strategic significance" of all-weather ties are "getting more prominent" as two countries signed several agreements to firm up all-weather ties. The joint statement said "both sides

The China-Pakistan joint statement also said that China recognised Pakistan's sacrifices and efforts in the fight against terrorism adding that both sides reaffirmed their commitment to fighting terrorism in all its forms and manifestations.

parties concerned to cease such actions," he said.

The China-Pakistan joint statement also said that China recognised Pakistan's sacrifices and efforts in the fight against terrorism adding that both sides reaffirmed their commitment to fighting terrorism in all its forms and manifestations.

It said, "both sides agreed to continue the momentum in defence cooperation at various levels between the armed forces of Pakistan and China". China has emerged as Pakistan's biggest supplier of weapons including battle tanks, fighter aircraft and latest naval frigates. "They underscored that stronger defence and security

expressed their strong determination to safeguard CPEC from all threats and negative propaganda". Pakistan reaffirmed its commitment to making all-out efforts for the security of all Chinese personnel, projects and institutions in Pakistan and the Chinese side expressed its appreciation for the measures taken by Pakistan.

China has repeatedly called on Pakistan to step up security for thousands of its personnel working in the CPEC in view of several attacks on them. Khan praised the Chinese leadership for hosting the Winter Olympics which was diplomatically boycotted by the US and its allies over human rights violations against Uygur

Muslims in Xinjiang. Coinciding with his visit, the two sides signed a host of MoUs, covering bilateral cooperation in areas of economic and technical, industry, investment, infrastructure, space, vaccine, digitalisation, standardisation, disaster management, culture, sports and vocational education, the joint statement said. Prominent of these agreements whose details are not revealed was the new Framework Agreement on Industrial Cooperation to begin the construction of the 2nd phase of the CPEC in which China has so far invested about USD 25 billion, according to its envoy to Islamabad, Nong Rong.

In his meeting with Khan, Xi called on the two sides to "create better future for bilateral relations with firmer confidence", state-run Xinhua news agency reported. He did not elaborate.

The joint statement said "the two sides are ready to discuss with Afghanistan the extension of the CPEC to Afghanistan".

Xi expressed China's willingness to work with Pakistan to expand cooperation in the fields such as science and technology, agriculture and people's wellbeing, build a green, healthy and digital corridor, and support Pakistan's industrialization to enhance its sustainable development capability. Xi said that China is willing to strengthen coordination and cooperation with Pakistan on multilateral platforms including the United Nations, to safeguard world and regional peace and stability.

On Saturday, Chinese Premier Li Keqiang in his meeting with Khan said Pakistan is China's priority in neighbourhood diplomacy and encourages its business enterprises to invest.

Pakistan is willing to take active steps to promote the construction of the second phase of CPEC, and strengthen cooperation with China in the fields of industry, agriculture and information technology, said Khan. This is Khan's fourth visit to China as he paid last visit in October 2019.

5 Pak soldiers killed in firing from Afghanistan; TTP claims responsibility for attack

At least five Pakistani soldiers were killed in firing from neighbouring Afghanistan on Sunday. Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) claimed responsibility for the attack

(Staff Reporter) At least five Pakistani soldiers were killed by firing from neighbouring Afghanistan, Islamabad said Sunday, in an attack claimed by the Pakistani Taliban. It comes just days after Baloch separatists in the southwest killed nine Pakistani troops in a series of brazen attacks that officials said involved planners from Afghanistan as well as India. After seizing power in August, Afghanistan's Taliban pledged terror groups would not be allowed to operate from the country, but Pakistani militant groups have long taken sanctuary across the porous border. They include the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), which on Sunday claimed responsibility for the attack in the Kurram district of rugged Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province.

The TTP has been emboldened by the return to power of the Taliban in Afghanistan and has stepped up attacks since a month-long truce with the Pakistan government ended last year.

The Taliban are separate groups in both countries, but share a common ideology and draw from people who live on either side of the border.

The TTP said it killed six Pakistani troops in Saturday night's attack, but the Pakistan military's public relations wing (ISPR) said five Frontier Corps members had died.

"Own troops responded in a befitting manner," it said, adding "terrorists suffered heavy casualties". Pakistan "strongly condemns the use of Afghan soil by terrorists", ISPR said.

The army "is determined to defend Pakistan's borders against the menace of terrorism, and such sacrifices of our brave men further strengthen our resolve".

Premier in China

It took four days until Saturday for Pakistani troops to put an end to assaults by separatists in Balochistan province, with the army putting the final death toll at 20 militants and nine soldiers.

The ISPR said intelligence agents intercepted communications during those assaults on army posts that showed militants had links to Afghanistan and India. Separatists have waged an insurgency in the vast southwestern province for years, fuelled by anger that its abundant reserves of natural resources are not relieving citizens from crushing poverty.

The fighting came as Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan was making an official visit to China, which has invested significantly in Balochistan, further stoking tensions.

Chinese investments in Balochistan are part of Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative.

A Pakistani security official told AFP on Friday that the attacks were an attempt to derail Khan's visit to China.

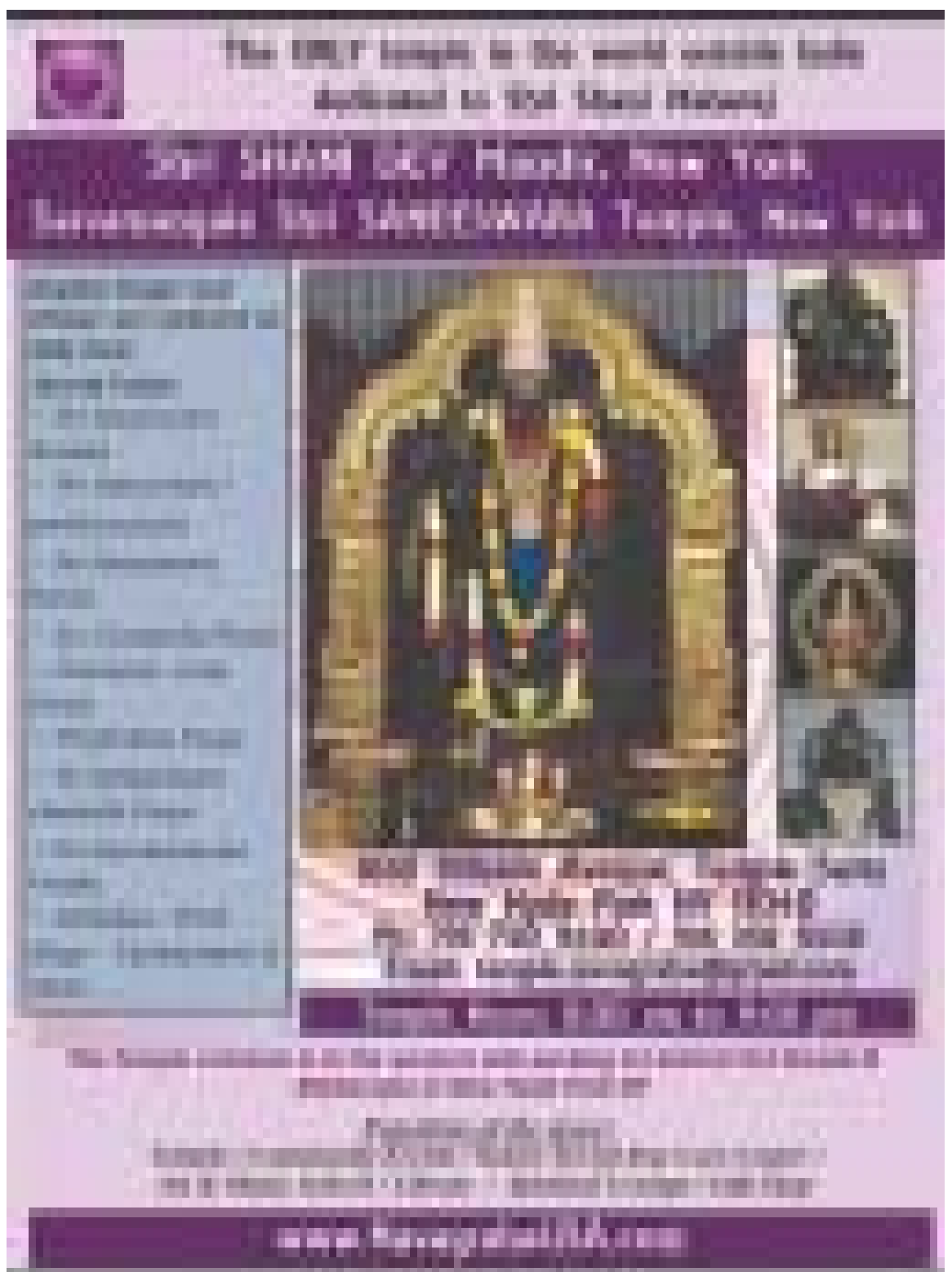
The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) project linking China's far-western Xinjiang region with the strategic port of Gwadar in Balochistan has sparked claims that the vast influx of investment does not benefit locals.

While the economic corridor offers a lucrative gateway for China to the Indian Ocean, the security of its workers has long been a concern.

Pakistan's government announced late last year it had entered a month-long truce with the TTP, facilitated by Afghanistan's Taliban, but that expired on December 9 after peace talks failed to make progress.

The TTP has been blamed for hundreds of suicide bomb attacks and kidnappings across the country, and for a while held sway over vast tracts of the country's rugged tribal belt, imposing a radical version of Islamic law.

But after the 2014 massacre of nearly 150 children at a Peshawar school, the Pakistan military sent huge numbers of troops into TTP strongholds and crushed the movement, forcing its fighters to retreat to Afghanistan.



Bangladesh PM Sheikh Hasina mourns Lata Mangeshkar's demise

In a message of condolence, the Bangladesh PM said Mangeshkar will remain alive forever in the hearts of the people in the region through her work

(News Agencies) Lata Mangeshkar's demise has created a "great void in the subcontinent's musical arena", Bangladesh's Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina said on Sunday as she condoled the death of the "empress of music". In a message of condolence, Hasina said Mangeshkar will remain alive forever in the hearts of the people in the region through her work.

"A great void has been created in the subcontinent's musical arena with the demise of the 'Sur Samraggi (empress of music)'," the prime minister said, praying for the salvation of the departed soul and conveying her deep sympathy to the bereaved family. In a separate message, President Abdul Hamid also expressed his profound shock and sorrow at the death of the legendary singer and expressed condolences to the bereaved family, local news website Jagonews24.com reported.





COMING SOON

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US airborne infantry troops arrive in Poland amid Ukraine crisis

Biden ordered additional US troops deployed to Poland, Romania and Germany to demonstrate to both allies and foes America's commitment to NATO's eastern flank amid rising tensions between Russia and Ukraine

(News Agencies) Hundreds of US elite troops were expected to arrive in southeastern Poland near the border with Ukraine on Sunday on President Joe Biden's orders to deploy 1,700 soldiers there amid fears of a Russian invasion of Ukraine.

The airborne infantry troops of the 82nd Airborne Division were expected at the Rzeszow-Jasionka airport. Their commander is Maj. Gen. Christopher Donahue, who was the last American soldier to leave Afghanistan on August 30.

Biden ordered additional US troops deployed to Poland, Romania and Germany to demonstrate to both allies and foes America's commitment to NATO's eastern flank amid rising tensions between Russia and Ukraine. NATO's eastern member Poland borders both Russia and Ukraine. Romania borders Ukraine.

The division can rapidly deploy



within 18 hours and conduct parachute assaults to secure key objectives. Based in Fort Bragg,

North Carolina, the division's history goes back to 1917.

Earlier in the week, US planes

brought equipment and logistics troops in preparation for the arrival of elements of the division

to the airport, located some 90 kilometers (56 miles) from Poland's border with Ukraine.

Iran welcomes US sanctions relief but says it's too little

(News Agencies) Iran's foreign minister on Saturday welcomed US sanctions relief intended to entice Iran back to the 2015 nuclear deal, but called it insufficient. On Friday, the Biden administration restored some sanctions relief to Iran's atomic program, as world powers and the Islamic Republic continue talks aimed at salvaging the languishing agreement.

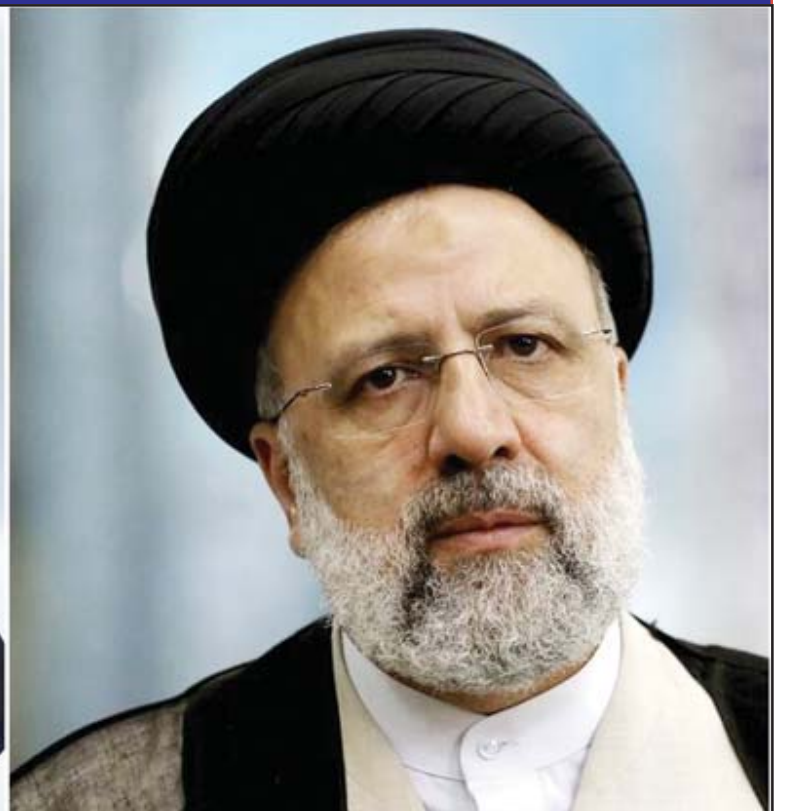
"Lifting some sanctions in a real and objective manner could be interpreted as the good will that Americans talk about," Foreign Minister Hossein Amirabdollahian told reporters. However, he said the move is not sufficient. Secretary of State Antony Blinken signed several sanctions waivers related to Iran's civilian nuclear activities. The move reverses the Trump administration's decision to rescind them. It comes as US negotiators return to Vienna for what could be a make-or-break session. The waivers are ultimately intended to attract Iran back to the 2015 deal that it has been violating since

former President Donald Trump withdrew from the agreement in 2018, and re-imposed US sanctions. In the short term, the waivers will exempt foreign countries and companies that work in Iran's civilian nuclear sector from American penalties. The Trump administration had

rescinded them in May 2020. Iran has gradually distanced itself from the terms of the nuclear deal with world powers after the US pulled out of it. Iran has demanded the restoration of all sanctions relief it was promised under the deal before it returns to compliance. "Good will, in our

viewpoint, means that something tangible happens on the ground," Amirabdollahian said. Foreign Ministry spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh on Saturday also called the US sanctions relief insufficient, saying Tehran expects the lifting of sanctions outlined under nuclear deal.

"Everyone knows that is not sufficient," Khatibzadeh was quoted as saying by the Iranian Jamaran news website. "Indeed, the Islamic Republic of Iran is waiting for the US to implement its duties and commitments according to the nuclear deal dimensions," he said.





Trump's Truth Social app, self-proclaimed foe of Big Tech, needs Apple and Google to survive

The launch of Truth Social comes a year after the former US president was banned from Facebook, Twitter and YouTube

(News Agencies) With just weeks to go before an expected launch, Donald Trump's new media venture is trying to strike a delicate balance with its app: giving Trump's base the freedom to express themselves, without running afoul of Apple and Google's app store policies.

The launch of Truth Social comes a year after the former US president was banned from Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. It will be a major test of whether Trump Media & Technology Group (TMTG) and other tech companies that describe themselves as champions of free speech can scale alongside the Silicon Valley gatekeepers that conservatives have accused of squelching free expression. TMTG has pledged to deliver an "engaging and censorship-free experience" on its Truth Social app, appealing to a base that feels its views around such hot-button topics in American life as vaccines and the outcome of the 2020 presidential election have been scrubbed from mainstream tech platforms. Yet Trump's tech team must

erect guard rails to ensure Truth Social does not get kicked out of the app stores run by Apple Inc and Alphabet Inc's Google – a fate that befell popular conservative app Parler in the wake of the Jan. 6, 2021, riots in the US Capitol. Without these stores, there is no easy way for most smartphone users to download the app.

The risk of such "de-platforming" is a top priority for TMTG Chief Executive Devin Nunes, a former Republican congressman, as his team builds the app, according to two people with knowledge of the matter. Recognizing that the app will be a major target for hackers from day one, Nunes wants to have cyber talent at the "nation-state level," one of the people said. Nunes has said publicly that the company's goal is to launch its Truth Social app by the end of March.

A spokesperson for TMTG did not respond to a request for comment.

TMTG remains shrouded in secrecy and is regarded with scepticism by some in tech and media circles. Two conservative

media executives pointed to the venture's apparent failure to launch a beta service in November, as planned, and cited the lack of known involvement by high-profile media, tech or political players – other than Nunes – as evidence it may be more bluster than substance.

"No one has approached me or my team," said one conservative media insider. "Trump has always been a bit of (his) own island."

Content Moderation

TMTG's mission of standing up to Big Tech is limited by its reliance on Google and Apple, which operate app stores that dominate the smartphone market. TMTG is working with Hive, a San Francisco-based company that does AI-based content moderation, to flag sexually explicit content, hate speech, bullying and violent content. That partnership is driven in part by TMTG's desire for the Truth Social app to remain in the Apple App and Google Play stores, according to a person familiar with the venture.

Truth Social will need robust content moderation in the form of both automated detection and in-person teams, as well as a way for users to report offensive posts, said David Thiel, the big data architect and chief technology officer of the Stanford Internet Observatory.

"Where it is going to become difficult is if they get into a situation like with Parler, where they have such a degree of hate speech that the hosting service and potentially the App Store starts to take notice," he said.

The Truth Social app will be subject to Apple's App Store rules that require developers to offer a way for users to report offensive content and provide "timely responses." The rules also bar content that "encourages violence" or "depictions that encourage illegal or reckless use of weapons and dangerous objects."

As of Feb. 4, TMTG had 12 job openings listed on the company website, for technical roles such as a developer to be part of the Android team and an iOS engineer. Salaries range from

\$80,000 to \$220,000, according to the postings, which beckon candidates to work for a "well-funded," "remote-first" and "conservative-leaning" startup. A requirement for the iOS engineer role is "knowledge of Apple's Human Interface Guidelines and App Store Review Guidelines (which are more like rules)." One posting describes the ideal candidate as someone who "enjoy(s) companies that are scrappy and able to do more with less."

Among other positions, the company is seeking to hire at least one developer with experience with Elixir, a back-end programming language, according to a job posting.

In a Jan. 13 interview with radio host Ray Appleton, Nunes said the Palm Beach, Florida-based company will be looking for a more "permanent" location – favouring states like Florida, Tennessee and Texas over Silicon Valley. In the company's early months, some tech talent has been working in the Atlanta area, according to two people with knowledge of the matter.

Minneapolis police release video of fatal shooting of Black man during raid



The Minneapolis Police Department released the video and a still image showing Amir Locke holding a gun as he twisted around beneath a blanket after being roused by officers who entered the apartment to carry out a search warrant

(News Agencies) Minneapolis police fatally shot a 22-year-old Black man during a raid on an apartment on Wednesday, newly released video recorded by a police body camera showed.

The Minneapolis Police Department released the video and a still image on Thursday showing the man, Amir Locke, holding a gun as he twisted round beneath a blanket after being roused by officers who entered the apartment to carry out a search warrant.

The incident is the latest to put the Minneapolis police department under scrutiny. Almost two years ago, George Floyd, an unarmed Black man, was killed by a white officer who knelt on his neck for over nine minutes during an arrest. Outrage

over Floyd's death sparked a nationwide movement challenging police brutality and bias in the US criminal justice system.

The video shows police unlocking Locke's apartment with a key, and officers shouting, "Police, search warrant, get on the ground, get on the fucking ground," as they entered. An officer then kicks at the couch where Locke was lying and as Locke turns, an arm comes out from beneath the blanket, showing a gun held in the hand.

Almost immediately, police fired at least three shots. Locke was not named in the search warrant, which was issued in relation to a homicide investigation that is being run by the neighbouring Saint Paul Police Department, Minneapolis Police Department

interim chief Amelia Huffman said on Thursday.

Locke's parents described their son as a talented musician, beloved member of his community, and law-abiding citizen at news conference on Friday with their lawyer, prominent civil rights attorney Ben Crump, who also represented Floyd's family. "I'm going to fight every day, throughout the day, 365 days, to make sure that Amir Rahkare Locke gets justice for being executed by the MPD," said Locke's mother, Karen Locke. "We are going to make sure that we speak loudly for Amir."

"They saw a Black man reach for his gun, not knowing anything about Amir, and they shot. They didn't even give him a chance," Crump said at the news conference.

In a statement released on Wednesday, the Minneapolis Police Department said that the man had a "handgun pointed in the direction of the officers."

During a news conference on Thursday, Huffman said the county's attorney will review the facts, in response to a question noting that the video appeared to show that Locke's gun was pointed toward the floor. "As there's a gun emerging in your direction, you are forced to make a split-second decision on when it's a threat," Huffman added.

In commenting on the search warrant in the homicide probe, Huffman said, "It is unclear at this time how he or if he was connected to the Saint Paul's investigation." She added that officers from the

Saint Paul's Police Department were at the scene later and had recovered possible evidence for the homicide investigation.

Locke was taken to the Hennepin County medical center after the shooting, where he died on Wednesday. According to the family's lawyers, Locke had no criminal history and legally possessed a firearm at the time of his death.

"In the wake of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, the City of Minneapolis told the public that it was limiting the use of no-knock warrants to 'limit the likelihood of bad outcomes.' Less than two years later, Amir Locke and his family needlessly suffered the worst possible outcome," Jeff Storms, another lawyer representing Locke's family in the case, said in a statement.

Taylor, a Black woman, was shot and killed when armed police raided her Kentucky apartment in March 2020. Floyd was killed in May 2020.

Las Vegas: Gaming officials track down winner of jackpot who was not informed due to slot machine malfunction



(News Agencies) A tourist in Las Vegas hit the jackpot but could not be informed due to a malfunction in the slot machine.

Known as Robert Taylor, the man was tracked down by the Nevada Gaming Control Board after he won \$230,000.

He had played several rounds

on the slot machine at Treasure Island Hotel and Casino. Upon noticing the defect the casino personnel informed the gaming board which conducted an exhaustive search.

They combed through hours of surveillance footage,

interviewed witnesses, and analysed data provided by rideshare facility of the Nevada Transportation Authority. Robert Taylor, who is from Arizona, had returned home after trying his luck at the slots machines in Las Vegas when he thought he did not win

anything. James Taylor, chief of the board's enforcement division said, "The Nevada Gaming Control Board is charged with the strict regulation of the gaming industry, the protection of the gaming public, and ensuring that the industry benefits the State of Nevada." "I commend the agents

of the Enforcement Division, particularly Agent Dan Nuqui, for ensuring that the public trust in the gaming industry remains strong by spending countless hours over two weeks to ensure that a patron is awarded winnings owed to him," Taylor said.

United States: FDA poised to tap brakes on China-made cancer drugs

(News Agencies) The Food and Drug Administration of the United States may halt cancer drugs and other medicines made in China. The federal agency of the Department of Health and Human Services has raised concerns about the studies conducted in China. It raised doubts about whether these studies can apply to patients in the United States.

It comes as the FDA is holding an advisory meeting to review the effectiveness of sintilimab used for cancer immunotherapy. Developed by Eli Lilly and partner Innovent Biologics, the immunotherapy blocks a protein called PD-1, the same as Merck & Co.'s Keytruda and Bristol Myers Squibb's Opdivo.

Lilly's application has become a test of the regulator's views on cancer treatments developed and tested exclusively in China. A handful of companies are using that



blueprint in an attempt to speed new therapies to the US market, raising concerns from some of the agency's top cancer drug evaluators. Previously, the FDA had approved BeiGene Ltd's lymphoma treatment, validating the China-based drugmaker's strategy of largely using data from trials held outside the

United States to file for approval. BeiGene's treatment is competing with Johnson & Johnson and AbbVie Inc's Imbruvica and AstraZeneca's Calquence, as well as Celgene's Revlimid. Analysts believe one of the biggest national security threats in the US-China trade war could be to the everyday medicines taken by millions of

Americans. The US relies on imported medicines from China in a big way. Antibiotics, over-the-counter pain meds and the stuff that stops itching and swelling — a lot of it is imported from China. Former US President Donald Trump had left pharmaceuticals out of the bilateral trade war. He had used national security as a rationale to slap tariffs or trade sanctions on a variety of imports but medical supplies were not scrutinised. "Medicines can be used as a weapon of war against the United States," Rosemary Gibson, a senior adviser on health care issues at the bioethics-focused Hastings Centre and co-author of "China Rx: Exposing the Risks of America's Dependence on China for Medicine," told lawmakers last month. "Supplies can be withheld. Medicines can be made with lethal contaminants or sold without any real medicine in them, rendering them ineffective."

Will Queen Elizabeth II abdicate? 'Sensitive' planning underway for Prince Charles' coronation

(Staff Reporter) Queen Elizabeth II became the first British monarch to reign for seven decades after she had acceded to the throne on February 6, 1952, after the death of her father King George VI. She received greetings and wishes from all over the world as she marked the historic date quietly at Sandringham, her estate in eastern England where her father died.

In a landmark address marking the 70th anniversary of her reign, the Queen said that she wants Camilla, Duchess of Cornwall, to be known as 'Queen Consort' when Prince Charles becomes King.

The announcement further quantifies the speculations that whether the longest-serving British monarch will abdicate to let her son take over. On the day when the entire country was celebrating,

there were reports that the Queen might step down in favour of her son Prince Charles.

Important to note that Queen has said in the past that she will never abdicate and will stay in the role her entire life.

The Daily Star reported citing a military source that "sensitive" planning for Prince Charles' coronation is underway.

The report also added that there's a "working plan" for Charles to be crowned, which might take place as early as 2023.

"We are shaping a military event that will need approval from the palace nearer the time," the source added.

The source added, "Our role is the ceremonial presentation and

to make sure we are ready for whatever date is -decided. We have lots of contingencies in

regarding the date for the coronation will be made by the Palace and the Queen's office,"

Police.

On the other hand, Lady Pamela Hicks, cousin of the late Prince Philip, stated otherwise during a virtual event. During a panel called "70 Years of Duty and Friendship", Hicks was asked about the rumoured abdication.

She replied: "She [Queen] will never abdicate." "Queen Wilhelmina of the Netherlands abdicated to her daughter [in 1948], but the Queen was



place – but this will be special."

"On current direction we have been told to make contingency plans for a coronation parade – that means we need to make sure the military can -deliver what we plan. Delicate matters

the source added.

The source said that any event of such magnitude will -require a detailed "military and -security planning", adding that with the lead on security will be the responsibility of the Metropolitan

shocked by the idea because she never can, because she has been anointed and takes her religion very seriously," she explained during the virtual event held on February 4.

UP polls: Samajwadi Party promises 33% reservation to women in govt jobs

(News Agencies) The Samajwadi Party (SP) on Tuesday released its poll manifesto -- Samajwadi Vachan Patra -- for the coming Assembly election in Uttar Pradesh. The SP released its manifesto on the same day as its rival Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). In 'Samajwadi Vachan Patra', the Samajwadi Party has promised big on freebies and sops for farmers, while promising a 33 per cent reservation to women in government jobs. Speaking at the release of the manifesto in Lucknow, Samajwadi Party national president Akhilesh Yadav said the "manifesto is aimed at taking Uttar Pradesh on the path of prosperity, development and progress in the coming times".

"I remember that in the year 2012, when the SP released its election manifesto, it was fully implemented. Many things which were not included in the manifesto were also implemented by the SP government," PTI quoted Akhilesh Yadav as saying.

Sops for farmers

On promises made to farmers, Akhilesh Yadav said, "Minimum support price will be provided to all crops and payment to sugarcane farmers will be ensured within 15 days. For this, farmers' corpus fund will be created if needed."

Here's what the 'Samajwadi Vachan Patra' promises to UP farmers

* Farmers with less than two acres of land will be provided with two bags of DAP and five bags of urea, electricity for irrigation, interest-free loan, insurance and pension.

* Rs 25 lakh to the kin of those farmers who died during the farm protests

* A farmer's memorial in the memory of farmers who died during farm protests

* Setting up of Kisan Bazars in all districts

Focus on jobs

* The Samajwadi Party manifesto promises to provide regular government jobs to 'Shiksha Mitras' within three years and provide employment to one crore people in the MSME sector.

* The party has also promised to bring an urban employment scheme on the lines of Mahatma Gandhi National Rural

Short term and contractual recruitment system will be discontinued.

Big promise of freebies

300 units of free electricity and a 24-hour power supply in the entire state.

Promises for women



Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA). The 'Urban Employment Guarantee Act' will review and revive the IT sector so that 22 lakh people can be given employment, the manifesto states.

* Within the first year of the SP government, appointments will be made on all the vacant posts in the state's education system.

* The Samajwadi Party manifesto promises a slew of freebies, including two LPG cylinders every year to below poverty line (BPL) families.

* One litre of petrol to all two-wheeler owners.

* Three litres of petrol and six kg of CNG per month to auto-rickshaw drivers.

* The manifesto also promises

* The Samajwadi Party manifesto promises 33 per cent reservation to women in government jobs. This will include women from all sections of the general, economically weaker sections and scheduled castes and tribes. * Women will be able to file complaint on the 1090 power line through email and WhatsApp as well.

Retired Pope Benedict XVI asks forgiveness over handling of abuse cases

Responding to a report that he had mishandled four cases involving the sexual abuse of minors while he was an archbishop in Germany decades ago, retired Pope Benedict XVI acknowledged Tuesday that “abuses and errors” had taken place under his watch, and asked for forgiveness, although he denied any misconduct.

“I have had great responsibilities in the Catholic Church,” Benedict said in a written response to the findings in the report commissioned by the Roman Catholic Church in Munich. “All the greater is my pain for the abuses and the errors that occurred in those different places during the time of my mandate,” he said in the response made public by the Vatican. “Each individual case of sexual abuse is appalling and irreparable.” The report, and the accusations by investigators that Benedict had misled them, sent shocks through a Roman Catholic

Church that has for a quarter century been devastated by revelations of sexual abuse of minors by clergy. The allegations related to Benedict’s time in Munich reached the very top of the church hierarchy, and they came not long after a separate report commissioned by the Vatican itself cast a shadow over Benedict’s predecessor, John Paul II, for failing to root out abusers in his church.

Benedict, whose backers point out that as pope he did much to throw abusers out of the church, has sought to put himself in a better light. But critics have found his answers more legalistic than pastoral and short of what many victims of abuse and their advocates long to hear from the former head of the church.

“He is repeating words of apology that have fallen on deaf ears for decades,” said Mike McDonnell, communications manager with Survivors Network of Those Abused by Priests, a global



association known as SNAP.

“True apologies are followed by true amends, and that is a concept that the church doesn’t seem able to grasp,” he said, adding that the letter issued Tuesday followed a pattern of abuse, institutional acknowledgement and lack of action that victims have long complained about. On Tuesday,

Benedict recalled again that he had met with dozens of abuse victims during his eight-year papacy and over many apostolic trips. He had, he said, “seen at first hand the effects of a most grievous fault.”

Benedict, 94, also expressed indignation that the Munich law firm that conducted the investigation had accused him of

being less than honest in his initial answers, which he had provided in 82 written pages.

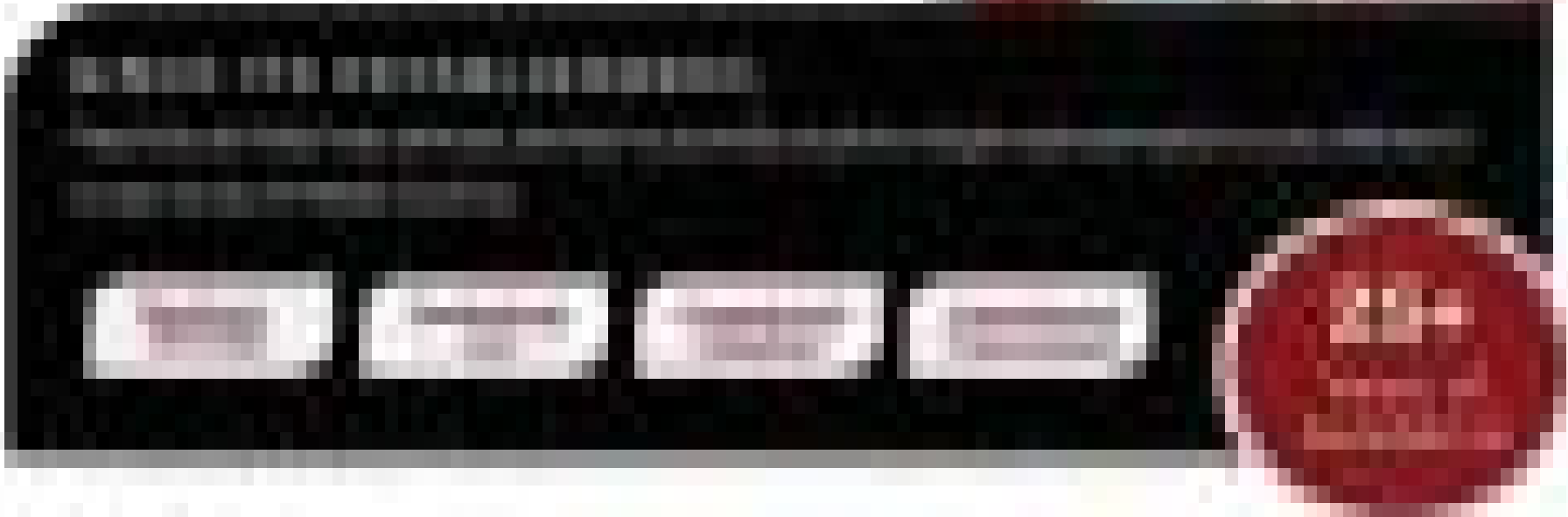
The lawyers had presented evidence in a news conference that the pontiff had participated in a meeting about the transfer of an abusive priest to his diocese for therapy, though he had claimed not to have attended.

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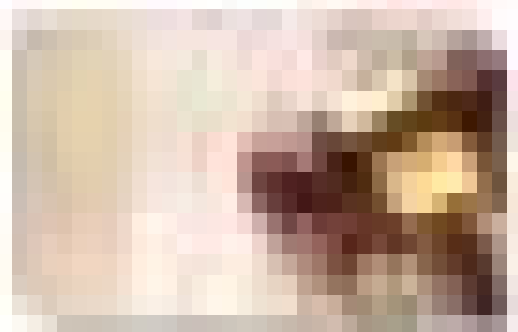
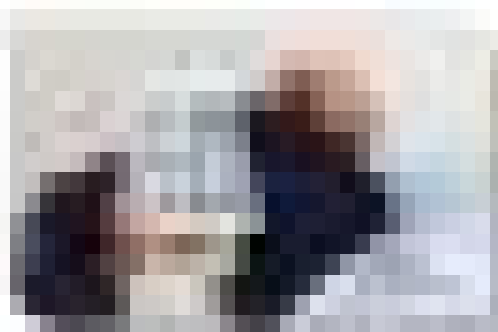


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US strike framed to spare civilians after mounting criticism



Dozens of US commandoes landed outside Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurayshi's Syrian hideout and warned people in nearby homes to stay inside, US officials said. As one of their first moves, they called out to families living inside the same building as al-Qurayshi. By the time the operation ended, the officials said, 10 civilians had been led to safety

Facing criticism for civilian deaths in US airstrikes, President Joe Biden targeted the leader of the Islamic State group on Thursday in an approach — a ground raid by special forces that was riskier for American troops but intended to be safer for the innocent.

Dozens of US commandoes landed outside Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurayshi's Syrian hideout and warned people in nearby homes to stay inside, US officials said. As one of their first moves, they called out to families living inside the same building as al-Qurayshi. By the time the operation ended, the officials said, 10 civilians had been led to safety. But the US raid still brought the deaths of women and children. Al-Qurayshi's wife and two children were killed along with the militant leader when he detonated a suicide bomb. A lieutenant of the militant leader and that man's wife also died along with a child, after the pair fired upon US forces, officials said. The deaths from the high-stakes mission highlight the challenge US forces face in targeting violent militants, while bound by ethics and international laws and treaties to try to avoid killing non-

combatants.

Biden, speaking from the White House, said he directed the military to take "every precaution possible to minimize civilian casualties." "Knowing that this terrorist had chosen to surround himself with families, including children, we made a choice to pursue a special forces raid at a much greater risk to our own people rather than target him with an airstrike," he said. Biden described al-Qurayshi's decision to blow himself up while surrounded by family members as "desperate cowardice." Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said the Pentagon would review the operation. "We know that al-Qurayshi and others at his compound directly caused the deaths of women and children last night. But, given the complexity of this mission, we will take a look at the possibility our actions may also have resulted in harm to innocent people," he said in a statement.

US officials reported no American injuries. California Democratic Rep Adam Schiff, chairman of the House Intelligence Committee, called for an investigation of the civilian deaths in Thursday's strike,

"while keeping in mind the history of ISIS leaders using civilians as human shields." By one estimate, that of Brown University's Costs of War project, close to 400,000 civilians have died in fighting since the United States and its allies launched what Americans called their war on terror, in 2001, after the 9/11 attacks. Military strikes of all kinds have declined dramatically under Biden, according to Airwars,

Biden described Al-Qurayshi's decision to blow himself up while surrounded by family members as "desperate cowardice"

which tracks US attacks. The number of strikes dropped 54 per cent from 2020 to 2021, a period when the Biden administration was moving toward with what in August became a complete US withdrawal from the 20-year Afghanistan conflict, according to Airwars. However, the Biden administration has come under criticism for civilian casualties, including during the withdrawal from Kabul in August. After a bombing claimed by the Islamic State's Afghanistan branch killed US service members and Afghans at the gate to the city's

airport, the Pentagon responded with airstrikes against suspected Islamic State members. Although US officials defended the actions, it eventually became clear that a final drone strike as Americans completed their withdrawal from Afghanistan killed 10 civilians, including seven children, but no militants. The US has not punished any American for what the Pentagon described as a tragic

mistake. Modern laws and rules of war broadly require militaries to distinguish between combatants and civilians and try to minimize the loss of civilian lives. Rights advocates and legal experts have faulted successive Republican and Democratic US administrations for their heavy reliance on airstrikes in the fight against the Islamic State, al-Qaeda and other insurgent groups in the Middle East, Afghanistan, Somalia and elsewhere. Opponents argue that attacks by air, while minimizing risk to American forces, increases the

risks of civilians with the misfortune to be near a US target.

Priyanka Motaparthi, who works on counterterrorism issues at Columbia University's Human Rights Institute, was heartened that Biden emphasized efforts to limit civilian casualties in his remarks. Given how details about previous strikes have trickled out over time, she said she's "cautious about accepting the initial picture as the final one." But the decision by US forces to warn people in the building "definitely speaks to their work to prevent civilian casualties." "Their obligation is to take all feasible precautions," Motaparthi said. She said Biden should continue to be outspoken about the need for safeguards in military operations. "As the commander in chief, he should not just be claiming successes, but he should also be leading reforms," she said. Senior administration officials, speaking on condition of anonymity to give details of the military operation, described what they depicted as painstaking efforts in the leadup to Thursday's strike to reduce the risk to civilians. That included weeks of preparation, including rehearsals of the raid.

French, German leaders to visit Russia, Ukraine amid tension

The high-level visits come as China has backed Russia's demand that NATO be precluded from expanding to Ukraine, and after the US accused the Kremlin on Thursday of an elaborate plot to fabricate an attack by Ukrainian forces that Russia could use as a pretext to take military action



offered to mediate talks between Russia and Ukraine.

Erdogan visited Kyiv this week and upon returning to Turkey charged that Western leaders have failed to make a positive contribution toward the resolution of tensions between Russia and Ukraine.

In this photo provided by the Ukrainian Presidential Press Office, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, right, and Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan speak, during their meeting in Kyiv, Ukraine, Thursday, Feb. 3, 2022. (Ukrainian Presidential Press Office via AP)

Erdogan also said that Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy strongly supports a Turkish proposal for mediation to reduce tensions between the two nations.

"Unfortunately, the West has not contributed anything toward a solution of this issue," Erdogan said. They are just creating obstacles.

Meanwhile in Washington, US officials said that a plan for a fake attack on Russian territory or Russian-speaking people was described in declassified intelligence shared with Ukrainian officials and European allies in recent days.

It was the latest example of the Biden administration divulging intelligence findings as a tactic to stop Russian disinformation efforts, and foil what it says is Putin's attempt to lay the groundwork for military action.

Russian officials have rejected the allegations.

Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov on Friday spoke about the "absurdity" of the claims, and Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov recommended reporters not to take anyone's word for it, especially the (US) State Department's, when it comes to these issues. Ukraine's foreign minister said on Friday that Washington shared the information with Kyiv and that it did not surprise Ukrainian authorities. "Since 2014, we have seen many insidious actions by Russia. We have seen that nothing stops them from fabricating something and accusing Ukraine of something," Kuleba told reporters.

The French president and the German chancellor will head to Moscow and Kyiv in the coming weeks, adding to diplomatic efforts to try to deter Russian President Vladimir Putin from launching an invasion of Ukraine and find a way out of the growing tensions.

France's Emmanuel Macron is scheduled to visit Moscow on Monday and Kyiv on Tuesday, while Germany's Olaf Scholz will travel to Kyiv on Feb 14 and Moscow on Feb 15.

The high-level visits come as China has backed Russia's demand that NATO be precluded from expanding to Ukraine, and after the US accused the Kremlin on Thursday of an elaborate plot to fabricate an attack by Ukrainian forces that Russia could use as a pretext to take military action.

The US has not provided detailed information backing up the claims, which Moscow has vehemently denied.

While France is a major player in NATO and is moving troops to Romania as part of the alliance's preparation for possible Russian action, Macron has also been actively pushing for dialogue with Putin and has spoken to him several times in recent weeks.

The two will hold a one-on-one meeting Monday, Macron's office said Friday.

A Ukrainian marine border guard walks on the deck of a boat after a patrol in the Sea

of Azov, waters near Mariupol, Donetsk region, in eastern Ukraine

Macron is following a French tradition of striking a separate path from the United States in geopolitics, as well as trying to make his own mark on this crisis and defend Europe's interests.

Germany has emphasized the importance of various diplomatic formats in tackling the tensions and has refused to send weapons to Ukraine, irking some allies.

Scholz also has faced criticism at home lately for keeping a low public profile in the crisis.

After weeks of talks in various diplomatic formats have led to no major concessions by Russia and the US, it's unclear how much impact the trips will have.

But Ukraine's Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba said on Friday that "top-level visits seriously reduce challenges in the sphere of security and upset the Kremlin's plans."

U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken had a call with Kuleba Friday to discuss the Russian military buildup, and steps "to encourage Russia to pursue diplomacy over war and ensure security and stability."

Blinken reaffirmed the US and its allies' willingness to "impose swift and severe consequences on Russia if it chooses to escalate," State Department spokesperson Ned Price said.

In a call Wednesday with

US President Joe Biden, Macron filled him in on his diplomatic efforts.

In talks with the Russian and Ukrainian leaders Thursday night, Macron's office said they discussed ways to "identify elements that could lead to de-escalation," and conditions for strategic balance in Europe, which should allow for the reduction of risks on the

ground and guarantee security on the continent.

Scholz has a previously planned meeting with Biden in Washington on Monday.

Russian and Belarus troops held joint combat training at firing ranges in Belarus Wednesday as tensions remain high under the looming threat of war with Ukraine. (Russian Defense Ministry Press Service via AP)

Moscow has been signalling an apparent readiness for more talks with Washington and NATO in recent days.

Some experts say that as long as Russia and the West keep talking, that's a reason for cautious optimism.

Russia has amassed more than 100,000 troops near Ukraine's northern and

eastern borders, raising concern that Moscow might invade again, as it did in 2014.

The troop presence and uncertainty have unnerved Ukrainians and hurt the country's economy.

The Kremlin has denied that an invasion is planned and has demanded guarantees from the West that Ukraine will never join the bloc, deployment of NATO

weapons near Russian borders will be halted and the alliance's forces will be rolled back from Eastern Europe.

China lent its support to the demands Friday after Putin met with Chinese President Xi Jinping in Beijing before the opening of the Winter Olympics.

After the talks, the two leaders issued an elaborate joint statement, declaring their opposition to any expansion of NATO.

"The Chinese side is sympathetic to and supports the proposals put forward by the Russian Federation to create long-term legally binding security guarantees in Europe," the statement read.

Separately from Macron and Scholz, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has

France's Emmanuel Macron is scheduled to visit Moscow on Monday and Kyiv on Tuesday, while Germany's Olaf Scholz will travel to Kyiv on Feb 14 and Moscow on Feb 15

Researchers found supermountains hiding in a tiny time capsule. Evidence suggest they will return

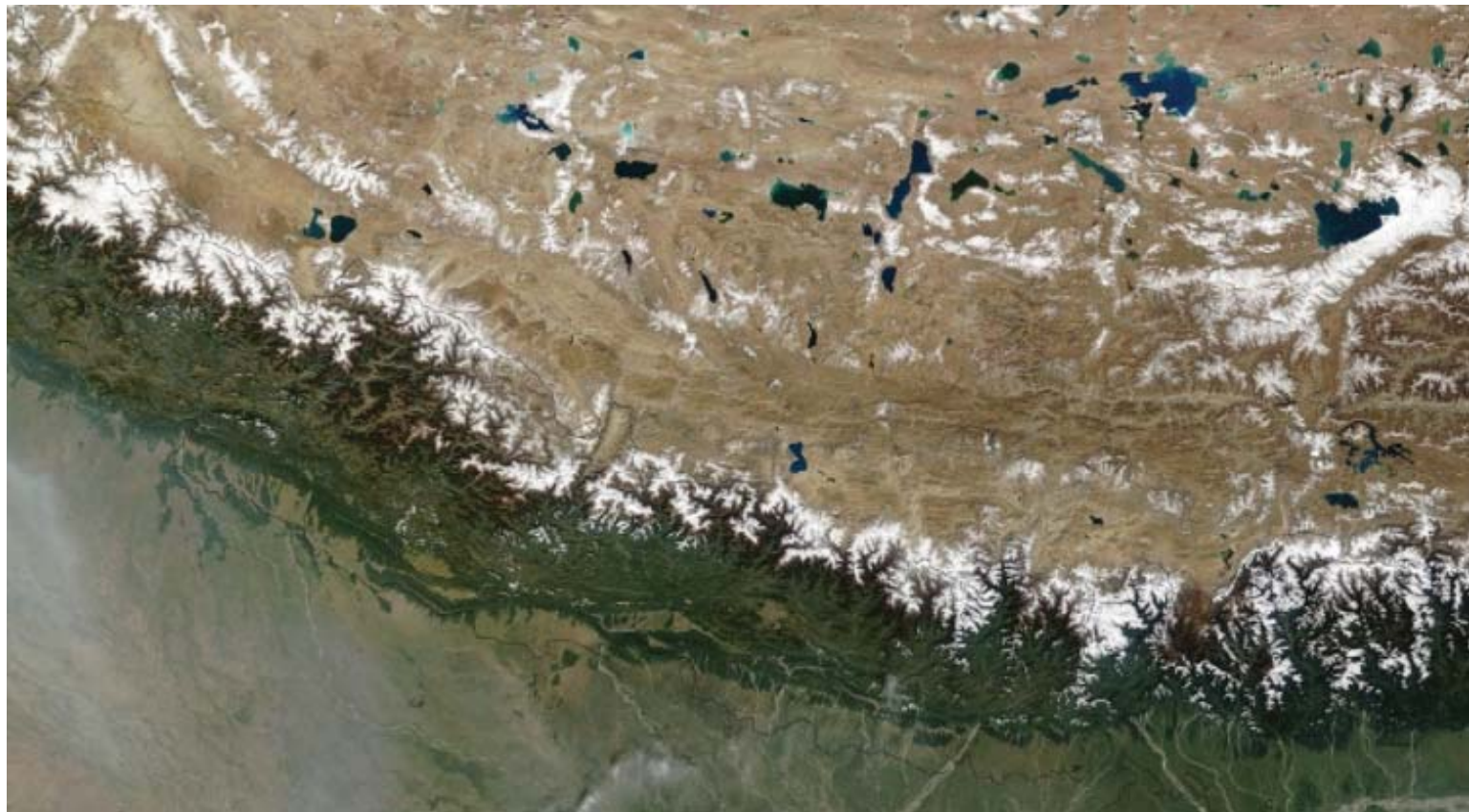
Researchers found supermountains hiding in a tiny time capsule. Evidence suggest they will return

Researchers have discovered Earth's lost supermountains that kickstarted life on the planet. Here's how we lost them and what happened next.

Yi Zhu of the Australian National University (ANU) had no idea that her research would lead to the discovery of a mega-geographical structure that once dominated the surface of our planet and led to the evolution of life as we know it today. Dubbed supermountains, this chain of hills spanned across continents and led to the emergence of the first macroscopic organisms.

A Ph.D. candidate at ANU, Ziyi says that it all started when one of her collaborators from the Queensland University of Technology spotted peculiar traces of minerals known as zircons in samples collected from eroded roots of mountains. Zircons are often termed as 'time capsules'; they are minerals that are known to retain chemical fingerprints of the era to which they belong.

"I then searched for the geological meaning of these low-Lu Zircons and found their connection with supermountains. The finding of the link between supermountains and biological evolution was also unexpected. It was about one and a half years ago when I happened to read a paper about the changes in the maximum size of life through time, which then turned out to fit



my supermountain theory well," Ziyi told IndiaToday.in.

Ziyi and her fellow researchers published their findings in the journal Earth and Planetary Science Letters revealing that these supermountains took shape twice in the short history of Earth.

HOW DID THESE SUPERMOUNTAIN FORM?

The Himalayan ranges that span 2,300 kilometers in length would be just one-fourth of these unique features that extended for over 8,000 kilometers, nearly 2000 million years ago. Ziyi says that the origin of these supermountains is largely similar to how the Himalayas formed about 50 million years ago due

to a collision between the Asian continental plate and the Indian plate. "These supermountains too formed when two continents collided," she added.

They formed twice in Earth's history — the first time between 2,000 and 1,800 million years ago and the second between 650 and 500 million years ago. Researchers believe that there are links between these two instances of supermountains and two of the most important periods of evolution in Earth's history.

The first supermountains are being called Nuna Supermountain, which coincides with the likely appearance of eukaryotes, organisms that later

gave rise to plants and animals. The second structure that evolved around 650 and 500 million years ago is the Transgondwanan Supermountain, which coincides with the appearance of the first large animals and the Cambrian explosion 45 million years later, when most animal groups started appearing in the fossil records.

HOW DID EARTH LOSE ITS SUPERMOUNTAINS?

The loss of these mountains was not a sudden event. High mountains are exposed to strong winds, rain, and ice, all of which lead to small pieces of rocks breaking off, a process that's called weathering. Once a rock has been broken down, a process called erosion transports the

minerals into the oceans.

Once these supermountains were gone, the continent became relatively flat, which slowed down the process of erosion. The slowing down of weathering and erosion caused a major decline in the supply of nutrients to the oceans.

"The slowed erosion rates would then reduce the supply of nutrients to the oceans, and therefore limit biological productivity. In a more specific sense, biological organisms during that time may have insufficient nutrients to grow more and grow larger," Ziyi Zhu said.

WILL THERE BE SUPERMOUNTAINS IN THE FUTURE?

With climate change and global warming affecting mountain ranges across the world, geologists have found evidence suggesting that a new supercontinent named Amasia will form in the next few hundred million years when Asia will crash into the Americas, and Australia will slam into southeastern Asia.

"In such a scenario, extensive high mountains (supermountains) would be able to form (again) when many plates collide with each other," Ziyi Zhu told indiataoday.in.

The new discovery is key to understanding the evolutionary process that a young planet went through and could provide information that could help in saving the mountains of today.



Terror groups have more freedom in Afghanistan now



at any time in recent history," it said, adding that UN member states have not reported "significant new movements of foreign terrorist fighters to Afghanistan".

"One Member State reported that Bin Laden's son, Abdallah (not listed), visited Afghanistan in October for meetings with the Taliban. [Current al-Qaeda chief] Aiman al-Zawahiri was reported alive as recently as January 2021, but Member States continue to believe that he is in poor health," the report said.

Amin Muhammad ul-Haq Saam Khan, who coordinated security for slain al-Qaeda chief Osama Bin Laden, also returned to his home in Afghanistan in late August.

AQIS, which is led by Osama Mehmood and his deputy Atif Yahya Ghouri, "retains a presence in Afghanistan, in the Provinces of Ghazni, Helmand, Kandahar, Nimruz, Paktika and Zabul, where the group fought alongside the Taliban" against the ousted government of Ashraf Ghani. AQIS is estimated to have between 200 and 400 fighters, mainly from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Myanmar and Pakistan, the report said.

The latest report of the UN Security Council on activities of the Islamic State and al-Qaeda and their affiliates said the Taliban have not done anything to limit the activities of foreign terrorists – an assertion that will strengthen suspicions about setup in Kabul in capitals around the world.

Foreign terror groups ranging from al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) to the

Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) enjoy more freedom in Afghanistan than in recent years, and Osama bin Laden's son visited the country in October for meetings with the Taliban, states a new UN report.

The latest report of the UN Security Council on activities of the Islamic State and al-Qaeda and their affiliates, made public this week, said the Taliban have not done anything to limit the activities of foreign terrorists – an

assertion that will strengthen suspicions about setup in Kabul in capitals around the world.

The UN's analytical support and sanctions monitoring team prepares such reports twice a year as part of efforts to implement sanctions imposed on Islamic State and al-Qaeda. The report said al-Qaeda was maintaining a "strategic silence" after congratulating the Taliban on its victory last year, apparently "not to compromise

Taliban efforts to gain international recognition and legitimacy". "The security landscape in Afghanistan changed dramatically on 15 August, when the Taliban took control of the country. There are no recent signs that the Taliban has taken steps to limit the activities of foreign terrorist fighters in the country," the report said.

"On the contrary, terrorist groups enjoy greater freedom there than

Why share market is struggling? All you need to know

The NSE Nifty 50 index was down by 0.68 at 17,397.75, while the S&P BSE Sensex slipped by 0.64 per cent to 58,271.43. The indexes were headed for their third straight session of losses

The share market on Monday fell, weighed down by losses in stocks of private-sector lenders and automakers, while Public Sector Banks pushed higher after a batch of strong quarterly results.

The NSE Nifty 50 index was down by 0.68 at 17,397.75, while the S&P BSE Sensex slipped by 0.64 per cent to 58,271.43. The indexes were headed for their third straight session of losses. "Results have been very good so far, there is no problem on that front," said AK Prabhakar, head of research at IDBI Capital in Mumbai, adding that the banking sector was showing signs of recovery, Reuters reported. Out of the 36 Nifty 50 companies

that have reported earnings so far, 20 have beat analysts' estimates by an average 11.7 per cent, Refinitiv data showed.

"The problem is with elevated crude prices, rising interest rates and bond yields," Prabhakar said. "(The) spike in bond yields in Europe is an alarm for India."

Asian share markets were also weaker on Monday after strong U.S. jobs data on Friday caused a spike in bond yields and added to the risk of an aggressive tightening by the Federal Reserve.

In the Indian stock market, the Nifty Auto sub-index tumbled 1.6 per cent, led by a 3.5 per cent drop in two-wheeler maker Hero

MotoCorp. Data from a retail industry body showed total



vehicle retail sales in January dropped 10.7 per cent.

Heavyweight non-bank lender Bajaj Finance slid 2.1 per cent,

while private-sector lenders HDFC Bank and ICICI Bank fell

1.5 per cent and 1.4 per cent, respectively. Meanwhile, State Bank of India, India's largest lender, rose 3.2 per

cent after reporting stronger-than-expected profit for the third

quarter, while smaller peer Bank of Baroda jumped nearly 10 per cent after its quarterly profit more than doubled.

The Nifty PSU Bank index, which tracks state-owned lenders, surged 4.1 per cent to its highest since July

2019.

Steel major Tata Steel climbed 3.3 per cent after beating estimates for quarterly profit.

Will release postage stamp on Lata Mangeshkar, says Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw



The Centre has decided to introduce a postal stamp to honour singing legend Lata Mangeshkar.

Speaking at the India Today Budget Round Table, Minister of Railways, Communications and Electronics & Information Technology of India, Ashwini Vaishnaw said that the stamp would be an appropriate honour for the 'Nightingale of India'.

The stamp will be released as a commemorative stamp.

According to the postal department, commemorative stamps are issued commemorating important events, prominent personalities in various fields, aspects of nature, beautiful or rare flora and fauna, environmental issues, agricultural activities, national/international issues, games etc. These stamps are only available at Philatelic Bureaux and counters or under the Philatelic Deposit Account

Scheme. They are printed in limited quantities.

Stamps on personalities shall not exceed 10% of the Annual Issue Programme, state the guidelines of the Department of Posts.

Legendary singer Lata Mangeshkar passed away on Sunday, February 6. She was admitted to Mumbai's Breach Candy Hospital on January 8 after testing positive for Covid-19. She was under treatment at

the Intensive Care Unit (ICU) over the past couple of weeks.

Asha Bhosle shares precious throwback memory with Lata Mangeshkar. Fans are heartbroken Asha Bhosle shares precious throwback memory with Lata Mangeshkar. Fans are heartbroken

When Lata Mangeshkar admitted 'Ghulam Haider is truly my Godfather'

After showing signs of

improvement recently, her health condition deteriorated.

Unfortunately, she passed away on Sunday, leaving the entire nation in a state of grief. Lata Mangeshkar was cremated on Sunday at Shivaji Park in Dadar, Mumbai, with full state honours.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Maha CM Uddhav Thackeray to Bollywood celebrities like Shah Rukh Khan and Ranbir Kapoor attended the funeral.

Nike and Amazon are weighing bid for fitness company Peloton

A new report has revealed that Nike and Amazon are weighing bids for fitness company Peloton.

As per the Wall Street Journal, representatives of both the company have been in touch with Peloton regarding potential offers.

"There's no guarantee the companies will follow through with an offer or that Peloton, which is working with its own advisers, would be receptive," the Journal reported.

"Should there be a transaction, it could be significant, given Peloton's market value of around \$8 billion — down sharply from its high around a year ago of some \$50 billion," it added.

Shares of the at-home fitness company jumped on Wall Street amid reports of the company's potential takeover.

Peloton has been the target of an activist investor, Blackwells Capital, who is pushing for CEO John Foley to be fired and for the company to be sold.

It posted a YouTube tongue-in-cheek commercial to fire back at an episode of a "Sex and the City" reboot TV series that suggested the company's exercise bikes can be lethal.

In a scene of the show, the fictional Mr. Big suffers a fatal heart attack after taking a Peloton bike class. The

death of Big, played by actor Chris Noth, leaves a major character, actress Sarah Jessica Parker's Carrie Bradshaw, a widow. The company benefited significantly from the pandemic restrictions of 2020 as gyms closed and people began to exercise at home. The growth in the fitness band market

has prompted tech giants such as Apple Inc and Samsung to introduce features for health tracking, including electrocardiograms and blood pressure sensors. But Peloton Interactive Inc has struggled to

adjust to easing Covid restrictions. Its shares fell more than 75 percent last year and almost 25 percent since



January.

The company has tried to cushion the blow to its growth by cutting the price of its popular bike and ramping up its ad spending, but growth remains stagnant

Sri Lankan foreign minister on bilateral ties with India, fishermen issue and more

Sri Lankan Foreign Minister Prof GL Peiris arrived in Delhi on Sunday on a three-day official visit



Sri Lankan Foreign Minister Prof GL Peiris, who arrived in Delhi on Sunday on a three-day official visit, held extensive talks with External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar on Monday.

In an exclusive conversation with India Today, Sri Lankan Foreign Minister Prof GL Peiris spoke about all facets of bilateral ties.

Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi visited Sri Lanka last month where he proposed a forum that sounded similar to Prime Minister Narendra Modi's SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) initiative. When asked about growing ties with China, as it's a matter of concern for India, the Sri Lankan foreign minister replied, "There was no reason for it to come up in an explicit manner because we have covered that ground here. This is a question I am frequently asked by the Indian media that overlooks the fact that Sri Lanka at all times is determined to prevent any part of its territory from being used to jeopardise or endanger Indian security interests in any form.

We would never allow that to happen because we do have a very special relationship with India," the minister said, adding, "That has been amply demonstrated by recent events because when we needed India's support, it was always available." Explaining further, he said, "This latest package of financial support (Exim Bank loan) was negotiated by our Finance Minister Basil Rajapaksa when he was here. It enormously helped us tide over temporary problems resulting from the collapse of our tourism-generated revenue and the remittances raised by Sri Lankans working in foreign countries, particularly the Gulf. All of that is coming back on track. Tourists are returning - about 35,000 a day. It was a difficult period and to bridge that gap, Indian support was invaluable."

Similarly, during the Maritime disaster, India came and doused the flames. Otherwise, the destruction would have been in far greater proportion in terms of fisheries and resources, he added. "Even when it came to

Covid-19, the first country that came to the scene with 500,000 vaccines was India. This attitude of goodwill is not confined to any particular situation. It also is not the result of protracted negotiations or persuasion of any kind. The essential quality of it is spontaneity, which arises from the proximity of the two countries, not just geographically, but also in terms of economy, history, culture," the minister said.

"There is now a growing realisation on both sides that even closer integration between India and Sri Lanka in all these sectors is a win-win situation for both of us," he added.

When asked about India's strategic placement in Sri Lanka, the minister said, "India's presence in Sri Lanka is ubiquitous...health, education, pharma, water, sanitation. Right across the spectrum, there is an Indian footprint in Sri Lanka, not in an oppressive way, but in a way that is directly and measurably beneficial for the development of the Sri Lankan economy. When asked if some solutions are being discussed

with India following the recent clashes between fishermen on both sides, the minister said, "It is a real concern. I would say that it is a flashpoint and the only constant irritant in the bilateral relationship, as almost every week or fortnight fishermen and boats are taken into custody. Sometimes there is violence and we then focus on resolving the issue. We really need a viable, durable solution to this," he said. He added, there will be a high-level meeting in Colombo shortly, which will involve not only the foreign ministers but also the fisheries ministers. "The solution will not be found on an immediate basis, whereas the problem is immediate and keeps surfacing literally every week, so we do need to address this. We don't want it to escalate. That is the only potential spoiler in what is otherwise an unreservedly warm, cordial relationship," he said.

When asked whether there is a shift from China to India, the Sri Lankan foreign minister said, "Wouldn't talk of a shift from one country to another. The Chinese have always been good friends.

We are not denigrating that or underplaying that. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), whatever anybody might say, has brought benefits to Sri Lanka." There have been speculations of Sri Lanka being debt trapped. When asked to comment, the minister replied, "There is this misconception of a debt trap. That we have borrowed more money than we can repay, resulting in the transfer of equity. That is simply not true. Because we have not taken loans indiscriminately. Loans have been taken for productive purposes."

Over the delay in payment of loans taken by the country, the Sri Lankan minister accused the previous government. "Many things were derailed because of the irresponsible actions of the government that was elected between 2015-2019. There was never a danger of Sri Lanka being unable to pay back the loans and therefore succumbing to some kind of Chinese economic domination. That is a misconception," he said.

Just 15 per cent of world's coastal regions remain unharmed

A new study has revealed that only 15.5 per cent of the world's coastal regions are ecologically intact. Led by researchers from the University of Queensland, the research calls for conservation measures in a bid to protect the remaining coastal regions.

The team of researchers used satellite data to properly analyse the extent to which human activities have affected coastlines across the globe.

The small areas of the coast that remain undamaged were mostly located in Canada, Russia, Greenland, Chile, Australia and the US. Very few such coastlines are also located in Europe, and countries including Vietnam, India and Singapore.

Brooke Williams, the study's lead author and a conservation ecologist at the University of Queensland, in a report by The Guardian, said, "Our paper really advocates for coastal region restoration quite urgently. That such a low proportion is at the higher spectrum of the intactness scale is alarming. It's not good news."

Meanwhile, another report revealed that the many big companies are failing to meet their own targets on tackling climate change. The climate pledges of 25 of the world's largest companies in reality only commit to reducing their emissions by 40 per cent on average, not 100 per cent as



suggested by their "net zero" and "carbon neutral" claims.

The study evaluates 25 major companies – operating across different sectors and geographies – to determine the transparency and integrity of their headline climate pledges.

As per the study, Google, Amazon, Ikea, Apple and Nestle are among those failing to change quickly enough. As per the report, only one company's net-zero pledge was evaluated as having "reasonable integrity"; three with "moderate", ten with "low". The remaining 12 were rated as having "very low" integrity.

Does paracetamol's use pose any risk?

Study makes the striking revelation

Paracetamol is a household name. In the era of Covid, it seems to have been used extensively. But the real question is that does it poses any risk.

Well, let's find the answer to this query. In a striking revelation, a study has suggested that the long-term use of paracetamol can raise the risk of heart disease and strokes in people, who are suffering with high blood pressure. The patients who have a long-term prescription for the medicine should take the lowest effective dose for the least amount of time possible, the researchers said. It is generally prescribed for the treatment of chronic pain.

The study, which was carried out by University of Edinburgh, has been published in the scientific journal 'Circulation'. It seems to be the first large randomised clinical trial to understand the effects of this medicine. Dr Iain MacIntyre, who is consultant in clinical pharmacology and nephrology at NHS Lothian and the lead investigator of the study, said, "This is not about short-term use of paracetamol for headaches or fever, which is, of course, fine – but it does indicate a newly discovered risk for people, who take it regularly over the longer term, usually for chronic pain."

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World's top companies failing to meet their own targets on tackling climate change



The world's biggest companies are taking pledges to tackle issues related to climate change, but how well are they coming along is a question. The latest report highlights a grim reality as according to a study of 25 corporations, many big companies are failing to meet their own targets on tackling climate change. The climate pledges of 25 of the world's largest companies in reality only commit to reducing their emissions by 40 per cent on average, not 100 per cent as suggested by their "net zero" and "carbon neutral" claims.

The findings of the Corporate Climate Responsibility Monitor were released on February 7. It was conducted by NewClimate Institute in collaboration with Carbon Market Watch. It evaluates 25 major companies – operating across different sectors and geographies – to determine the transparency and integrity of their headline climate pledges. As per the study, Google, Amazon, Ikea, Apple and Nestle are among those failing to change quickly enough. As per the report, only one company's net-zero pledge was evaluated as having

"reasonable integrity"; three with "moderate", ten with "low". The remaining 12 were rated as having "very low" integrity.

As per the report, Amazon, Deutsche Telekom, Enel, GlaxoSmithKline, Google, Hitachi, IKEA, Vale, Volkswagen and Walmart have low integrity.

Accenture, BMW Group, Carrefour, CVS Health, Deutsche Post DHL, E.ON SE, JBS, Nestlé, Novartis, Saint-Gobain and Unilever have very low integrity.

"We set out to uncover as many

replicable good practices as possible, but we were frankly surprised and disappointed at the overall integrity of the companies' claims," said Thomas Day of NewClimate Institute, lead author of the study. "As pressure on companies to act on climate change rises, their ambitious-sounding headline claims all too often lack real substance, which can mislead both consumers and the regulators that are core to guiding their strategic direction. Even companies that are doing relatively well exaggerate their actions," Day added.

SpaceX Falcon 9 second-stage rocket component disintegrates, falls to Earth

Reports say that part of SpaceX's Falcon 9 rocket broke down and fell towards Earth over Mexico as it burnt through the atmosphere. The rocket had sent a satellite to space in the year 2017. The spacecraft had helped in the launch of EchoStar 23 mission that aimed to provide internet, broadband and other connectivity solutions to Brazil. A Twitter handle @FronteraSpacial posted a video on February 6. The handle says that the video shows visuals of Falcon 9 rocket burning up through Earth's atmosphere. It was initially thought that this was a meteoroid. But FronteraSpacial says that this visual represents part of Falcon 9 rocket falling towards Earth.

"SPACEX FALCON 9 FALLS OVER MEXICO. Tonight a "#Meteorite" has

been seen falling over northern Mexico. It was actually the second stage of a SpaceX Falcon 9 launched in March 2017 with the EchoStar23 mission. It has completely disintegrated in the atmosphere," says the handle (translated). When a satellites falls towards Earth (re-entry), it is rarely a dangerous situation for citizens as friction with atmosphere breaks up the parts and subsequently burns it. There are, however, several examples of sizeable portion of a re-entering satellite having been found on the surface of Earth. Elon Musk or SpaceX haven't commented on second stage Falcon-9 rocket falling, as it is fairly common for second state rocket component to re-enter the Earth's atmosphere and getting destroyed.



IN THE LAND OF CONTRASTS

HAVE you ever been to a city where the alphabet gets jumbled and acquires uneven stance, and emotions get addled between the carnage of a war, the poetry of a Utopia, the darkness of a heart and the syrupy sinfulness of a pastry that comes with a meringue mop? It can happen in Warsaw. In the Polish capital, Ra is about the first female Nobel Laureate who lived in a yellow house and mulled over the properties of radium. F Minor might as well be a proud note from a composer whose heart still floats in cognac inside a church.

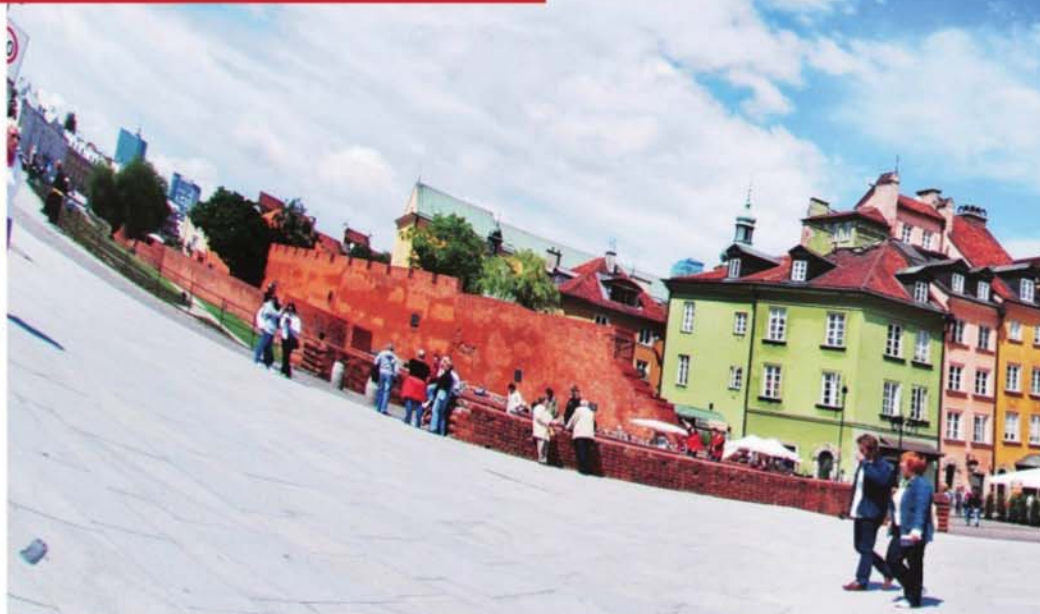
Behind the immaculate mien of Warsaw hide the carnage of war, where Utopia sometimes is just a stanza from another Nobel laureate's poem. Warsaw does something to you. Here not one column seems crooked, not one hue incongruous, not one façade discordant, not one monument a clutter. It seems as if the gods hunched over their drawing board for hours before creating this city that sits by the Vistula river. Then, history pokes a reminder — Warsaw is not as old as it looks; it is not even original. During World War II, the city was bombed into debris, only two buildings survived. When peace returned, the entire city was recreated in three years.

Amidst the painstaking chore of recreating a city one brick on another, one dowel in a plank, one daub of emulsion, it did not forget its bravehearts. It built the Monument to the Heroes of the Jewish Ghetto, the Tomb to the Unknown Soldier and Monument to the Katyn Victims. I THINK of Warsaw and the world much before the war and step onto the cobblestone pathways of the 14th century Old Town where moneyed merchants built the colourful narrow-fronted tenement houses, where the Royal Castle looks oh! so medieval, where the tall Sigismund's Column almost scrapes the sky and the crypt of Gothic St John's Cathedral where lie the sarcophaguses of the princes of Mazovia and other famous Poles.

I lean on the column and think of Joseph Conrad, he must have sat on these steps and woven the plots of Lord Jim and Heart of Darkness. Marie Skłodowska-Curie, the first female Nobel Prize winner, must have walked out of her yellow house by the Barbican Wall and mulled over the properties of radium, a discovery that fetched her Nobel Prize in 1903. Who knows maybe it was here that poet Nobel laureate Wislawa Szymborska defined the pentameters of her famous Utopia. However, my heart was pining for one Pole. The one with square jaw, gimlet eyes and magic in his fingers. I



(Clockwise from right) Old Town Square in Warsaw; the mermaid at the centre of Old Town Square is the long-standing symbol of Warsaw; the Warsaw Uprising Monument



wanted him to play two polonaises in G minor and B-flat major on the grand piano. It was music composer Fredrick Chopin that I was yearning for.

I knew I could never meet Chopin; I had walked into Warsaw 165 years after his death. But beyond the music in my heart, there was the heart of Chopin that rests in the Holy Cross Church. When Chopin died of tuberculosis in Paris at age 39, his heart was brought back to Warsaw, preserved in cognac and sealed

behind a concrete pillar inside the Church. There is nothing ornate or flamboyant about the pillar, the plastic flowers in the white vase look odd, even the plaque that reads, Here rests the heart of Fredrick Chopin, looks too ordinary. I stood by the wall, waiting for the heartbeat to reverberate; instead I heard the strains of the Ballade No. 4. Maybe Chopin's heart still beats in that vial of cognac.

At least I heard the murmur in F minor. Next day, I left Chopin behind

and took the train to Krakow, one of the oldest cities in Poland, a city that grew from Stone Age into a busy trading centre as early as 965 to Poland's royal capital (until 1596) to one of Europe's most beautiful cities with Krakow Old Town being the first one on UNESCO's World Heritage Sites.

Perhaps no other place packs so much history within its cobblestone pathways — Old Krakow Town has nearly 6,000 historic sites and two million works of art.

AN EPIC ADVENTURE

Acrobatic dinners, wavy rooms and a frozen bar on a four-day cruise



area, are perfect for solo passengers who don't want to pay a single supplement.

Elsewhere, balcony cabins have a 'wavy' design, with an unusual bathroom arrangement, but use their available space excellently. There are also interconnecting staterooms. Taking the tots along doesn't mean having to sacrifice on style when it comes to staterooms. Some of the most luxurious suites, such as the Haven two-bedroom balcony villas, are perfect for a family of four. This luxurious ship-within-a-ship area called the Haven is an exclusive place for Haven villa and suite guests. With its own plush lounge, dining room, pool, spa and gym area, there's no need to ven-

ture out into the ship.

It would be a shame not to, though, as there is so much going on. Kids big and small can enjoy a ride on one of the three water slides in the Aqua Park. Teens and adults can indulge in treatments in Mandara, the largest spa at sea. There's also the Posh Beach Club – an adults-only area of day beds. NCL Epic is a fun place for a holiday with friends and couples, but she is also an ideal place for families to enjoy a quick getaway. Norwegian Cruise Line has a partnership with TV channel Nickelodeon and so children can enjoy a Dora's dance party, breakfast with SpongeBob SquarePants or take part in messy 'splash

mobs' with Team Nick. Epic's free children's clubs have had a makeover with the addition of the Splash Academy for children aged six months to 12 years old and the Entourage programme for 13- to 17-year-olds.

On 2012 Epic sailings there is a 'Little Norwegians Explore for Free' programme of free shore excursions for children. Ports of call often take a back seat to the wow factor of the ship itself, but with stops at Marseilles, Palma, and a day at sea, the four-night cruise to and from Barcelona packs in some Mediterranean highlights.

In Majorca's attractive capital Palma, Epic's berth overshadows even the poshest mega yacht in the marina, and it's a pleasant walk to the old town's cathedral and winding back streets. On board, there's entertainment throughout the day, but the evening is when the fun and freestyling really begins with the huge range of restaurants to choose from. Epic is big on Asian food; from the swish Wasabi sushi bar to the Japanese-style Teppanyaki, where our jubilant chef expertly sliced open a raw egg and showed off his knife skills as he cooked dinner in front of our table.

Moderno Churrascaria is based on Brazil's famous meat meccas. Waiters come around brandishing meat skewers, carving some off for you until you turn over a card on your table to say you've had enough.

We always tell children it's rude to play with your food. But when circus performers hang upsidedown while you're eating, chefs juggle knives by your table and waiters only stop bringing you food when you show them a red card, it's hard not to join in the fun.

Dining has always been an important part of any cruise holiday but on Norwegian Epic, food as theatre has been taken to whole new heights.

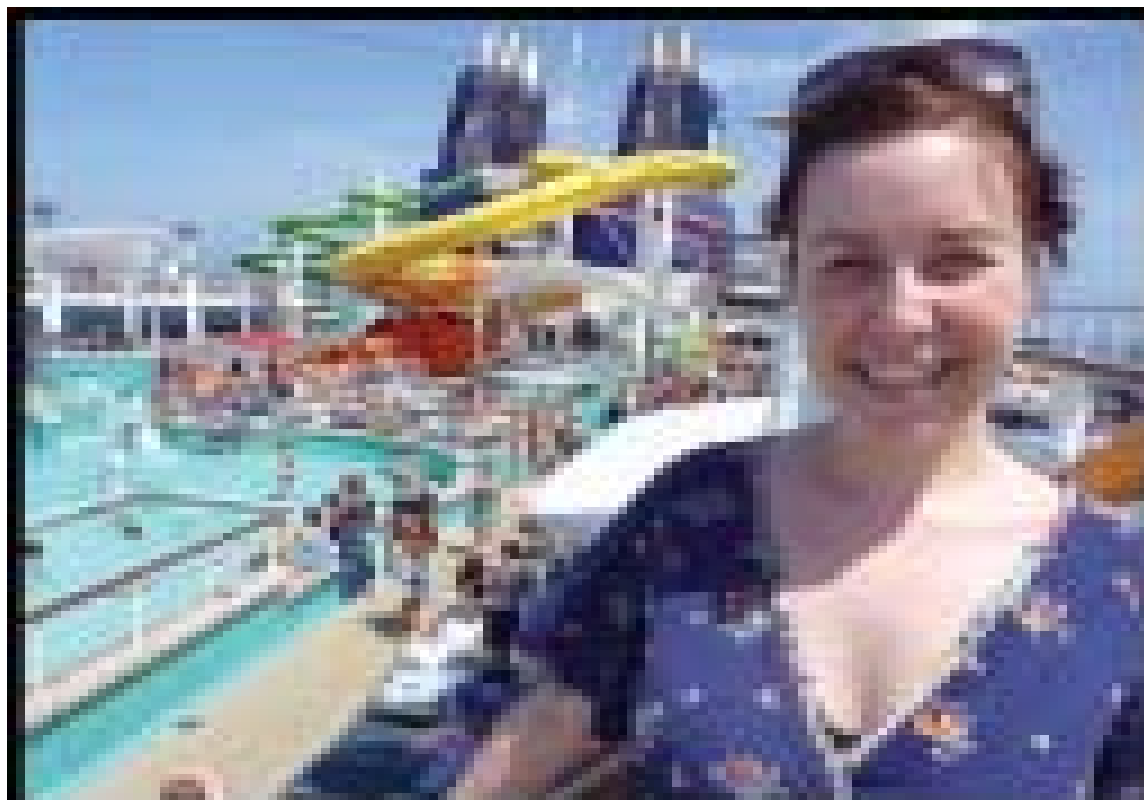
During Cirque Dream And Dinner, the incredible acrobats performed mind-boggling feats above us and we had to remind ourselves to eat the three courses that had been served in the Spiegeltent big-top restaurant.

With 20 eating establishments on board Norwegian Epic, our four-night mini cruise around the Mediterranean gave me only enough time to get a taste of the options available.

Launched in 2010, the 4,100 passenger Epic dwarfs most other big cruise ships, but despite its hulking size, the ship has a pleasant flow and well-thought-out design inside.

Eschewing the glitzy, brash décor that many large ships favour, Epic attracts a young mixed European crowd of couples and families who come for the less stuffy 'freestyle cruising'.

Studio single cabins are a genius idea; these cool inside-facing pods, with mood lights and a communal lounge



Still a lot to be done in healthcare sector in India, says Dr Naresh Trehan

Noting that the government, in the Union Budget 2022, has increased allocation to the healthcare sector, Dr. Trehan said it still doesn't move the needle enough

(Staff Reporter) Eminent cardiologist Dr Naresh Trehan, Medanta Chairman, on Monday said there is still a lot to be done in the healthcare sector in the country. Dr. Trehan said, "In healthcare per se our expectations, which are a throwback to the two years of the pandemic, have always been that we will try to achieve 2.5 per cent of our annual budget allocation for the sector."

ROBUST HEALTHCARE SYSTEM

Noting that the government, in the Union Budget 2022, has increased allocation to the healthcare sector, Dr. Trehan said it still doesn't move the needle enough.

"Although there has been some allocation increase in this year's budget - Rs 16,000 crore to Rs 88,000 crore, it still doesn't move the needle enough. In the background of

what we have been through, we won't be able to say that the world is going to be safe from further viral assaults," he said.

Dr. Trehan stressed creating a robust healthcare system in small towns and remote areas. "So that means we have a short window to establish a robust system not only in metros and tier-II and tier-III cities. In addition, if we can add more muscle to our civic amenities, because we are suffering from a double whammy right now in India."

DUEL DISEASE BURDEN

"The duel disease burden of communicable and non-communicable diseases have taken a huge toll on our population.

Therefore, the sooner we built the stack from the ground up where we start our wellness centre, 150 thousand were supposed to be established and we are half way there," Dr. Trehan said.

HEALTHCARE CHAIN

Dr. Trehan said, "we need to build a chain of primary health centres,

network that we have," he said. "There is a lot to be done and

building new infrastructure means three to five years -



community health centres, district hospitals and so on to the tertiary level hospitals as we need all of them in this whole business." "In the second wave, more lives would have been lost if we did not have this kind of

there are some lacunas which we really need to adjust. I know this is not the time and did not fall in the Budget but I would request that we sent you a list of the things that could be done to provide immediate relief because

that's a big endeavour for which we should not wait," Dr. Trehan said.

There is a need to move the needle further than we have tried in the Union Budget 2022, he said.

RBI monetary policy 2022: Key things to expect today

A Reuters poll of economists forecast that the RBI would raise the reverse repo rate - the rate at which it borrows from banks - to 3.55 per cent from 3.35 per cent, narrowing the corridor between it and the repo rate to 45 bps.

(Staff Reporter) The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) is expected to maintain its repo rate steady on Thursday but several economists are expecting an increase in the reverse repo rate as part of a process to reduce surplus liquidity poured into markets earlier in the pandemic. The key meeting of RBI's monetary policy committee is set to end today, having been delayed after Maharashtra state declared a day of mourning on Monday following the demise of legendary singer Bharat Ratna Lata Mangeshkar. A Reuters poll of economists forecast that the RBI would raise the reverse repo rate - the rate at which it borrows from banks - to 3.55 per cent from 3.35 per cent, narrowing the corridor between it and the repo rate to 45 bps. The repo rate is expected to go up by 25 bps at the subsequent meeting in April according to a little over half the respondents, while two-thirds expect one more similar sized increase later in the year, Reuters reported. "After

months of incremental moves, we think the RBI will take a decisive step towards policy tightening by hiking the reverse repo rate at the conclusion of its MPC meeting," said Shilan Shah, senior India economist at Capital Economics. The MPC has held the key repo rate at record lows since May 2020 and reiterated time and again that it will remain supportive of growth and keep its stance accommodative until economic recovery is firmly entrenched. However, market participants believe it is time for the RBI to shift focus back to controlling inflation and for it to at least change its stance to 'neutral' from 'accommodative' at the upcoming review, the Reuters report said. Retail inflation accelerated to a five-month high of 5.59 per cent in December from a year earlier, while wholesale price-based inflation, a proxy for producer prices, marginally eased to 13.56 per cent, but remained in double-digits for nine straight months.

RBI is working on launching India's digital currency, says FM Nirmala Sitharaman

FM Sitharaman said that government officials were constantly monitoring the crypto sector

(Staff Reporter) Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman on Monday said the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) is working on launching India's own digital currency. She also said that taxation on crypto assets will be implemented first.

DIGITAL CURRENCY

"The form and shape of India's digital currency will largely depend upon the Reserve Bank of India (RBI). The Ministry of Finance had consultations with RBI and the country's central bank is working on it," FM Sitharaman said.

GOVT MONITORING CRYPTO FM Sitharaman said that government officials were constantly monitoring the crypto sector. "We have a team of people who are constantly

monitoring, watching the crypto sector and listening to people from that area. They are giving me feedback," FM Sitharaman said.

In her Budget 2022-23 speech on February 1, FM Sitharaman proposed the RBI would

will give a big boost to the digital economy. Digital currency will also help in the currency management system, the minister said.

"Digital currency will also lead to a more efficient and cheaper currency management system.



introduce digital currency in the next financial year beginning April 2022 to boost the digital economy and efficient currency management. The introduction of a central bank digital currency

It is therefore proposed to introduce the digital rupee using blockchain and other technologies to be issued by the Reserve Bank of India, starting 2022-23," FM Sitharaman said.

Amitabh Kant opens up on crypto ban, Tesla entry and why pvt sector should run economy

(Staff Reporter)NITI Aayog CEO

MAKE INDIA

Amitabh Kant on Monday said growth of India's economy will be heavily dependent on private sector investment and infrastructure development. Kant has also spoken on the relevance of Crypto and the issue of the entry of American electric vehicle manufacturer Tesla. Budget Roundtable 2022 on "Progress towards A \$5 Trillion Economy."

PRIVATE SECTOR MUST DRIVE INDIAN ECONOMY

It is important to drive private sector investment as there is a huge amount of scope for the private sector to enhance capacity utilisation, Amitabh Kant said. "Indian economy in the long run, if it has to grow at high rates of 9 per cent to 10 per cent per annum year after year for three decades, it has to grow on the back of the private sector," Amitabh Kant said.

In Budget 2022, the government aims to crowd in private investment, Kant said, adding, "the private sector must come in to drive the economy."

EXPORTS

Amitabh Kant said that exports are growing and it should be sustained as that will be critical.

Make India needs to be an integral part of the global value chain, Amitabh Kant said.

"Across the sectors, India needs to become a major manufacturer. We need to become globally competitive," said the CEO, NITI Aayog.

INFRASTRUCTURE

Noting that infrastructure will be key to India's growth, Kant said that "we must use the strength to penetrate the global market."

ASSET MONETISATION PLAN

Amitabh Kant said, "By 2024-25, the government has a plan of raising Rs 6 lakh crore through an asset monetisation plan.

Through the asset monetisation plan of Rs 6 lakh crore, the government welcomes private operators that can come in, operate and maintain."

CRYPTO, DIGITAL CURRENCY

"Behind crypto and digital currency, there is blockchain technology which is real-time, completely transparent, and cutting-edge technology," Amitabh Kant said.

Amitabh Kant said, "India is way ahead because of its Unified Payments Interface (UPI) and we are using our mobiles to make

digital transactions."

"Crypto is like a virtual asset, it is like mutual funds, gold, bonds which are procured. Many people have been transacting through crypto and the government was losing out on tax," Kant said.

Stressing on regulation, Kant said, "You can not ban crypto in isolation as it is a global phenomenon. Banning capital would lead to the flight of capital and skilled manpower. It was the right policy to tax it and make it transparent." "When you have put

a regulatory fee or tax, that means you have allowed the business to go on," Kant said.

TESLA ENTRY

Kant said that the present policy of the government allows Tesla to come in as there is no hindrance.

"Tesla's argument is there are rates of duties - one is 110 per cent on luxury vehicles and 60 per cent for cars which have been dismantled, brought here and assembled here," he said.

"The government's argument is

you can come in and use the 60 per cent structure of tax. The government is keen on whatever you are doing must be linked to manufacturing in India. So, the government says do come and manufacture in India and it will be assisted," Kant said.

"The government is in an advanced stage and there will be a battery swapping policy in the next three months. There will be clear battery swapping standards in the next 60 days," Amitabh Kant said.



Cryptocurrency prices today: Bitcoin, Ethereum, Shiba Inu gain

(SAI Bureau) Prices of popular cryptocurrencies such as Bitcoin and Ethereum have gained even as the value of tokens associated with gaming has spiked.

Bitcoin, the oldest cryptocurrency, was trading at USD 42,824.85, up by 3.11 per cent, according to CoinDesk data.

Ether, the second biggest cryptocurrency by market capitalization, was up by 2.21 per cent to USD 3,079.70.

Meanwhile, gaming tokens witnessed a price bump even as the global crypto market moved a little.

Cryptocurrencies such as XRP was up by 7.95 per cent, Solana was up by 4.51 per cent, Terra was up by 2.34 per cent, Cardano was by 3.54 per cent, Polkadot was by 3.56 per cent, Stellar was by 3.06 per cent,

Dodgecoin was up by 6.84 per cent, Chainlink was up by 4.35 per cent, Polygon was up by 3.83 per cent, Shiba Inu was up by 24.32 per cent.

"The global crypto market volume rose by nearly 3 per cent in the past 24 hours. Bitcoin hovered above USD 42,000 while Ethereum crossed the USD 3,000 mark returning back to the winning streak. If buyers can make a decisive move above USD 40,000, the BTC's price can get back to its peak at USD 69,000. The next resistance level is likely to be at USD 45,000," said Edul Patel, CEO and Co-founder of Mudrex.

"According to the market cap, the other top cryptocurrencies such as XRP, Dogecoin, Fantom, UNUS SED LEO, and Decentraland have gained good growth, while Shiba Inu has gained more than decent growth

over the past day. This upward growth is a relief to all the crypto investors after the market went down last week," Edul Patel said.

Cryptocurrency will never be a legal tender in India, a government official said.

"Crypto will never be a legal tender. Legal tender means by law it is accepted in settlement of debts. India will not be making any crypto asset as a legal tender. Only 'Digital Rupee' of the Reserve Bank will be a legal tender in India," Finance Secretary T V Somanathan said while clearing the air on the legality of private digital currencies in the market.

The 2022-23 Budget has given a

clarity on taxation of virtual digital assets and proposed to impose a 30 per cent tax on gains made

on such trades, besides subjecting crypto transactions, beyond a threshold, to 1 per cent Tax Deducted at Source (TDS). In an interview with PTI, Somanathan said just like gold and diamond, despite

being valuable, are not a legal tender, private cryptocurrencies too will never be a legal tender.



Except El Salvador, which in September last year adopted Bitcoin as legal tender, no other country has made crypto a legal tender. India is working on legislation to regulate cryptocurrencies, but no draft has yet been released publicly.



Youngest pair of asteroids ever discovered in solar system spotted by astronomers

(SAI Bureau) Astronomers have spotted the youngest pair of asteroids ever discovered in the solar system. Split off from their parent body merely 300 years ago, they possess properties that are hard to explain due to their young age. Nicholas Moskovitz of Lowell Observatory said, "In the present day, the bodies don't display any signs of cometary activity. So it remains a mystery how these objects could have gone from a single parent body, to individually active objects, to the inactive pair we see today in just 300 years." The findings of the study have been published in the Monthly Notices of the Royal

Astronomical Society. According to Petr Fatka of the Czech Academy of Sciences, "Thanks to the measurements performed with the Lowell Discovery Telescope (LDT) in northern Arizona, it is clear that 2019 PR2 and 2019 QR6 come from the same parent object and their high orbital similarity is not coincidental." While the larger asteroid measures about one kilometre in diameter and the other half that size, and they were found to have very similar orbits around the Sun.

The majority of asteroids in our solar system reside in the area between the orbits of Mars and

Jupiter known as the main asteroid belt. Closer to home, scientists have identified additional asteroids known as Near Earth Asteroids (NEAs), whose orbits bring them within the vicinity of Earth. "It's very exciting to find such a young asteroid pair that was formed only about 300 years ago, which was like this morning—not even yesterday—in astronomical timescales," says Fatka. She explains, "To have a better idea about what process caused the disruption of the parent body, we have to wait until 2033 when both objects will be within the reach of our telescopes again."

'After playing with dolls, children talk more about others' thoughts, emotions'



(SAI Bureau) Children just adore dolls. Well, it is well-known but ever wondered about what role does dolls play in a child's life? A study has just helped to find the answer. As per it, the children talk more about others' thoughts and emotions after playing with dolls.

Not just this, playing imaginary games with dolls can also trigger development of social skills, theory of mind and empathy in the children, the research suggests.

The study was published in the Developmental Science journal. It was funded by the manufacturers of Barbie. It involved 33 boys and girls, who were aged

from four to eight.

Dr Sarah Gerson, lead author of the study, who is also a neuroscientist at Cardiff University, said, "When children create imaginary worlds and role play with dolls, they communicate at first out loud and then internalise the message about others' thoughts, emotions and feelings."

"This can have positive long-lasting effects on children, such as driving higher rates of social and emotional processing and building social skills like empathy that can become internalised to build and form lifelong habits," added Gerson.

Astronomer clicks photo of potentially hazardous asteroid coming towards Earth

(SAI Bureau) Human eyes (and lenses) are almost always pointed at the sky. Along with wonders of the universe, they are also on the look-out for threats that may be hurtling towards Earth at speeds of thousands of miles an hour. Asteroids pose great threat to Earth and humanity. A direct hit can singlehandedly wipe-out humanity's existence from the planet. This has happened before. A direct hit from an asteroid ended reign of dinosaurs millions of years ago. The species that was dominating nearly every food chain on the planet was eliminated in one stroke. It is therefore wise to keep looking at the skies for any such threat. Gianluca Masi, An astronomer at Virtual Telescope Project in Italy has clicked image of a potentially hazardous asteroid that is hurtling towards the Earth at the speed of 26,800



miles per hour.

The asteroid is soon going to have a close encounter with Earth. It is slated to take place on March

4 at 1:30 pm IST.

As per a report in Newsweek, the asteroid completes an orbit of the Sun in 384 days. The asteroid has

indeed been classified 'potentially hazardous', but we need not worry about it being responsible for the end of humanity. Classification as

'potentially hazardous' does not mean that the asteroid is going to hit us. It only means that it will pass closely by the Earth.

Scientists identify first-ever wandering black hole in Milky Way galaxy



(SAI Bureau) Astronomers have identified the first-ever wandering black hole in the Milky Way galaxy as per a new study. "We report the first unambiguous detection and mass measurement of an isolated stellar-mass black hole," wrote a team of astronomers led by Kailash Sahu of the Space Telescope Science Institute.

Moving at a speed of 45 kilometers (28 miles) per second, the black hole is 5,200 light-years away. It received a

modest natal 'kick' from its supernova explosion.

The researchers used Hubble Space Telescope (HST) to carry out precise astrometry of the source star of the event MOA-2011-BLG191/OGLE-2011-BLG-0462, in the direction of the Galactic bulge.

The remarkable event lasted around 270 days and was also unusual as it had high magnification.

The study, submitted to The Astrophysical Journal, is available on the pre-print server

arXiv. Black holes are extremely dense, with gravitational pulls so ferocious, not even light escapes. "We show that the lens emits no detectable light, which, along with having a mass higher than is possible for a white dwarf or neutron star, confirms its black hole nature," Sahu said.

There are three categories of black holes. The smallest, like 'the Unicorn,' are so-called stellar mass black holes formed by the gravitational collapse of a single star. There are gargantuan 'supermassive' black holes like

the one at our galaxy's center, 26,000 light years from Earth, which is four million times the sun's mass. A few intermediate-mass black holes also have been found with masses somewhere in between. Cygnus X-1 is the Milky Way's largest-known stellar-mass black hole and among the strongest X-ray sources seen from Earth, said astronomer James Miller-Jones of Curtin University and the International Centre for Radio Astronomy Research.

This black hole spins so rapidly,

nearly light speed, that it approaches the maximum rate envisioned under physicist Albert Einstein's theory of general relativity, Miller-Jones added. It devours material blowing from the surface of the companion star it tightly orbits, a "blue supergiant" about 40 times our sun's mass. It started its existence 4 million to 5 million years ago as a star up to 75 times the sun's mass and collapsed into a black hole a few tens of thousands of years ago.

Startup plans to create robotic outpost near the Moon

(SAI Bureau) It's been more than fifty years since man set foot on the Moon. Since then, we have made progress in space science by leaps and bounds. But humankind is focussing its gaze on the Moon again. NASA's Artemis mission is aiming to bring a human on the lunar surface again.

There are talks in the scientific world of making use of the Moon as a launching pad for future space missions. For this, we would have to have a much more comprehensive presence on and around the Moon than before.

What a space start-up is doing may come handy in such an endeavour. This company, called Quantum Space is planning to create a robotic outpost near the Moon.

Quantum Space has been set-up by Steve Jurczyk. He is

former associate administrator of NASA. The company was formed in 2021. As per a report in The Verge, the robotic outpost Quantum Space plans to set up near Moon will help in providing

internet capabilities on the lunar surface. It will also refuel spacecrafts, collect data and help assemble structures in lunar space.

Jurczyk says that his company

also intends to make vehicles that will aid NASA in lunar missions.

NASA is planning to create an internet-like system of communications infrastructure

around the Moon called LunaNet. This would be less reliant on Earth technologies for navigation, communication, and data relays," he said as quoted by The Verge.



'Aalu' Alia Bhatt reveals she'd be 'more than glad' to work with Allu Arjun, says entire family is Pushpa actor's fan



(SAI Bureau) Actor Alia Bhatt has revealed that she is 'more than glad' to work with actor Allu Arjun, who was recently seen in Pushpa: The Rise. Alia also revealed that her entire family is his fan.

In a statement, Alia Bhatt has

said, "My entire family has watched Pushpa and became fans of Allu Arjun. They are asking me when I will get a chance to get paired opposite him. As they call me Aalu at home, they are asking, 'Aalu, when will you work with Allu?' I'm

more than glad to jump aboard if I get a chance to work with him". Allu Arjun's Pushpa, an action entertainer directed by Sukumar, released in theatres on December 17 last year and has been widely praised. It has been produced by Naveen Yerneni and

Y Ravi Shankar of Mythri Movie Makers in association with Muttamsetty Media.

The movie that stars Allu Arjun as Pushpa Raj also features Rashmika Mandanna and Fahadh Faasil. Pushpa: The Rise will also have a sequel,

Pushpa: The Rule. The film has crossed the ₹100 crore mark at the Indian box office. It has also become one of the highest-grossing movies of 2021.

Meanwhile, Alia is all set for the release of her long-delayed film Gangubai Kathiawadi, helmed by Sanjay Leela Bhansali. The first, almost 3-minute trailer was unveiled recently. The period drama features Alia as Gangubai, one of the most powerful, loved and respected madams from Kamathipura during the 1960s. Ajay Devgn also plays a pivotal role in the movie. Gangubai Kathiawadi also stars Vijay Raaz, Indira Tiwari, and Seema Pahwa. This project will also see Bhansali Productions collaborating with Jayantilal Gada's Pen India Limited. After being delayed multiple times due to the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, Gangubai Kathiawadi is now slated to release in theatres on February 25. Apart from Gangubai Kathiawadi, Alia also has the upcoming film Brahmastra in the pipeline.

Jhund teaser: Coach Amitabh Bachchan gets his ragtag team together in sports drama, fans say 'love it already'

(SAI Bureau) The teaser for Amitabh Bachchan's long-delayed sports drama Jhund dropped on Tuesday. The 1-minute video shows Amitabh Bachchan in his sports coach avatar as he gets together his band of kids into a team. In the teaser video shared on YouTube, youngsters can be seen sitting in a ground, using scrap metal and junk as percussion. Amitabh is then seen walking towards the kids as the beats grow louder. We then get a first look at the actor, dressed in track suit, as the kids get up and follow him. The film is directed by veteran Marathi director Nagraj Manjule and is set to release on March 2 in theatres.

The biographical sports drama is based on the life of social

worker Vijay Barse, who inspired slum kids to form a football team, with Amitabh essaying that role. Apart from him, the film also stars Akash Thosar, and Rinku Rajguru, both of whom featured in director Nagraj's hit Marathi film Sairat. The comments section of the teaser on YouTube was flooded with reactions such as "Mahanayak at his best" and "love it so much already." One fan wrote: "hats off to him" while one more added, "Mr. Manjule never disappoints his audience."

Jhund has seen a lot of delays over the last three years. The film was originally slated to release in September 2019. Since then, it had been postponed several times. There were even murmurs that due to the rising Omicron cases, the producers were mulling a direct OTT release for

the film. In an earlier interaction with Hindustan Times, Nagraj had said he wants the film to

struggle for that a lot. The entire crew has come together to support me in that and we all now

Kumar, Krishan Kumar, Savita Raj Hiremath, Raaj Hiremath, Nagraj Popatrao Manjule,



release in theatres. "It has been made and delayed for so long. I myself want that it releases in theatres. I have been trying and

will try to get it released in theatres when the time is right," he had told us last month. The film is produced by Bhushan

Gargee Kulkarni, Meenu Arora and Sandeep Singh, under the banner of T-Series, Tandav Films Entertainment and Aatpat.

Paralyzed patients walking in minutes: New electrode device a step forward in spinal injury care



(SAI Bureau) For years, researchers have been helping paralyzed people walk by stimulating their spinal cords. Now, a team of Swiss scientists has improved upon that effort, enabling three patients with spinal cord injuries to turn on a device and take their first steps within minutes. The improvements

suggest that a commercial product, available to tens of thousands of paralyzed people worldwide, might only be a few years away. One of the men, Michel Roccati, 29, who was injured in a 2017 motorbike accident, said with the stimulation turned on he can now walk, bike, swim and climb stairs.

"Everything I have in mind to train, I can do with the stimulation," he said on a recent call with media. He uses the stimulator, which activates electrodes implanted on his spinal column, a few hours a day. "It's part of my daily life," he said. The device was designed

specifically for this use in contrast to previous devices, which were repurposed neurostimulators meant to help people with Parkinson's and similar diseases.

Michel Roccati practices his walking in front of the École polytechnique fédérale de Lausanne, where he had his surgery.

While the stimulation had an effect right away, it still took three to four months of training before Roccati and the others could walk without support.

"It's not that it's a miracle right away," said Grégoire Courtine of the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology, who is helping to lead the work published Monday in Nature Medicine. But the stimulation enabled Roccati to begin training about 10 days after his August 2020 surgery.

"After one day I was able to walk," Roccati said. "To see my legs moving, it was a very

emotional experience."

He stayed in Switzerland for nine months of rehabilitation before moving home to Torino, Italy where he continues his therapy. "I feel better when I use it," said Roccati, who now lives independently in his own apartment. "I can do everything alone, no problem."

Roccati and the other two trial participants had no sensations or movements in their legs at the beginning of the trial.

Although more work needs to be done to refine the stimulator, Dr. Jocelyne Bloch, a neuroscientist and neurosurgeon who helped lead the work at Lausanne University Hospital, said she expects it will be widely effective for spinal cord injuries. "We need one day to have this technology as a treatment available for everyone," she said. "It's not yet, but hopefully will be within a few years."

Digital health solutions – robust initiative towards holistic healthtech ecosystem

(SAI Bureau) Post the emergence of Covid, the world is going through quivering changes and a big shift in the health and wellness industry has been consumers' interest in personalised services made available to them on a digital platform. Consumers post Covid view 'wellness' very differently with a much broader lens, encompassing health, fitness, nutrition, appearance, sleep and mindfulness.

At a time when holistic health and wellness is gaining the ground amongst masses, the current budget comes as a great boost to the healthcare ecosystem. The budget has truly focused on the issue of mental health that has come to the fore post the emergence of Covid. The announcement of a 'national tele-mental health programme' is a great initiative. Also, the government has taken positive steps to make health care accessible to all and bring an

overall reform by announcing a spending of 2.5-3% of its total GDP on healthcare.

During the pandemic, healthtech start-ups immensely contributed towards innovation and research, especially in the field of AI powered smart interactive applications and solutions. This budget will boost them to strengthen their services and offerings. As per a recent McKinney research, the global market for health and wellness products and services is growing by 5 to 10 percent per year. With consumers seeking personalized wellness focussed offerings, technology stands as the unique enabler of all things digital.

Listed below are few technology trends that will have a huge impact in the health tech sector.

Relational AI:

Artificial intelligence (AI) builds smart machines that are capable of performing tasks that typically require human intelligence. At a



time when consumers are seeking personalized solutions for their specific health needs, AI is the tool that will connect them to their respective solution channels. This feature, wherein the user gets relatively connected to their healers, happens through 'Relational Artificial Intelligence (RAI)'. RAI is a

new terminology in the technology domain that would be the way forward towards high-end intelligent machines enabling digital relationships with humans. Relational AI enables generating health and well-being digital partners that could act as wellbeing coaches or anti-loneliness agents.

Scalability & affordability:

Tech innovation is the key to helping everyone enjoy holistic health in a way that suits them the most. Consumers today want a seamless digital experience to schedule appointments, get mindfulness tips, and receive essential communication and advice on their health.



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Researchers found supermountains hiding in a tiny time capsule. Evidence suggest they will return

Researchers have discovered Earth's lost
supermountains that kickstarted life on the planet.
Here's how we lost them and what happened next.



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