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## IAAC announces appointment of Suman Gollamudi as Executive Director



(Insider Bureau)-The Indo-American Arts Council is pleased to announce the appointment of Suman Gollamudi to the position of Executive Director. She most recently served as Director of Marketing for IAAC where she focused on strengthening the IAAC and NYIFF branding and communications efforts as well as developing relationships within the community. In her new role, she will focus on taking IAAC to the next level given the new opportunities which have opened up for it.

Suman Gollamudi

IAAC Chairman Dr. Nirmal Mattoo said, "Suman brings a deep commitment to the arts and community which will scale IAAC in the years to come. She emerged as the clear choice for the Board to fill this important role. We are embarking on the most exciting and challenging phase in IAAC's growth and are proud that a person of Suman's caliber will lead the organization."

Suman Gollamudi said, "I am thrilled to accept the role of the Executive Director of the Indo-American Arts Council. I am grateful for the trust placed in me to safeguard this leading supporter of Indian arts and culture in the New York Tri-State Area.. I am confident that despite these very difficult times, our team and community will come together to provide support to our artistic endeavors and ensure that our programs are vibrant and impactful. I look forward to greeting you, our patrons and stakeholders in person this year."

Rakesh Kaul Vice Chairman added, "I have worked closely with Suman and seen her shoulder increased responsibilities with a high degree of ownership and excellence.

Much of the success of IAAC's expanded brand awareness in 2020 is because of her contributions. The IAAC team is fully vested in her success and delighted that one of their own won this coveted position. Suman will have complete executive responsibility for the organization and will report directly to the Board."

Suman brings over 15 years of experience with for-profit and non-profit organizations in India and the US. She has extensive experience in leading teams towards successful outcomes, and in streamlining practices in settings as diverse as charitable organizations, startups and multinational technology companies.

Suman has a B.Tech in Mechanical Engineering and has further specializations in Computer Science and Digital Marketing.

About the Indo-American Arts Council :

The Indo-American Arts Council is a not-for-profit arts organization passionately dedicated to promoting, showcasing and building an awareness of the arts and artists whose heritage lies in the Indian subcontinent in the performing arts, visual arts, literary arts and folk arts. IAAC supports all the artistic disciplines in classical, fusion, folk and innovative forms influenced by the arts of India. They work cooperatively with colleagues around the United States to broaden collective audiences and to create a network for shared information, resources and funding. The IAAC's focus is to help artists and art organizations in North America as well as to facilitate artists from India to exhibit, perform and produce their work in the United States.

## "Humanitarian Crisis": Indian Women Flag Huge Delays In H-4 Work Permits

(Insider Bureau)-There has been inordinate delay in issuing of H-4 work authorisation permits to certain categories of spouses of those possessing H-1B foreign work visas, the most sought after among Indian IT professionals, a group of highly talented Indian women in the US has said.

An H-4 visa is issued by the US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) to immediate family members (spouse and children under 21 years of age) of the H-1B visa holders, most of whom are Indian IT professionals.

The H-1B visa is a non-immigrant visa that allows US companies to employ foreign workers in specialty occupations that require theoretical or technical expertise. The technology companies depend on it to hire tens of thousands of employees each year from countries like India and China. The H-4 visa is normally issued to those who have already started the process of seeking employment-based lawful permanent resident status in the US. A group of such Indian women over the weekend organised a protest march in San Jose, California on the occasion of International Women's

Day to highlight the suffering of tens of thousands of immigrant women being forced out of their livelihoods, organisers of the event SaveH4EAD said.

Spouses of Indian professionals on H-1B visas, mostly women, are the biggest beneficiary of the Obama-era rule that gave employment authorisation cards.

"We are here to reiterate that this is our home,

this is where we have spent the last many years of our lives, raised families and contributed positively to the society and economy as skilled legal immigrants," said Pratima Joglekar, California chapter lead volunteer and organiser of the event.

The group has sought the Biden administration's attention to end these arbitrary policies that are disproportionately oppressing women of colour and robbing them of their livelihood.

A week after his inauguration on January 20, US President Joe Biden withdrew a Trump-era rule rescinding work authorisation for H-4 visa holders, who are spouses of those possessing H-1B work visas, with majority being highly-skilled Indian women.



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# "I Regret Harsh Rhetoric": Indian-American Vanita Gupta At Senate Hearing

*"I regret the harsh rhetoric that I have used at times in the last several years. I can pledge to you today that if I am confirmed, you won't be hearing that kind of rhetoric for me," Vanita Gupta told members of the Senate Judiciary Committee during her confirmation hearing.*

(Insider Bureau)-Vanita Gupta, President Joe Biden's nominee to a senior post at the US Justice Department, has expressed regret for using "harsh rhetoric" in the last several years over social media as she faced sharp criticism from Republicans during her confirmation hearing, becoming the second Indian-American to face trouble over her past Twitter outbursts.

Gupta, 46, was nominated to serve as the Associate Attorney General at the Department of Justice.

"I regret the harsh rhetoric that I have used at times in the last several years. I can pledge to you today that if I am confirmed, you won't be hearing that kind of rhetoric for me," Gupta told members of the Senate Judiciary Committee during her confirmation hearing on Tuesday. Gupta was responding to sharp criticism from Republican

members of the Senate Judiciary Committee.

Senate Judiciary Committee ranking member Senator Chuck Grassley, the panel's top Republican, said that while Gupta, has performed "admirable" work in the past, her past comments about Republicans gave him concerns over whether she could fill a critical Justice Department position, Fox News reported.

Top Republican Senator Ted Cruz also accused her of being an extreme partisan advocate.

If confirmed, she would be the first woman of colour to be the associate attorney general.

Gupta told lawmakers that it will be the honour of her lifetime to assume the Associate Attorney General's responsibility to oversee the enforcement of laws to protect the health, safety, and economic security of all Americans.

That includes ensuring fair competition and preventing abuse

of market power that harms consumers; combating environmental degradation and promoting environmental justice; enforcing nation's civil rights laws and prosecuting hate crimes and human trafficking; supporting crime victims, and survivors of domestic abuse and sexual violence.

"My parents are proud immigrants from India, and they believe more than anything in the promise of America. Growing up, they taught me that loving this country brings with it the obligation to do the necessary work to perfect our union. That belief is shared by my husband, whose family fled violence and war in Vietnam and sought refuge on these great shores," Gupta said.

Her parents Rajiv and Kamla Gupta, she said, were watching the hearing. "It is because of this nation's welcome and my parent's



sacrifice that I sit before this Committee today. Only one nation's immigration laws..., she said.

bears the name of a value. By virtue of that name - that value of justice - we know the Department carries a unique charge and North Star," she said.

Responding to a question, she said the health and safety of children has been something that she has long been concerned with throughout her career and in this particular facility the conditions were quite horrific. "And it was important that I was able, with other lawyers and advocates, to step in to protect the health and wellbeing of these children's

"If I am confirmed as associate attorney general, I will be motivated to enforce our federal laws to protect and enforce our immigration laws. I believe that we can have border security and safety for all of our communities..., " Gupta said.

"And that is a dual role and responsibility that I would look forward to working, of course, with the deputy attorney general and the attorney general who have even greater authority over immigration than I would," she said.

## Josh India WebTV



**Geeta Saxena**  
Show Host (Prime Time News)

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## Steps to help prevent the spread of COVID-19 if you are sick

**FOLLOW THE STEPS BELOW:** If you are sick with COVID-19 or think you might have it, follow the steps below to help protect other people in your home and community.

### Stay home except to get medical care

- Stay home:** People who are mildly ill with COVID-19 are able to recover at home. Do not leave, except to get medical care. Do not visit public areas.
- Stay in touch with your doctor.** Call before you get medical care. Be sure to get care if you feel worse or you think it is an emergency.
- Avoid public transportation:** Avoid using public transportation, ride-sharing, or taxis.



### Separate yourself from other people in your home, this is known as home isolation

- Stay away from others:** As much as possible, you should stay in a specific "sick room" and away from other people in your home. Use a separate bathroom, if available.
- Limit contact with pets & animals:** You should restrict contact with pets and other animals, just like you would around other people.
  - Although there have not been reports of pets or other animals becoming sick with COVID-19, it is still recommended that people with the virus limit contact with animals until more information is known.
  - When possible, have another member of your household care for your animals while you are sick with COVID-19. If you must care for your pet or be around animals while you are sick, wash your hands before and after you interact with them. See COVID-19 and Animals for more information.



### Call ahead before visiting your doctor

- Call ahead:** If you have a medical appointment, call your doctor's office or emergency department, and tell them you have or may have COVID-19. This will help the office protect themselves and other patients.



### Wear a facemask if you are sick

- If you are sick:** You should wear a facemask when you are around other people and before you enter a healthcare provider's office.
- If you are caring for others:** If the person who is sick is not able to wear a facemask (for example, because it causes trouble breathing), then people who live in the home should stay in a different room. When caregivers enter the room of the sick person, they should wear a facemask. Visitors, other than caregivers, are not recommended.



### Cover your coughs and sneezes

- Cover:** Cover your mouth and nose with a tissue when you cough or sneeze.
- Dispose:** Throw used tissues in a lined trash can.
- Wash hands:** Immediately wash your hands with soap and water for at least 20 seconds. If soap and water are not available, clean your hands with an alcohol-based hand sanitizer that contains at least 60% alcohol.



### Clean your hands often

- Wash hands:** Wash your hands often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds. This is especially important after blowing your nose, coughing, or sneezing; going to the bathroom; and before eating or preparing food.
- Hand sanitizer:** If soap and water are not available, use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer with at least 60% alcohol, covering all surfaces of your hands and rubbing them together until they feel dry.



- Soap and water:** Soap and water are the best option, especially if hands are visibly dirty.
- Avoid touching:** Avoid touching your eyes, nose, and mouth with unwashed hands.

### Avoid sharing personal household items

- Do not share:** Do not share dishes, drinking glasses, cups, eating utensils, towels, or bedding with other people in your home.



CS 136129-A 03/26/2020

[cdc.gov/COVID19](https://www.cdc.gov/COVID19)



# Indian-American Leads Lawmakers To Condemn China's Curbs On Hong Kong

***The effort was led by Indian American Congressman Ami Bera who is the chairman of the Asia Sub-Committee of Foreign Affairs Committee of the House.***



(Insider Bureau)- Led by Indian American Congressman Ami Bera, a bipartisan group of influential lawmakers on Monday expressed concern over changes sought to be imposed by Beijing on Hong Kong's electoral system. "We are deeply concerned about the changes Beijing announced

in Hong Kong's electoral system. These revisions will only continue to advance Beijing's ever-tightening grip on Hong Kongers' autonomy, basic freedoms and fundamental human rights," said a group of lawmakers from both the House of Representatives and the Senate. The effort was led by Indian American Congressman Ami

Bera who is the chairman of the Asia Sub-Committee of Foreign Affairs Committee of the House. He was joined by Ed Markey, the chairman of the East Asia Sub-Committee of the Senate's Foreign Relations Committee, Senator Mitt Romney, Ranking Member of the East Asia Sub-Committee of the Senate's Foreign Relations Committee and Congressman Steve Chabot, Ranking Member of the Asia Sub-Committee on the House Foreign Affairs Committee. Other lawmakers who joined Bera are Senator Jeff Merkley

and Congressman James McGovern, co-chairs of the Congressional-Executive Commission on China, and Senator Marco Rubio and Congressman Chris Smith, co-Ranking Members of the Congressional-Executive Commission on China. The joint statement was issued in response to the Chinese government's decision to schedule a March 11 vote in the National People's Congress that would impose new restrictions on Hong Kong's electoral system. "With these planned actions, the Chinese Communist

Party is doubling its attempts to impose an authoritarian system on Hong Kong," the statement said. "Beijing is once again violating its binding international commitments under the 1984 Sino-British Joint Declaration and its obligations under Hong Kong's Basic Law," it added. "Contrary to recent Chinese government statements, true patriots are not 'yes-men and -women'," the statement said, adding "Beijing's efforts to stamp out democratic opposition in Hong Kong only underscores its own insecurities".

# Undocumented Indian Immigrants In US Hold \$15.5 Billion In Spending Power: Report

***Using the latest available American Community Survey data from 2019 in its latest research, the new American Economy think-tank said undocumented Indian immigrants are the top third contributor to the US economy among other undocumented immigrants.***

(Insider Bureau)-Undocumented Indian immigrants to the US, numbering over half a million, hold a collective spending power of \$15.5 billion and contribute \$2.8 billion to the federal, state and local tax revenue, says an American think-tank report. Using the latest available American Community Survey data from 2019 in its latest research, the new American Economy think-tank said undocumented Indian immigrants are the top third contributor to the US economy

among other undocumented immigrants. There are 4.2 million immigrants from Mexico who lack documentation. Together, they make up more than 40.8 percent of the 10.3 million undocumented immigrants in the United States. In 2019 alone, they earned almost \$92 billion in household income and contributed almost \$9.8 billion in federal, state and local taxes. Mexican undocumented immi-

grants held more than USD82.2 billion in spending power, money that often goes back into local economies as they spend on housing, consumer goods and services, the report said. In terms of the number of undocumented immigrants, Mexico is followed by El Salvador (621,000, or 6.0 percent of all undocumented immigrants), India (5,87,000, or 5.7 percent), Guatemala (5.4 percent, or 5.4 percent), and Honduras (416,000, or 4.0 percent).



With its \$15.5 billion of spending power, India, however, holds the second position, followed by El Salvador (\$11.5 billion), Guatemala (\$9.1 billion) and Honduras (\$6.4 billion). They also make

significant contributions to the federal, state and local tax revenue: India (\$2.8 billion), El Salvador (\$1.4 billion), Guatemala (\$1.1 billion) and Honduras (\$778 million), the report said.

# "Rowdy" Indian Passenger Forces Paris-New Delhi Flight To Make Emergency Landing

***The Indian national has been provided with a court-appointed defence lawyer and an interpreter, the report said, adding that the Embassy of India in Bulgaria has been informed.***

(Insider Bureau)- A "rowdy" Indian passenger on board an Air France flight from Ghana via Paris to New Delhi forced the plane to make an emergency landing at Bulgaria's capital, according to a media report. The Indian national, whose identity was not made public, has been detained for 72 hours, Bulgarian News Agency BTA quoted Sofia City Prosecutor Iliana Kirilova as saying on Saturday. "After the troublemaker's deten-

tion, the flight proceeded to its destination," he said. The Indian has been charged with endangering the safety of an aircraft while airborne, said Ivailo Angelov of the National Investigation Service. If convicted, he faces from 5 to 10 years' imprisonment, the report said. The Indian national has been provided with a court-appointed defence lawyer and an interpreter, the report said, adding that the Embassy of India in Bulgaria has

been informed. The Indian, whose motives are being clarified, rampaged right from the beginning of the flight but did not resist arrest at Sofia Airport, the report said. "He realises what he has done but does not behave quite adequately," Angelov said. The report said that the "Air France flight overflying Bulgaria en route from Ghana via Paris to New Delhi had to make an emergency landing at Sofia Airport around 5 PM (local time) on



Friday because of a rowdy passenger on board". Commissioner Teodor Cheshmedjiev, Chief of the Bor-

der Police Department at Sofia Airport, said that the request for the emergency landing was received at 4:10 PM on Friday.



# "You Kidding Me? What An Honour"

## Biden To Indian-American At NASA Meet

**US President Joe Biden congratulated the NASA team responsible for the successful landing of the six-wheeled rover on Mars and for giving the country a "dose of confidence".**



pandemic.

Joe Biden, speaking during a video conference call with the leadership of NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory (JPL) team led by Dr Michael Watkins, expressed awe over the landing of the Perseverance.

Interacting with Joe Biden, Dr Mohan said: "You know, Perseverance is my first mission at JPL, where I have gotten to work from the very beginning of formulation, all the way through operations, and it made me feel like I was part of that crew. Being able to work with this incredibly diverse, talented team that has become like a family, spending years creating our own technological marvel has been a privilege." "Those last days and weeks leading up to landing day, it was pretty smooth, but we were all still really nervous and, frankly, terrified until we got through those final seven minutes."

Dr Mohan helmed the mission's attitude control system, which helps make sure the spacecraft is heading in the direction it needs to be.

"To be able to call touchdown safely, to see those first images come back from Mars, to see the place where we have never been

able to go to on Mars before and go there -- reach there for the express purpose of seeking out new life just made it feel like I was living in a dream," said the Indian-American engineer.

"Now that tremendous relief has passed for the team of being able to be there safely, all that's left is the excitement and the thrill of all the scientific discoveries that are yet to come and what Perseverance can actually find -- and hopefully find those signs of past life on Mars," Dr Mohan said.

She thanked the US President for speaking to the NASA team. "Thank you for taking the time to speak with us," she said.

Joe Biden said: "Are you kidding me? What an honour this is. This is an incredible honour. And it's amazing. Indian - of descent - Americans are taking over the country: you (Swati Mohan), my Vice President (Kamala Harris), my speech writer Vinay (Reddy). I tell you what. But thank you. You guys are incredible."

"I tell you what, you said you feel like you're 'living a dream' -- you've created a dream for millions and millions of young kids, young Americans. You talk about STEM. You -- it was

-- look, the thing that I found so exhilarating about this: You all did this -- the whole team -- the team I can see now and the entire team at JPL -- what you did: You restored a dose of confidence in the American people," Joe Biden said.

Dr Mohan went on to study mechanical and aerospace engineering at Cornell University, followed by a masters degree and doctorate in aeronautics and astronautics at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Eventually, she landed at NASA.

"They were beginning to wonder about us. They were beginning to wonder: Are we still the country we always believed we were? You guys did it. You guys gave a sense of 'America is back.' It's astounding what you did. You should not underestimate it. You should not underestimate it," the US President said. "You did it the most American way: You believed in science, you believed in hard work, and you believed there wasn't a darn thing you couldn't do if you put your minds together," he said. One of the reasons why America is "such an incredible country is we're such a diverse country."

(Insider Bureau)-Indian-American aerospace engineer Dr Swati Mohan, who played a pivotal role in the successful landing of NASA's Perseverance rover on Mars, has told US President Joe Biden that her path to the premier US space agency began when she watched the first episode of Star Trek as a child. Dr Mohan is the guidance and controls operations lead for the Perseverance rover mission, acting as the "eyes and ears" for NASA's most sophisticated spacecraft to date.

She played a key role in landing the US space agency's historic Perseverance rover on the Martian surface on February 18. Dr Mohan was also the first to confirm that the rover had successfully touched down on the Martian surface after surviving a particularly tricky plunge through the atmosphere of the Red Planet. Dr Mohan, who emigrated from

India to the US when she was only a year old, told Biden that her path actually started way back when she was a child, watching the first episode of Star Trek, the popular TV show.

"In addition to those fantastical scenes of space, what really captured my attention was this really close-knit team which was working together, manipulating this technological marvel with the sole purpose of exploring space and understanding new things and seeking new life," Swati Mohan told Joe Biden during a virtual interaction on Thursday.

US President Biden congratulated the NASA team responsible for the successful landing of the six-wheeled rover on Mars and for giving the country a "dose of confidence" at a moment when the nation's reputation as a scientific leader has been tattered by the coronavirus

## Biden Appoints 2 More Indian-Americans To Key Administration Positions

**Chiraag Bains has been appointed as Special Assistant to the President for Criminal Justice and Pronita Gupta has been named Special Assistant to the President for Labour and Workers.**

(Insider Bureau)- US President Joe Biden has appointed two more Indian-Americans in key administrative positions, according to the latest list announced by the White House on Friday.

Chiraag Bains has been appointed as Special Assistant to the President for Criminal Justice and Pronita Gupta has been named Special Assistant to the President for Labour and Workers.

The announcement for appointing Mr Bains and Ms Gupta was part of more than 20 appointments of

additional policy staff who will serve with the White House Covid Response Team, Domestic Climate Policy Office, Domestic Policy Council and National Economic Council.

"These qualified, impressive, and dedicated individuals reflect the diversity and strength of America and will play critical roles advancing the Biden-Harris administration's commitment to tackling the crises we face and building back our country better," the White House said.

The Biden administration has so far appointed more than 55

Indian-Americans to key administrative position.

Born in Ottawa to Indian parents, Mr Bains was the Director of Legal Strategies at Demos, a national public policy organisation where he led voting rights litigation and advocacy across the country. Before that, he was a senior fellow at Harvard Law School and at the Open Society Foundations.

He became a naturalised citizen in 2000. His mother currently resides in Massachusetts.

From 2010 to 2017, Mr Bains served in the Justice



Department's Civil Rights Division, first as a prosecutor of civil rights crimes and then as senior counsel to the Assistant Attorney General.

He was a member of the team that investigated and sued

Ferguson, Missouri, for constitutional violations. Mr Bains clerked for the Karen Nelson Moore on the Sixth Circuit Court of Appeals and Judge Nancy Gertner in the District of Massachusetts.



## Doctor's widow denied Rs 50 lakh insurance cover; HC says private docs on Covid duty covered by govt insurance

(News Agencies)-The Bombay High Court on Tuesday refused relief to the widow of a private doctor who died of coronavirus, saying that the Rs 50 lakh insurance cover under a government scheme included only those who were drafted for Covid-19 duties.

The woman's husband had died after contracting Covid-19 from a patient at his private clinic in Navi Mumbai.

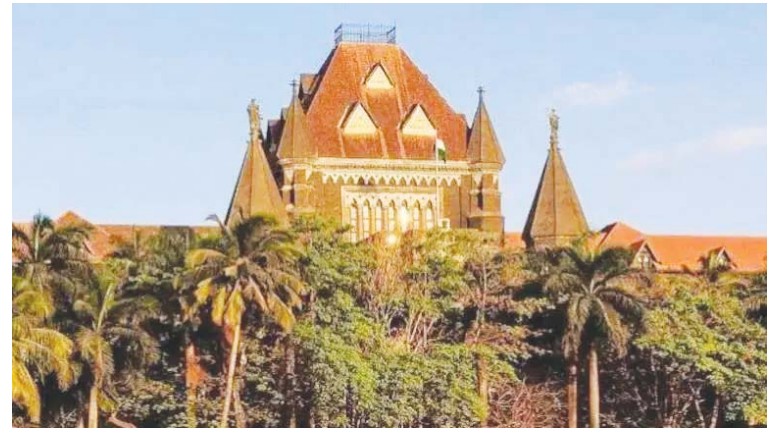
The HC said on Tuesday that the Rs 50 lakh insurance cover under the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana Scheme included only those private doctors whose services were requisitioned for Covid-19 duties.

Dismissing the plea, the division bench of Justice S J Kathawalla and Justice R I Chagla said, "The petitioner would be necessarily required to prove that Dr Surgade's services were in fact requisitioned/drafted in relation to Covid-19 duties by the State/Centre to seek application of the scheme." The Plea According to the plea, the petitioner's husband Bhaskar Surgade, an Ayurveda doctor, got a notice from the commissioner of the Navi Mumbai Municipal Corporation (NMMC), asking him to keep his dispensary open and warned action if he fails to comply with the notice. The petitioner claimed that her husband opened the clinic and started treating

patients, including those infected by coronavirus and he too contracted the disease and died of it on June 10, 2020.

The petitioner applied for the Rs 50 lakh compensation under the PMGKY insurance package but the request was turned down on the ground that her husband was not serving in any hospital or government healthcare centre and hence was not eligible.

What did govt tell HC? Advocate Kavita Solunke, appearing for the Maharashtra government, argued that the petitioner's services were not requisitioned and hence he would not be eligible for the insurance cover. The court said the NMMC notice only asked the



petitioner's husband to keep his clinic open and the same cannot be construed as a notice requisitioning his services for the specific purpose of treating Covid-19 patients and/or working in a Covid-19 hospital. "There is a difference between specifically

requisitioning/drafting services and directing private practitioners to not keep their clinic closed. The intent and object of the NMMC notice was to encourage medical practitioners to keep their dispensaries open," the court said.

## Indian-Origin Pharmacist Jailed For Year In UK For Illegal Sale Of Drugs



**The sentence this week came after Balkeet Singh Khaira had pleaded guilty to five counts of supplying controlled Class C drugs at Birmingham Crown Court last month.**

West Bromwich, was sentenced at Birmingham Crown Court on Tuesday. The court was informed that the 36-year-old sold the restricted medicines to be sold only with prescriptions at huge profit during 2016 and 2017, with the value of the pills on the black market estimated at over 1 million pounds.

"It is a serious criminal offence to sell controlled, unlicensed or prescription-only medicines in this way," said Grant Powell, En-

forcement Officer with the UK's Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Authority (MHRA) who led the case.

"Anyone who sells medicines illegally could be exploiting vulnerable people and clearly has no regard for their health or welfare. Prescription-only medicines are potent and should only be taken under medical supervision. We work closely with regulatory and law enforcement partners to identify and prosecute those involved,"

he said.

The sentence this week came after Khaira had pleaded guilty to five counts of supplying controlled Class C drugs at Birmingham Crown Court last month. The court heard that he had qualified as a pharmacist in 2008 and was working in the family business, Khaira Care Limited. His mother, whose pharmacy he worked at, was found not to be involved in any of the criminal activity.

(News Agencies)-An Indian-origin pharmacist in Britain has been sentenced to 12 months imprisonment for selling hundreds of thousands of doses of addictive prescription drugs in the black market. Balkeet Singh Khaira, who worked at his mother's Khaira Pharmacy on the high street in

## LAC activities opened India's eyes to what cooperative effort might mean for own defensive needs: Pentagon commander

(News Agencies)-Recent activities along the Line of Actual Control with China have opened India's eyes to what cooperative effort with others might mean for their own defensive needs, a top Pentagon commander told lawmakers on Tuesday observing that New Delhi, in the very near term, will deepen its engagement with the Quad. "India has long had an approach called strategic autonomy, you know, a nonaligned approach with others, but I think certainly the activities along the Line of Actual Control with China has opened their eyes to what cooperative effort with

others might mean for their own defensive needs," Admiral Phil Davidson, Commander of US Indo-Pacific Command told members of the powerful Senate Foreign Relations Committee during a Congressional hearing. "We have provided some information to India in that crisis, cold-weather closing, clothing, some other equipment, some things like that, and over the last several years, we have been deepening our maritime cooperation," he said.

"I think you will see India in the very near term, you know, remain committed to their nonaligned approach, but I think they will

deepen their engagement with the Quad, and I think that's a key strategic opportunity for us, Australia, and Japan," Davidson said. The admiral was responding to a question from Senator Angus King. "That would be a geopolitical major development if India more closely aligned with those other countries," King said responding to the answer from the admiral. "India has always been a neutral country, if you will. Are we developing a stronger alliance with them? You mentioned them as part of the Quad. Do they consider themselves a member of something of that nature," King



asked. Responding to questions, Davidson said that China has a vast disinformation machine. "They use both regular media and social media and have nearly 1 million people in their propaganda machine to undermine US interests, to capture the narrative

to their own benefit, and to, as I mentioned in my opening remarks, you know, corrupt the environment in a way that creates doubt amongst our allies and partners in the reliability of the United States," he said.



# Days after joining BJP, Mithun Chakraborty gets Y+ security from home ministry

**The Union home ministry has provided Y-plus security cover to veteran actor Mithun Chakraborty who joined the BJP recently.**

(News Agencies)-Days after he joined the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) ahead of the West Bengal Assembly election, the Union home ministry on Wednesday provided Y-plus security cover to veteran actor Mithun Chakraborty.

Sources say, the Central Industrial Security Force (CISF) will provide security cover to Mithun Chakraborty.

Usually, in a Y-plus security, the protectee gets an elaborate security cover comprising 11 commandos while a team of more than 55 security personnel is

deployed at and around the residence of the VIP. Mithun Chakraborty joined the party on March 7. He was introduced to the voters of West Bengal as "Bangalar Chhele" by Prime Minister Narendra Modi at his Brigade Parade Ground rally earlier this week.

The actor-politician is not the first VIP to have been given some kind of security cover in Bengal ahead of the assembly election. The Union home ministry has accorded X and Y category security cover to around 60 leaders in Bengal in the past one

month. Bengal has seen violence during election campaign and polling in the past. The Election Commission while announcing the poll schedule for five assembly polls declared that while Tamil Nadu would vote in a single-phase polling on April 6, West Bengal would go to the polls for its 294 seats in eight phases between March 27 and April 29.

Mithun Chakraborty has had a long political association, having been close to the CPI-M when it was in power in West Bengal. He later joined the Trinamool Congress of West Bengal Chief



Minister Mamata Banerjee, who sent him to the Rajya Sabha. After joining the BJP in Kolkata, Mithun Chakraborty said, "I am a cobra, one bite is enough", sending the massive crowd into raptures. He was welcomed into the BJP by BJP national general secretary Kailash Vijayvargiya and Bengal BJP chief Dilip

Ghosh. Speculation about his joining the BJP set off after he hosted RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat in Mumbai last month. The BJP hopes to generate positive waves for the party in Bengal with the induction of Mithun Chakraborty, who has been named a star campaigner for the party in assembly polls.

# India must prepare for borderless war, says Rahul Gandhi

**Congress leader Rahul Gandhi said in a tweet on Tuesday that India must prepare for a borderless war as the past practice of a 2.5-front war has become obsolete.**



In a tweet Tuesday morning, Rahul Gandhi said, "Indian forces are designed to fight a 2.5 front war. This is now obsolete. We must prepare for a borderless war."

"It's not about past practices and legacy systems. It's about transforming the way we think and act as a nation," Rahul Gandhi further said.

Rahul Gandhi has been accusing the Centre of ceding territory to China even when Defence Minister Rajnath Singh has clarified in Parliament that not an inch of Indian territory has been lost. On February 11, Rajnath Singh had announced in Parliament that India and China reached an agreement on disengagement in the North and

South banks of Pangong lake that mandates both sides to "cease" forward deployment of troops in a "phased, coordinated and verifiable" manner. The border row between India and China erupted in May last year and the stand-off escalated on June 15, when troops from the two sides clashed in Galwan Valley near Patrol Point 14.

(News Agencies)-India war has become obsolete, must prepare for a borderless war as the past practice of a 2.5-front Congress leader Rahul Gandhi said on Tuesday.

## Delhi Riots: Police arrested 1,829 persons, filed 755 FIRs, govt tells Parliament

(News Agencies)- Delhi Police arrested 1,829 people and filed 755 FIRs in connection with the northeast Delhi riots last year, Minister of State for Home G Kishan Reddy told Rajya Sabha on

accused. The minister said that out of the 755 FIRs filed, 62 were linked to heinous crimes and were investigated by the special investigation teams in the crime branch. One case, linked to the criminal conspiracy behind the violence, was being investigated by the special cell and the remaining 692 cases were being investigated by the North East district police, the minister said in a written reply to a question. A total of 1,829 people have been arrested and chargesheets in 353 cases have been submitted in the court for trial, he added. The riots had erupted in northeast Delhi on February 24 last year after clashes between



Wednesday. The MoS Home said that the police investigated all the cases based on facts and evidence, using the latest scientific techniques, and without any regard to the affiliation or identity of the

citizenship law supporters and protesters spiralled, leaving at least 53 people dead and also led to extensive destruction of property, including schools as well as religious places

## Bus falls into gorge in Himachal's Chamba, six dead, 13 injured



(News Agencies)- Six people died and 13 others were injured when a bus fell into a gorge in Chamba in Himachal Pradesh on Wednesday. The bus was coming to Chamba from Mangli in Teesa, a remote area of Chamba district, which is prone to accidents.

Last year, in November, three people were killed after a car they were travelling in skidded off the

road and plunged into a gorge in Chamba district. The accident took place on Chamba-Khajjiar road, with police saying that the driver lost control while negotiating a curve. In March too, a Himachal Road Transport Corporation bus met the same fate, killing five people and injuring 35 others. The accident took place near Chehli village, around 20 km from Chamba district headquarters.



## Farm unions call for Bharat bandh on March 26 to mark 4 months of agitation



(News Agencies)- Farmers' unions protesting against the central government's three new farm laws have called for a nationwide strike (Bharat bandh) on March 26. The day coincides with the completion of four months of farmers' protest at Delhi borders against the central government.

The Samyukta Kisan Morcha, the umbrella body of agitating farm unions, has also announced that farmer bodies and trade unions will protest privatisation and fuel price hike on March 15. Thousands of farmers, mostly from Punjab, Haryana and western Uttar Pradesh, have been camping at the Delhi border points --- Singhu, Tikri and Ghazipur --- for over three months, demanding the repeal of farm laws and a legal guarantee on the minimum support price(MSP) for their crops.

The protesting farmers have expressed apprehension that these laws would pave the way for the dismantling of the MSP system, leaving them at the "mercy" of big corporations.

However, the government has maintained that the new laws will bring better opportunities to farmers and introduce new technologies in agriculture.

Earlier on March 6, the farmers had blocked the six-lane KundliManesarPalwal (KMP) Expressway in Haryana to mark the completion of 100 days of their agitation.

The road blockade in Haryana began at 11 am and continued till 4 pm. Farmers holding black flags and wearing black armbands and some women protesters with black 'dupattas' shouted slogans against the Central government for not acceding to their demands.

## Delhi HC allows Mehbooba Mufti to skip March 15 summon sent by ED



(News Agencies)-In an interim relief to PDP chief Mehbooba Mufti, the Delhi High Court on Wednesday told the Enforcement Directorate (ED) not to insist on her presence on March 15. On March 5, the ED had issued summons Mehbooba Mufti to appear before it on March 15 in connection with a money laundering case. The probe agency, however, did not mention the case or charges for which she was being summoned. "It is an interim relief to my client. The

hearing for the court case has now been scheduled on March 19," Mufti's counsel said. The HC order came after the PDP chief approached the court seeking quashing of ED summons to her. In the petition, she has also challenged the constitutional validity of Section 50 and any incidental provisions of the Prevention of Money Laundering Act, 2002 (PMLA) that allow the probe agency to summon a person without disclosing the case details.

## Mamata Banerjee hospitalised after getting injured in Nandigram, BJP calls it 'drama'

(News Agencies)-West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee got injured during her campaign trail in Nandigram today. She is being taken to Kolkata for treatment.

Sources say Mamata Banerjee has injured her foot and even received bruises on her face.

Speaking to reporters, Mamata Banerjee alleged she was "pushed" by someone and has claimed that there was a "conspiracy" against her.

She added that her foot was swollen and that she wants to go back home to see her doctor.

Mamata Banerjee also said she will complain about the incident to the Election Commission of India. The Election Commission, meanwhile, has sought an immediate report from the West Bengal chief election officer into the incident.

The BJP and Congress, meanwhile, have called the incident a "drama" to gain sympathy.

MAMATA BANERJEE NARRATES ORDEAL, CLAIMS SHE WAS PUSHED - The incident

happened around 6.15 pm when Banerjee was about to leave the Birulia area near Reyapara after praying at a local temple.

"I was standing outside my car with the door open. I was going to a temple there to offer my prayers. Few people came around my car and pushed the door. The door hit my leg," she said.



The 66-year-old chief minister claimed that her leg got swollen because of the injury and she was feeling feverish, besides having chest pain.

Pointing to her leg, she told reporters, "See how it has swollen."

Speaking to reporters, she said that no local police personnel was present at the spot when the incident happened.

The nature of her injury seemed serious as she was seen being carried by her security personnel to the backseat of her SUV from the front seat, which she usually occupies during travel, as she was in pain. A white cloth was also wrapped around her injured leg.

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# One Way Trump May Have Changed Immigration Forever

Last month, Stephen Miller - the senior Donald Trump advisor and architect of the former president's immigration regime - took to Fox News to give a fervid rant on President Joe Biden's immigration policy. "This is madness!" Miller shouted at one point, referencing a proposal to make available citizenship applications to people the previous administration deported. Since taking office, Biden has rolled back one after another of Trump and Miller's initiatives. On Day 1, he ended the travel ban from 13 majority-Muslim countries; paused construction of the wall along the Mexican border; and introduced a new bill that would give undocumented immigrants a path to citizenship. Biden also made clear he intends to rein in Immigration and Customs Enforcement. But despite Miller's alarm at all his work being undone, there's still one way that his and Trump's immigration regime remains largely in force - and will likely continue to for some time: Since March 2020, America has been cut off almost entirely to asylum seekers and refugees. Last year, citing the pandemic, the White House strong-armed the Centers for Disease Control to invoke Title 42, an order that closes the border in times of emergency. Though for many classes of people the border has remained totally porous - businesspeople, vacationers and even many immigrants have crossed it freely for most of the pandemic - asylum seekers and refugees have been blocked. In the months since, a record-low number of refugees have been resettled, and just about every asylum seeker arriving on the southern border, except for some unaccompanied children, has been turned away or summarily deported.

While Biden has started to reopen those processes - people in refugee camps in Mexico as part of Trump's "Remain in Mexico" plan have begun to enter the U.S. to make their cases for asylum - there are reasons to believe that on this front, Trump's presidency will have a much longer-lasting effect. While Trump and Miller attacked immigration in all its forms, no would-be immigrants received more attention or provoked more action than refugees. And in turning asylum seekers into political ammunition in the American fight over immigration - conflating them with illegal border-crossers - Trump broke a fragile but powerful consensus that had lasted through Republican and Democratic presidents and had kept America open as a nation of refuge for more than a generation. Biden may yet repeal Title 42, the order closing the door to refugees and asylum seekers, though the White House has said it will remain in place while it figures out how to implement an improved processing system. But that order was not

the only way Trump damaged the system. He was the first major party candidate to run on an explicitly anti-refugee platform. And he continued to wage a campaign unapologetically against asylum seekers after taking office, putting through a barrage of rule changes, regulations and legal decisions that hobbled the system before he shut it down altogether in the pandemic. "Even if people would say these things behind closed doors, it was never articulated in public fashion the way that Trump did," says Ruth Wasem, a professor of public policy practice at the University of Texas who specializes in asylum. "Now, that vitriol towards refugees - once that taboo is crossed, it's hard to put the genie back in the bottle." Since World War II, presidents of both parties have accepted millions of asylum seekers, honoring the treaties and statutes that the U.S. agreed to over the decades after the Holocaust affirming a right to refuge for people fleeing persecution. Taking in refugees has never been particularly popular in American public opinion, leaving the system vulnerable to a populist political attack, but governmental leaders had been able to invoke notions of America's standing in the world to depoliticize asylum policy and keep commitments relatively steady. No longer. Since Trump mainly used executive action - circumventing Congress - to change policy, it may not be hard for Biden to reopen the U.S. to refugees and asylum seekers over the next four years. But in the longer term, closing the political divide that Trump widened on asylum will prove much more challenging. Thanks to the last administration, asylum in the U.S., once globally reliable, has become like the carpeting in the Oval Office: something that can be torn up and remade from president to president. On the campaign trail, Biden framed asylum as more than a policy: He made it clear that he sees rebuilding asylum as fundamental to his mission of restoring the soul of the nation: "Offering hope and safe haven to refugees is part of who we are as a country," his platform read. He was appealing to a vision of America that predates even the Constitution. In colonial times, Thomas Paine's fiery pamphlet Common Sense described the so-called New World's potential to be a shelter for those fleeing civil and religious persecution across the globe. "O! receive the fugitive, and prepare in time an asylum for mankind," Paine wrote in 1776. And since then, the image of the U.S. as a sanctuary has pervaded the national mythos: The colossal, outward-facing Statue of Liberty in New York's harbor raises her beacon to the world's tired, poor, tempest-tossed and homeless, huddled masses yearning to breathe free.

# Will The Quad Summit Dare Mention China?

The "Quad" Summit on March 12 when US President Joe Biden will make his first appearance with Indian, Australian and Japanese prime ministers was described by the White House as "one of his earliest multilateral engagements" that would speak on "the importance we place on close cooperation with our allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific". The Quad has strong Indian connections which nobody remembers now. It was first proposed by former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe to the Indian Parliament on August 22, 2007, with his "Confluence of Two Seas" speech. The session was chaired by former Vice-President M.H. Ansari, Chairman of the Rajya Sabha. Abe recalled the visit of his grandfather Nobusuke Kishi, the first Japanese Prime Minister to visit India in 1957 and how he was treated with great dignity by Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru despite being the leader of a defeated nation. He told our parliament with pride that he had heard stories as a little boy from his grandfather how Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru "brought my grandfather to an outdoor 'civic reception' at which tens of thousands of people had gathered, introducing him to a crowd energetically saying, 'this is the Prime Minister of Japan, a country I hold in the greatest esteem.'" Kishi was also the first Japanese prime minister to start the "Official Development Assistance" (ODA) despite being a poor country. "At that time, the country that had accepted Japan's ODA was none other than India. My grandfather never forgot

that fact either". Unfortunately, the Quad went into a stupor from 2008 for 10 years when Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd withdrew to mend fences with China. Only some infrequent military exercises went on. However, China challenged Quad when it was revived in the present form in 2017. There is a feeling in East Asia that the amorphous structure of Quad which nowhere mentions the real purpose of its existence is the reason for confusion. For example, the communique issued by our Ministry of External Relations after the last Quad ministers' meeting hosted by US Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken on February 17, 2021 mentions almost every subject like political democracies, market economies, pluralistic societies, rules-based international order, territorial integrity and sovereignty, rule of law, transparency, freedom of navigation and peaceful resolution of disputes, ASEAN cohesion and centrality, Covid-19 pandemic and vaccination programmes. It nowhere mentions China. Even the White House statement on March 9 described it as "formed in the aftermath of the 2004 tsunami and formalized in 2007, the Quad has met regularly at the working and foreign minister level. However, Friday will be the first time that the Quad is meeting at the leader level." The Associated Press quoted White House press secretary Jen Psaki on March 9 that "the leaders are expected to discuss everything from the threat of COVID-19 to economic cooperation between the nations and climate policy".



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# Embracing techno-alliances of the future



***The US will soon stitch together coalitions. If India plays its cards right, it could become a major hub for these techno-alliances***

If tariffs were Donald Trump's weapon of choice against China, technology is going to be Joe Biden's. Even as the Quad leaders prepare for their first-ever summit meeting on Friday, Washington has begun piecing together a set of coalitions designed to counter China's dominance in key technologies. Some of these alliances may be centred around the Quad. India should watch this space carefully. If these "techno-alliances" start to come together, they could be a major economic and geopolitical opportunity for India. But New Delhi must be prepared to dilute some of the economic fixations it has developed. In its recent Interim National Security Strategy, the Biden administration says the United States (US) will seek to shape "emerging technology standards to boost our security, economic competitiveness, and values...We will join with like-minded democracies to develop and defend trusted critical supply chains and technology

infrastructure". The Biden administration's plan is more than just about reducing dependency on China for various technological inputs. It is also about ring-fencing know-how against Beijing's penchant for large-scale intellectual property pilfering. It is also about re-establishing the US and its partners as world leaders in innovation and production efficiency.

Early reports on these techno-alliance plans say semiconductors are first on the list. Semiconductors are in the news thanks to a global shortage, itself partly because of Chinese hoarding. It is also an industry dominated by a handful of countries, most of whom are US allies. China would not be denied these chips, but the alliance would seek to ensure that the technology's future trajectory is not decided by Beijing.

Each techno-alliance would be sui generis, built around a set of countries competitive in a certain technology. The Trump administration had urged India to join a nascent US-Japan 5G coalition and the new US president will probably do the same. Plans are on for coalitions regarding Artificial Intelligence (AI), quantum computing, biotechnology, surveillance technology and more. Most of these will begin by simply setting common rules, standards and practices. Over time, they could become more complicated with member-states offering each other market access, sharing technology and perhaps subsidies to boost alternatives to Made in China goods and services.

Some of these coalitions will coalesce around existing multilateral groupings. The most obvious one would be the

Group of Seven. Another could be the Quad. While most reports say India is a target country, US officials say Washington internally wonders how far New Delhi is prepared to join such arrangements given its autarkic tendencies. India is also not a major research and development (R&D) centre for most such technologies and a niche player in terms of advanced manufacturing.

India's contribution, and benefit, would be in being able to provide a competitive and alternative site if sensitive manufacturing has to be moved out of China. It would be an obvious player where software is concerned, for example in 5G. However, India would have to accept being part of an export control regime to ensure against the leakage of technology to China. This would be needed for even associate club membership.

# In Kabul, a strategic defeat for the US

***The elaborate United States (US) draft "Afghanistan peace agreement", and its impatient letter to Afghan president Ashraf Ghani, once again reveal the strategic defeat of the US in a country that has been "the graveyard of empires"***

The elaborate United States (US) draft "Afghanistan peace agreement", and its impatient letter to Afghan president Ashraf Ghani, once again reveal the strategic defeat of the US in a country that has been "the graveyard of empires". America's new desire to shift the onus of resolving the Afghan mess from its shoulders alone to a group of countries, including India, only starkly profiles its Afghan failure. The Joe Biden administration will doubtless justify this collective approach as part of its commitment to multilateralism to address international issues. This does not, however, disguise its ongoing desperation to extricate itself from a 20-year-long morass of its own making. The three-part draft containing ideas for a new constitution, the establishment of an interim government - called "the Peace Government" to take

the global mind away from the wheel turning full circle two decades after the Bonn agreement set up an interim administration - and principles for a permanent and comprehensive ceasefire are hardly realistic in many crucial elements. It claims to represent "a variety of ideas and priorities of Afghans on both sides of the conflict", but reflects US concerns and aspirations for Afghanistan in their very selection and enumeration. In the absence of corroborative evidence, it is difficult to visualise how the Taliban and the Kabul authorities will take a giant leap of faith for peace, with the former abandoning fundamental sources of strength and the latter their current political offices. The Taliban's strength is derived from the success of its armed cadres. Aided by Pakistan, the Taliban first demonstrated that the US-led North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) forces could

not crush it. This also meant that NATO could not prevent the spread of Taliban influence and, in many cases, control of a significant portion of Afghan territory.

A principal reason for Taliban's strength lay in its bases in Pakistan which, because of the US policy of self-denial, remained protected. Later, as US forces withdrew, armed Taliban elements kept the Afghan security forces under pressure, preventing the Afghan government from achieving stability. Will the Taliban, now, agree to the imposition of crippling conditions, including abandoning its foreign (read Pakistani) bases, draining the effectiveness of its armed cadres?

This question is all the more pertinent if it is put in the context of the US proposal that the constitution of the Afghan



Republic is to be "the initial template from which the future Constitution will be prepared". Many Taliban leaders may construe this as a way of the international community seeking to pressure them ab initio in abandoning the founding principles of the Islamic Emirate. Will the lure of becoming full participants in the Peace Government be sufficient to make many in the Taliban senior leadership consider pulling up their roots?

The president of the Peace Government is to be decided by the "two parties". Let alone the

Taliban, it is most unlikely that even the Kabul political elite will accept Ghani in that office. Thus, the US letter to Ghani virtually asks him and his administration to do the honourable deed of falling on their swords for Afghanistan's future. Ghani and his colleagues have given no indication of a desire to do so, despite the caution that if US troops withdraw by May, the Taliban will irresistibly gain ground. Vice-President Amrullah Saleh is certainly not the kind of person who will fold up - his courage and ghairat (honour) will never allow that.



# Killer Waves, Nuclear Plant Cooking Off - Covering The Japan Tsunami

The word tsunami had entered the lexicon of journalists in newsrooms around the world after the December 2004 Indian Ocean tragedy, and on 11 March 2011, when news broke of tsunami waves striking the coast of east Japan, there was a sense that this had the potential of becoming a major crisis. Within hours, images had started coming in, of gigantic tsunami waves triggered by one of the most powerful earthquakes in human history, obliterating townships and parts of cities in the north-east of Japan. I remember anchoring 'breaking news' bulletins that day with a torrent of fresh images of the destruction coming in every few minutes. Little did I know then that I would be on a flight to Japan that night and in the worst-hit Miyagi prefecture forty-eight hours later. No one really knew the extent of the devastation in Japan. Yes, the images were shocking but this was Japan, perhaps the most developed nation in the world. Surely, the loss of life would be contained. In fact, the Indian electronic media decided to give the Japan story a complete miss. Except NDTV. We were the only Indian media team to get into

Sendai.

The drive between Tokyo and Sendai is usually covered in a few hours on a superhighway but with parts of the road flooded or destroyed, we had to travel through narrow provincial roads. The journey took us over fourteen hours - painfully slow. When we reached Sendai late at night, we discovered the modern, developed city resembling a ghost town. Yes, there was electricity, but the roads were completely empty. Everything was shut. We drove into a hotel to be told it was closed - there was just one motel open - but by the time we reached, there were no rooms available. Every single room had been booked by the big international networks. After a freezing few hours inside our van and just a few hours of sleep, we woke up the next morning to the first of several aftershocks that continued to hit the area in the wake of the magnitude-9 earthquake which had triggered the tsunami in the first place.

These were no ordinary aftershocks. Each major aftershock was upwards of

magnitude 6 on the Richter scale. We could literally hear buildings around us groan. That day, forty-eight hours after the tsunami struck the Japanese coastline, once again I witnessed first-hand how devastating a tsunami could be. As we drove into the places worst hit, we saw entire areas flattened by the immense waves. Residential colonies, once occupied by thousands of people, resembled a war zone or an area in the midst of a bombing campaign. Not a single structure was intact - buildings had been yanked free from their foundations and dragged away to the sea. All that remained was debris. In the midst of the debris, on the banks of the Natorigawa, the only survivor I spotted was a poodle, looking for its owners. It followed us around for quite some time, perhaps hoping for some food. We had none to offer. Later that evening, we were finally able to get a room in the motel and managed a few hours of proper sleep, the first in days. We woke up the next day to the sounds of journalists racing down the stairs. There was an emergency and their embassies had told them to evacuate Sendai immediately.



The nuclear plant in Fukushima was about to go into a meltdown. Given the prevailing wind conditions in the area, Sendai would perhaps feel the impact of nuclear fallout within minutes. This seemed unreal. Just how bad could this situation get? Within hours, CNN and the BBC had pulled out their journalists. Al Jazeera had hired a plane to evacuate their reporters from an airstrip well to the west of Sendai and all the major French television networks were already on the road. None of this made sense to me at the time. My gut told me that the other channels were getting it wrong - that the sense of panic made no sense. No one could predict the situation at Fukushima, no one

could know for certain that it was going into meltdown immediately. But then again, could senior editors and news desks from a dozen leading agencies all get it wrong? I spoke to my cameraperson S Dhanpal, a tough-as-nails NDTV veteran, about what we should do. We decided to wait. There had, after all, been no evacuation of Sendai that had been announced. Now among the last remaining international journalists in the Sendai area we faced a huge dilemma - to remain in the crisis zone and hope for the best or follow in the footsteps of other international media crew. My driver, a local from Tokyo, had already made up his mind - he intended to leave.

## New Delhi's new regional calculus



Last month, New Delhi's regional policy took another interesting turn with the beginning of disengagement along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) and the announcement of ceasefire along the Line of Control (LoC). After nine rounds of high-level military talks, a disengagement process in the Pangong Tso region has witnessed the return of Chinese and Indian troops and armour to their permanent bases. While Indian troops still continue to lock horns with the Chinese at multiple sites along LAC, this move is being widely viewed as the beginning of a long

drawn out de-escalation process between the two Asian giants. On LoC, the Director Generals of Military Operations (DGMO) of the two nations engaged telephonically and decided to adhere to all agreements on ceasefire along LoC and the sectors of the International Border "in the interest of achieving mutually beneficial and sustainable peace along the borders". Though an agreement was also reached in 2018 to abide by the 2003 ceasefire agreement, there has been an increasing number of ceasefire violations in recent years with

volatility rising across the frontier. More than 5,000 ceasefire violations were reported in 2020 and this year has seen Pakistan violating the ceasefire more than 600 times. Given the state of India-Pakistan relations, the announcement of a ceasefire took everyone by surprise. What has been striking in the analyses of these developments in India is a strange sense of defeatism. Some have criticised these moves as being timid while others have argued that these moves have been pursued under external pressure. One can be critical of the policy moves only after assessing the fundamental shifts in India's regional environment and New Delhi's foreign policy and security posture. And that assessment seems to be missing.

All policy frameworks evolve in a wider domestic, regional and global context. No nation, even the mightiest one, exists in a state of splendid isolation where

external factors do not impinge on policymaking. Smart policy is about recognising those constraints and using them to your advantage at the right time. The single-most important geopolitical development of the last few months has been India standing up to China after the Galwan Valley incident in June 2020 and making it clear to Beijing and to the world that it is possible to resist Chinese aggression successfully. Even as Indian forces challenged their considerably more resource-rich Chinese counterparts along LAC, Indian diplomacy ensured that New Delhi retained a central role in the global health crisis, emerging as net provider of security in the realm of public health. While, for most countries, taking China on in a challenging domestic and global environment would have been impossible, New Delhi stood up. India's message to the world was - if this is the new normal, then we are prepared.

And not only did the world notice, Beijing did as well. If the Chinese Communist Party is talking today about "the need to create enabling conditions to settle the border dispute", it is, in no small measure, due to a consistent message from India that the Sino-Indian relationship cannot be divorced from the border challenge. The larger strategic fabric of bilateral ties between India and China remains as fragile as ever and China is not going to mend its ways just because it has moved back from a part of LAC. But it can no longer be ignored that the ability of India to shape the terms of its engagement with China is growing. This confidence is reflected in the way New Delhi has moved with Pakistan on LoC with the new ceasefire agreement. After decades, Indian policy vis-à-vis Pakistan has been able to put the latter under pressure from multiple points.



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# India's women and the workforce

**Women are not dropping out. They are being pushed out by the lack of demand for their labour. There has been movement out of agriculture into informal and casual jobs, where the work is sporadic, and often less than 30 days at a stretch. The new modern sector opportunities, especially in high value-added service sectors, mostly accrue to men.**

Why is women's employment declining in India? The thrust of the predominant explanations is that women are dropping out of paid work or the labour force either because of fear of sexual violence outside the home; or fear of being stigmatised by the community that might see their work as a marker of low status, i.e. the inability of the husband, the main breadwinner, to provide for the family; or a rise in conservative attitudes that believe a woman's place is inside the home and kitchen, and that if the woman steps outside the socially approved threshold, it would invite a backlash. All these explanations prima facie sound persuasive and plausible. But consider this. Recorded labour force participation rate (LFPR) of Indian women, never very high, logged a dramatic decline between 2004-05 and 2011-12. It has continued to decline thereafter, albeit at a lower rate. The bulk of the decline has been in the LFPR of rural women, with the sharpest decline

seen in the case of Scheduled Tribe or Adivasi women. How do the mainstream explanations fit in with this basic fact? Research on the impact of sexual violence on female LFPRs focuses on urban areas; but urban female LFPRs, always lower than rural, have not registered a decline. My ongoing work with my PhD student Jitendra Singh shows virtually no correlation between crime statistics and female LFPRs, not for India, not internationally. Female employment outside the home in rural areas was flat between 2004 and 2017 (the period when the total rural female LFPR registered a decline), and in urban areas, there was a slight upward trend. This picture does not lend credence to the rising stigma story. National Crime Records Bureau data show a rise in assault cases (between 2011 and 2013) and rise in cruelty cases between 2004 and 2013. Rape cases increased from 2011 onwards, with slight fluctuations. Thus, national data for India does

not support the presumed correlation between crimes against women and their (in)ability to work outside the home. Macro-statistics suggest very little connection between the two, if any. This should not be read to mean that violence against women is not a serious problem, or that it does not adversely affect their work. While there is no evidence that fear of violence keeps women from seeking jobs, for women who have jobs, sexual harassment at the workplace is very real, with devastating consequences for their work and well-being. This is a good place to note that the public focus on external violence is not only misplaced in the context of women's employment, but the consequent push to keep women indoors completely masks the fact that the bulk of violence against women is perpetrated by those known to them - husband, partner, family, friends. Keeping women locked indoors is absolutely the wrong policy for multiple reasons; most of all it fails



in its stated objective, i.e. to protect them from violence. Data indicate that the decline in LFPRs is driven by women moving from paid to unpaid work and hence not getting counted as "workers", even though they might continue to be involved in unpaid economic work in family enterprises (farming, livestock, kirana shops, handmade products for sale and so on). These are economic activities, and men involved in them get counted as workers, but not women. This reflects the low value placed on women's contribution to these activities without which these would not survive. The real issue is the lack of demand for labour in occupations and activities in which women are concentrated. There is important

research that shows that what we note as a decline (which is equated with the withdrawal of women from the labour force in the mainstream view) is a manifestation of the changing nature of work availability, especially for rural and less educated women. This body of research raises a question mark on the "dropping out" narrative. Thus, the proportion of economically active women has not declined, but the number of days they work has, which shows up as a decline in LFPRs. Over the last three decades, there has been a massive decline in agricultural jobs, which has not necessarily been accompanied by an increase in rural non-farm employment or livelihood opportunities.

## How Covid-19 can transform health care



The pandemic disrupted life, livelihoods, education and health like little else in recent history. The world found innovations and adaptations to minimise some of the disruptions for some people, but not all. Health care disruptions, less amenable to home-based solutions, ranged across a very broad continuum - a shift in health-seeking behaviour, limitations in health infrastructure, difficulties in outreach to community members, lack of availability of human resources and interruptions in supply chains. Not

all of these were limited to the context of the pandemic - some have pre-existed but got magnified in the context of the pandemic. Covid-19 saw health care workers diverted to the much-needed task of preventing and dealing with infections, taking them away from their regular tasks, and thus, further reducing the availability of health care workers. Health care facilities were deployed for testing and treating patients, but this made them unavailable for regular services. Supply chains were disrupted due to lockdowns. When

health facilities were functioning, citizens were either fearful or unable to travel to them or were unaware that facilities were functioning. All this led to significant disruption in the provision of essential health services such as routine immunisation, testing and treating tuberculosis (TB) patients, maternal and child health care and nutrition-related interventions.

But India is no stranger to innovation. A few months into the pandemic, there were a variety of interventions, which sought to address some of these barriers related to health human resources, demand for and access to services, and provision to the last mile. Innovations were found in at least four categories - leveraging technology, leveraging community platforms, strengthening frontline workers and augmenting supply chains.

Extensive interventions leveraged the digital platform such as remote counselling and consulta-

tion in several states; a child growth-monitoring app for remote monitoring of severely acute malnourished children in Rajasthan, Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh; an Interactive Voice Response System-based solution in Uttar Pradesh for reminder calls to the community about immunisation sessions; digital surveillance applications for frontline workers for TB and Covid-vulnerability assessment in states such as Gujarat, Kerala and Punjab for simultaneous TB and Covid assessment; an artificial intelligence-based diagnostics solution to scan chest X-rays and detect abnormalities. Various organisations leveraged digital platforms to conduct training and information sessions for frontline workers. The range of such services and their providers is vast including e-Sanjeevani, Swasth, Practo, Portea, TeCHO, Anmol, to name just a few.

The involvement of community-

based organisations in the form of self-help groups (SHGs) and village organisations reinforced their potential for last-mile services. Active TB case finding by community health volunteers through outreach and awareness; demand generation for services and provision of timely information to pregnant women by volunteer groups through helpline numbers; support for essential health service delivery through panchayati raj institutions contributed to strengthening health services.

The Indian postal department was leveraged for its extensive postal network as an alternative logistics chain for delivery of family planning commodities. Social franchising model for TB diagnosis and drug dispensation via e-pharmacies to the doorsteps of patients was also utilised. India saw many innovations rolled out, although not necessarily at scale and most not evaluated for impact.



# Meghan Markle latest example of elites' unseemly victimhood

Sunday's interview of Prince Harry and Meghan Markle by Oprah is everywhere in the news. The other news outlets are going wall-to-wall with it. (They're natural fangirls, so of course they love the royals.) But we're Americans. The idea of discussing the details of some dispute within a decayed monarchy felt too much like European history class. Who cares?

It's not like prince whatever-his-name-is and his angry wife from Los Angeles are compelling. You know exactly who they are. He's weak and unhappy. She's a manipulative opportunist. So who do you root for in this? How about nobody? We were going to take a hard pass on the whole thing, but then we heard some of it:

MARKLE: A few days before the wedding, she [Kate Middleton] was upset about something pertaining to, yes, the issue was correct, about the flower girl dresses, and it made me cry, and it really hurt my feelings."

The princess, or duchess, or whatever she is - not that we know the difference - one of the most famous and fawned-over people in the world, told Oprah that she was incredibly wounded because she got into some kind of petty argument about dresses

with her sister-in-law at her wedding three years ago. Stop the presses: She and her sister-in-law had a tiff about clothes. That's never happened before. She thinks this is important enough to bring up in a television interview. It was her 9/11, so of course she considers it newsworthy. Meghan Markle is a narcissist. We guessed that. But that's not the whole story. What she's really saying is that despite her enormous wealth and fame; despite the fact she never has to cook her own dinner or drive her own car ever again for as long as she lives; despite the fact that every time she heads to the gym, the journey is treated like the moon landing by an army of awe-struck reporters; despite the fact that she's literally a princess - sorry, duchess - she is actually an oppressed victim. She may look powerful, but she's powerless, which she explained to Oprah.

MARKLE: That's the sad irony of the last four years, is I've advocated for so long for women to use their voice, and then, I was silent.

OPRAH WINFREY: Were you silent or were you silenced?

Meghan Markle: The latter ... I came to understand that not only

was I not being protected, but that they were willing to lie to protect other members of the family, but they weren't willing to tell the truth to protect me and my husband "I had bodyguards but I was not protected. I was silenced!" says the lady doing a TV interview with Oprah Winfrey. "When I speak, only 100 million people hear it around the world - though to be fair, that number rises considerably once you count DVR and internet views. But the point remains: I have been silenced. I am a victim."

A rational person might consider this claim absurd. But, amazingly, no one else seems to think it is. Oprah clearly doesn't think it's absurd. She's deeply empathetic. Oprah's worth more than a billion dollars, but she knows the pain, because she sees herself as a victim too. She often says so. You're not allowed to make fun of this, and you're definitely not allowed to mock the oppressed duchess.

Our friend Piers Morgan just did that on television in the U.K., and had to resign from his job.

Rich people are oppressed, period. And if you claim otherwise, they will use their total powerlessness to get you fired. It's not just duchesses, by the way. A mem-



ber of America's own royal family told us how incredibly difficult her life is from her castle in Martha's Vineyard,

MICHELLE OBAMA, Aug. 17, 2020: Now, I understand that my message won't be heard by some people. We live in a nation that is deeply divided, and I am a Black woman speaking at the Democratic convention.

Yeah, no one can hear you, Michelle. It was just a prime-time speaking slot at the Democratic National Convention. When, oh when, will your voice be heard, Michelle Obama? When will you get the credit you're so sorely due for all of your remarkable achievements? Unfortunately, America's not quite ready for you yet. And, honestly, that's our fault. We're

a backward country. We apologize.

One person we should definitely apologize to more is Hillary Clinton. Four years ago, in a weak moment that we're now ashamed of, we stole something from Hillary, something that was hers, something that she owned. It was the presidency of the United States. That office belonged to Hillary Clinton. We knew it at the time. It had a little dry cleaning tag on the back with her initials on it. But we stole it anyway - we and the Russians, and the FBI director and Facebook and the Macedonians and the Democratic Party itself. We're all guilty here, as Hillary has repeatedly explained.

## Mithun, The Cobra Who Could Sting Mamata Hard



I moved to a new school when I was 10. My neighbour, who knew me already, introduced me to others in the school bus as Mithun Chakraborty's cousin. This spread like, as I am told, wildfires do, and caused me much shame. Mithun, for all his popularity, was a Disco Dancer. I was a junior bhadralok. But the memory of our fictitious kinship came to my aid 25 years later. That was at a London hotel where I was holidaying with wife and 9-month-old. The hotel had an an-

noying practice of levying an extra five-pound 'tray charge' every time one ordered room service. On our third day, the Polish gent who was taking my order noticed my surname. "Any relation of Mithun Chakraborty?" he asked. "He is my cousin," I replied without batting an eyelid. "I am a big fan, Sir," the man said. "From now, there'll be no tray charge for you."

This was 2007. Mithun was well past the peak he achieved in 1989, when he entered the record books by shooting 19 movies in a single

year. By the mid-2000s, Mithun was doing more low-budget films that were released in single-screen theatres in working-class localities. In fact, even in Bengal, Mithun's fan following was mostly amongst the working classes and the urban poor. Even though he made his debut in Mrinal Sen's arthouse movie Mrigaya, and won the National Award for Best Actor, the Bengali middle class found him too declasse.

This would periodically show up in the culture wars within the ruling Left Front. The big flare-up over Mithun happened first in 1986, when then Sports Minister Subhash Chakraborty got a number of 'Bombay cinema' stars for a fund-raiser called "Hope-86". Mithun was his main contact in Mumbai, and many identified the show with the actor. Subhash had his boss Jyoti Basu's implicit blessings, but many in the CPIM, including

Buddhadeb Bhattacharya, made their displeasure public. Bollywood was considered to be apasanskriti, a word that can best be translated as bad or low culture.

But much to the chagrin of the Left-leaning bhadralok, the people on the street loved it. When Mithun took Rajesh Khanna and Asha Bhosale with him to meet Chief Minister Jyoti Basu, "he created traffic snarls, made the crowds go hysterical and forced the state secretariat security to line up special armed guards." If the late Soumitra Chatterjee was the darling of Kolkata's genteel folk, Mithun represented the hoi polloi, who might have voted for the CPIM, but shared little of the party leadership's cultural elitism. He spoke the argot of Kolkata's tenement quarters and slums, which was ubiquitous on the street but rendered invisible in the self-image of the Bengali.

Interestingly, the slang used by

young middle class Bengalis was liberally peppered with tropes from this street-lingo. I learnt two phrases that my Kolkata cousins taught me, amidst much laughter and incredulity. The first was "mere dewaale chhobi baniye debo" - "I will thrash you so badly that you will turn into a photograph on the wall". The other was "lash phele debo" - "I will drop your dead body."

Imagine my great excitement when on joining the BJP yesterday, Mithun referred to his movie dialogues that contained these very phrases. "Ami joldhorao noi, bele borao noi... ami ekta cobra, ek chobol-ei chhobi (Don't mistake me for a harmless snake, I am a pure cobra, one strike and you become a photograph)" and "Marbo ekhaney...lash porbay shoshaney (I will thrash you here. Your body will be found at the crematorium)."

This language from someone who



# How we the people are responsible for the spread of the virus

***Can the authorities who are serious about supporting the vaccination roll-out with a compliance roll-in, consider three urgent suggestions?***

The virus has moved in Delhi from "pandemic" to "endemic", says Delhi's health minister. And I have heard a senior virologist say exactly that about the country. They may well be right. But what matters is that the virus is still very much around, and we are as responsible for it being so as the virus itself is. We?

Yes, we. And that includes just about everyone except health workers who have been given but a small token of our appreciation by being made the first to be vaccinated. And even there, we want them to be protected because we want them to continue to protect us.

And the 'we' starts with our political class. As they bared their upper arms for the jabs before cameras, did all our leaders wear masks? Alas, not all of them. Our vice-president, M Venkaiah Naidu, and external affairs minister, S Jaishankar, did.

They wore masks, correctly, admirably, over mouth and nose as the needle went in. And they sent two clear messages across - wear masks, get vaccinated. There may well have been others like them who did. But not all our other leaders did so. It is not as if the nation would have failed to recognise them, masked. And why could the officials on duty not have whispered just two words to them, "Sir, mask..."

And now, with elections, leaders are going to be needed to campaign. They will need crowds. Where does social distancing go? A great responsibility rests on leaders and their compliance to health protocols during elections. But our leaders are only what we or the majority of us are. Put differently, what we are, our leaders are.

And what are "we" doing?

We have to but step outdoors to see us as we always are - mixing,

milling about in clusters and crowds, holding hands, eating, chewing, spitting, with the gentlemen among us secure in the belief that incontinence is integral to the Indian male's vested rights. All this, let us recognise, is not a class matter. The well-to-do in malls and cinema houses galumph around like elephants in musth, maskless, careless, shameless. Travelling by air, the "business class" is no model of compliance. Small wonder that the virus thrives.

Can the authorities who are serious about supporting the vaccination roll-out with a compliance roll-in, consider three urgent suggestions?

First, about masks. Let the non-wearing of masks be visited with condign fines on the spot. This is not difficult to do in places of public concourse, on trains, in buses, in cinema houses,



shopping plazas, with a "virus police" on duty. Mumbai has started, late, perhaps, but it has. Other cities must follow suit.

Second, about elections. Let the vaccination drive be opened immediately to all registered voters in poll-bound regions straightaway, irrespective of the age and comorbidity criteria. And let no political campaigner do any campaigning, whether as a speaker at rallies or otherwise, unvaccinated. And let all poll personnel, including security forces, report for duty only after being vaccinated. Third, about farmers. The spike in parts of north India, including Punjab, may be because of many reasons, figures.

pandemic, endemic or other. But common sense tells us that the prolonged farm protests, with groups of protesters moving back and forth from their villages to the rallies, are both at risk and unwittingly, innocently, risk-enlarging. As a health measure first and last, let the government announce the revocation of the three farm bills and a reconsideration of their provisions by the Inter-State Council (ISC) with farm leaders being heard at it, after the majority of the nation has been vaccinated and the number of new cases has been brought down to, and kept at, negligible figures.

## Bigotry And British Royals Like Wimbledon And Strawberries

In a long and bleak year, two cultural shifts offered at least some hope: racial progress, accelerated by massive street protests across the United States, and the marginalization, albeit tentative, of the culture of celebrity.

Both these attainments seem to have been undermined this week by Oprah Winfrey's palace-rattling interview with Prince Harry and Meghan Markle at their mansion in Santa Barbara. Only a day before, the main news in the U.K. had been the pitiful 1% pay raise offered by Prime Minister Boris Johnson's government to the overworked and exhausted staff of the National Health Service. The general reaction veered between dismay and outrage.

On Sunday, however, public attention, a strained reserve these days, quickly shifted to the travails of a disinherited prince and princess. Evidently, the pair was driven from Britain for Southern California by overt racism from the royal family and a campaign of persecution from

British tabloids. On Tuesday evening, Buckingham Palace issued a statement saying the allegations were being "taken very seriously" and would be addressed privately.

It is not callous to suggest that Markle might have avoided this fate had she, like many women marrying into a joint family system, done some due diligence on her in-laws. Take, for instance, this typical remark by Prince Philip, offered to a group of British students in China in 1986: "If you stay here much longer, you'll all be slitty-eyed." The jaw-dropping recent BBC interview with Prince Andrew, Harry's uncle and friend to the late Jeffrey Epstein, confirmed the royal family's continuing remoteness from reality.

Markle could have also properly informed herself of the journalistic culture of her new country. Almost all of the British press has supported Johnson, despite his track record while a journalist of baiting gay men ("tank-topped bumboys"), Black people ("watermelon smiles")

and burka-clad Muslim women ("letterboxes").

In other words, unreconstructed bigotry among the establishment and its loyal media is as much a British thing as Wimbledon and strawberries.

If anything, though, Markle may have been less ingenuous than those who hailed her marriage as the start of a social revolution in Britain.

According to a British writer of color in the New York Times in 2017, Markle's marriage to a prince was "astonishingly political" and had "shaken to the core the country's ideas about who is entitled to a seat at the royal table." Another commentator in the Guardian prophesied that "Britain's relationship with race will change for ever."

So it has, but not quite in the desired manner. Markle's unsurprisingly doomed cohabitation with an archaic dynasty has ended up hardening divisions in what the Guardian this week called "a culture war."



Black or Brown commentators might bristle at the suggestion that it was not worth going to the barricades on Markle's behalf. But there was always something desperate about the fantasy that social justice would be fast-tracked by a foreign citizen placed by marriage inside Buckingham Palace. A mixed-race American actress gratefully accepting her seat at the royal table was never going to be as politically transformative as, say, Rosa Parks refusing to give up her seat on an Alabama bus.

Bitter experience should have warned against investing

political hopes in this or that upwardly mobile representative of racial minorities. Barack Obama was once thought to have inaugurated a "post-racial" America as the first Black president. He ended up provoking a ruinous "whitelash."

Now, regardless of whether the U.S. economy recovers or social divisions are healed, it appears Obama will be "having a blast" with his rapidly growing multi-media empire and fortune, as the Washington Post reported this weekend. The naïve politics of racial symbolism may draw mass support.



# The significance of the LoC ceasefire for bordering communities

**A similar engagement led to the ceasefire agreement first in 2003 that translated into over a half-decade calm in Kashmir and a degree of healing. Build on the current moment.**

A rare joint statement by the Indian and Pakistani directors general of military operations, on February 25, announcing that the two countries have agreed to strictly observe the ceasefire along the Line of Control (LoC) in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) triggered much speculation over what brought about the turnaround. Moeed Yusuf, special assistant on national security to Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan, called the announcement a "victory of diplomacy" and added that "more avenues" will open in the future, amid reports that back-channel meetings at neutral locations led to the pact. Analysts linked the reiteration of the observance of the truce along the de facto border to the protracted stand-off between the Indian and Chinese troops in Ladakh and New Delhi's attempts to avoid a two-front conflict with two allied adversaries. Many wondered whether the new Joe Biden administration had nudged the two countries to normalise ties.

The Pulwama attack, the subsequent Balakot strike, and India's move to change the constitutional status of J&K escalated tensions between the two countries in 2019. The following year, the highest ceasefire violations - about 5,000 - were reported along the de facto border.

But while the roots of the current thaw can be debated, the only question that matters for the residents in the constant line of fire along the 740-km border is whether the ceasefire will sustain long enough for them to live to fight another day, or whether their lives and livelihood will again be sacrificed at the altar of narrow political ends. The breakthrough means they can tend to their fields, and educate their children without worrying whether they would be able to return home alive. Cross-border shelling over the years has destroyed livelihoods, left crops unharvested, and forced even well-off people to opt for small-time jobs in faraway towns to sustain their families. Most of

the border areas are inaccessible and remote, and were even denied mobile phone connectivity for years due to their proximity to Pakistan.

Border residents can now hope to live their lives with dignity without having to often rush to cramped bunkers to save their lives. Cross-border shelling has not just left hundreds dead but has taken an emotional toll on survivors. Many border areas such as Karnah are so remote that people have to stock up supplies for the winter months before snow cuts it off from the outside world. The cross-LoC shelling would even hamper the stocking and evacuation of wounded residents.

In Kashmir's hillside Churnada village of 1,600 people, which lost two residents in 2020 to cross-border shelling, residents gathered at the shrine of a Muslim saint to celebrate the new agreement. They heaved a sigh of relief that they could now finally till their land, graze their cattle and



send their children to school without fear. As many as 70 civilians and 72 soldiers have died in cross-border firing since 2018. According to Reuters, nearly 300 civilians have been killed since 2014 in ceasefire violations on the Pakistani side. It reported that in the picturesque Neelum valley on the other side, hundreds of hotels and guesthouses came up when the ceasefire held as tourists visited around the year. Reuters said tourism went into a tailspin and guesthouse operators were forced to dig into their savings as skirmishes and firing increased. The divided border residents on both sides can only hope the ceasefire is not derailed like it was in the aftermath of the 2008 Mumbai attacks. The 2003-

2008 era of peace brought rich dividends for border communities and led to the start of cross-LoC bus services. This would have been unthinkable a decade earlier, as it was akin to Pakistan's acknowledgment of the Indian sovereignty over J&K.

The reiteration of the commitment to the truce has raised hopes for a dialogue process effectively stalled since 2008. That top national security officials are believed to have been involved in the back-channel talks ahead of the turnaround should hold out hope. A similar engagement led to the ceasefire agreement first in 2003 that translated into over a half-decade calm in Kashmir and a degree of healing. Build on the current moment.

# The changing nature of urban homes and women's lives



In the backdrop of International Women's Day, amid the continuing global pandemic, India needs a discussion on reimagining the idea of home. The notions of stay-at-home and work-from-home dominated the narrative with the pandemic, and with it began the discussion on the increase in violence within the home. It was interesting to see that the Supreme Court recently proposed fixing a notional income for a homemaker, indicating that the law and courts value the labour, services and sacrifices of women. Domestic

spaces have been transformed in multiple ways in the last few decades in Indian cities. One could go back to the sociological studies of the 1970s to 1990s on urbanisation, migration and nuclearisation of families to understand changes in the domestic space, from stay-at-home women performing all the household work to women shouldering the double burden of paid employment and housework. Over time, with grandparents or other relatives leaving the shared domestic space, middle and upper middle class urban home started

hiring part-time domestic help. Education remained the one tool for social mobility, but women were still expected to use fairness creams to be marriageable. While many of these changes were sociologically explained as arising from emancipation, neither the Towards Equality Report of 1974 nor the Shram Shakti report of 1989 reinforced the transformation. In fact, gendered hierarchies and the sexual division of labour in Indian families became important areas of anthropological exploration.

In the past 20 years, the number of women opting for higher education has increased to 48.6%, according to the All India Survey on Higher Education (2018-19); the average age of marriage for women is 22.1 years as per a 2019 report of ministry of statistics and implementation. As per Census 2011, only 5% of Indian marriages are inter-caste, while 93% respondents of a Centre for Monitoring of Indian Economy-

administered study of 2018 said they had arranged marriages. Finally, as per a 2016 BBC report, the divorce rate in India is less than 1%. These figures have to be read simultaneously with the 2019 National Statistical office survey that states 92% women in India take part in unpaid domestic work in homes in comparison to 27% of men. At least three sociological analyses can be made from these numbers. First, marriage and domestic arrangements still remain deeply caste endogamy-based or arranged despite processes of urbanisation or more mobility for work purposes.

Second, low divorce rates do not necessarily indicate happy marriages, but rather the deep economic and social pressures which create the inability to leave a marriage. For women, it is connected as much with stigma as with economic insecurity and the absence of housing if parents are unwelcoming.

Third, equal sharing of domestic responsibilities remains a far cry in most households and women still continue to bear the burden of child and elder care, caring for the sick and the disabled, besides cooking, cleaning or gathering.

When we look at all this along with the data that only 22% of women participate in any form of employment activity, we understand how serious the situation is. While the government initiated the Smart City Mission in 2015 to promote inclusive cities, urban planning in terms of safe and accessible transport and affordable and liveable housing remains unfavourable for women and trans persons. Since getting into the formal workforce is a distant dream for most women, the pressures of marriage-based security are real. Heterosexual marriage still remains the main source of legal entitlement for women and any other form of domestic intimacy does not find much space in official policies.





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# My Response To PM's Comments On Babus And IAS

The Prime Minister's outburst against 'babus' (civil servants) in the Lok Sabha a few weeks ago has once again triggered a debate about the role and efficacy of the IAS in particular and the civil services in general. I had no wish to join the debate but am compelled to do so because the debate has provided another opportunity to the detractors of the IAS to damn the service. The service does need to be defended, not because I myself served in it for nearly two decades and a half, but because I believe that it has done - and still doing - a good job by and large. I also have my complaints but they are against individual officers, not the service as such.

When I was a student way back in the 50s of the last century, the IAS was the most preferred service of the day, like the Indian Civil Service (ICS) was in the British days. Every young person worth his salt wanted to get into the service if he could. After the IAS came the turn of the police and other central ser-

vices, the state civil and police services and any other government job in that order. The private sector paid well even in those days, better than any government service, including the IAS, but those who joined it were derisively called the 'Boxwallahs' after a well-known private sector company called the Metal Box. Some respect was attached even in those days to a senior position in the Tatas. But the crème-de-la-crème was the IAS.

When India achieved independence, the rulers who had been at the receiving end of the administrators' stick during the freedom movement had a choice. They could have abolished the ICS, dismissed those in that service and not created its clone, the IAS. But they chose wisely to create a top civil service much like the ICS. One had to compete on an all-India basis, pass a difficult examination and go through an even more difficult oral interview to get into it. I had once said in the Lok Sabha that the IAS examination was perhaps the most difficult examination of my life until I con-

tested popular elections and realised that there was nothing more difficult than that.

The basic thing the recruiters looked for in the IAS was a bright and balanced mind that could face challenges of any kind. And I firmly believe that it continues to be and must remain the basic requirement of a generalist civil service like the IAS. Long ago I had read somewhere that a generalist knows less and less about more and more until he knows nothing about everything, while a specialist knows more and more about less and less until he knows everything about nothing. So, I am not getting into the debate of generalist versus specialist. At a certain level in the administration, one needs people with a bright mind, a strong common sense and the capacity to face challenges. Anyone can fill this bill, not merely an IAS officer, but the IAS has been created to provide exactly this kind of an officer. On a lighter note, I shall not be surprised if it came to light that it was actually a Babu who persuaded the Prime Minis-



ter to say what he said about Babus.

The ICS officers fully lived up to the expectations of Nehru and Patel by discharging with distinction whatever responsibility was assigned to them - from difficult diplomatic assignments to managing the economy and setting up and running steel plants like my father-in-law NC Shrivastava (ICS) did after rendering great service post-partition to the refugees who had come from Pakistan. The IAS officers have not been far behind. Taking names will be odious, but there have been officers who brought credit to whichever post held from Collec-

tor to Cabinet Secretary to Governor to Ambassador. Some of them have become internationally famous international trade experts, Many of them have distinguished themselves, first as outstanding field officers and later as representatives of India to the WTO or while serving in international organisations. Such examples can be multiplied manifold. But not everyone is up to the mark. Like any other walk of life, the civil service also has many black sheep. They generally fall by the wayside, though. It is a real rat race to survive and reach the top.

by Yashwant Sinha

# The Royal Soap Oprah And Meghan's Kahaani

Amazing, isn't it? The so-called tell-all 'interview of the decade' (woh wala - Meghan Markle and Prince Harry), graciously granted to the empress of interviews (Oprah Winfrey), turned out to be a full-on rona-dhona Bollywood style saga, complete with smarmy dialogue-baazi that would make our most gifted script writers proud! A popular meme showed the tawdry Brit Royals (before the split) dressed like the cast of Karan Johar's mega hit, "Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham." And I thought to myself: Oprah should definitely have borrowed the haunting title track of the movie for the show watched by zillions across the world. "Aaa aa aa aaah ...."

It's really most ajeeb that even in faraway India, so many people I know were hanging on to every line, eyebrow twitch and tear during the televised interview, as if nothing else mattered. Forget the Covid jab statistics, Hiran controversy, it was Meghan's accusations against her in-laws that had the chattering classes....well, chattering! For hours! I received so many messages from unlikely people, asking whether I 'sympathised' with Meghan and believed her. I wanted to say, "Since I am not her saas (thank God!), I really don't give a damn." To put it crudely and in delectable 'Indian-ese' - what goes of my



father if Meghan felt she had been ill-treated by her in-laws? This is the story of most desi joint families in our country. Ekta Kapoor has minted millions exploiting the saas-bahu angle from all perspectives. Meghan was stating nothing we aren't familiar with - so, I really was not about to give up on my precious free time on this - that too on International Women's Day. Come on, Meghan! You are a big girl! Deal with your problems like a big girl. The sort of privileges and wealth these two still enjoy hardly make them credible candidates for victimhood. Harry came across as a pathetic 'joru ka ghulam', making fans wonder: whatever happened to the charm-

ing bad boy of the tight-assed Royal family? He is now a sad shadow of his former dashing self. No wonder nobody wants to hang with him - saala bore ban gaya! Meghan, on the other hand, sounds like a woman with a plan, an all-American biz lady, pouring over her spreadsheets, strategizing her future and planning an IPO. When she simpered that she had never googled Harry before marrying him, women across the world shook their heads and said, "Chal, jhooti kahin ki!" I mean, that's the first thing people do when they meet a future spouse! She also claims she had no idea about her royal duties as his wife! That's called slip-

shod homework, honey! Not buying this one. The rest of her charges are equally disingenuous. The only one I kinda believed was about members of The Firm discussing the colour of the unborn bachcha. I suspect that must have been Camilla Parker Bowles - her step mother-in-law. Listen - we are equally racist in India, okay? A nasty saas will not only worry about her grandchild's complexion, she may go further and doubt the baby's paternity! Hota hai!

Meghan has pulled out every conceivable hate card in the American market - race, cruelty, put downs, prejudice, discrimination, financial blackmail, deprivation, the entire half-cooked khichdi. Enough to give collective indigestion across continents. Meghan talks of feeling suicidal. Ask any bahu here if she has escaped that feeling, even if she is married to Hari and not Harry. Meghan wants her jalebi and to eat it, too - the title, the money, the security. But no responsibility! Wah! Every bahu would want the same - does it happen? And that wimp Harry doesn't feel shy about confessing that he is living off Mummy's money! Bechari Diana! Get off your royal butt, Harry Baba, and earn your own dosh! But some royals believe it is their birthright to sponge off subjects.

by Shobhaa De



# America's southern border has been erased -- does anyone in charge care?

Ten days before the 2020 election, Mitchell Ferman, a reporter for the Texas Tribune, came across a very strange sight in Starr County, Texas, which sits right on the border with Mexico.

Starr County is one of the poorest places in the country. Not a lot of people visit, but Ferman did, and he watched as more than 70 vehicles with Trump flags drove in parade formation from the little town of Roma to Rio Grande City. "All Aboard the Trump Train" read one sign.

This convoy was organized by a man called Roel Reyes, and not even he could believe the turnout. "I was expecting 15 to 20 cars, max," he told Ferman. The reason Reyes wasn't expecting more cars is that Starr County is not exactly a Republican stronghold. In fact, just four years before, Hillary Clinton defeated Donald Trump in Starr County by 60 points.

But things changed and they changed fast. In the span of just four years, Starr County moved from deep blue to almost red. Donald Trump finished within just five points of Joe Biden. That's a swing of more than 50 points.

And the numbers are even more dramatic in nearby Zapata County. Donald Trump lost Zapata County in 2016 by 33 points, but last November, he easily beat Joe Biden. These are big changes, and you're seeing them all along the Rio Grande Valley.

Now to the geniuses looking at these numbers in Washington, trying to figure out what they mean, the thing that leaps out to them immediately is that Starr and Zapata counties are overwhelmingly Hispanic. Starr County is 96% Hispanic, and Zapata is 85%. So how could Hispanics support Donald Trump in numbers like that? (They must be QAnon people!)

Not only are those two counties non-white, they're very poor. Nearly a third of the residents in Starr County live in poverty. The median household income in both those counties is under \$35,000 a year. But they're voting for Trump. What the hell is going on?

Well, a lot of things are going on probably, but uncontrolled illegal immigration is definitely one of them, probably the main one. That's completely baffling

to people in D.C. If you're a Yale-educated bureaucrat or a nonprofit executive living in Bethesda, you see everything through the lens of identity politics. You've been told to do that, and needless to say, you obey. You always obey.

Most illegal aliens are Hispanic. So you assume that most Hispanics support illegal immigration. That's just how you think. The problem is, you're an idiot. You have no idea what you're talking about, and you have no clue how ignorant you are. How could you know? You never leave Bethesda.

Rep. Henry Cuellar, D-Texas, represents both Starr and Zapata Counties, and he sees what's happening. He can't ignore it. On Saturday, he told Fox News that his constituents are being overwhelmed by an influx of migrants from Latin America and the Biden administration is doing nothing to stop it. In fact, they're lying about it.

CUELLAR: It might have started under Trump, but when you're the President, you own the situation, whether it's a success or not a success ... I think in February we're going to get about



100,000 [border crossers]. And again, I don't care what we call it, but I can tell you this, those numbers of people that are being released, they're purposely withholding that information ... I now know that they're bringing people from McAllen over to Laredo, processing them in Laredo, and they're going to release them in my community." Henry Cuellar says the Biden administration is purposely withholding the number of people being released. Now, why would they do that? How bad is it? Again, this is an elected Democrat admitting that he has no idea how many people are flooding into his community every day because the

Biden administration is hiding that information.

Cuellar is supposed to be representing this area, but he has no idea how many of these people compete for his constituents for jobs. He has no clue how many of them are criminals. He has no idea how many of them have COVID. No one knows. The situation there is that out of control.

And it's not just Henry Cuellar who's upset about it. Another Democrat from Texas, State Senator Chuy Hinojosa from McAllen, has charged the Biden administration is encouraging illegal aliens to come, which obviously they are.

## A mountain of debt, 'free money' is not the answer to our problems. Here's what is

**There is no such thing as a free lunch. Debt today becomes massive interest payments tomorrow**

Democrats (and many Republicans) don't seem to care about the mountain of debt Congress added last year and continues to add this year. Instead of simply opening the economy back up as the virus wanes, Democrats are plowing ahead with another \$2 trillion in deficit spending. The Congressional Budget Office, a non-partisan agency, warns that this mountain of debt will explode interest payments, such that over the next 30 years, taxpayers will have to pony up \$61 trillion in interest. (Interest payments, by the way, don't buy you government services. Interest payments just eat up cash and crowd out other government expenditures.)

By 2050, interest payments will consume nearly half of the entire budget!

The latest CBO report doesn't pull any punches, the rapid expansion of the debt will "increase the risk of fiscal crisis - that is, a situation in which investors lose confidence in the U.S. government's ability to service and repay its debt, causing interest rates to



increase abruptly, inflation to spiral upward..." CBO further warns that this mountain of debt could cause the world to replace the dollar as the reserve currency.

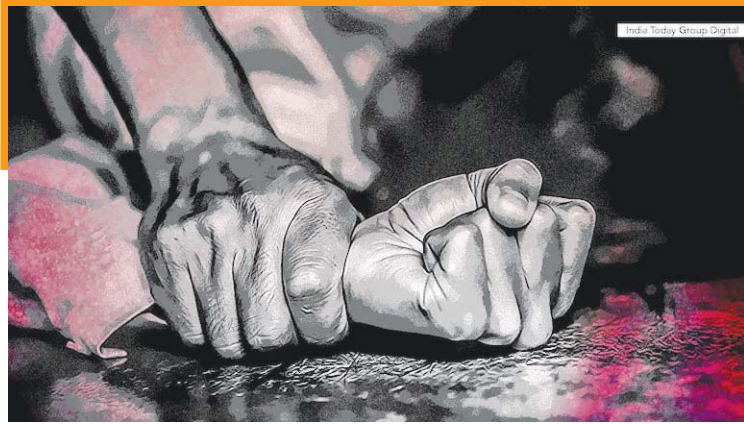
By 2050, the CBO estimates that our national debt will equal 202% of our gross national product. For years, fiscal conservatives, like myself have warned of the danger of having the national debt exceed 100% of the GDP but the CBO points out we are hurtling toward a time

when our debt will be twice the size of the economy.

I, for one, have advocated that there is another answer to our current problems. Instead of printing more money and making believe that this money will retain its value as it is sprinkled across the land, we could remove the government shackles that have caused a depression in the restaurant, retail, and entertainment sectors of our economy. Instead of passing out 'free' money, we should simply end the lockdowns. The daily incidence of COVID is in free fall. In addition, there is no evidence that the government lockdowns have worked. I don't know if I'll make it to 2050 but my kids will and I hope soon that enough voters will decide that there is no such thing as a free lunch and debt today becomes massive interest payments tomorrow. The economist John Maynard Keynes famously said that stimulus works in the short run and he didn't much care about the future because we'd all be dead.



# Kanpur: Minor gang-rape survivor's father dies 'in accident', kin allege foul play



**The father of a 13-year-old girl who was gang-raped died in an 'accident', police said on Thursday. The deceased's family has alleged foul play.**

(News Agencies)-The father of a minor girl who was allegedly gang-raped by three persons died "in an accident" after being hit by a truck on Wednesday in Uttar Pradesh's Kanpur. The incident happened when the girl's father was returning from a hospital, where her

medical tests were carried out, accompanied by police officials. Family alleges foul play. Family members of the victim have alleged that police conspired with the accused to kill the girl's father. "Police officials conspired with the accused, who is the son of a cop, to kill the

girl's father," said a family member. The family has blocked the Kanpur-Sagar highway in protest.

Police said that the girl's father was rushed to a hospital where he was declared brought dead. Police said one of the accused has been arrested.

"An FIR was registered against two people accused of raping the minor girl. The girl was taken to the hospital for a medical test. When her father was returning from the hospital, he was hit by a truck. Police officials took him

to a hospital where he was declared dead. One of the accused of girl's gang-rape has been arrested," said Kanpur SSP Preetivinder Singh.

What happened

As per a report in PTI, an FIR was registered on Tuesday against Deepu Yadav, his brother Saurabh Yadav and friend Golu Yadav in connection with the gang-rape, Superintendent of Police (rural) Brajesh Srivastava said. Deepu and Saurabh are sons of a police sub-inspector, officials said. Srivastava said the

girl had gone out to collect fodder for cattle on Monday when she was kidnapped by the accused and taken to an unknown place, where she was allegedly raped by Deepu and Golu.

Saurabh allegedly threatened the girl of dire consequences if she dared to speak to anyone about the incident, the SP said. The girl, however, managed to reach her house in the morning and narrated the incident to her family members, who lodged a complaint with the police, reported PTI.

## Mumbai Police arrest three for murder of two senior citizens in Goa

**Three people were arrested by Mumbai Police from the city for the murder of two senior citizens in Goa earlier this week.**

(News Agencies)-Mumbai Police has arrested three people accused for allegedly bludgeoning to death two senior citizens in Fatorda area in South Goa district. The accused had hammered and stabbed the senior citizens to death and escaped to Mumbai. The deceased were identified as Minguel Miranda (65) and his mother-in-law Catherin Pinto (86). Mumbai Crime Branch has arrested three accused Ravinkumar Sada (18) Akash Ghosh (20) and Adityakumar

Kharwal (18).

Motive behind murder

Miranda family ran a construction business while the accused owed money from Miranda. Sada, a native of Bihar, and Jharkhand residents Kharwal and Ghosh (20) were working with Miranda, who was a contractor, reported PTI.

During the course of investigation, the cops found a heavy hammer lying next to both bodies. The cops also found that three people suspected to be involved

were missing after the murder.

The police suspected that the accused could flee to Mumbai and therefore Goa Police sought help of Mumbai Crime Branch. Acting on a tip-off, the accused were arrested by police near Shivaji Park area. The cops learnt that the accused were planning to escape to Jharkhand from Mumbai.

Murder over non-payment of dues. The accused confessed to the police that they killed Miranda after they demanded their pay-



ment of last three months from him. Miranda and the three accused had a fight while Pinto intervened. In a fit of rage, the accused hit both deceased with a hammer and also stabbed them to death and

escaped. The incident took place on Monday and the accused were arrested from Mumbai on Tuesday.

The accused are handed over to Fartado Police Station for further investigations.

## ED raids Punjab MLA Sukhpal Singh Khaira's Chandigarh home in money laundering case

**ED officials have accused Sukhpal Singh Khaira of money laundering. Khaira was previously linked to a drug smuggling case in 2015. The raids are being carried out by the ED under provisions of the Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA).**



raids were carried out by the ED under provisions of the Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA). With the fresh raids, ED wants to gather more evidence in connection with the money laundering case, related to alleged cross-border drug trafficking.

A court in Fazilka had summoned Sukhpal Singh Khaira in connection with the drug smuggling case registered in the city in 2015. His name emerged after the arrest of some drug smugglers. The police

had recovered 2 kilograms of heroin, 24 gold biscuits, a country-made pistol and two Pakistani mobile SIM cards from the arrested smugglers; the assets seized are linked to Khaira.

Allegations were levelled that Khaira was using the mobile phone of his PS to speak to the smugglers. The MLA had denied the allegations and moved the high court for anticipatory bail after a non-bailable warrant was issued against him by the local

court. Khaira's bail application was rejected by the high court. Khaira then moved the Supreme Court and got some respite as it stayed the Fazilka court's non-bailable warrant order against him.

Khaira, 56, is a legislator of the Punjab Ekta Party (PEP), which he founded in 2019. While he was elected to the State Assembly in 2017 on an Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) ticket, he quit the party and formed the PEP two years later.

The Enforcement Directorate on Tuesday raided the Chandigarh residence of Punjab MLA Sukhpal Singh Khaira in connection with a money laundering investigation. The agency also

raided at least 10 locations in Punjab and New Delhi. ED officials have accused the Bholath MLA of money laundering. Khaira was previously linked to a drug smuggling case in 2015. The



# Mukesh Amban bomb scare: Sachin Vaze denies using Mansukh Hiren's SUV



**Mumbai police officer Sachin Vaze has denied using the SUV that was later found laden with explosives outside Mukesh Ambani's house.**

(News Agencies)- Mumbai Police's encounter specialist Sachin Vaze has denied using Mansukh Hiren's SUV that was later found laden with explosives outside Mukesh Ambani's house in Mumbai. In his statement to the Anti-Terror Squad, probing the bomb scare, Sachin Vaze on Wednesday said that he never used the SUV. He also denied meeting Hiren a day before his death. After a Scorpio with explosives was found near industrialist Mukesh Ambani's house in South Mumbai on February 25,

Hiren, a Thane resident, had claimed it had been stolen from his possession a week earlier. Hiren himself was found dead in Thane creek on March 5.

In her FIR, Mansukh Hiren's wife Vimla Hiren said that Vaze was in possession of the said SUV for four months prior to the incident.

In her statement, Vimla Hiren said that the SUV was handed over to Vaze by Mansukh in November 2020 and he re-

turned it to him on February 5, 2021, citing a steering problem in the vehicle. Her statement also corroborates Mansukh's version that he had left the SUV on Mulund Airoli link road due on February 17 to steering problems and it was stolen when he went there the next day.

However, in his statement to the ATS, Sachin Vaze denied using the SUV. Vaze also told the ATS that he did not meet Mansukh Hiren a day before

his death, as claimed by Mansukh's wife.

Vaze said that Mansukh trusted him and had told his family to contact him in case of any problem.

In the FIR filed by Mansukh Hiren's wife, it has been stated that she last saw her husband when he left for Godbunder Road on an autorickshaw to meet police officer Tawde from the Kandivali crime branch. His body was found in Thane creek the next day.

# Red Fort violence: Police nab Dutch national trying to flee India, another who assaulted cops

**Delhi Police has made two more arrests in the Red Fort violence case. While one of the two had allegedly assaulted a policeman on duty at the Red Fort during the Republic Day violence, the other is a habitual offender and was trying to flee the country.**

(News Agencies)-Delhi Police has made two more arrests in the Red Fort violence case. While one of the two had allegedly assaulted a policeman on duty at the Red Fort during the Republic Day violence, the other is a habitual offender and was trying to flee the country.

Accused Maninderjit Singh, who is a Dutch national and is settled in Birmingham, UK, has been arrested from the Delhi airport while he was trying to flee India with forged travel documents. A lookout circular notice had been issued against him.

The other accused, Khempreet

Singh, had assaulted the police personnel on duty inside the walls of Red Fort with a spear, said the police. He was absconding and had willfully evaded arrest.

Delhi Police have continued with the regular raids at different places across Delhi and Punjab over the Republic Day violence during the farmers' tractor rally in Delhi. Several arrests have been made so far, including that of actor Deep Sidhu, who has been accused of inciting the farmers to storm the Red Fort.

With the latest arrests, the total number of those who have been arrested in the Red Fort violence

case has gone up to 14.

Police have said accused Maninderjit Singh was seen in video footages of the Red Fort incident, carrying a spear in his hands.

Pressured by the raids being conducted by the teams of Crime Branch at different places in Punjab, Maninderjit attempted to flee the country by boarding a flight from Delhi. With the forged travel papers, he had planned to first fly to Nepal from Delhi and then to UK.

Maninderjit Singh also has other cases in his name under the Arms Act and other laws, said



the police. He has been produced before the court and has been given police custody.

The other accused, Khempreet Singh, was also seen carrying a huge spear during the Red Fort violence and assaulting police personnel.

During investigation he disclosed

that on January 26, he along with his associates joined the tractor rally from Sanjay Gandhi Transport Nagar and finally reached Red Fort after breaching the barricades at Burari and Chattha Rail.

He will be produced before the court on Wednesday.

# Two drug peddlers arrested in Kolkata in Pamela Goswami drug haul case

(News Agencies)-Two more arrests have been made in Kolkata in connection with BJP leaders Pamela Goswami and Rakesh Singh, who were arrested last month in a cocaine haul case.

The latest arrests in the Pamela Goswami case are that of 26-year-old Farhan Ahmed and 25-year-old Daim Akhtar, both of whom are drug peddlers.

Ten grams of cocaine in a small plastic pouch was also found in possession of Farhan Ahmed. Earlier on Tuesday, police arrested a woman from New Town near Kolkata in connection with the cocaine haul case of arrested BJP leader Rakesh Singh and youth leader Pamela Goswami.

Police have found the woman used to allegedly purchase cocaine from drug peddlers for Rakesh Singh.

"We have arrested a woman in the New Alipore drugs



case. She was engaged by Rakesh Singh to procure cocaine from drug peddlers," the police said.

"She purchased cocaine at the rate of Rs 9,500 per gram and handed it to Rakesh Singh. We are finding

out whether she is associated with other drug peddlers. We arrested her on Monday night from her residence in New Town," an officer said. Around 10 people have been arrested so far in the drug haul case lodged under sections of the NDPS Act.

BJP youth leader Pamela Goswami along with her friend Prabir Kumar Dey and private security guard Somnath Chatterjee were arrested last month from south Kolkata's New Alipore area with allegedly around 90 gm of cocaine that was found in her car.

Based on her statement, BJP's state committee member Rakesh Singh and another person, who was accompanying him, were arrested from Galsi in Purba Bardhaman district.

Another close aide of Rakesh was arrested last week from the Orphanganj Road area.



# Pakistan to receive 45 million 'Made In India' vaccine under GAVI alliance

**Islamabad will be getting 45 million doses of 'Indian-made' vaccine under the United GAVI alliance, Federal Secretary National Health Services, Regulation and Coordination Aamir Ashraf Khawaja on Thursday informed the Public Accounts Committee (PAC) of Pakistan.**

(News Agencies)- Islamabad will be getting 45 million doses of 'Indian-made' vaccine under the United GAVI alliance, Federal Secretary National Health Services, Regulation and Coordination Aamir Ashraf Khawaja on Thursday informed the Public Accounts Committee (PAC) of Pakistan. GAVI, the vaccine alliance, helps vaccinate almost half the world's children against

deadly and debilitating infectious diseases. It has been providing assistance to Pakistan all through the pandemic as well. It had signed an agreement with Pakistan to provide COVID-19 vaccine in September 2020. Secretary Khawaja said that a total of 45 million doses of vaccine would be received under an agreement with GAVI and out of those, total 16 million would be received till June this year.

According to Pakistani media reports, while briefing the committee when Senator Mushahid Hussain Syed was questioned about where the vaccine was coming from, the health secretary informed that Pakistan would receive vaccine manufactured by the Serum Institute of India.

"It is Indian manufactured vaccine that would be administered to Pakistani nationals under the



GAVI alliance that has been income nations on the vaccine aiding developing and lower front," he had said.

## Gilgit-Baltistan Assembly passes resolution for interim provincial status for region

**Gilgit Baltistan Legislative Assembly on Tuesday passed a resolution demanding interim provincial status for the region.**



(News Agencies)-Gilgit Baltistan Legislative Assembly on Tuesday passed a resolution demanding interim provincial status for the region. Prime Minister Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI)-led government has demanded from the federal government that

Gilgit-Baltistan should be allocated seats in the National Assembly, Senate and representation in federal institutions. The resolution was moved by Gilgit-Baltistan Chief Minister Khalid Khurshid Khan. According to reports, the Chief Minister was

joined in tabling the resolution by Opposition leader Amjad Hussain from Pakistan Peoples' Party (PPP), Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) representative Ghulam Muhammad, Majlis Wahdatul Muslimeen (MWM) member Muhammad Kazim and Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam Fazl (JUI-F) leader Rehmat Khaliq. Apart from seeking representation in the federal government and the institutions, the resolution also stated that a bill to amend the Constitution of Pakistan to declare Gilgit-Baltistan a province

of Pakistan should be passed by Parliament but keeping UN resolutions on Kashmir in mind. "The demand for constitutional rights is a unanimous demand of the people of Gilgit-Baltistan, not that of an individual/party. The unity we've shown on this issue needs to be repeated again at a federal level," Chief Minister Khan was quoted by PTI as saying. India has in the past rejected moves made by Pakistan to incorporate Gilgit-Baltistan as part of its territory.

"The Government of India firmly rejects the attempt by Pakistan to bring material changes to a part of Indian territory, under its illegal and forcible occupation. I reiterate that the Union Territories of Jammu and Kashmir and Ladakh, including the area of so-called 'Gilgit-Baltistan', are an integral part of India by virtue of the legal, complete and irrevocable accession of Jammu and Kashmir to the Union of India in 1947," Indian Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) had said in November last year.

## India Has Direct Stakes In Maintenance Of Peace In Myanmar: Centre

**In response to a question in Lok Sabha, Minister of State for External Affairs V Muraleedharan said India has urged that the rule of law and democratic process be upheld.**

(News Agencies)- India on Wednesday said it has direct stakes in the maintenance of peace and stability in Myanmar and the recent developments in that country were of deep concern to it. Last month, Myanmar's military grabbed power in a coup against the civilian government and imposed a state of emergency after detaining Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi and other leaders of her National League for Democracy (NLD).

In response to a question in Lok Sabha, Minister of State for External Affairs V Muraleedharan said India has urged that the rule

of law and democratic process be upheld and called upon the leadership of Myanmar to work together to resolve their differences in a peaceful and constructive manner. He said India will closely monitor the situation in Myanmar and remain in discussion with the international community, including at the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), on the issue. "India shares a land and maritime border with Myanmar and has direct stakes in the maintenance of peace and stability in the country. As part of our 'Neighbourhood First' and 'Act

East" policies, India has supported socio-economic development in Myanmar and facilitated the process of democratic transition in the country," he said. "The recent developments in Myanmar are therefore of deep concern," he added. The minister also said India's relationship with Myanmar remains independent of its ties with any third country. Myanmar witnessed massive protests in the last few weeks against the February 1 coup. To a separate question on vandalisation of a statue of Mahatma Gandhi in the city of



Davis in California on January 28, M Muraleedharan said India has strongly condemned this "malicious and despicable act" against a universally respected icon of peace and justice. He said the Embassy of India in Washington DC has taken up the matter with the US Department of State for a thorough

investigation and appropriate action against those responsible for this despicable act. The Consulate General of India in San Francisco has separately taken up the matter with the City of Davis and local law enforcement authorities, which have initiated an investigation," he said.





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# Punjab farmers caught between two fences at India-Pakistan border

**Farmers say fencing along the 553-km border has robbed them of their lands and they have not been adequately compensated.**

(News Agencies)- Raghbir Singh Bhangala often stands looking at his fields beyond the barbed-wire fence that marks the border between India and Pakistan. He stands on five acres of his own farmland in the Tarn Taran district of India's Punjab state, while the remaining eight acres is on the other side of the fence.

Bhangala, now 78, has spent more than 25 years of his life fighting for the right to till his land, ever since it was declared a restricted area because it falls between the fence and the so-called "zero line" - the international border between India and Pakistan.

When the Khalistan rebellion, a separatist movement seeking to create a sovereign Sikh-majority state, was at its peak in Punjab between 1988 and 1991, the Indian government installed barbed-wire fences and gates

along the 553-km (343-mile) international border, restricting access to 21,300 acres of farmland. A 13.4-metre (44-foot) strip of land was carved out of farmers' holdings, four metres (14 feet) were kept on Pakistan's side, seven metres (22 feet) were on India's side, and about three metres (11 feet) were in between. Apart from that, another three-metre strip of the farmers' land abutting the international border was restricted for patrolling by Indian security forces, according to documents accessed by Al Jazeera.

'Do I have to pay for securing the borders?'

Bhangala alleges his land was neither officially acquired nor was there adequate compensation paid to him or the farmers from 220 villages whose land he says were taken away.

"Do I have to pay for the cost of

securing the borders of India by giving up my own livelihood?" he asks.

Meanwhile, despite being legal owners of their land, farmers like Bhangala have been left at the mercy of India's Border Security Force (BSF), which imposes restricted timings and checks on irrigation and other farming activities.

"The farmers have been stopped from going to their own fields," says Bhangala in his native Punjabi language.

In 1996, Bhangala along with other anguished farmers, formed the Border Farmer Welfare Organisation and filed a petition in the Punjab and Haryana High Court, demanding the right to access their lands.

The petition was dismissed in 2011 after the BSF accused the farmers of being under the influence of Pakistan's spy



agency, the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI).

Next year, Bhangala filed an appeal against the High Court order. In 2015, the court ordered the state of Punjab and the government of India to pay 10,000 rupees (\$137) per acre annually to farmers as compensation for their loss.

The court also ordered Punjab state to acquire the 11-foot strip of land over which BSF conducts its patrolling.

"However, in the last three years, neither any compensation has been paid nor has the land been

legally acquired," Raghbir Singh, who also filed a contempt petition in the high court in December last year, told Al Jazeera.

'Why leave us hanging?'

At a time when nationalist sentiments in India are high, driven by the right-wing government headed by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Bhangala asks if the cost of securing the nation's borders is to be paid by him and hundreds of other farmers.

"If they want our land, they can acquire it or compensate us. Why are they leaving us hanging in the middle?" he told Al Jazeera.

## NYC: STOP THE SPREAD OF CORONAVIRUS!

New Yorkers working together can slow the spread of Coronavirus (COVID-19) in New York City.



### PROTECT YOURSELF AND OTHERS

- Wash your hands with soap and water often.
- Cover your nose and mouth with a tissue or sleeve when sneezing or coughing.
- Do not touch your face with unwashed hands.
- Do not shake hands. Instead wave or elbow bump.
- Monitor your health more closely than usual for cold or flu symptoms.



### STAY HOME IF SICK

- Stay home and call your doctor if you have symptoms like coughing, shortness of breath, fever, sore throat.
- If you do not feel better in 24-48 hours, seek care from your doctor.
- If you need help getting medical care, call 311.
- NYC will provide care regardless of immigration status or ability to pay.



### PROTECT THE MOST VULNERABLE

- If you have chronic conditions like lung disease, heart disease, diabetes, cancer or a weakened immune system, avoid unnecessary gatherings and events.
- If you have family or friends who have one of these conditions, do not visit them if you feel sick.



### REDUCE OVERCROWDING

- Consider telecommuting.
- Stagger work hours, starting earlier or later.
- Walk or bike to work, if possible.
- If the train is too packed, wait for the next one.

Text COVID to 692-692 for real-time updates or visit [nyc.gov/coronavirus](https://nyc.gov/coronavirus).

Call 311 to report harassment or discrimination.

\*Messages and data rates may apply. Check your wireless provider plan for details.

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# The Pakistani Taliban is Back

**Over the past two years, the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan has re-emerged. The group poses a threat in Pakistan and beyond.**

(News Agencies)- Six years after their defeat, the once-dreaded Pakistani Taliban have staged a gradual comeback in their former territories in Waziristan, the rugged tribal region bordering Afghanistan, by carrying out targeted killings, attacking Pakistani security forces, kidnapping government officials, and collecting protection money from local businessmen and government contractors. The visible uptick in Taliban attacks over the past year in north and south Waziristan is believed to be the result of the re-unification and merger of several Taliban factions and splinters in the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), a loose alliance of militant groups founded by the then-Taliban chief Baitullah Mehsud in 2007.



Baitullah Mehsud, a veteran of the Afghan "jihad," was killed in a drone strike in August 2009 and was replaced by Hakimullah Mehsud, another ruthless commander from the Mehsud clan, as the group's new leader. However, banned militant group. Already weakened by its internal rifts and the separation of various factions and splinters, the TTP received what was perceived as a final blow when Pakistan launched a massive military operation, Zarb-e-Azb, in June 2014. The TTP leadership fled across the border to hide in eastern and southern Afghanistan. The Taliban under Fazlullah struggled for survival. However, Fazlullah's death in June 2018, also in a drone strike, once again returned the TTP leadership to the Mehsud Taliban. Mufti Noor Wali Mehsud, who is considered a writer and strategist rather than a hardened fighter, focused on bringing the various factions together under the TTP umbrella again over the next two years.

## Afghan Buddha in virtual return, 20 years after Taliban destroyed



(News Agencies)-Twenty years After a lantern-lit procession, after being blasted out of hundreds gathered at the base of the cliff where the statues once stood alongside a network of ancient caves, monasteries and shrines. The projection filled the alcove that once housed Salsal - the 55-metre (180-foot) high statue. "These moments also remind you of what a great treasure we lost," said Gulsoom Zahra, a 23-year-old Bamiyan resident who attended the ceremony. The Taliban drew international revulsion when they blew up the centuries-old figures during their brief, iron-handed rule over the country as they went on a of the A Night With Buddha event.

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The first signs of global warming are now clearly visible. We urgently need to limit greenhouse gas emissions. Nothing and no-one will be spared from climate change. This warning is therefore to all people, all countries and, in particular, to the Belgian Council of Ministers who, on the weekend of March 20 and 21, will have to decide what action to take regarding essential measures linked to the Kyoto Protocol.





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# Malala teams up with Apple for content aimed at women, children

**Pakistani Nobel laureate signs deal that would 'draw on her ability to inspire people around the world'.**

Pakistani Nobel laureate and activist Malala Yousafzai, who survived a Taliban assassination attempt, has signed a deal with Apple TV+ that will see her produce dramas and documentaries focusing on women and children.

The multi-year partnership would "draw on her ability to inspire people around the world", the company said in a statement on Monday, adding that content would also include animation and children's series. "I'm grateful for the opportunity to support women, young people, writers, and artists in reflecting the world as they see it," the 23-year-old was quoted as saying. Yousafzai earned the wrath of the Taliban as a 10-year-old in rural northwestern Pakistan when she began

campaigning for girls' education rights. At the time, the Pakistani Taliban had gained a significant foothold in the Swat Valley and had, among other things, banned education for girls and employment for women.

International attention Yousafzai drew international attention with a series of blogs and articles she wrote under a pen name for the BBC about everyday life and hopes for a better future, but her fame incensed the Taliban, whose leadership ordered her murder. In October 2012, a Taliban assassin shot Malala, then 15 years old, in a school van. The bullet struck near her left eye, went through her neck and lodged in her shoulder.

She recovered after months of treatment at home and abroad before co-writing a bestselling

memoir titled, *I am Malala*, which drew even more international attention.

Yousafzai was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize as a 17-year-old in 2014, sharing the award with Kailash Satyarthi, a children's rights activist from India. Apple produced a documentary about Malala in 2015 and teamed up with her Malala Fund in 2018 to promote secondary education for girls across the globe.

She graduated from Oxford University last year and has since created Assembly, a digital publication for girls and women, that is available on Apple News and formed her own TV production company, Extracurricular.

"I believe in the power of stories to bring families together, forge friendships, build movements,



and inspire children to dream," she was quoted as saying in Monday's statement.

In an interview with Reuters news agency, Malala said: "I hope that through this partnership, I will be able to bring new voices to this platform, to this stage. I hope that through me, more young people and girls will watch these shows, get inspired."

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# Covid resurgence in Brazil and what experts in India say

**Brazil is seeing more Covid deaths and cases than ever before and hence its hospitals are filled to the brim and overflowing.**

(News Agencies)-More than a year since the Covid-19 pandemic first originated, most countries have managed to put the worst behind them to embark on the recovery path, both case-wise as well as economically, thanks to some aggressive policies and the arrival of vaccines. Unfortunately, Brazil is not on this list.

The nation having a population of around 212 million is facing its worst Covid wave ever since the virus first hit the country last year. Brazil is seeing more Covid deaths and cases than ever before and hence its hospitals are filled to the brim and overflowing.

The non-existent policy is in disarray, and its vaccine supplies are seeing a major shortfall. It of course does no good when your president is someone who scoffs at the disease, rejects the theory behind the use of masks and lets states frame their own policies. The country is now host to variant P.1 of coronavirus that's more contagious and deadlier.

For instance, three different cities in Brazil - Araraquara, Bauru and Serrana - within 140km have had completely different approaches to fighting the sudden surge in case numbers. This has given rise to a lot of confusion and uncertainty in the country. Araraquara, for example, has been seeing complete lockdown. Bauru, on the other hand, has absolutely no lockdown or a strict mask policy. Serrana is seeing a complete vaccination programme. It remains to be seen what the future holds for either of these approaches.

"The acceleration of the epidemic in various states is leading to the collapse of their public and private hospital systems, which may soon become the case in every region of Brazil," the national association of health secretaries said in a statement. "Sadly, the anemic rollout of vaccines and the slow pace at which they're becoming available still does not suggest that this scenario will be reversed in the short term." It is

noteworthy to remember that India shipped a large consignment of vaccines to Brazil as part of its vaccine diplomacy or Vaccine Maitri initiative.

The highly contagious variant Preliminary studies show that the new variant that swept through the city of Manaus, capital of the northern state of Amazonas, is more contagious and infects people who have already recovered from other variants of the virus. And the variant has slipped through Brazil's borders, showing up in two dozen other countries, including India and the United States.

The variant P.1 spreads quickly. A study by Brazilian government researchers in January 2021 found that the P.1 variant was present in 91 per cent of samples sequenced in the state of Amazonas. By the end of February, health officials had reported cases of the P.1 variant in 21 of 26 Brazilian states.

Dr Eric Feigl-Ding, noted epidemiologist and health



economist from Washington D.C., has recorded that the P.1 variant is 2x-2.5x more transmissible. He observed that 17 state capitals in Brazil have more than 80 per cent of their ICUs filled.

Based on preliminary data, doctors in Brazil put the chances of Covid-19 reinfection via the P.1 variant between 25 per cent and 60 per cent.

The biggest concern amongst the medical world is ascertaining the effects of existing vaccines on this variant. A study published by Lancet, has revealed that the P.1 variant can evade the immunity developed against the wild-type coronavirus. This follows other

studies that have claimed that the existing Covid-19 vaccines show limited efficacy against the new strains of the virus that have originated in Brazil and South Africa. The researchers examined the neutralising ability of antibodies in plasma samples taken from survivors of earlier Covid-19 variants. The plasma had a six-fold less neutralising capacity against the P.1 variant than the earlier variants of the virus. "The lower neutralisation capacity of SARS-CoV-2 antibodies and partial immunity against new variants suggests that reinfection could occur in convalescent or even vaccinated individuals," the authors added.

## Queen's Response To Racism Claim The "Bare Minimum": UK Media



**Several tabloids ran front-page headlines picking up on the 94-year-old monarch's much-anticipated response, issued late Tuesday afternoon.**

(News Agencies)- British Queen Elizabeth II's statement on explosive racism claims by Prince Harry and Meghan Markle dominated British media on Wednesday, with some saying she needed to give a stronger response.

Several tabloids ran front-page headlines picking up on the 94-year-old monarch's much-anticipated response, issued late Tuesday afternoon.

"We will always love you," wrote The Mirror, while Metro went with "Our royal sadness".

The Sun, however, used a quote of the Queen's that appeared to cast doubt on Meghan and Harry's account: "Recollections may vary".

In an interview with US chat show host Oprah Winfrey, Meghan and Harry said an unnamed royal asked how dark their baby's skin would be. Meghan also

that "the issues raised, particularly that of race, are concerning".

It said that "some recollections may vary," but the claims "are taken very seriously and will be addressed by the family privately."

The statement "sought to draw a line under damaging racism claims," wrote The Guardian, a leftwing broadsheet. The Independent, a newspaper that

suggested there were moves to deny their son Archie privileges because he is mixed-race.

The queen's statement said the family was "saddened" and

gives little coverage to royal matters, called it a "rare intervention" from a monarch who "has historically kept quiet on matters of controversy".

Former royal correspondent Peter Hunt told BBC radio the 61-word statement was "the bare minimum" at a time when the royals found themselves in an "enormous hole".

"In my judgement, it was too little and it was too late," he said.

There were varying interpretations of what exactly the queen meant by "recollections may vary".

"It could refer to remarks over Archie's skin colour, or, perhaps, the fact the couple believed protocol was to be changed to deny their son the automatic title of prince when Charles accedes the throne,"

wrote The Guardian. Most assumed it referred to the racism claim. The Times, a rightwing broadsheet, called this "a sign that the Palace will refuse to let everything the couple said go unchallenged".

In a commentary piece, the newspaper also said the claims -- and the furore it has caused -- was "a soft-power disaster for Britain", and dragged the royal family in to the US "culture war".

The Telegraph, another conservative broadsheet, said the statement "suggests the individual has been identified", amid fevered speculation about the possible culprit.

But it said the public is unlikely to learn more as this was "expected to be Her Majesty's final word on the matter".



# Hawaii Declares Emergency Due To Floods, Orders Evacuations

**Poor weather was expected to run until Friday, he added, and flood advisories stayed in place for a second day.**

(News Agencies)-Hawaii Governor David Ige declared an emergency in the U.S. state after heavy rains brought floods, landslides and fear of dam failures, and authorities ordered the evacuation of several thousand people from communities threatened by rising waters.

The move came after a dam overflowed on the island of Maui, forcing evacuations and destroying homes, with the dam's "unsatisfactory" condition leading to it being scheduled for removal this year, the land

department has said. "The emergency proclamation makes state general funds available that can be used quickly and efficiently to help those impacted by the severe weather," Ige said on Tuesday. Poor weather was expected to run until Friday, he added, and flood advisories stayed in place for a second day.

The emergency declaration covers the counties of Hawai'i, Maui, Kalawao, O'ahu and Kaua'i, the governor's office said in a statement, while the disaster relief period runs until

May 8. The Honolulu Department of Emergency Management directed people to leave Haleiwa, a community of a few thousand people to the north of state capital Honolulu.

Hawaii News Now reported that two people were swept away in raging waters on Tuesday. One of them, a 27-year-old man, was rescued by authorities. A search for the other would resume on Wednesday, according to the report. There were no other immediate reports of injuries or casualties. In Maui, heavy rains damaged roads, leaving them



impassable, with one bridge completely washed out and another displaced, the governor's office said. State emergency management officials had said the rains led to the cresting of the Kaupakalua dam in the northern

region of Haiku, prompting authorities to open evacuation shelters and urge people not to return home.

Six homes were heavily damaged or destroyed, said Maui mayor Michael Victorino.

# Meghan Markle Files Complaint Over UK TV Host Piers Morgan Criticisms



**Piers Morgan left his role as host of Good Morning Britain on Tuesday following a scathing attack on the Duchess of Sussex's interview with US chatshow host Oprah Winfrey.**

(News Agencies)- Meghan Markle filed a formal complaint with British broadcaster ITV, after a presenter criticised her claims against the royal family and later quit.

Piers Morgan left his role as host of Good Morning Britain on Tuesday following a scathing

attack on the Duchess of Sussex's interview with US chatshow host Oprah Winfrey. She and her husband, Prince Harry, accused the royal family of racism, while the former television actress said she had suicidal thoughts during her time in Britain. Former CNN host Morgan's comments that

he did not believe her sparked 41,000 complaints to Britain's broadcasting regulator Ofcom. Britain's domestic Press Association news agency said it understood Meghan formally complained to ITV before he resigned, confirming a report in the Daily Telegraph newspaper. The complaint focused on how his remarks may affect those trying to deal with their own mental health problems, it added.

It did not concern his repeated criticism of her or allegations of racism, which have rocked the monarchy.

Morgan, a former tabloid newspaper editor, has been a consistent critic of Markle after she cut off contact with him after she met Harry and they married in 2018.

On Tuesday, Morgan stormed off the set of Good Morning Britain as he clashed with a fellow presenter who defended the duchess.

In a tweet as the programme aired on Wednesday, Morgan said he stood by his remarks and said he would fight for freedom of speech.

"On Monday, I said I didn't believe Meghan Markle in her

Oprah interview. I've had time to reflect on this opinion, and I still don't," he wrote.

Buckingham Palace on Tuesday responded to the explosive claims.

Queen Elizabeth II said Meghan and Harry, who quit royal life last year, and their son Archie would remain "much-loved family members". But she also said the accusations would be dealt with "privately". Asked to respond to Buckingham Palace's statement, a spokesman for Meghan and Harry said they would not be commenting any further.

# More than 100,000 migrants encountered at US-Mexico border in past 4 weeks, data shows

(News Agencies)- US authorities arrested and encountered more than 100,000 migrants on the US-Mexico border over the past four weeks ending on March 3, according to data obtained by CNN, marking the highest levels for the same time frame in five years. The number of migrants arrested on the southern border has been increasing in recent weeks, causing alarm among officials as they scramble to provide resources for the increase in minors and families who are unlawfully crossing into

the US. The surge in migrants adds to a growing sense of emergency for the Biden administration which has been seeking to unwind the Trump administration's immigration policies over that time. "February was unprecedented compared to the last five years," a Homeland Security official told CNN. Single adults make up the biggest portion of apprehensions, but the percentage of families and children jumped last month, according to the official. Since

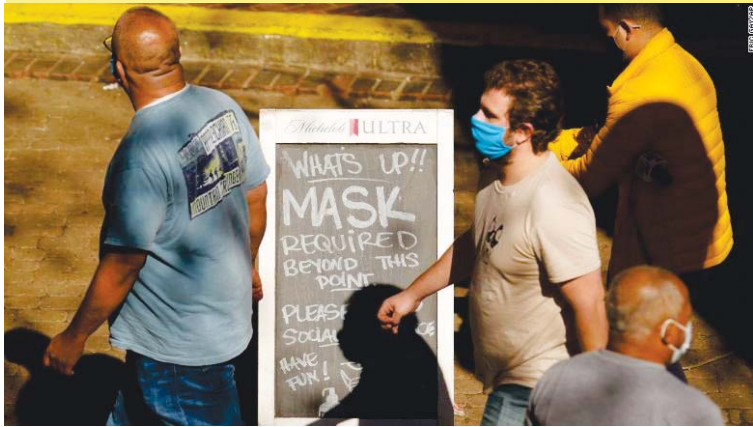
last April, Customs and Border Protection has seen an increase in border encounters from the Western Hemisphere due to worsening economic conditions brought on by the pandemic and natural disasters in the region, according to the border agency. Border arrivals typically rise in the spring, but the Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated the situation and further limited the capacity along the border to process migrants. Last year, the numbers dropped in March and April as the pandemic took hold

and travel restrictions were put in place. At the time, as the pandemic gripped the country, the Trump administration invoked a public health law allowing border officials to turn away migrants apprehended at the border, which is still in effect under the Biden administration. However, under the Biden administration, unaccompanied children are exempt from the order and are allowed to remain in the US pending immigration cases. Some families and others have also been allowed to remain in

the US due to changes in Mexican policy and case-by-case determinations. CNN has reached out to DHS and CBP for comment. A CBP spokesperson previously said, "The unique challenges of the pandemic require additional authorities, such as the CDC order known as Title 42, to allow DHS to effectively protect both the health and safety of migrants and our communities from the spread of COVID-19. The border is not open, and the vast majority of people are being returned under Title 42."



# As Texas governor lifts state mask mandate, here's what we know



business owners have struggled to pay their bills. This must end. It is now time to open Texas 100%," he said.

Critics of the decision said it was too soon, since only a small percentage of the state's population had been vaccinated -- less than 7% at the time -- and aggressively spreading variants of the virus may lead to another explosion of cases.

Less than 9% of Texans had been fully vaccinated when the mask order was suspended Wednesday, according to Johns Hopkins University data.

And several of the states' largest cities, including the capital, Austin, as well as counties and businesses, have said they will still require masks.

Some cities and businesses will still require masks

Austin chief medical officer Dr. Mark Escott announced Tuesday that masks will still be required. "In Austin, we're committed to saving lives, period," said City Council member Greg Casar. "If state officials don't want to do their jobs protecting people from the virus, then we will."

The council passed an ordinance last year allowing the health authority to establish public health mandates and Texas state law allows cities to create their own health rules, according to Tara Pohlmeier, the communications director for Casar.

The city's mask mandate and other health rules remain in place

through April 15, when they may be extended.

Other cities have said masks must still be worn on city properties and facilities, including Dallas, Houston, San Antonio and El Paso.

"People are still getting infected and individuals are still dying because of the virus," Houston Mayor Sylvester Turner said Monday. "Today the city of Houston's positivity rate is 13.1%, which is up from last week. So instead of going down it's kind of creeping right back up."

And retailers, grocery chains, pharmacies and automakers, including Target, Kroger, CVS, Walgreens, Best Buy, Macy's, JCPenney, Toyota, GM and others, say masks will still be required at their stores and facilities by both employees and customers.

Of course, masks will still be required on federal property in Texas, since President Joe Biden made that mandatory in January, as well as on public transportation.

Texas attorney general threatens to sue to stop Austin, county mask order

A showdown brewed on Wednesday when state Attorney General Ken Paxton sent a letter to Austin Mayor Steve Adler and Travis County Judge Andy Brown, saying he would sue unless the mask order was rescinded by 6 p.m. local time. Adler and Brown informed Paxton that they have no intention of backing down.

(News Agencies)-Texans were no longer under a statewide mandate to wear masks in public as of Wednesday, but they shouldn't be too quick to throw out their face coverings.

Gov. Greg Abbott last week announced he would be loosening restrictions meant to

stop the spread of Covid-19, including doing away with the mask requirement and allowing all businesses to reopen 100% since active Covid-19 cases and hospitalizations were down to levels not seen in months.

"Too many Texans have been sidelined from employment opportunities. Too many small

## Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and his wife Asma test positive for Covid-19

(News Agencies)-The Assads were in "stable condition" and planned to self-isolate for two or three weeks, the statement said.

Syria has recorded at least 45,879 positive Covid-19 cases and 2,023 total deaths based on cumulative numbers of multiple local medical authorities, but a full picture of the outbreak in the country has been difficult to get. Damascus received its first shipment of vaccines on March 1 from an unnamed "friendly" country, according to Syria's



state news agency. The name and quantities of the vaccines

were not mentioned in the statement.

Other territories in Syria, including rebel-held and Kurdish-held locations, have not received vaccines yet.

Assad has been repeatedly accused of war crimes and crimes against humanity during Syria's decade-long ongoing war. His government in Damascus has denied the charges.

The British-born wife of the Syrian president is a high-profile figure who has stood by Assad throughout the civil war. In 2018, she was diagnosed with breast cancer and has since recovered.

## China building offensive, aggressive military, top US Pacific commander says

(News Agencies)-China is assembling an increasingly offensive military and expanding its regional footprint, as Beijing steps up efforts to supplant American military power in Asia, a top US commander warned Congress on Tuesday.

"I cannot for the life of me understand some of the capabilities that they're putting in the field unless it is an aggressive posture," Adm. Philip Davidson, the head of US Indo-Pacific Command, said in testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee.

"I see them developing systems, capabilities and a posture that would indicate that they're interested in aggression," Davidson said. Davidson, who in

the hearing defended budget requests for billions of dollars of new weaponry in the Pacific, said the increased investment was necessary to deter Chinese military ambition in the region. Describing China as "the greatest long-term strategic threat to security in the 21st century" Davidson said Beijing has been carrying out increasingly threatening moves, citing Chinese military activity around Taiwan, along its disputed border with India and even around US islands in the Pacific.

"I'm worried that they're accelerating their ambitions ... to supplant the United States and our leadership role in the rules-based international order,

which they've long said that they want to do that by 2050. I'm worried about them moving that target closer," Davidson said. China is adamant its military is defensive.

"The development of China's national defense aims to meet its rightful security needs and contribute to the growth of the world's peaceful forces," the country's 2019 defense white paper said. "China will never threaten any other country or seek any sphere of influence." Concerning Taiwan, the self-governed democratic island that China claims as its sovereign territory, Davidson said Beijing may make a move to take control of it in the near future. "I think the threat is manifest during this



decade, in fact in the next six years," he said, adding that the threat to Taiwan is increasing while the US' ability to deter Chinese actions is "eroding." Asked if it is necessary for the US to defend Taiwan, Davidson said inaction would damage the US' international status and harm its credibility as

a defense partner. Mainland China and Taiwan have been governed separately since the end of a bloody civil war in 1949 but Beijing has vowed to never allow the island to become formally independent and has refused to rule out the use of force if necessary.



# Swastika Reclaimed!

(Press Release by Parveen Chopra) New York: In a breaking news that made the Indian community heave a sigh of relief, New York State Democratic chief Jay Jacobs announced that the S2727 bill misrepresenting Swastika as a symbol of hate "Will not move forward, it will not be advanced in the Senate or the Assembly, it is not going anywhere".

Jacobs gave his assurance while addressing a Zoom meeting Wednesday organized by Nassau County Democratic Committee and the newly formed United Front of Indian Americans in North America. The meeting was the result of intense efforts by Kamlesh Mehta, who has taken a frontline seat in the 'save Swastika' campaign. Besides him, Dr Raj Bhayani, Vibhuti Jha and Mukesh Modi formed the host committee for the high profile meeting attended by at least three score people.

Mehta introduced the keynote speakers, NYS Democratic Committee Chairman Jay Jacobs, the Consul General of India in New York, Ambassador Randhir Jaiswal, and Dr. Uma Mysorekar, President of the Hindu Temple Society of North America and the voice of Hinduism in the country, and called on other community leaders to speak. While

expounding on the meaning and significance of Swastika for Hindus, Buddhists and Jains, all said in unison that the Bill S2727 should be rescinded, or Swastika removed from its language because the bill was intended to ban Nazi Hakenkreuz as a symbol of hate.

Chairman Jacobs said in his remarks, "I am familiar with Swastika as a positive symbol of peace, prosperity and good tidings among people of many cultures and nationalities. So, when Kamlesh Mehta brought to my attention the difficulty with this bill I understood the importance to the Indian community."

Jacobs continued, "When I spoke to members of the Senate and others concerned, I said, we in this country have a culture of respecting each other. What makes America great is we are an amalgamation of people from all over and part of the lure of America is that you lead your life as good citizens with kindness towards each other and still have the ability to hold on to your own culture. This bill would have been an affront to that basic premise of American democracy. The Indian American community is essential to the success moving forward of this country."

Jacobs thanked Kevin Thomas, the first Indian American state

Senator, "He understood the need that the hate bill does not move forward."

Dr Mysorekar said that Swastik has been a sacred symbol in the Vedic tradition for many millennia. "Symbolizing well-being, auspiciousness and good luck charm, it is part of our festivals, temple rituals, and is displayed at homes, weddings and even below the deity as a yantra. Its negative connotation in the western world especially in the US is because of Hitler. But today, misrepresenting and teaching Swastik as a symbol of hate will cause confusion in the minds of young people, who utilize it in their daily religious practice, and can lead to bullying and biases against them. It can also perpetuate misinformation." Dr Mysorekar said that she has been receiving many calls from people worried about the hate bill, but after Jacobs's assurance, "now we can all sleep peacefully."

Ambassador Jaiswal shared that though he is a Hindu, and Swastik is personal (it is even displayed outside his father's house in Hazipur in Bihar), he also carries the responsibility of Buddhist and Jain traditions because of their links with the place of his birth, Vaishali. He said, "Swastik has given a wealth of hope, happiness and

philosophy to the modern world at large. So, juxtaposing something ancient and sacred with something as recent as early 20th century when it was twisted, would have amounted to doing injustice to the inner meaning of Swastik and the emotions of people attached to it."

Kamlesh Mehta appreciated the prompt response and instant action by Chairman Jacobs. He emphasized the sanctity of Swastik, saying all taking part in the meeting follow different faiths, yet Swastik is the common auspicious symbol among them, uniting 1.8 billion people all over the world.

Vibhuti Jha, active in promoting India-US relations, also thanked Jay Jacobs: "In the annals of India-US relationship, your name will last forever." Saying that the two symbols, Om and Swastika, are basic to Hindu religion, Jha said that Jacobs' assurance will delight over a billion people, and it has prevented a fissure between India and US.

Mukesh Modi, unofficially called the mayor of the Indian American community on Long Island, thanked Jacobs for respecting the constitutional and religious rights for everyone, adding, "You are going to get 1.8 billion blessings, which will give you more power and strength to protect our constitutional and religious rights." Dr Raj Bhayani, an eminent leader in healthcare

whose heart beats for India, said that we have to recognize the holocaust and difficulties our Jewish brothers have gone through, but two wrongs do not make a right. Hakenkreuz is not Swastik. He mused though that the bill has brought the Indian community together, which has its own power. "Now we will unitedly fight any other injustice that comes our way."

Dr Bhayani acknowledged the leadership of Kamlesh Mehta, founder of The South Asian Times, India Day Parade, Rotary Club of Hicksville South, RANA and the new organization which hosted the Zoom meeting. Coincidentally, a few years back, Mehta was instrumental in getting the Plainview gurdwara reopened after it stayed shut for over 6 months.

Pradeep Tandon, in his power point presentation, showed that not only is it ancient, Swastik as a positive symbol was freely used in US society and culture before World War II. Incidentally, a town named Swastik in Clinton County in New York has refused to change its name. Krish Rudra recalled working with Jacobs some years ago and requested him to see that Swastik identified as a hate symbol is also removed from New York Penal Code 240.31. Bina Sabapathy expressed the hope that the issue does not arise again.

## Decannounces Residential Brush Burning Prohibited in New York State March 16 through May 14

### Ban Reduces Wildfire Risks, Protects Lives and Property

New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) Commissioner Basil Seggos today announced the annual statewide ban prohibiting residential brush burning will begin March 16, and run through May 14. With spring approaching, DEC is reminding residents that conditions for wildfires are heightened in springtime when most wildfires occur.

"While wildfires are more visible in the western part of the country, the start of spring brings an increased risk of wildfires right here in New York," Commissioner Seggos said. "In an effort to protect our communities and natural

resources, New York prohibits residential burning for two months starting on March 16, when dry conditions are highest. Help DEC put safety first and continue to reduce the number of wildfires in New York's communities by following the burn ban."

Even though some areas of the state remain blanketed in snow, warming temperatures can quickly cause wildfire conditions to arise. DEC will post a Fire Danger Map rating for the 2021 fire season on DEC's website once there is a moderate risk anywhere in the state.

Open burning of debris is the largest single cause of spring wildfires in New York State.

When temperatures are warmer and the past fall's debris and leaves dry out, wildfires can start and spread easily and be further fueled by winds and a lack of green vegetation. In 2020, DEC Forest Rangers extinguished 192 wildfires that burned a total of more than 1,122 acres. In addition, local fire departments, many of which are volunteer, all too often have to leave their jobs and families to respond to wildfires caused by illegal debris fires.

New York first enacted strict restrictions on open burning in 2009 to help prevent wildfires and reduce air pollution. The regulations

allow residential brush fires in towns with fewer than 20,000 residents during most of the year, but prohibit such burning in spring when most wildfires occur. Campfires using charcoal or untreated wood are allowed, but people should never leave these fires unattended and must extinguish them. Burning garbage or leaves is prohibited year-round. For more information about fire safety and prevention, go to DEC's FIREWISE New York website. Some towns, primarily in and around the Adirondack and Catskill parks, are designated "fire towns." Open burning is prohibited year-round in these municipalities unless an

individual or group has a permit from DEC. To find out whether a municipality is a designated fire town or to obtain a permit, contact the appropriate DEC regional office. A list of regional offices is available on DEC's website.

Forest Rangers, DEC Environmental Conservation Police Officers (ECOs), and local authorities enforce the burn ban. Violators of the State's open burning regulation are subject to criminal and civil enforcement actions, with a minimum fine of \$500 for a first offense. To report environmental law violations call 1-800-TIPP DEC (1-800-847-7332), or report online on DEC's website.



# In Bengal, the BJP's now-or-never moment

That apart, Bengal has not seen such a high-stakes election in recent memory.

In 2014, the Modi tsunami that swept the country spared Bengal. Though the BJP won only two out of 42 seats, there was a surge in its vote share to over 16% in the 2014 Lok Sabha elections (from a paltry 4.1% in the 2011 assembly elections). But, along the way, it lost steam and its vote share slipped to 10.1% in the 2016 assembly polls.

Banerjee continued on her warpath. At some point during Modi's first term, she appears to have begun nurturing national ambitions, envisaging the possibility of a third front wresting power from the BJP. While the 2019 results flummoxed pollsters and politicians, the results of Bengal were more astounding. The BJP's vote share went up to 41%, and it won 18 seats, close to half the parliamentary strength of the state. The TMC drew solace from the fact that its own vote share also improved by three-odd per

cent (from 40% to 43%). It rationalised that the gains of the BJP came from the decimation of the Left and the Congress.

It was true the bulk of the anti-TMC votes that earlier went to the Left and the Congress shifted en masse to BJP. But, less apparent was the shift of the non-Muslim subaltern classes, Scheduled Castes and Tribes, especially from south-west Bengal, towards the BJP. Two factors contributed to this change. The first was the incredible amount of groundwork done by the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS).

The second was the obvious disenchantment with the TMC in those belts. This was partly a fall-out of the TMC's excessive focus on the border districts of South Bengal, which have a large minority population. In a flash, "Unish (2019)-e-half; Ekushe (2021)-e-Saaf" - half in 2019, wiped out in 2021 - sounded like a real possibility.

The TMC went on the defensive. Under Banerjee, the party operated as a federation of regional satraps. But, over time,

new power centres developed.

Following the setback of 2019, the younger cohort gained importance and the former stars were marginalised. This suited Amit Shah's policy of "what you don't have, you acquire". The party general secretary in charge of Bengal, Kailash Vijayvargiya, went on an acquisition spree. The prize jewel came in the form of Suvendu Adhikari. Other leaders such as Rajib Banerjee were force multipliers. Their entry has strengthened the BJP's presence in East Midnapore and Howrah. But interior South Bengal still remains a challenge for BJP due to its demographic composition.

The districts of 24 Parganas (north and south), and the areas adjoining Bangladesh going all the way to Malda and South Dinajpur, remain under the TMC's grip.

These are also geographies where the new secular front (of Left-Congress-ISF) is hoping to score at the cost of Trinamool. But mired in internal contradictions, it is unlikely to



make any significant dent. The TMC's physical hold in these parts is strong, given its solid base among the dominant community. Phased elections may ensure a more disciplined ballot. But whether it can tilt the scales in favour of the BJP is not certain.

In Bengal, Banerjee is a phenomenon. She dons a teflon coating that might be even a shade stronger than what Modi enjoys in other parts of India. So, she needs neither the epithet of "Banglar Meye" nor the prop of "Bohiragoto" (outsiders). But faced with desertions, she has been forced to field many outsiders, a decision that may

come back to bite her compounded by a weakened cadre base depleted by defections. With successive state governments at perpetual loggerheads with Delhi for over 50 years, there is a widespread feeling that Bengal has missed the development train. Therefore, Bengal's voters may like to give the BJP's promise of a "Double Engine Ka Sarkar" a chance, turning this into a wave election. Like Banerjee's call of "Ebar or Never" in the 2000s, the BJP is fighting this election based on a now-or-never spirit. For the Left and Congress, however, the writing on the wall appears to be never-ever.

## Gujarat HC proposes ban on exclusion of menstruating women from private, public places

this court to hear all the respondents and other stakeholders."

"The aforesaid should not be construed as if this court has made up its mind one way or the other. A healthy and meaningful

their undergarments to prove they weren't menstruating. The incident was reported on February 14 last year.

Sixty eight undergraduate girls in a hostel run by Shree Sahajanand Girls Institute

menstruating. Counsel Megha Jani, appearing on behalf of Nirjhari Sinha, said that although menstruation is a physiological phenomenon, a natural part of the reproductive cycle experienced by every woman, yet it has

always been associated with taboos and myths, which exclude women from their daily course of life. The counsel said the myths are based on an assumption that a woman is impure and would pollute the surroundings during her menstruation.

"She is, therefore, kept in isolation, excluded from the



debate or deliberation is necessary in the present litigation," the high court said. The high court passed the order while hearing a plea filed by activist Nirjhari Sinha Matter.

Nirjhari Sinha had filed a petition after an incident at a college in Bhuj city wherein more than 60 students were made to remove

(SSGI) were allegedly forced to strip and paraded in the collage to prove that they were not menstruating.

The incident allegedly took place after the hostel rector complained to the principal that some of the girls had been violating their religious norms, specifically those who were

daily activities, not allowed to touch water, not allowed to cook, not allowed to touch vessels, remain in a separate earmarked place and not visit temple in any religious ceremony or rituals," the counsel said.

Further hearing in the matter has been posted on March 30.

## US resolved to deepen Indo-Pacific engagement, says State Dept ahead of first Modi-Biden Quad meet



On being asked if Quad is heading towards a military dimension or economic, political Ned Price refrained from putting his finger on one.

"The Quad is a grouping with important friends and allies of the United States, and it's a grouping that is predicated on shared interests," said Price. He added, "There are a number of shared interests. Some of them involve maritime security, global health, climate. So, I would hesitate to point to one animating challenge that the Quad is set to address today. We are engaging with the Quad

to take on those collective shared interests that will be relevant in that setting."

Prime Minister Narendra Modi will be participating, along with Prime Minister of Australia Scott Morrison and Prime Minister of Japan Yoshihide Suga and President of USA Joseph Biden, in the first Leaders' Summit of the Quadrilateral Framework, being held virtually on March 12, said the government.

The four Quad member countries have been resolving to uphold a rules-based international order in the Indo-Pacific.



# Are we trapped in another housing bubble? A rapid rise in home prices has some experts worried

(SAI Bureau)- In the midst of a raging COVID-19 pandemic, with millions of Americans still out of work and facing the possibility of eviction and foreclosure, the United States is experiencing a real estate boom the likes of which it hasn't seen in 15 years.

Home prices are rising practically everywhere. From Augusta, Maine, to Phoenix and from Sarasota, Florida, to Aberdeen, Washington, prices are up by double digits.

Driven by historically low interest rates that make borrowing cheap and waves of people fleeing densely populated cities because of COVID-19, home buying has become as competitive as it was during the boom years of the mid-2000s. Supplies of existing dwellings have dwindled far below the six-month level considered normal. Realtors are receiving multiple offers. Builders can't keep up with demand and flipping is back. Talk of a housing bubble is now common among analysts - including those at Swiss banking giant UBS, who back up their claims with charts showing how home prices are outstripping both wages and rents. While home prices have appreciated more than 60% since November 2012, incomes have only appreciated by 20% and rents by 30% over the same time period. The upshot: Homes are out of reach for more and more buyers every year, the analysts argue.

But unlike the real estate boom that led to the Great Recession, this nationwide price spike is not being fueled by a wholesale collapse in lender ethics. There aren't any low-doc or no-doc loans to be had and borrowers are having to do much more than fog a mirror to get funding.

## Supply and demand fundamentals can also fuel rising prices.

"For over a decade, we've had a chronic lack of supply of housing," said Marco Santarelli, chief executive of Norada Real Estate Investments in Laguna Niguel, California. "We need 1.62 million units a year to keep pace with organic demand, but we produce significantly less. We're about 370,000 units short each year."



Santarelli added that the supply imbalance will only get worse as more than 140 million millennials and members of Gen Z move into rental units and starter homes in the years ahead.

"About 52% of young adults from 18 to 29 are still living with their parents," Santarelli said. "That's the highest rate in over 110 years. These people have to go somewhere and that's why I'm so bullish about real estate over the long term."

## An out-of-balance housing market

But these healthy fundamentals don't mean there aren't worrying distortions in the market.

With the Federal Reserve continuing to buy Treasury bonds and other securities under its quantitative easing program, interest rates are being held artificially low as dollars are being pumped into the economy. That makes borrowing cheap and encourages investors to buy riskier assets like stocks and real estate, driving prices of those assets ever higher.

Until the Federal Reserve halts its bond buying and interest rates begin to rise again, real estate prices will continue to climb, says Robert Goldman, a real estate agent with Michael Saunders & Co. in Sarasota. And no change in policy is expected any time soon.

"The Fed will keep buying bonds far into the future despite what could be a booming economy in 2021 and 2022," Goldman said in his monthly newsletter.

"We had a 10.2% increase in home prices in Sarasota in 2020," Goldman told USA TODAY. "What I'm concerned about is that prices will continue to appreciate at 10% to 15% a year and that's not sustainable." At a certain point,

interest rates will rise and there won't be enough buyers coming in from more expensive markets to keep paying the higher prices. Either development or both, could lead to a pullback in prices.

The moratoriums on evictions and foreclosures are also distorting the market. There's no question these policies are needed to keep people from being displaced in the midst of a pandemic, but they will eventually have to be lifted and it is not clear what will happen when they do.

Santarelli is confident the damage will be minimal. He believes renters will find jobs when the economy rebounds and they will not join the legions of the homeless. He also believes homeowners will either be able to sell their houses and condos and walk away with equity, or refinance or modify and tack whatever they owe to the back end of their mortgages.

"We saw people's equity grow 11% last year and it's expected to grow another 6% this year," Santarelli said. "So the appreciation is in their favor. They can sell or refinance and banks are well off either way."

If homeowners can't sell or refinance, there could be a spike in foreclosures and the supply of homes on the market would increase sharply, pushing down prices.

## Rental market is humming

Meanwhile, the segment of the real estate market that seems to be working most efficiently at the moment is the rental market. As people leave densely populated cities to escape COVID-19 and congestion, rents are dropping. In San Francisco, rents fell 24% in 2020, according to Zumper.com, which tracks rents across the country. They were down nearly 20% in New

York and 17% in Boston. In cities like Newark, New Jersey, Sacramento, California, and Richmond, Virginia, where people are relocating, rents are moving sharply in the opposite direction.

"The top eight cities in the nation, which were very hot and very millennial heavy, have seen enormous declines in rent, while secondary cities in the same regions have benefited," said Anthemos Georgiades, co-founder and chief executive of Zumper.com.

Median home prices in cities experiencing major out-migration, however, have not fallen - at least not yet. New York, for instance, saw rents drop by 20%, but its median home prices rose 6%. The same trend holds true in San Francisco, Boston, Los Angeles and Washington, D.C.

Georgiades says that's because the rental market is much more dynamic than the "for sale" market.

"Rent prices adjust super quickly to the realities of the market," Georgiades said. "If I get a vacancy in April, the clock is ticking. I've got a depreciating asset. I'm going to drop my price fast to get someone in there." Homeowners looking to sell their properties are willing to be more patient, he said. So prices don't adjust as quickly.

According to Norada Real Estate Investments, San Francisco's famously hot real estate market has cooled of late. But inventories of unsold homes are still tight and that's why prices aren't declining. The reality in New York is different. Norada is reporting that there are now more homes on the market in the city than there are buyers who want them, which puts buyers in the driver's seat when it comes to downward price

negotiations. It's cities like this that should see prices decline first, according to prominent Yale economist Robert Shiller, and he advised homebuyers in a New York Times column "to avoid investing in too expensive of a house or in taking on too much risk."

San Jose leads in home price increase

Major U.S. cities ranked by median home prices as of Nov. 30, 2020 and year-over-year percentage changes:

## Home prices gone wild

For Mark Stapp, a real estate professor at Arizona State University, what's going on in the real estate market right now is not a bubble.

"The definition of a bubble is that when it pops, there's nothing there," Stapp said. "That's not this case. There's very real demand that exists and that's what's causing prices to increase."

## Realtors across the country generally agree.

Mary Jo Santistevan, a top producing sales associate with Berkshire Hathaway HomeServices in Phoenix, said buyers are flowing in from congested cities of California, Washington state and the Midwest. They are looking to take advantage of Arizona's lower home prices, lower property taxes and quality of life. But they are confronting a situation where inventories of unsold homes have been dropping steadily in recent years and are now teetering on a one-month supply in some areas and less than that in others.

Even builders are struggling to keep up with demand," Santistevan said. "There's a 10-month wait time for construction. The majority of builders are using a lottery system. One builder in particular in Gilbert had a waitlist of 100 deep."

Stacie Lee, a fellow agent at Berkshire Hathaway, says whenever something goes on the market in Phoenix, the showings are usually back-to-back and closing comes within a matter of days. "Many homes go for \$30,000 to \$40,000 over list price and a few homes in the mid \$300,000s have sold for \$100,000 over list," Lee said. "A



lot are going for cash. Cash is king right now."

Lee added that she had 70 people show up for an open house over the summer and had 15 offers in the first couple of hours. The home sold for \$375,000 and is now back on the market at \$550,000.

"There's a lot of investors flipping homes here," she said. Nearly 3,000 miles away in Augusta,

Maine, the housing market is just as frothy.

Fifteen of Maine's 16 counties experienced a 10% increase in median home prices in 2020, according to Aaron Bolster, president of the Maine Association of Realtors. Some of those counties saw leaps of 20% or more. "We already knew Maine was popular," Bolster said. "More than 32 million people visit

between Memorial Day and Labor Day. They don't typically come at this time of year. But in a pandemic, it's a safe place to be. The population density is very low and teleworking suddenly got popular in 2020."

Bolster said 25% of buyers in 2019 came from out of state. Last year, that number rose to 33%. Without a large housing stock to begin with, available listings got

siphoned off pretty quickly as out of state buyers bid up the prices.

At the moment, there are only 6,000 homes for sale in the entire state, Bolster said, and half of them are under contract. The situation is unique for Maine and Bolster is not sure how long it will last, especially given that the demand is driven by people coming from out of state - many

of whom will presumably be able to work from home - and not by job creation within Maine's borders.

"Maine doesn't create a lot of new jobs," Bolster said. "When we create a new job, we give one up. So real estate doesn't usually appreciate that fast. It's interesting to see such a robust market when it's not really tied to economics."



## Waiting for the Next Housing Bubble? Don't Hold Your Breath

As a formally-trained financial professional, few statements irk me more than the following-which I've had the misfortune of hearing quite a few times over the last year or so: "Buy a house? Not yet; they're way too expensive. I'm going to wait for the next housing bubble!"

This comment fires me up as much as Bitcoin did during the height of the cryptocurrency craze. I can tell you with some certainty: you're holding your breath for nothing.

As with all things financial, your best guarantee of success is to form a solid awareness of the subject matter at hand, and act accordingly. Placing your bets on some whimsical hope that may or may not ever be realized is definitely not what any trained financial expert would advise.

Here's Why the Next Housing Bubble is Not a Thing

The value of homeownership is one of the first things financial students are taught; traditional economic wisdom holds that real estate will consistently keep pace with inflation and that homeowners can expect to see about 3-4% of appreciation per

year, on average. So before we get ahead of ourselves, let's look at some updated numbers and put this into perspective. As always, understanding your options is key. You don't want to live with your head in a bubble while you wait for the next housing bubble.

You could be stuck like that for a very long time...

Historical Precedent Before the real estate market decline began in 2007, national housing prices from 1968 - 2006 never saw a negative year in housing appreciation, per the National Association of Realtors. Never. Not once!

During this period, you could have safely assumed an average rate of inflation over 5%, year over year.

So if you're waiting for the next housing bubble, I hope you've got two decades to spare. And that's if history repeats itself at all. As the saying goes, "Time waits for no man." And your financial growth opportunities won't, either. Interest Rates

Another thing that people don't take into consideration, is that by the time the housing market is affordable enough for you, where do you think interest rates will be? We are currently scheduled to see one or two more Federal Reserve rate hikes in 2018. So



even if you happen to be right about the bubble, you'd still be waiting for a perfect storm; you'd need interest rates to be flat or decreasing to see any real mortgage payment benefits from depressed housing prices. The Health of the Economy I hate to rub it in, but... let's imagine that you were right. You waited it out, and housing prices are down 20%. Rates are reeling, and the Feds are trying

to stabilize our spiraling economy.

That's right-if your perfect-storm scenario is actually happening, chances are that we are in a recession, and you may have much more serious financial problems than over

paying a few thousand dollars on a new home. (Like Accumulate Don't base your real estate investment choices on the fear of bubbles. Instead, do your due diligence and make carefully researched and the Next considered choices before making any major real estate decisions. Shop with facts, not fear or fantasy. No investment As you can

see, trying to time your housing purchase with the next housing bubble is ill-advised at best. But there is some solid advice to follow if you're in the market. As a CERTIFIED FINANCIAL PLANNER™, I'm happy to answer any of your financially-related real estate questions. But for now, I'll leave you with some time-proven wisdom-which,

yes, you've probably heard before: location, location, location.

The timeless importance of location will likely never lose impact-because it's true. Property located in the most in demand neighborhoods really do gain value faster. Oh, and having a total mortgage payment under 28% of your net income wouldn't hurt, either! Don't Speculate to (Like Accumulate Don't base your real estate investment choices on the fear of bubbles. Instead, do your due diligence and make carefully researched and the Next considered choices before making any major real estate decisions. Shop with facts, not fear or fantasy. No investment should be made in haste, but don't wait for some elusive opportunity that may never happen, or will take so long before it does that you'll spend years missing out. This time could have been used instead to work successfully through your wealth accumulation phase, and prepare you for retirement-and beyond. Your financial legacy, when planned correctly, could go on to support your family for generations.





# WILL THE US HOUSING MARKET CRASH IN 2021?

As soon as it became clear that COVID-19 was having a negative impact on the US real estate market back in March 2020, housing market crash predictions flooded the internet. Home sales were dropping and housing inventory became even tighter as both sellers and buyers initially decided to wait out the pandemic.

Fast forward to October, and we now see a different story. Low mortgage rates have pushed buyers back into the market. Demand is far surpassing supply across the nation and home prices are actually rising, not falling.

Some people who predicted a housing market crash in 2020 have since retracted their forecast. Others, however, have simply pushed their predictions to 2021 and are now saying that the US housing market will crash next year.

So will the housing market crash in 2021?

Not likely.

Mashvisor conducted a real estate market analysis and talked to a few experts who revealed their thoughts on the forecast for a housing market crash 2021. The general consensus is that we won't see a real estate market crash next year. Let's look at some of the reasons why.

**The End of the Mortgage Forbearance Won't Be Enough to Cause a Crash**

This is the first housing market prediction that needs to be addressed here. Many fear that once the federal mortgage

forbearance program introduced by the CARES Act expires in 2021, we will have a repeat of the 2008 crisis on our hands.

With the end of the forbearance next year, the market will be flooded with delinquent loans- this is true. However, there are a few things to keep in mind with regards to this being the event that brings about a US housing market crash.



For one, we have to look at the number of mortgage loans currently in forbearance. The total number of loans in forbearance is 2,977,000 as of October 23, 2020. During the 2008 housing market crash, the number of delinquent loans reached over 10 million.

What's more, this number has generally declined. Back in May, it reached a height of 4.76 million and has since been dropping. Most recently, the volume dropped by 11k week over week and 623k month over month (a 17% decline from September 2020). And with national unemployment rates

continuing to recover, we can forecast that even more homeowners will voluntarily pull themselves out of forbearance before the expiration date.

Greg McBride, Senior Vice President and Chief Financial Analyst at Bankrate provided Mashvisor with some insight into why these delinquent loans won't bring about a housing market crash as well as what effect they

may actually have on the US real estate market:

As McBride states, lending requirements are more strict nowadays and it was very lenient requirements that contributed to the foreclosure crisis of 2008. Marina Vaamonde, a commercial real estate investor and founder of HouseCashin.com, also points to modern lending standards as the reason we won't see a repeat of the 2008 housing crisis: So it's safe to say that delinquent loans brought about by coronavirus hardships will not cause a housing market crash in 2021.

Currently, demand is very high. The National Association of Realtors (NAR) recently reported that existing home sales jumped 9.4% in September month over month. This was a 21% increase year over year and marked the fourth consecutive month of home sales growth. Additionally, inventory is low. By the end of September, there was only a supply of 2.7 months, a historic low. As a result, prices continue to rise.

Matt Frankel, CFP, personal finance expert, and real estate analyst at Millionacres (The Motley Fool), told Mashvisor that if such conditions were to remain in place, a housing market crash would be unlikely as long as mortgage rates stay low and a COVID-19 vaccine is released, among other factors:

As long as current conditions in the market persist, it should keep prices rising (or

at least steady). Inventory of existing homes is at a historically low level in most of the United States, and record-low mortgage rates are making homeownership more attractive for many Americans. In short, there's a supply and demand imbalance right now that is keeping the market strong.

Having said that, there are some key things to watch for that could be signs of trouble. If unemployment stays elevated and further economic stimulus is slow to come, it could hurt demand for homes. If interest

rates unexpectedly spike, it could hurt mortgage demand. And if a COVID-19 vaccine is unexpectedly delayed, it could be devastating to the anticipated normalizing of the economy that most experts are expecting next year.

However, I don't view a housing market crash in 2021 as a particularly likely event. All indicators are that we'll get the needed fiscal stimulus early in 2021, if not sooner, and that the unemployment rate will continue to fall. And the Federal Reserve has all but committed to keeping benchmark interest rates low for the foreseeable future, which should help keep mortgages cheap. And it still looks like we'll get a coronavirus vaccine before the end of 2020, which should set the stage for normalization of American life in 2021.

Essentially, the US housing market 2021 will remain a seller's market and Marina concurs:

I believe we will continue to see a seller's market going into 2021 if interest rates and housing inventory is kept low.

So, When Will the Housing Market Crash?

It's hard to say when the next housing market crash will be. But as far as most experts can tell, we know that it won't happen in 2021. While some local real estate markets may be at higher risk of price drops than others, so far, there are no predictions that prices will crash as they did back in 2008 in any major cities in the US. McBride told Mashvisor:



# Is the Real Estate Market Going to Crash?

Many Americans may be worried about a real estate market crash. They are concerned about the unexpected impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on housing prices.

At first, the 2020 stock market crash worsened those fears, as home sales tumbled. Then, housing sales unexpectedly turned up, hitting new highs.<sup>1</sup>

People who were caught in the 2008 financial crisis may be spooked that the pandemic will lead to another crash. That's unlikely. According to an interview with Selma Hepp, deputy chief economist at CoreLogic, "There is not the same oversupply of homes this time. Instead, there is an undersupply."

## 10 Warning Signs of a Crash

There are 10 signs of a housing market crash. The first five are critical. They are when an asset bubble bursts, unregulated mortgages increase, interest rates rise rapidly, the yield curve inverts, and Congress changes the federal tax code.

The other five signs could contribute to a crash, but are less critical. They include a greater number of house flippers, warnings from experts, fewer affordable homes, and a return to risky derivatives.

Let's look at each more closely.

### Asset Bubbles Burst

Most crashes occur after an asset bubble has burst. One sign of a potential bubble is rapidly rising home sales. In February, existing home sales reached a pre-pandemic peak. Homes were selling at an annual rate of 5.76 million a year. That all changed after the national emergency was declared. Sales of homes plummeted to a rate of 3.91 million units in May.

Surprisingly, the pandemic then boosted home sales. Families that could move out of crowded cities headed to less densely populated areas. Those who worked at home also wanted larger spaces. Thanks to the Fed's actions, interest rates were at 50-year lows.<sup>2</sup> This further spurred demand.

By July, the sales rate reached 5.86 million homes. By October, it had blossomed to 6.86 million, beating the pre-pandemic peak.<sup>1</sup> Home prices also suggest a housing bubble. The pandemic



hasn't slowed home prices at all. Instead, they've skyrocketed. In September 2020, they were a record \$226,800, according to the Case-Shiller Home Price Index.<sup>3</sup> The pandemic has created high unemployment rates. This could lead to foreclosures, as people can't afford to pay their mortgages. But that is unlikely to affect the housing market in 2021, according to Hepp. "The foreclosures that do occur in 2020 or 2021 won't affect the market until 2022," she said. "It will take that long for the houses to go through the foreclosure process and affect the market." Increase in Unregulated Mortgage Brokers

Another concern is when the number of unregulated mortgage brokers increases. In 2019, they originated 54.5% of all loans. That's up from 53.6% of in 2018.<sup>4</sup> Six of the 10 largest mortgage lenders are not banks.<sup>5</sup> In 2018, five of the top 10 were unregulated

### Rising Interest Rates

Higher interest rates make loans more expensive. That slows home building and decreases supply. It also slows lending, which cuts back on demand. Overall, a slow and steady interest rate increase won't create a catastrophe. But quickly rising rates will.

Higher interest rates preceded the housing collapse in 2006. Many borrowers then had interest-only loans and adjustable-rate mortgages. Unlike a conventional loan, the interest rates with those rise along with the fed funds rate. Many also had introductory teaser rates that reset after three years. When the Federal Reserve raised

rates at the same time they reset, borrowers found they could no longer afford the payments. Home prices had fallen, so these mortgage-holders couldn't make the payments or sell the house. As a result, default rates rose. The history of the fed funds rate reveals that the Fed raised rates too fast between 2004 and 2006. The top rate was 1.0% in June 2004 and doubled to 2.25% by December. It doubled again to 4.25% by December 2005. Six months later, the rate was 5.25%. The Fed has raised rates at a much slower pace since 2015.<sup>7</sup>

### Inverted Yield Curve

A warning sign for the real estate market is when the yield curve on U.S. Treasury notes inverts. That's when the interest rates for short-term Treasuries become higher than long-term yields. Normal short-term yields are lower because investors don't require a high return to invest for less than a year. When that inverts, it means investors think the short term is riskier than the long term. That plays havoc with the mortgage market and often signals a recession.

The yield curve briefly inverted in February and March 2020. On March 9, 2020, the yield on the 10-year note fell to 0.54% while the yield on the one-month bill rose to 0.57%. The curve later returned to a normal shape. By Dec. 18, the yield on the 10-year note was 0.95% while that on the one-month bill was 0.8%.

### Changes to the Tax Code

The housing market responds dramatically when Congress changes the tax code. Initially, many thought that the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act (TCJA) could have a negative impact on housing. The plan raised the standard deduction, so many Americans no longer itemized. As a result, they couldn't take advantage of the mortgage interest deduction. For that reason, the real estate industry opposed the TCJA.<sup>9</sup>

Research has shown since then that the tax changes had little effect on the housing market. Reduction in home purchases by middle-income families who took the standard deduction was offset by other income groups. The law doubled the standard deduction, giving more income to low-income families who could then afford a home. High-income families continued using itemized deductions. Other tax cuts also made them more able to buy new homes.<sup>10</sup>

**Banks Return to Using Derivatives** The real estate market could collapse if banks and hedge funds returned to investing in risky financial products to the extent they did in 2007. These derivatives were a major cause of the financial crisis. Banks sliced up mortgages and resold them in mortgage-backed securities (MBS).

Over time, the MBS became a bigger business than the mortgages themselves. So, banks sold mortgages to just about anyone. They needed them to support the derivatives. They sliced them up so that bad mortgages were hidden in bundles

with good ones. Then, when borrowers defaulted, all the derivatives were suspected of being bad. This phenomenon caused the demise of Bear Stearns and Lehman Brothers.<sup>11</sup> Increase in 'Flipped' Homes Home flipping played a major role during the 2008 recession. Speculators bought homes, made moderate improvements, and sold them as prices continued rising. In 2006, flips comprised 11.4% of home sales.<sup>12</sup>

Flipping has slowed considerably. In the third quarter of 2020, 5.1% of all home sales were bought for quick resale. That's down from the 6.7% of sales in the second quarter of 2020. It's also lower than the post-recession high of 7.2% in first-quarter 2019.<sup>13</sup>

The decline in flipping is due to the reduced inventory of housing stock. At the same time, flipping has become more profitable. Attom Data Solutions reports that the pandemic's effect on flipping is contradictory and difficult to forecast

### Affordable Housing Plummets

A booming housing market sends home prices rising. Another sign of a housing bubble is that the availability of affordable housing shrinks. Housing growth outstrips income growth. There are signs that this is happening. In 2017, only 39.1% of rental units across the country were affordable for low-income households. That's down from 55.7% in 2010. The shortage is the worst in cities where home prices have soared

### Rising Sea Levels

Regional real estate markets could collapse in coastal areas vulnerable to the effects of rising sea levels. At least 300,000 coastal properties will flood 26 times a year by 2045.<sup>16</sup> The value of that real estate is \$136 billion. That affects the value of 30-year mortgages currently being written. By 2100, 2.5 million homes worth \$1.07 trillion will be at risk of chronic flooding. Properties on both coasts are at most risk. In Miami, Florida, the ocean floods the streets during high tide. Harvard researchers found that home prices in lower-lying areas of Miami-Dade County and Miami Beach are rising more slowly than the rest of Florida.



# What could make Myanmar's military junta back off?

With live fire being deployed on a widespread basis in Myanmar since a military coup on February 1, the generals who seized power have lived up to fears that they would resort to lethal force against their own citizens. Early restraint in the face of peaceful protesters has been replaced with bullets, and security forces have killed more than 50 people to date. Several victims were killed by shots to the head -- a sign that the troops were shooting to kill as part of their intensifying crackdown that also has included curfews and nightly internet shutdowns, armored vehicles and armed troops on the streets and draconian laws limiting freedom of speech and assembly. Predictably, the coup and the violence against unarmed civilians triggered international condemnation, new sanctions by the US, the UK and Canada and threats of sanctions from the European Union. But statements like these have done little more than highlight just how limited the world's dip-

lomatic arsenal is against crises of this nature -- especially when most governments are battling the Covid-19 pandemic or trying to revive their sagging economies and Myanmar's military leaders seem not to care about returning their country to pariahdom. "The army in Myanmar has a long track record of not listening to the outside world, not caring what people think, simply living off, in a vicarious way, the isolation that is then imposed," Southeast Asia expert Michael Vatikiotis told me.

Indeed, it is hard to see how international opprobrium or even sanctions -- a blunt and controversial tool with a limited record of success -- are likely to convince the generals to release the government leaders they're detaining and accept that the military lost last November's election. Nor are measures against the military likely to get backing from China and Russia, which have taken a softer line to responding to the coup.

So is there anything that could persuade the generals to back

down? Myanmar is a member of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the political bloc that probably has the most influence over the generals. So far the bloc has failed to unite behind a strong call of action, but it's high time it did. If member countries such as Thailand begin to see a flood of refugees, transforming the unrest into a regional crisis, that could force ASEAN to relax its policy of non-interference in the affairs of member states and take a strong stance against the junta -- something it should do nonetheless for the sake of ASEAN's own credibility.

Regional businesses perhaps could also play a role in setting a path for their cautious governments. Japanese drinks giant Kirin Holdings, for example, has already said it was cutting links with a military-owned conglomerate in Myanmar. Others could follow suit.

It's not going to be easy. Myanmar's military has a well-deserved reputation for ruthlessness, something I saw at first-



hand during my first visit to Myanmar in 1989. A year earlier, the government's brutal crackdown on a student-led pro-democracy movement killed thousands. I interviewed many student activists who could hardly hold themselves together when describing the mass murders. Sleep, food deprivation and physical torture were described to me as all part of the measures used to extract confessions. Shortly after I was detained for taking photographs of a marketplace, a Burmese army lieutenant colonel lectured to me: "People need to learn discipline before they can

have democracy."

The military's condescending attitude toward Western institutions remains deeply entrenched. During the 2008 Cyclone Nargis emergency -- which claimed nearly 140,000 lives and impacted some 2.4 million people -- the then-government had the audacity to insist on vetting the list of humanitarian aid workers nominated by the UN Secretary General's office. Reports of aid being diverted by the military were widespread, and those reporting the scale of the disaster were arrested.

## Safe water -- it's what women want

Of the many indirect consequences of Covid-19, growing gender inequality is an area of grave concern where the world is falling grievously behind. While women labor at the frontlines, comprising 70% of the world's healthcare workers, according to the World Health Organization (WHO), they are also leaving the workforce at a much higher rate than men, and doing over three-quarters of all unpaid care work, including the care of children. This International Women's Day, we must address gender inequality and unite through this crisis to ensure women and children are prioritized in our recovery agenda. To advance gender equity, we must prioritize the most basic rights that are still denied to women and children. Let's start with the most fundamental of human needs -- access to clean water and safe sanitation, including soap for handwashing. Too many of us take these for granted, and yet, according to the WHO, 2.2 billion people don't have access to safe drinking water and, according to UN Water, 4.2 billion don't have a safe place to use the toilet. One in four health care facilities lack basic water services, according to UNICEF, and one in three don't have hand hygiene facilities at points of care, even though



handwashing with water and soap is the first line of defense against Covid-19. As healthcare facilities are overburdened during this pandemic, one study projects that within six months, the world could see up to an additional 57,000 maternal and 1.2 million child deaths. Water and sanitation are critical pathways to transforming gender relations and can dramatically improve reproductive, maternal, adolescent and child health. In fact, basic and simple hygiene practices during antenatal care, labor and birth can reduce the risk of infections, sepsis and death for infants and mothers by up to 25%, according to the WHO. Even before the pan-

demic, approximately 810 women died every day from preventable causes related to pregnancy and childbirth -- 94% of these deaths occurred in low and lower middle-income countries, according to UN Women.

Improving access to water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) is not only the right thing to do -- it's what women want. In a survey of over 1.2 million women and children in 114 countries, improved access to WASH was listed as the second highest demand in maternal and reproductive care.

Even in their daily lives, women and girls are the first to suffer without clean

water and decent toilets, given the traditional gender roles imposed by society. Women and girls are usually the stewards of household water and managers of household sanitation, and are most often the primary caregivers of children, the elderly and/or sick relatives. When they menstruate, they often miss work, avoid school and suffer economic losses for the family. Around the world, women and children spend 200 million hours every day collecting water, according to UNICEF. This makes up an additional 266 million hours of time each day lost because they have no toilet at home.

The WHO's Partnership for Maternal, Newborn and Child Health has, on behalf of its over 1000 members, issued a Covid-19 Call to Action. It urges governments to protect and promote the health and rights of women, children and adolescents by strengthening political commitment, policies and financing for seven key interrelated issues. They include the advancement of gender equality and the provision of functional, safe and clean toilet and hand washing facilities, and quality potable drinking water, with a particular focus on healthcare centers, schools and centers for refugees and internally displaced persons.



# The world's largest protests you've probably never heard of

We are now well into the ninth straight month of strikes and protests by the farmers of India. My family are farmers, and have been for many generations, and my mother called me in distress last summer about the agricultural bills that were being passed in India. She wasn't the only one who was hurting: These new laws would not only affect farmers, but the price of food and India's massive informal economy, which engages many millions. Protests began on a small scale in June in Punjab when the government first rolled out its new agricultural policies. Demonstrations have grown exponentially since they were passed as laws on September 20. In late November, protests moved into the connective streets and main entry points around New Delhi; by early December, 250 million people had participated in a nationwide strike, in a show of solidarity. The laws are now on hold, amid the groundswell of opposition. At issue are changes to the rules around the pricing, storage and selling of farm produce. Taken together, they would effectively deregulate India's crop sales and, activists have said, endanger farmers' livelihoods. Currently, Indian farmers sell their produce at government-con-



trolled markets for assured prices. This system affords stability, allowing farmers to make decisions and investments for the following crop cycle.

The new laws may seem to give farmers choice and freedom, in that they would have farmers sell directly, but the likelihood is that they would slowly become vulnerable to a few powerful corporations, cutting out the governmental middleman, in this case, the state's Agricultural Produce Market Committee. That's how Prime Minister Narendra Modi's party, the BJP, has promoted the changes. But farmers worry that over time, large corporations will take over much of the market. Without the protection of mini-

mum prices, the fear is that big businesses could take control over crop pricing and storage, undercutting everyone else. Private players might offer better prices at first, but as the government begins to pack up subsidized mandis (markets), prices could fall, especially in years when global markets are glutted with supply.

In an open letter arguing against the new laws, 10 economists cited a risk of "collusion and market manipulation ... in the unregulated market space," if corporations are to become farmers' direct customers. Economists Kaushik Basu and Nirvikar Singh, professors at Cornell and the University of California, Santa Cruz, respec-

tively, write that "there is no indication of risk mitigation policies," to accompany the laws, that might protect farmers from market forces or the weight of large corporate buyers.

In India's northern breadbasket, many livelihoods are already in danger, and as International Monetary Fund Chief Economist Gita Gopinath said recently, incomes could indeed rise -- but when such major policy changes are instituted, it's important to make sure people have a safety net. India's economic inequality has been widely noted, and with this policy, the divide between the haves and have-nots could grow even further. Without anything to prevent their sale prices from collapsing, Indian farmers fear los-

ing their land, their income and their livelihoods.

How did we get to this point of protest and misunderstanding? Firstly, the farmers say these laws were passed without their input -- which is unfortunate, in the proudly democratic country that India is. As Barkha Dutt argued in The Washington Post, many Indians (outside the country's hundreds of millions of farmers) might be uncertain about the laws as a matter of policy, but "what the protests are really challenging is the manner of decision making in India," as Parliament "rushed through" the laws in the face of opposition, without referring them to a panel for consideration. As Dutt puts it, this fits a Modi-government "pattern of enacting abrupt, disruptive measures that shake up the status quo." Secondly, the laws are cumbersome to read and understand; they've been presented in a way that looks as though the changes would be beneficial, encouraging free-market economics, and potentially spurring innovation within the industry -- but the long term effects are perceived, by farmers, to be detrimental to them and to most likely benefit large corporate players.

## Myanmar protesters getting permanent symbols of resistance – tattoos

Throughout Myanmar's month-long demonstrations against the resumption of military rule, artists have helped shape how the protests are expressed visually, from moving illustrations of demonstrators who have died, to huge murals, roadside artworks and satirical protest signs mocking coup leader General Min Aung Hlaing.

But the most permanent form of protest is, perhaps, the tattoo.

From big cities like Yangon and Mandalay, to Shan state's Nyaung Shwe, a small town near the popular tourist spot of Inle Lake, protesters are getting inked for democracy. Tattoos are a lasting memory for your whole life, and a way to express our dreams. They can't be removed and therefore it shows our solidarity. It unites us protesters," said Htun Htun, a resident of Nyaung Shwe, originally from Yangon.

Htun Htun was one of about 70 people who took part in a tattoo protest event in Nyaung Shwe on Friday. The event, organized by a local youth group from the Intha ethnic minority, invited residents to get a protest tattoo to raise funds for the civil disobedience movement, or CDM. The movement has seen thousands of white- and blue-collar workers, from medics, bankers and lawyers to teachers, engineers and factory workers, leave their jobs as a form of resistance against the February 1 military coup.



Eight tattooists inked dozens of participants who were each asked for a minimum donation of \$2. Each tattoo took about 20 minutes to complete and, for speed, participants were given a choice of four styles: the face of ousted leader Aung San Suu Kyi, the words "Spring revolution," the phrase "Kabar Ma Kyay Bu" (which references a protest song and means "we will not forget until the end of the world") and the ubiquitous "three-finger salute," from "The Hunger Games" movies, that has become a symbol of resistance at protests in Myanmar and neighboring Thailand.

The most popular design? An outline of Suu Kyi's face. "I got a tattoo because I love Aung San Suu Kyi and admire people who stand up and suffer under a dictatorship. To get a tattoo is painful but it's nothing compared to the pain of our hearts (caused by the coup). I want

our freedom back," said Moh Moh, a 26-year-old participant who did not want to provide her full name for security reasons.

Suu Kyi, whose National League for Democracy Party won a landslide in November 2020 elections, has been held under house arrest since the military seized power, along with the ousted President and other government officials.

The tattoo campaign was our own idea -- it's a group of tattooists who are using the event to support the CDM. What's happening right now with the protests is more worrying than Covid," said organizer Nyi Nyi Lwin. He said the event was marred by recent deadly crackdowns on peaceful protesters by Myanmar's security forces, with some people fearful of a rumor that police would arrive to arrest attendees.

Ongoing clashes

In recent weeks, the military and police have stepped up their deadly crackdown on protesters in towns and cities all over the country. Junta forces have been accused of shooting to kill as they opened live fire on crowds and used rubber bullets, tear gas and flash bangs against protesters. At least 54 people have died in crackdowns on protests, including many teenagers and young people, according to the United Nations. Rights groups have put the death toll higher.



# Royal family's 'post-racial' fantasy unravels



made-for-TV special to delude us into believing we were seeing monumental change. But the treatment of Markle, and the bombshells from the interview, are an excellent lesson about racism in the UK and the US in the present day. At the time of the wedding, I worried that the best we could hope for is that Markle melted smoothly into the royal family to the point that she became indistinguishable. My biggest fear was that the couple would be routinely rolled out as a sign of progress and used to bolster Black and brown people's connection to the terrible institution of the British monarchy both in Britain and around the world. But Markle has actually become an object lesson in how racism works today, making it clear that Blackness and the monarchy are like oil and water. Probably the most shocking revelation from the interview was hearing that Markle was so depressed by her treatment she considered suicide whilst pregnant. Unfortunately, this will likely come as no surprise to any Black person who spends their time navigating White institutions. The constant feeling of being out of place, undermined and misunderstood take a daily toll. The term we use in academia is "microaggressions"

-- the paper cuts of racism that have the cumulative effect of damaging our mental health.

Markle's treatment in the press was the perfect example of this kind of racism. No one came out with openly racist language, it was all coded with accusation that she was a "bully," someone was alien to the royal family. The numerous times where she did exactly the same things as her White sister-in-law but got called out for her it in her Black body: textbook undercover racism.

Markle also revealed the callous HR response to her pleas for help she received, when she was told that as she was not technically on the payroll there was nothing the family could do to help. From both personal and professional experience, this bureaucracy of institutional racism is an aspect that of many of us will relate to. Markle went from being the post-racial princess, a symbol of progress, to the poster child for how racism manifests in elite professions. That the royal family allowed all of this to happen and then, according to Markle, said she could not receive help for her mental health issues should tell us all we need to know about the values of that institution.

The couple refer to the family as "the Firm," but given the

monarchy's history, I'd consider the institution as akin to the Mafia in some ways. A family who procured their wealth through immoral means and are always trying to go legit. An institution that expects a pledge of omerta once you join and will try to silence anyone who steps out of line.

There is perhaps no greater racket than the royals, who serve no concrete role in the life of the nation, draining millions of pounds from taxpayers each year. In the interview, Markle detailed the lengths to which she was restricted from speaking whilst subject to their code; indeed, the reason that the royals are so obsessive with their image is likely because it is the only way they can justify their existence.

In theory the Queen is the head of state, in reality she is a symbol rolled out for public events and to give speeches dictated by the government. The role of the family is to represent the idea of Britain both to the nation and the globe (see the popularity of "The Crown"). In this sense the British monarchy is one of the premiere symbols of White supremacy, a born to rule White elite encrusted with the wealth and jewels stolen from their former colonies.

When Harry and Meghan walked down the aisle, surrounded by examples of #BlackExcellence, and being serenaded by a gospel choir on May 19, 2018, it was meant to mark a new era in race relations. Even the royal family was being "modernized," dragged into the 21st century showing just how far we have come. Right wing papers like the Daily Mail even heralded the Markles' remarkable achievement of going from "cotton slaves to royalty" in just 150 years. The only surprise is how quickly this post-racial fantasy unraveled, culminating in Sunday's tell-all interview with Oprah Winfrey, revealing the har-

rowing time Markle says she endured as a serving royal. As if the universe was trying to warn us, May 19 is also Malcolm X's birthday and I dread to think how fast he was spinning in his grave with all the talk of the wedding symbolising racial progress. Malcolm famously declared the 1963 March on Washington, despite its best intentions and relative success, a "farce," a production that "Hollywood couldn't have topped," so I shudder to think what he would have made of this. One revelation from the Oprah interview -- that the couple were already married -- only strengthened the understanding of the event as a spectacle, a

## Pakistan's beloved 'poor man's buger'

Every morning before sunrise in Karachi, Pakistan, while the city is largely asleep, Abdul Ameen ducks through a tunnel and crosses dilapidated railway tracks to the more affluent side of town. Here, parked strategically between a mosque and a marketplace, his pushcart awaits him.

An incandescent bulb illuminates him as he stacks shami kebab (ground beef-and-lentil patties) brought from home in columns behind glass panes. Next, he forms cascading towers of onion rings, lettuce and thickly sliced tomatoes. Working with almost flamboyant grace, it's evident his routine has been perfected over the past 30 years.

By the time the first call to prayer, Fajr, is made (traditionally, when there's enough daylight to distinguish between white and black thread), he's

already dipping into his 16kg canola oil dabba (a rectangular tin bucket) and warming up his giant cast-iron griddle. Over the next few hours, a donkey cart owner, sleepy office workers, domestic helpers and an armed entourage of personal guards all stop by Ameen Burgers to purchase their greasy bounty wrapped in brown paper.

But despite the name of his stall, Ameen is not selling burgers.

Bun-kebabs, widely considered the most beloved Pakistani street food, are thin shami kebab or potato patties in fluffy, milky buns with tangy chutney and crisp vegetables. Optional fried eggs add an extra protein hit. The combination of explosive South Asian flavours, chutney-drenched buns and veg-

etarian options create a starkly different culinary experience from that of a burger. Ubiquitously available at kiosks and small shops or peddled on pushcarts throughout the country, they are generally sold for between 50 and 120 Pakistani



rupees (£0.23-£0.55), depending on the neighbourhood. Potato bun-kebabs have long been staples at school canteens, and travellers in Pakistan will see women perched on wooden benches feasting on them in crowded shopping plazas. They're accessible enough to grab for a quick bite, but not so

heavy - on the pocket or the stomach - to require serious investment. "You don't need to book a reservation or plan out your monthly savings to have a really good bun-kebab," said Riffat Rashid, the food content creator behind Girl Gotta Eat.

For many Pakistanis, bun-kebabs are intertwined with nostalgic family memories, often representing a first experience of eating out or getting takeaway.

Osamah Nasir, who founded the Karachi Food Guide in 2013, remembers first eating bun-kebabs during load-shedding (power outages) at his maternal grandmother's house when he was a child, where nearly a dozen of his cousins spent lazy

Sunday afternoons. "In less than 100 Pakistani rupees (£0.46), we'd all be fed," he said. Pinpointing a definitive moment in history when bun-kebabs originated is difficult. Some consider them Pakistan's affordable (and zestier) answer to burgers, especially because of the unique phenomenon of bun-kebab stalls positioned right outside fast-food franchises. Others, like Haji-Adnan, the third-generation owner of an unnamed bun-kebab stall in Burns Road (a food street in Karachi) think they came about in the 1950s.

Haji-Adnan believes his grandfather, Haji Abdul Razzak, introduced them as a mess-free, to-go option for bustling workers in the city centre in 1953, before fast food joints started proliferating across Pakistan's cities.





HARPO PRODUCTIONS/JOE PUGLIESE

# Harry, Meghan and the power of their story

Among journalists in Queen Victoria's England, Walter Bagehot was a central figure. Not only did he marry well - to the daughter of the Economist's founder, whose death installed Bagehot in the editor's chair -- he also wrote a classic study of British government, "The English Constitution." Of the monarchy's role, Bagehot famously cautioned, "Above all things our royalty is to be revered, and if you begin to poke about it you cannot reverence it. When there is a select committee on the Queen, the charm of royalty will be gone. Its mystery is its life. We must not let in daylight upon magic."

Whatever magic is left in the House of Windsor today, after "The Crown," may not survive Sunday night's airing of Oprah Winfrey's interview with Prince Harry and Meghan, the Duchess of Sussex.

Meghan told Winfrey that the royal family, aka "The Firm," was "perpetuating falsehoods" against her. Her words evoked memories of the tension between Buckingham Palace and Princess Diana in the 1990s.

The palace announced Wednesday that it was investigating accusations that the duchess had bullied employees in the royal household and that it was "very concerned." After the investigation was reported, Holly Thomas noted, "Meghan's spokesman said the duchess was 'saddened

by this latest attack on her character,' and a spokesperson for the Sussexes dismissed the Times report as 'a calculated smear campaign.'" Thomas added that the palace's "eagerness" to respond to the allegations stands "in stark contrast to its previous reactions to the substantially more serious complaints against the Queen's third child, Prince Andrew, the Duke of York. These have been minimal, and resolutely supportive of the prince ..."

Peggy Drexler wrote, "It's easy to feel bad for Harry, who grew up in the spotlight, and for Meghan, who many would say both pursued that

attention and fought it." For all his privileges, "since he was small, Harry's life was one of being followed, trailed. He was young when his mother, Princess Diana, was pursued to her death by paparazzi, but old enough to remember."

Don't blame Harry for stepping away from his royal duties, Drexler added. "He's human and chose to recognize the pain that performing those duties caused." (Here's how to sign up for CNN's new newsletter on the royal family.)

Harry is sixth in line to the British throne and thus unlikely to ever have a constitutional role in the United Kingdom's government. But the fascination with his family's story lands him and his wife in the headlines constantly, even at a time when the Covid-19 pandemic and economic turmoil are the pressing everyday realities for billions of people. 'Smorgasbord of stupid'

prompted a full-on right-wing freakout. The story got top billing on Fox News and has been burning up right-wing Twitter," she wrote.

"In case you've been too busy paying attention to other things -- say, surviving a global pandemic," observed SE Cupp, you might have missed the outrage around "an Ice Age species of human that went extinct 40,000

years ago, a wildly popular series of children's books spanning the mid-20th century, and a starchy tuber-turned dress-up toy from the 50s."

On Friday, as the Senate moved toward passage of Biden's \$1.9 trillion Covid-19 relief bill, the Labor Department reported that the United States added 379,000 jobs in February -- reflecting a faster pace of hiring but with a workforce still nearly 10 million smaller than a year earlier.

The relief bill proceeded through Congress without any Republican support, in contrast to bipartisan votes for stimulus during the Trump administration. Even moderate GOP senators showed little appetite for the kind of major stimulus bill Biden wanted -- and he took note, wrote Julian Zelizer. "It's likely that his experience as vice president taught him that there is in fact a red and blue America, and that trying to blend them could easily lead to political paralysis... Biden is making his own decisions, shaping his own agenda and counting on his own party to move policies forward rather than waiting for Republicans to help him along."

Polls show that 68% of Americans back the Covid-19 bill, so why would the GOP vote no? "The Republican Party's own cold calculations have con-



As if to satisfy the need for distractions, conservative media seized on an innocuous announcement from Dr. Seuss Enterprises Tuesday that it was ending distribution of six of Seuss' many books because they contained racist images. The storyline: 'Cancel culture' is targeting Dr. Seuss! The truth, according to Jill Filipovic: "It is a recognition that a small portion of his older work is out of place today. No one is canceling Dr. Seuss." But this decision "has

prompted a full-on right-wing freakout. The story got top billing on Fox News and has been burning up right-wing Twitter," she wrote.

"I didn't know Neanderthals had a lobby, but they do and her name is Marsha Blackburn. The Tennessee Senator went on Fox Business to defend the poor, oppressed, EXTINCT class, insisting, in the present tense, 'Neanderthals are hunter-gatherers,

they're protectors of their family. They are resilient. They are resourceful."





## How a Chinese website for pirated TV shows became a cultural touchstone for millennials



Syria and Crimea, that doesn't allow access to Netflix, the world's most-popular streaming platform, for example.

China also strictly limits how many foreign films can be screened in cinemas each year. And of the content that is allowed to air in the country, much is heavily censored.

For Chinese millennials, watching

Founded in 2003 by a group of Chinese students in Canada, Renren Yingshi - a phrase that means "everyone's film and TV" - was born out of a desire to spread foreign TV shows and movies more widely within China.

Young, internet-savvy Chinese were drawn to foreign content as China reformed its economy and



foreign shows and movies is not only a favorite pastime - it's an opportunity to learn about the world. And many of them say the roadblocks imposed by the Chinese government leave them with little choice but to turn to pirated websites, even though they are willing to pay for legitimate access to uncensored, foreign content. While the demise of Renren Yingshi and the country's censorship crackdown suggests the status quo might not change, the reaction to its closure and the popularity of uncensored work shows that there remains a huge appetite for such content within China.

Strict censorship rules

opened up to the world. They found that such films and shows offered an edgier, more diverse alternative to the heavily censored content produced at home - as well as a way to learn about other cultures and societies. Getting access to that kind of content through legitimate means, though, is difficult in China.

Since the early 1990s, authorities have allowed just a few dozen foreign films to be screened in the country each year - only nine of the 26 Oscar best picture winners were screened publicly in China from 1994 to 2019, for example.

International streaming ser-

vices, including Netflix, Hulu and Amazon Prime Video, have also been unable to crack the market. Netflix, for example, told shareholders in 2016 that the "regulatory environment for foreign digital content services" was "challenging" in China. A subsequent attempt to partner with a local company to distribute content failed.

The content that is allowed to air in China, meanwhile, needs to meet strict guidelines. Movies or shows with controversial themes - such as those that depict China in a bad light, portray taboo subjects like the 1989 Tiananmen Massacre, or feature LGBTQ storylines - are kept out entirely. And since China lacks a film rating system, any content approved by Chinese regulators is heavily edited to remove certain scenes, such as graphic sex or violence. When the Oscar-winning Freddie Mercury biopic "Bohemian Rhapsody" was released in China in 2019, for example, any mention of the Queen singer's sexuality - as well as his AIDS diagnosis - was edited out.

And the American blockbuster fantasy drama "Game of Thrones," which built its popularity on graphic sex and violence, was censored so heavily on Chinese streaming giant Tencent Video that some viewers complained that it was turned into a staid "medieval European castle documentary."

"There were too many 'sensitive' scenes deleted that I could hardly understand the plot anymore -- it was so confusing," said a fan of the show who watched on Tencent Video. The fan asked to remain anonymous because she once helped translate shows for a website that featured pirated content, and she also spoke to CNN Business about that experience.

There's little indication that these rules may change. Under Chinese President Xi Jinping, tolerance for foreign ideas and values has declined drastically. Popular Western culture is seen by Beijing as a key risk for foreign infiltration that targets Chinese youth - making such content important for the government to control.

A long history of legal issues The sweeping restrictions have motivated fans of shows and movies that run afoul of censorship rules to subtitle them in Chinese and upload unauthorized copies online. They operate in loose networks of volunteer translators known as fansub groups.

When Bill Liang realized that popular video download and streaming service Renren Yingshi might be gone for good his heart sank.

The website, also known as YYeTs.com, was how the 24-year-old film school student was able to watch hundreds of episodes of pirated American TV shows when he was growing up in northern China.

But the site - one of China's largest, longest-running and last-remaining destinations for pirated, subtitled foreign content - was shuttered on February 3 as part of a sweeping police clampdown on piracy. While the website is still live, none of its services work anymore.

"I was heartbroken when I found out," Liang told CNN Business. "I feel like there is one place fewer in China through which we can expand our horizons."

Police in Shanghai arrested 14 people they claim ran the website and app after a three-month investigation into suspected intellectual property infringement. At the time of its closure, Renren Yingshi had amassed over eight million registered users and was

home to more than 20,000 pirated TV shows and movies. The site's operators made some 16 million yuan (\$2.5 million) in the past couple of years from ads, subscription fees, and selling hard drives loaded with pirated content, according to police.

Renren Yingshi did not respond to a request for comment from CNN Business.

The crackdown was lauded by state media and intellectual property experts as a sign of China's resolve to enforce copyright protection - criticism over which has dogged Beijing for years. But it also drew a wave of backlash from fans who, like Liang, had long relied on the site for uncensored foreign content.

An outpouring of support for Renren Yingshi dominated China's Twitter-like Weibo platform in the days after the crackdown. Some thanked the site for "opening a door for us to the world."

The public outcry came, at least in part, because of how tightly the Chinese government restricts access to foreign content. It is one of only four countries or regions, alongside North Korea,



# A misplaced idea of honour enables violence against women

*The prevailing gendered notions of honour remain at variance with the gender-just society that the Constitution seeks to establish. The constitutional principles of non-discrimination and equality are in tune with India's international obligations as a party to the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women.*

Multiple efforts at preventing, eliminating and redressing violence against women (VAW) have had limited success. Securing violence-free homes, workplaces and other public spaces for women has been an onerous task, among other reasons, on account of it meandering through the realm of what people see as honour. We all have been witness to frenzied groups perpetrating VAW with the specific objective of dishonouring a particular community in ethnic or communal strife. Saving or restoring "family honour" tends to promote tolerance, acceptance, even justification for honour killings. Honour metamorphoses into a barrier to the elimination of VAW if it constitutes the foundational premise of such law. Even if it does not constitute the foundational premise, operationalisation of the law within such a culture of honour contradicts the purpose of law. Internationally accepted understanding of VAW falls into a quagmire when juxtaposed with the

socially and culturally determined notions of honour. Violence against women or gender-based violence is defined by the Committee on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women as "violence that is directed against a woman because she is a woman or that affects women disproportionately". Gender-based violence violates women's human rights and the infringement of human rights constitutes an affront to humanity. The inviolability of humanity stands eroded when expected to be judged through the prism of honour. First, the notion of honour is socially and culturally determined and is thus ever shifting. It is incapable of offering an unconditional basis for any conception of justice or righteousness. Second, on account of being constructed within and through the existing social structure, the notions of honour or dishonour embody and reflect social hierarchy and prejudices. The notion of honour thus has a tendency to perpetuate hierarchy rather than

usher in a transformation or deliver social justice. Finally, the ideology of gender attributes respect/honour to women not on the basis that they are human beings and thus worthy of respect, but on whether and to what extent their actions are in accordance with what is socially expected of them, and what is socially valued in them. The prevailing gendered notions of honour remain at variance with the gender-just society that the Constitution seeks to establish. The constitutional principles of non-discrimination and equality are in tune with India's international obligations as a party to the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women. Despite this, it's appalling to find legal norms pertaining to VAW or their operationalisation meandering the realm of honour, in complete contravention of international standards. Many instances of the meandering of legal norms through the



realm of honour relate to sexual offences. For instance, the exclusion of marital rape from the category of sexual offences raises the question of whether rape is an offence against the bodily integrity of a female or an affront to her honour. One of the presumptions on which one may exclude marital rape from the category of sexual offences is that the socially determined honour of the female remains unblemished. What adds to the malaise is the judicial meandering into the realm of honour. The recent remarks by a Supreme Court (SC) bench holding out the promise of "help" to a person accused of rape if he wanted to

marry the girl, in this context, are worrying. Can the violation of bodily integrity be lawfully redressed through the social arrangement of marriage? Even where in its substance or its assumptions, the law seeks to usher in gender justice, as in rape by an unknown person, its interpretation and operationalisation in the gendered culture of honour makes it frail. Everyone is constitutionally entitled to legal redress for violations of their rights and for that the SC still remains the last hope for the marginalised. And it must rely on law, not a misplaced sense of what constitutes honour, in providing justice.

# Power of COVID vaccines vs. politics of fear, Neanderthals

Public health, especially in the middle of a pandemic, should trump politics (pun intended). Unfortunately, too often it doesn't. For public health to be most effective and inspire cooperation rather than fear and division, it must involve a simple direct message.

This kind of powerful science and direct messaging when it comes to COVID is what I found a little over a year ago, at Nebraska Medicine, which I visited on behalf of "Tucker Carlson Tonight."

In Nebraska, a group of top scientists at the National Quarantine Center, led by chancellor Dr. Jeffrey Gold, was examining the supposedly new-to-America SARS COV 2 virus found in passengers from the Diamond Princess cruise ship. Dr. Gold and others warned me that the emerging outbreak was far more contagious than people realized.

They believed the virus was already spreading through our communities at the time. Tucker himself realized it too, warning of the extent of this massive pandemic even as the World Health Organization continued to maintain into early March, 2020, that international travel was OK, even as the virus was spreading into Europe and beyond. Flash forward to now, where the pandemic is finally ebbing thanks to mass vaccination added to natural immunity in those who have had COVID, yet mixed messaging from the top



leads to continued fear and division.

We could all be celebrating over 82 million doses of the vaccine having been administered to over 16% of Americans and hospitalizations dropping to below 45,000. Instead, the president himself is calling the governors of Texas and Mississippi "Neanderthals" for prematurely removing their states' mask mandates while at the same time he is relaxing Trump immigration rules leading to over one hundred migrants who tested positive for COVID to enter our border communities and beyond. This inconsistency spreads fear as well as COVID. While continued masking and distancing makes sense, ridicule never works as a motivator in the public health world.

At the same time, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's delay in releasing guidelines that it would at least be OK for fully vaccinated, maskless

individuals to congregate in small groups sends the unfortunate message that even immunized patients remain at risk.

This despite a growing body of science supporting the fact that being fully vaccinated with two Pfizer/BioNTech or Moderna shots causes a marked decrease risk of viral transmission. In Israel, for example, which examined the contacts of over 600,000 people who were vaccinated with both shots and found a 92% drop in infections. For those who have been vaccinated, these results should mean at least some freedom from fear of contagion if not yet complete freedom from restrictions here in the U.S. Sometime soon, as the case and hospitalization numbers continue to decline and the numbers vaccinated continue to increase, I predict a vaccine card will be your ticket to travel or to enter a restaurant or gym, as is currently the case in Israel. But in the meantime, I am concerned that a pandemic mentality could continue undiminished no matter what the actual numbers reveal. As I write in my book, "COVID: the Politics of Fear and the Power of Science," mixed messaging creates uncertainty and fear, which the media and politicians may continue to use to advance their agendas at our expense, even as the threat itself diminishes.



# How Kenya is harnessing the immense heat from the Earth



Drive along the dusty dirt road that winds through Kenya's Hell's Gate National park, past the zebra, gazelles and giraffes, and you'll see a plume of steam shooting skyward in the distance. Vehicles must sometimes swerve to avoid running over warthogs as they enter a vast valley dotted with dozens of steam vents - a factory of clouds.

Blasts of steam billow loudly, releasing heat from deep within the Earth. But even more powerful is the steam you don't see: that which twists through miles of tubes to push past turbines, generating a type of clean energy that won't run out for millions of years.

Atop this infernal labyrinth of tubes is Kenya's Olkaria Geothermal Project, where a new addition to the powerplant is about to go online. At 86 megawatts, the Olkaria VI expansion will push the project's total production to 791.5 megawatts. That's about 27% of all the energy in Kenya, according to KenGen, the parastatal company that operates Olkaria. Already, Kenya relies on geothermal steam for 38% of its power - a greater proportion than any other nation.

"When Olkaria VI is complete, it will be the largest single geothermal plant in the world," according to Cyrus Karingithi, who leads infrastructure and resource development for Olkaria. Globally, geothermal energy is a \$4.6bn (£3.3bn) industry, with more than 500 powerplants electrifying millions of households across South-east Asia, North America, Europe and beyond. Geothermal is, after all, the second most abundant

source of energy in the world behind solar.

But it in terms of how much we tap this source of power, geothermal lags well behind. In 2016, the energy the world harvested from geothermal was just 4% that from solar, despite geothermal having some important advantages. Wind turbines are useless on a still day, and solar panels' energy falls when the sun is covered by clouds and at night. Meanwhile, no matter the time of day, the Earth below us is steadily releasing vast quantities of heat, whatever the weather.

This is where the continent is breaking up - Anna Mwangi

To appreciate the potential of this heat, there is nowhere better to look than where it blasts through the surface in the towers of steam erupting from Hell's Gate, around 90 kilometres (56 miles) north-west of Kenya's capital, Nairobi. Heat from the depths

On cloudy days here, it's hard to tell which clouds come from the sky, and which ones come from the ground. One morning in February, Anna Mwangi, a geophysicist who works for firms including KenGen, is tasked with exploring for new geothermal drill sites. She points at a faint whisp of steam rising from a small hole in the rocky hillside.

"You can boil an egg in it," she says with a smile. The area around Olkaria is teeming with natural geothermal vents such as these, some hot enough they burn to the touch. The steam, Mwangi explains, is what gives Hell's Gate National Park its name: The landscape looks like the underworld is boiling over.

This energy is coming from the

Earth - and it's essentially limitless - Juliet Newson

In a way, it is. Some 3,000 kilometers (1,860 miles) down lies the Earth's core, with temperatures hotter than the surface of the Sun. That heat travels upward through the Earth's thick mantle, to the planet's outermost layer - the crust. In places where tectonic plates - consisting of the Earth's crust, and the upper mantle - are being pushed together or torn apart, this heat rises closer to the surface. One such place is Africa's Great Rift Valley, which runs 7,000km (4,350 miles) across the eastern side of the continent.

"This is where the continent is breaking up," says Mwangi, gesturing to the rocky ridges with deep gorges in between them. These are the visible signs of two vast tectonic plates slowly inching apart. "This is an active process that will go on for several millions of years to come," she says. "In some millions of years if you come here, this will be an ocean."

But in the meantime, this tectonic movement can be exploited for the energy it releases. As tectonic plates move they cause fissures - breaks in the Earth's crust that allow underground water to interact with super-heated rock, turning it into steam. These fissures create pathways up to the Earth's surface, where they form hot springs, geysers or steaming geothermal vents. Here in the Great Rift Valley, much of that heat is trapped just beneath the surface.

"This energy is coming from the Earth - and it's essentially limitless," says Juliet Newson,

director of the Iceland School of Energy at Reykjavik University.

"Kenya has got a really good resource and that's the Rift Valley. You've got this [incredible] heat that's so near the surface." In other parts of the world, you'd have to drill several kilometers or more to find equivalent temperatures.

Harnessing this energy for electricity is very simple, says Karingithi. "The way we do it at Olkaria, you separate the water from the steam. The steam you take to the turbine, which rotates and generates electricity."

The turbines at Olkaria V whirl at 3,000 rotations per minute, too fast for the human eye to follow. Inside a small control room, two engineers work in 12-hour shifts, staring at a dozen monitors with data from the plant.

Kenya started early. We explored from the 1950s, so we've had many decades of studies and development and successes - Anna Mwangi

"What is your output today?" Karingithi asks them. One consults a computer screen: "158 megawatts." That's about 5% of the electricity capacity in the country.

All told, Olkaria generates about a quarter of Kenya's power, transmitting some of it nearly 500km (310 miles) south-east to Kenya's port city of Mombasa, and a few hundred kilometers west toward the border with Uganda. Kenya is the eighth largest producer of geothermal energy in the world, behind nations such as the United States, the Philippines, Indonesia, Turkey and New Zealand. Already ahead of Iceland and Japan, it is set to

overtake Mexico and Italy once Olkaria VI goes live.

This legacy has been a long time in the making. "Kenya started early," says Mwangi. "We explored from the 1950s, so we've had many decades of studies and development and successes."

And also failures. "Our first wells were terrible," says Mwangi. "That was in 1956. Those wells produced low-pressure steam," says Karingithi, and at the time, the technology wasn't developed enough to use that steam.

The original Olkaria - Kenya's first geothermal power plant, and the first in Africa - came a quarter of a century later, in 1981. Since the 1950s, KenGen, the parastatal company that operates Olkaria, has drilled 310 wells here in Hell's Gate, 125 of which are still steaming today. Two massive new power plants came online in 2014 and 2015, substantially increasing output. But their work is far from over. A quarter of Kenya's population still lacks electricity. Blackouts are common, hampering the nation's manufacturing sector and making it hard for students who need to study at night or parents to charge their cell phones. "We need to add more power so our nation is lighted like the rest of the world," says Karingithi.

Drilling down

To find the next sources of steam, Mwangi and Karingithi trek as much as 50 kilometers (31 miles) in a single day. They look for sprigs of what they call "geothermal grass" - tall and thin, with green and yellow strands, which hint that heat and moisture may be lying underneath.



# The wonder material we all need but is running out

Natural rubber is a uniquely tough, flexible and highly waterproof material. It puts tyres on our vehicles, soles on our shoes, it makes seals for engines and refrigerators, insulates wires and other electrical components. It is used in condoms and clothing, sports balls and the humble elastic bands. Over the past year it has played a pivotal role in the pandemic in personal protective equipment worn by doctors and nurses around the world.

In fact, rubber is deemed to be a commodity of such global importance that it is included on the EU's list of critical raw materials.

Unfortunately, there are signs the world might be running out of natural rubber. Disease, climate change and plunging global prices have put the world's rubber supplies into jeopardy. It has led scientists to search for a solution before it's too late.

But how has such an important commodity fallen into such peril in the first place?

The global supply of natural rubber - around 20 million tonnes per year - is produced

almost entirely by fragmented smallholders working tiny plots of land in tropical forests. Millions of these workers tend to plantations in Thailand, Indonesia, China and West Africa, carefully stripping bark from the trees to extract a milky white sap which is shaped into sheets and dried in the sun. Between them, these farmers provide 85% of the world's natural rubber supply.

But this fragile supply is under threat. A native of the Brazilian rainforest, the rubber tree *Hevea brasiliensis* is no longer grown commercially in the country due to the prevalence of South American leaf blight, a catastrophic pathogen which killed off the country's rubber industry in the 1930s. Strict quarantine controls have kept the disease contained to the South America for now, but arrival in Asia is thought to be almost inevitable.

In the meantime, farmers elsewhere in the world still face local pathogens such as white root disease and other leaf blights that have made the leap from neighbouring oil palm plantations. Climate change is also exerting its toll - Thailand's

rubber production has been hit by droughts and flooding in recent years, with the latter also further spreading disease-causing microbes across growing regions.

A growing demand for rubber and short supply should be good news for the farmers, as it would make rubber more profitable to grow. Unfortunately, that's not the case. The price of rubber is set by the distant Shanghai Futures Exchange, where brokers speculate on value of this material alongside gold, aluminium, and fuel. "The pricing has nothing to do with the cost of production," says Robert Meyer, co-founder of rubber buyer Halcyon Agri. Because of this arrangement, the price of rubber per tonne can vary three-fold from one month to the next, and in recent years has been held at very low values.

Low prices force farmers to over-tap their trees to obtain more rubber, weakening the plants and making them more susceptible to disease. This situation further jeopardises the supply of rubber. "The mathematics smallholders make is that income equals price times volume," explains Meyer. Low prices force farmers



to over-tap their trees to obtain more rubber, weakening the plants and making them more susceptible to disease. The low prices have also discouraged planting of new trees to replace those at the end of their commercial lifespan, and many farmers have abandoned plantations entirely.

Eleanor Warren-Thomas is a research fellow at Bangor University, Wales, who has studied the dynamics of rubber plantations. "Oil palm and natural rubber make the same money per unit of land, but the labour input is higher for rubber," she says. "Because the rubber price is falling, farmers are switching from producing rubber to selling the timber for near term profit, and growing oil palm instead."

These factors combined means that the world is now at a point where the supply of natural rubber is not keeping up with demand. In late 2019, the International Tripartite Rubber Council warned the global supply would fall short by one million tonnes (900,000 tons) in 2020, around 7% of production. Then the pandemic hit. Demand reduced immediately, and driven miles - the key measure for ultimate demand for rubber - dropped as countries went into lockdown. But rubber soon bounced back. "Demand outpaced even the most bullish predictions," says Meyer. As they came out of lockdown, Chinese citizens bought huge numbers of new cars, thanks to fears around the safety of public transport.

# Neanderthals disappeared from Europe thousands of years earlier than we thought



Neanderthal remains believed to belong to some of the last survivors of the species in Europe are thousands of years older than once thought, according to a new study.

Exactly when Neanderthals, our closest ancestors, disappeared in Europe is hotly debated. They are thought to have gone extinct around 40,000 years ago -- not long after modern humans migrated out of Africa.

But previous studies of remains found in Belgium's Spy Cave had placed specimens as recent as around 37,000 years ago -- which would have made the owners some of Europe's latest surviving Neanderthals.

But experts from Belgium, England and Germany suspected that the age of previously analyzed specimens could be unreliable due to contamination.

contamination of the remains meant that they had been dated as "inaccurately young" by up to 10,000 years. Experts then dated remains found at two other Belgian sites, Fonds-de-Forêt and Engis, and found the remains were a similar age to those found in Spy Cave.

"Dating all these Belgian specimens was very exciting as they played a major role in the understanding and the definition of Neanderthals," Grégory

Using a process known as liquid chromatography separation, experts extracted a single amino acid from the Neanderthal remains. They used this to date and reanalyze the remains, which were now free from contaminants such as glue.

The experts said that Abrams, an archeologist at Belgium's Scladina Cave Archaeological Centre, said in a statement. Based on these latest radiocarbon dates, experts estimate that Neanderthals disappeared from the region much earlier than previously estimated -- 44,200 to 40,600 years ago. "This new study gives us more clues about when Neanderthals got extinct in Europe," lead author Thibaut Deviese, associate professor at Aix-Marseille Université, told CNN in an email. "There was some controversy about the last appearance of Neanderthals in Western Europe and particularly for some individuals from Spy Cave," he explained. "Dating is crucial in archaeology, without a reliable framework of chronology we can't really be confident in understanding the relationships between

Neanderthals and Homo sapiens as we moved into Europe 45,000 years ago and they began to disappear," Tom Higham, a professor at the University of Oxford, who directs the PalaeoChron research project, which ran the study, said in a statement. "That's why these methods are so exciting, because they provide much more accurate and reliable dates," Higham added. Deviese said that more accurate dates for these Neanderthal specimens answered one important question -- but also opened up new ones, such as how long did Neanderthals and early modern humans overlap? "We now know more precisely when Neanderthals disappeared in Europe, but we now need to confirm with the same robust methods when anatomically modern humans arrived in order to elucidate for how long these two species cohabited," he added.



# GE dismantles the business that ended its dominance a decade ago



Covid-19 pandemic caused a plunge in air travel and massive losses across the airline industry. GECAS' cash-starved airline customers paid only about 84% of the unit's invoices in 2020. It resulted in a \$786 million loss for 2020 after a \$1 billion profit in 2019.

After the deal, GE Capital will no longer be a separate unit of General Electric. Its remaining business -- Energy Financial Services (EFS) and an insurance business which was already being wound down, will be reported as part of its corporate operations.

"Today marks GE's transformation to a more focused, simpler, and stronger industrial company," said GE CEO Larry Culp, who just two years ago told investors the company had "no plans to sell GECAS."

End of an era

The effective end of GE Capital is the end of an important era for the former conglomerate.

The company has been trying

to become leaner and more profitable in recent years, selling off its appliance business in 2016, its NBC Universal entertainment unit in 2011 and its light bulb business in 2020, among other divisions. And while those businesses had a higher public profile than GE Capital, no business was more important to the conglomerate during its heyday than GE's finance arm. It provided financing on many of its industrial products, such as jet engines and electric power plants, as well as a key source of financing for small business and consumers. It even became a major player in the subprime mortgage business.

But when the housing bubble burst and the subsequent meltdown in financial markets in 2008, no part of the GE business was wounded more than GE Capital, and what had once been a key driver of the company's success became an albatross. GE sold off most

of the real estate and other assets from GE Capital in 2015 and has been trying to exit its business ever since step by step.

While GE plans to use the sale to shave its debt, consolidating what's left of GE Capital into GE corporate will likely lead Standard & Poor's to lower its overall credit rating for the company to BBB, S&P said Wednesday. That is only two steps above junk bond status, and another sign of how far GE has fallen over the past decade. It was only 12 years ago that GE had the top of the scale AAA credit rating, a sign of financial muscle that few companies are able to achieve.

GE also warned investors it expects to make between 15 cents a share to 25 cents a share in earnings this year. That's lower than the consensus forecast of a 26-cent profit. Shares of GE (GE) were down 5% in Wednesday morning trading on news of the deal and its new guidance.

General Electric is selling off its aircraft leasing business, closing the books on its once mighty GE Capital unit, the financial arm of the company that had been its largest business and one of the world's most dominant financial institutions.

GE is selling the aircraft leasing business known as GECAS to rival AerCap (AER), an Ireland-based company that will become by far the largest company in that industry with an estimated 25% to 30% share of the market. GE will receive \$24 billion in cash and stock that

will give it about a 46% stake in the combined company.

The company plans to use proceeds to reduce its debt load by about \$30 billion, part of a multi-year effort to slash \$70 billion of debt from its balance sheet. It is the latest and among the most dramatic steps GE is taking to reshape and slim down the now struggling company.

GECAS, which buys aircraft and leases them to airlines and other operators, had been providing most of the revenue for the GE Capital unit. But sales fell about 20% last year as the

## Nigerian startup Flutterwave secures \$170 million in capital injections from investors, now valued at over \$1 billion



Flutterwave, an African fintech startup has secured \$170 million in capital injections from investors, the firm said in a statement Wednesday.

The new capital flows -- facilitated by "a leading group of international investors" -- will bolster Flutterwave's client base in the global market, the statement said.

"The fundraise brings the total investment in Flutterwave to USD \$225 million and is one of only a very small number of African fintech companies to have raised significant funds in a pe-

riod of widespread disruption and economic uncertainty," the statement added.

Founded in 2016, Flutterwave provides digital payment services for small businesses in Africa. Its Nigerian chief executive, Olugbenga Agboola, said on social media Wednesday that the tech firm had aimed to "build a payments technology infrastructure that connects Africa to the global economy by making local and international payments seamless."

"We knew this would be incredibly difficult but we continued,"

he added, in a Twitter thread Wednesday morning.

The fintech company -- famed for its "seamless and secure" payments system -- has gone on to process in excess of \$1 billion in transaction value, Agboola said.

Flutterwave is renowned for creating a digital store -- helping SMEs to remain in business -- in the wake of Covid-19 lockdowns.

More than 1,000 SMEs across Africa have signed up to display and sell their products online using the Flutterwave store.

## WhatsApp Web: Everything you need to know, complete guide

WhatsApp is one of the planet's most popular applications used by millions of people in the whole world. The app has already replaced SMS and fast becoming our primary mode of communication. WhatsApp Web feature is mostly used for organisations. It's fast and fun to type messages using a web browser.

Nowadays WhatsApp has become a very powerful communication tool. Apart from using it for personal communication, you can use WhatsApp for your business in various ways, it's cost-effective and easy to use.

Check here the complete guide which you can follow to use WhatsApp Web.

WhatsApp Web How to use: One of the simplest ways you can access your WhatsApp on your PC is by downloading and installing the desktop software. Install the WhatsApp web desktop application, available for PC or Mac from [whatapp.com/download](https://whatapp.com/download).

If you don't want to download the software on your device then you can open WhatsApp Web on your browser. You can

pair your phone with a WhatsApp desktop from both devices: Android and iOS.

Open the camera of your phone. Now point the phone at the QR code shown and scan the code. Once this is done, your phone and your PC will be connected to your WhatsApp account. Once connected you can conveniently communicate on WhatsApp without having to look at your phone. But remember WhatsApp will remain active until you log out.

WhatsApp Web Voice/ Video calling:

WhatsApp users will soon be able to make voice and video calls from the web version of the app. "WhatsApp is rolling out beta calls for specific users but unfortunately, being a beta feature, it's available for very few people.

Where is my WhatsApp QR code?

Install and open the WhatsApp web desktop application to use the WhatsApp QR code. Now point the phone at the QR code shown and scan the code. It is available for PC or Mac from [whatapp.com/download](https://whatapp.com/download).



# Expert panel approves Covaxin for emergency use, waives off clinical trial condition

**A subject expert committee has approved Bharat Biotech's Covaxin for emergency use authorisation in India and removed the clinical trial mode condition on its use..**

The subject expert committee (SEC) of the Central Drugs Standard Control Organisation has approved Bharat Biotech's Covaxin for emergency use authorisation in India.

Earlier the vaccine's emergency use was permitted only in the clinical trial mode. This condition has now been waived off. The decision was taken after the expert panel studied the interim data of Covaxin's Phase-3 trial

that showed 81 per cent efficacy.

Covaxin is India's first indigenous vaccine against the Covid-19 and is being developed and manufactured by Bharat Biotech.

It is among the two Covid-19 vaccines that have secure emergency use authorisation in India. The other vaccine is Covishield, which is developed by Oxford University and

AstraZeneca and is being manufactured in India by the Pune-based Serum Institute of India.

On March 3, Bharat Biotech announced results of Phase 3 clinical trials of Covaxin, saying the vaccine demonstrates interim clinical efficacy of 81 per cent.

The Phase 3 clinical trials involved 25,800 volunteers, making it the "largest trials ever



conducted in India" in collaboration with the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR), Bharat Biotech said.

"Covaxin has demonstrated 81 per cent interim efficacy in preventing Covid-19 in those without prior infection after the sec-

ond dose," it said, adding that apart from demonstrating high clinical efficacy against Covid-19, the vaccine also provides "significant immunogenicity against the rapidly emerging variants" of the virus causing Covid-19.

## Biden announces plans to purchase 100 million more Johnson & Johnson coronavirus vaccine doses



President Joe Biden announced Wednesday that he is directing the US Department of Health and Human Services to purchase an additional 100 million doses of the Johnson & Johnson Covid-19 vaccine. The administration

and the pharmaceutical giant still need to negotiate when these 100 million doses will be available but it will likely happen later this year as Johnson & Johnson works to ramp up production.

"There is light at the end of this dark tunnel of this past year, but we cannot let our guard down now or assume victory is inevitable. Together we're going to get through this pandemic and usher in a healthier and more hopeful future," Biden said alongside the CEOs of Johnson & Johnson and Merck, which is helping to manufacture the Johnson & Johnson's vaccine under a deal brokered by the White House.

The New York Times first reported the announcement was expected. The White House told governors Tuesday to expect fewer than 400,000 doses of Johnson & Johnson vaccine next week, far below what they initially expected would be avail-

able. Biden announced last week that the US would have enough Covid-19 vaccine doses for every adult American by the end of May, which was a two-month acceleration of the previous timeline his administration had laid out. This new purchase of Johnson & Johnson vaccines will not accelerate that timeline, but these doses would help build up US vaccine stock later in the year. The new goal was made possible by a rare partnership between competitors Merck and Johnson & Johnson. The White House says it is utilizing the Defense Production Act to help equip two Merck facilities to manufacture the Johnson & Johnson vaccine.

When Biden first took office, his

team learned that Johnson & Johnson's one-shot coronavirus vaccine was highly effective but the company was millions of doses behind its production schedule. Jeff Zients, the White House's coronavirus czar, called Johnson & Johnson's CEO Alex Gorsky and was instrumental in brokering the deal. Having enough vaccine supply by the end of May does not mean all Americans will receive shots by the end of May. Issues with distribution and personnel mean it could take much longer for all the doses to be administered. More than 527,700 Americans have died from Covid-19 as of Wednesday morning, according to Johns Hopkins University.

## Why some people can deal with the cold



Plunging into ice baths post-workout might be how some professional athletes choose to recover, but anyone trying to keep fit in the winter will know that the cold can be as harsh as it is rejuvenating.

For Matilda Hay, a recreational swimmer, there's no choice be-

tween a heated pool or cold-water wild swimming. While the latter has been lauded for its health benefits, it's not for everyone. "When I've tried wild swimming, I can't stay in for long - I lasted maybe a few minutes before I came running out," says Hay. "My sister is able to

stay in much longer than me for some reason. I just think we handle the cold differently."

Evidence for some of the mental health benefits of cold-water swimming cited in the media is a little thin, too. It's largely based on the case study of one 24-year-old woman. So why has it proven so popular? And is Hay right; are some people just better at handling the cold than others?

The weather takes the cutting edge off our performance levels. In the cold our muscles slow, taking longer to tense and reducing our ability to both burst into action and the total amount of power generated (though this can be mitigated with a good

warm-up beforehand).

The reasons for this decrease in performance in cold weather are a little complex, not least because our tolerance of the cold depends on our genetics, subcutaneous fat levels - the fat just beneath our skin - and body size. One suggestion is that when our bodies cool the rate at which we release energy in our muscle cells decreases.

But exercising in the cold has also been linked to better cardiac health, a stronger immune system and converting white fat cells to brown, contributing to more weight loss. So, if done safely, it could bring serious health benefits.

Some of us might have an ad-

vantage when it comes to working out in cold weather. One in five people lack the muscle fibre protein  $\beta$ -actinin-3. This mutation reveals a little bit about our evolutionary history and explains why some modern athletes succeed in the cold, while others remain frozen to the start line. Sometimes called the "gene for speed",  $\beta$ -actinin-3 gives athletes a competitive advantage when it comes to powerful bursts of energy and muscle recovery, but it might be less useful in other situations.

All of our skeletal muscles are made up of a combination of two types of fibre: slow-twitch muscle fibres and fast-twitch muscle fibres.



## Roohi movie review

*Rajkummar Rao-Varun Sharma's equation stands out in convoluted film, Janhvi Kapoor is average*

**Roohi movie review: Rajkummar Rao and Varun Sharma are the shining stars of his horror comedy. Janhvi Kapoor gets little room to impress.**

Roohi  
Cast: Janhvi Kapoor, Rajkummar Rao, Varun Sharma  
Direction: Hardik Mehta  
After Amar Kaushik's 2018 film Stree emerged winner at the box office, and set new benchmark for horror comedies in Bollywood, it was to expect that the second offering from the same production should at least be equally good, if not better. Sadly, the latest release in the genre, Roohi, starring Janhvi Kapoor, Rajkummar Rao and Varun Sharma, is a rather drab attempt at trying to scare people while making them laugh. Neither of the two click. With a plot that's too convoluted and takes the entire runtime of the film to establish itself, Roohi terribly falters at storytelling, and fails to give out the message it intends to. Even until the inter-

mission, you can't make out the exact reasoning behind whatever is unfolding on screen. There's a scared young girl (Roohi played by Kapoor), who is possessed by a ghost and transforms, with extensive prosthetic makeup, into a screaming chudail, Afza. Well, no prize for guessing the intended pun in their names. Then there are two men - Rao as Bhawra Pandey and Sharma as Kattanni Qureshi --journalists and part time kidnappers in the quaint town in North India. They are hired by an entitled groom to abduct Roohi for a 'pakdai shaadi'. While the men do pull off a shoddy heist, they get a lot more trouble than what they had bargained for. However, overtime (we mean in just a day), the men lose their hearts to the 'two-in-one' woman. While Sharma falls for Afza, Rao promises Roohi he'd

help her get rid of the chudail. In all this, the script is laced with multiple superstitious beliefs, supernatural practices in small towns, and paranormal activities. Before anything else, I seriously didn't understand the idea behind Kapoor's supposedly scary makeup. Imagine, in one of the scenes, the man Afza is getting married to, looks at her hands and exclaims, "Danger mehendi lagayi hai aapne". Even her dialogues as a ghost aren't heard clearly at all, hence leading to a bit of a difficulty in understanding her actual ordeal. If it were not for Rao and Sharma's camaraderie, I don't think you can stand the film for more than 20 minutes. The comic timing of these two is the only saving grace. Their near perfect dialogue delivery is what gives us genuine laughs. At



many places, with mispronounced words like waitsup (whatsapp), Kim Karadarshan (Kardashian), anchunt (ancient), horrorscope (horoscope) and exercise of Imli (The Exorcism of Emily Rose), you sense a clever play with words that add to the fun.

A special mention to Sharma who's given a tough competition to Rao, with his hilarious expressions and comical body language. Rao is decent but not as exceptionally good as he was in Stree. Kapoor, for some strange reason, despite being

there in the entire film, doesn't really get her moments to shine. Other than the scene in which she she talks to the chudail side of Roohi, there isn't much that Kapoor brings to the table.

As supporting parts, Alexx O'Neill, Manav Vij and Sarita Joshi have very little to do and their character sketch are half-baked. Even though Hardik Mehta's direction manages to keep you intrigued, it's Mrighdeep Singh Lamba and Gautam Mehra's frail writing that doesn't let Roohi strike an instant chord.

## Judas and the Black Messiah movie review:

**Judas And the Oscar must go to Daniel Kaluuya**

**Judas and the Black Messiah movie review: Daniel Kaluuya and Lakeith Stanfield deliver extraordinary performances in Shaka King's politically charged film, co-produced by Ryan Coogler.**



Judas and the Black Messiah  
Director - Shaka King  
Cast - Daniel Kaluuya, Lakeith Stanfield, Dominique Fishback, Jesse Plemons  
Judas and the Black Messiah arrives at the tail end of what will be seen, in the future, as a particularly pivotal few months for Black filmmaking. In many ways, it serves as a crossover to Aaron Sorkin's The Trial of the Chicago 7, which itself felt like a 'sidequel' to Steve McQueen's Mangrove. Directed with style and sheer brute force by Shaka King, the terrifically titled film tells the parallel stories of the charismatic leader of the Black

Panther Party, Fred Hampton (Daniel Kaluuya), and the FBI informant who betrayed him, Bill O'Neal (Lakeith Stanfield). It's part morality play, part conspiracy thriller - two tones that normally wouldn't gel - but mostly on the strength of the extraordinary performances of its two leads, the film feels rather seamless. In its excellent opening scene, O'Neal, a petty criminal pretending to be an FBI agent, walks into a bar and proceeds to shake down a few goons. He gets caught. The obvious question on everyone's mind is this: why didn't he pull a regular armed robbery; why impersonate a federal agent?

O'Neal shoots back, "A badge is scarier than a gun." And so, in exchange of immunity, he agrees to infiltrate the Black Panthers, and provide vital information about them to the Feds.

It's such a smart Stanfield performance, nuanced in a way that deserves to be taught in Julliard or something. You can sense the conflict in his shifty eyes as he gets sucked deeper into the mission, collecting evidence on Hampton, whom the FBI believes is a violent threat. But as embracing of violence as the Black Panthers were, Hampton was no mere madman with a gun. We see scenes in which he teaches socialism and Marxism to young Black men and women, and delivers speeches with the bravado of Kanye West and the measured eloquence of Barack Obama.

Hampton was just 21 years old

when he was assassinated by the FBI in 1969, on intelligence provided by O'Neal. That's around the same age as Bhagat Singh and Burhan Wani were when they were killed. One man's terrorist, as they say, is another man's freedom fighter. The film's title is an indication of the confidence with which Shaka King directs. This is bold, bristling moviemaking, tethered to the ground by Kaluuya and Stanfield's performances. The themes may be Biblical, but the two actors find a deep humanity in their characters. A parallel plot line, about Hampton's personal life, is particularly well done - adding to the sadness of his story. Similarly, watching the fleet-footed O'Neal be used as a pawn by the FBI is distressing in its own way.

Ultimately, while Hampton was fighting for the emancipation of his people, O'Neal was essentially locking himself up in

a cage. As he struggled with the morality of his choices, he became swept up by Hampton's cause, becoming somewhat of a true believer himself.

A lot of the film is framed through his perspective, highlighting the dual tragedies that we see unfold. O'Neal, in real life, spoke about his involvement in Hampton's state-sponsored killing in 1989; a year later, he died of an apparent suicide. The film does, however, paint Hampton as a messianic figure, which may or may not be a creative decision driven entirely by passion. All controversial aspects of his personality and his politics have, ironically, been whitewashed.

Co-produced by Ryan Coogler, Judas and the Black Messiah is the sort of movie that he could very well have made had he not been lured into the Marvel Cinematic Universe.



## Salman Khan and Katrina Kaif snapped on film sets. Fans think it's Tiger 3

Salman Khan and Katrina Kaif were snapped on the sets of a film in Mumbai on Wednesday (March 10). A picture of the two on the film sets has started doing rounds on social media. Both Salman and Katrina are seen wearing casual outfits in the pic and fans are wondering if they have started shooting for Tiger 3. **SALMAN KHAN AND KATRINA KAIF IN MUMBAI**

In the picture that has surfaced on the internet, Salman Khan can be seen wearing an off-white T-shirt with a loar. Katrina Kaif, on the other hand, is seen wearing a white T-shirt, shorts, and a cap.

### FANS REACT

Fans reacted to the picture and guessed that Salman Khan and Katrina Kaif are shooting for Tiger 3. "Zoya and tiger are back," wrote a fan while another user commented, "After a long time we gonna see the most loved couple of Bollywood going to work together again. #tiger3 (sic)."

As per reports, the shooting of the film commenced on March 8. However, an official announcement regarding the same is awaited. Salman Khan was

also snapped at YRF studios yesterday (March 9).

### WHEN SALMAN KHAN AND KATRINA KAIF PERFORMED PUJA

On February 25, Salman Khan, Katrina Kaif, Emraan Hashmi, director Maneesh Sharma, and select members of the Tiger 3 crew were spotted at YRF Studios, where a small puja was performed. "The energy was palpable during the puja. All the cast members were thrilled to be taking the story forward of the Tiger franchise. They spent a good one hour with each other before Salman went to shoot for Pathan," a source had said.

**ABOUT TIGER 3** - Emraan Hashmi will reportedly play the villain in Tiger 3. It was also reported that Emraan Hashmi will be seen fighting Salman Khan in the film. Salman reprises his titular role of RAW agent in the film and Katrina Kaif will also return in the role of his wife and ISI agent Zoya. The film will be helmed by Maneesh Sharma and its budget is reported to be around Rs 350 crore.



## Amazon Prime Video & Excel Entertainment to Globally Premiere this year's Most Awaited Summer Blockbuster : Toofaan

Amazon Prime Video today announced the direct-to-service global premiere of the year's most-awaited summer blockbuster - upcoming inspirational sports drama, Toofaan. Produced by Excel Entertainment in association with ROMP Pictures, Toofaan stars Farhan Akhtar as a boxer, alongside Mrunal Thakur, Paresh Rawal, Supriya Pathak Kapur and Hussain Dalal. Directed by Rakeysh Omprakash Mehra with Story and Screenplay by Anjum Rajabali, the highly-anticipated sports drama will premiere directly on to Amazon

Prime Video on the 21st of May, 2021 across 240 countries and territories.

Vijay Subramaniam, Director and Head, Content, Amazon Prime Video said, "Excel Entertainment have been an integral part of our India journey and we treasure a long-standing relationship with them. Toofaan marks another exciting chapter for us together. Toofaan is one more step in our continuous commitment to bringing quality entertainment to our customers and another excellent addition our direct-to-service film selection. The film is



an engaging and inspiring tale of the power of perseverance and following ones' passions against all odds. With Rakeysh's flair for

narrating stories with a unique appeal and Farhan's ability to make every character he plays appear relatable and endearing

we're sure Toofaan has all the makings of the perfect summer blockbuster and will be loved by our consumers across the globe. A story that that's as intriguing as ever, we're looking forward to bringing this sports drama to Prime members this May." Sharing the excitement for the same, Ritesh Sidhwani, Producer, Excel Entertainment says, "At Excel Entertainment, we always try to tell stories that touch the heart and soul of the audience. We consistently strive to develop new concepts which can entertain and enlighten the viewers.

## Varun -Kriti all ecstatic to catch Roohi at a cinema hall that releases on 11th March

After a year long wait, a Bhediastic surprise took over theatres as B-town's coolest on screen couple was spotted watching Rajukmmar Rao, Janhvi Kapoor and Varun Sharma starrer Roohi on the big screen. Varun Dhawan and Kriti Sanon, along with the cast and crew of Bhediya, were in high spirits about returning to the cinemas to enjoy a full blown entertainer. The two stars were at a movie hall after almost 12 months, and their joy of coming back to the theatre was quite palpable.

While the Badlapur star was at his candid best, excited that the



magic of movies arrives in our lives again, Ms. Sanon couldn't keep calm either, overwhelmed

of catching a film on the big screen "after ages".

The pair even took to Instagram

to share their happiness. Kriti tweeted about the film too, showering praises on the cast and giving a big thumbs up to the laugh riot, apart from being delighted about her big screen experience. If this buzz is anything to go by, looks like Roohi and co are all set to rock the bada parda!

Jio Studios & Dinesh Vijan present, Roohi. A Maddock Films production, Produced by Dinesh Vijan and Mrighdeep Singh Lamba, directed by Hardik Mehta starring Rajkummar Rao, Janhvi Kapoor, and Varun Sharma releasing in theaters on 11th March 2021.



**Nimrat Kaur begins Dasvi shoot**



# Har Funn Maula song out.

## Aamir Khan and Elli AvrRam groove in cabaret number

A brand new song featuring Elli AvrRam and superstar Aamir Khan is now out. Titled Har Funn Maula, the song has been released as part of the film Koi Jaane Na. Elli shot for five days for the song and Aamir Khan took time out of his busy schedule to shoot the peppy track. Koi Jaane Na is helmed by Aamir's close friend Amin Hajee.

Har Funn Maula has been penned by Amitabh Bhattacharya. It has been sung by Vishal Dadlani and Zara Khan. The music of the song has been composed by Tanishk Bagchi.

### HAR FUNN MAULA SONG OUT

The song begins with Elli, looking gorgeous in a shimmery dress, acting some sensual dance moves. Moments later we see Aamir, sitting at a bar and looking dashing as ever. Elli walks up to him and he joins her on the dance floor.

### ELLI AVRRAM SHARES THE SONG

Elli AvrRam says that the song is a fusion of Broadway and Jazz. She further added that the hook step is celebrating their choreographers, Bosco-Caesar's vibe.

Sharing the song on Instagram, she wrote, "The Jack of all trades meets the Queen of the dance floor. #HarFunnMaula from #KoiJaaneNa out now (sic)."

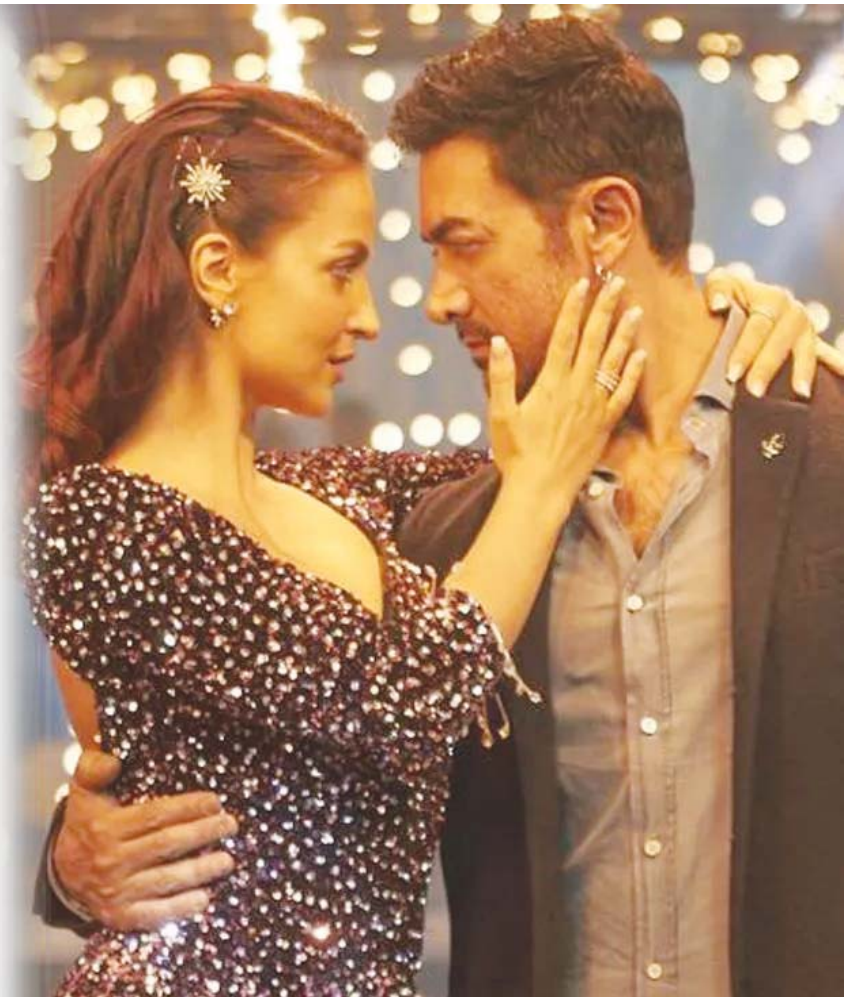
### AMIN HAJEE TALKS ABOUT THE SONG

Talking about the song, Amin Hajee said, "Both in my life and now the movies, Aamir has always stood by me Rock-solid! He has always encouraged me towards cinema, writing and direction. The song is different which Aamir liked and I am so grateful he readily agreed to be a part of it. Elli has killed it with her moves in the song."

### HAR FUNN MAULA TEASER

Before the release of the song, the teaser of Har Funn Maula was unveiled. The teaser showed Aamir Khan and Elli AvrRam burning the dance floor.

Sharing the teaser on Instagram, Elli wrote, "Ouchhhh. March is gonna be Hot this year....Get ready to have Funn on 10th of March!!! #HarFunnMaula from #KoiJaaneNa (sic)."



## Taapsee - Tahir starrer "Loop Lapeta" announces release date



The Taapsee Pannu and Tahir Raj Bhasin-led "Loop Lapeta", which has already evoked quite a buzz for its cool, millennial look released recently by the makers, is set to release in cinemas on October 22, 2021.

The makers were among the first to take the plunge to resume production in October last year. The film was shot in Mumbai and Goa from November and wrapped on schedule. It is currently in post-production.

"Loop Lapeta" is being touted as a new-age, intriguing

roller-coaster ride centered around a girl (Savi) who finds herself in a sticky situation when her boyfriend (Savi) gets unknowingly trapped in a crisis.

Helmed by noted ad filmmaker Aakash Bhatia, "Loop Lapeta" is produced by Sony Pictures Films India, Ellipsis Entertainment (Tanuj Garg, Atul Kasbekar) and Aayush Maheshwari. It comes from the makers of "Neerja", "102 Not Out", "Padman", "Tumhari Sulu" and "Shakuntala Devi".

# Silence teaser out.

## Manoj Bajpayee and team get together to solve a murder



Fans of Manoj Bajpayee are a little disappointed that the teaser of The Family Man 2 has not been released yet but the actor has a special gift for them. The actor unveiled the teaser of his upcoming film Silence Can You Hear It on Tuesday (March 9). Manoj Bajpayee is playing the role of a cop in the film. Silence will premiere on Zee5.

### THE TEASER OF MANOJ BAJPAYEE'S SILENCE

Silence, directed by Aban Bharucha Deohans, is a murder mystery. Manoj Bajpayee is playing the role of ACP Avinash in the film. Silence revolves around the murder of a woman

and ACP Avinash is the one in charge of the case. As the investigation progresses, the case turns out to be more complicated and convoluted than it was initially expected but ACP and his team are not going to be daunted by these challenges. Prachi Desai and Arjun Mathur will be seen in important roles in the film. Prachi will be playing the role of a cop. From the teaser, it appears that Silence will be a gripping and nail-biting ride.

### MANOJ BAJPAYEE UNVEILS THE TEASER OF SILENCE

Manoj Bajpayee shared the teaser of Silence on his social media handles. "Witnesses,

Meticulous Minds, Determined Detectives. Will the case be solved? #SilenceCanYouHearIt Premieres 26th March on @ZEE5 (sic)," Manoj Bajpayee wrote sharing the teaser of the film on Twitter.

Prachi Desai had earlier shared her look from the film. The actress is playing the role of Inspector Sanjana. "Meet Inspector Sanjana. Sharp with the wit of a fox. Joining ACP Avinash on the most complex murder investigation yet. #SilenceCanYouHearIt 26th March @ZEE5Premium (sic)," she wrote.





## In Bengal, the BJP's now-or-never moment

(SAI Bureau)- As PM Narendra Modi addressed the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)'s mega rally at the Brigade Parade Ground in Kolkata on Sunday afternoon, a Bengali TV channel was showing, on a split screen, chief minister (CM) Mamata Banerjee's meeting in Siliguri. When Modi raised the pitch on allegations of "cut money and syndicates" under the Trinamool Congress (TMC) rule, the channel switched its audio to Banerjee. At that moment, she was coming down heavily on the Modi government for its proposals of privatisation and corruption in central schemes. Exactly a week ago, there was another large rally at the same Brigade Maidan. It was the coming together of three strange political bedfellows - the Left Front, Congress and the newly-formed Indian Secular Front (ISF) helmed by a Muslim cleric, Abbas Siddiqui. Their message was similar. Leaders of the new alliance spoke out against



the misrule of TMC in the state and the anti-people policies of the BJP at the Centre, adding, for good measure, the BJP's deficit on secular credentials. Thus, at the level of rhetoric, West Bengal seems poised for a triangular contest. But, the actual state of play at the ground level is not so evenly balanced.

(Contd on page 32)

## Gujarat HC proposes ban on exclusion of menstruating women from private, public places



(SAI Bureau)- The Gujarat High Court has proposed to prohibit the social exclusion of women on the basis of their menstrual status at all public, private and religious places.

The high court has sought the state and the central governments' views and also asked them to sensitise people against perpetuating biases against women.

A division bench of Justice JB Pardiwala and Ilesh Vora said, "We are conscious of the fact that we are dealing with a very delicate issue and therefore, it is necessary for

(Contd on page 32)

## Swastika Reclaimed!



(SAI Bureau)- Recently in a Zoom meeting, New York State Democratic chief Jay Jacobs assured the Indian community that the proposed NYS Hate Sign Bill "is not going anywhere". Nazi sign Hakenkreuz is not the Swastika, which is an auspicious sign used by 1.8 billion Hindus, Jains & Buddhists for over 5000 years.

(Contd on page 31)

## US resolved to deepen Indo-Pacific engagement, says State Dept ahead of first Modi-Biden Quad meet

(SAI Bureau)- Ahead of the Quad meeting between PM Narendra Modi, US President Joe Biden and other members of the grouping, US has said it was important for the nation to underline the importance Indo-Pacific holds for the current Biden administration.

Leaders of India, United States, Japan and Australia will hold their first summit in a virtual format under the framework of the Quadrilateral coalition or Quad on March 12, in a major step towards enhancing cooperation in the Indo-Pacific amid rising global concerns over China's growing assertiveness.



US State Department spokesperson Ned Price said, "It was important for us to underline in the early days of this administration our commitment to the Indo-Pacific. It's a region that holds tremendous promise for the United States, also tremendous challenge. We want to deepen that engagement, and this is an important forum with important partners with whom we share a good deal of interest, so it was important for us to demonstrate that early on." The Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) on Tuesday said the leaders will discuss regional and global issues of shared interest, and exchange views on practical areas

of cooperation towards maintaining a free, open and inclusive Indo-Pacific region.

(Contd on page 32)

