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Israel and Palestine

What is the history of the conflict between them in the Middle East ?

Conflict between Israel and Hamas continues to escalate. The recent fighting between Israeli forces and Hamas militants in Gaza shows no sign of abating, as both sides exchange deadly airstrikes and rocket attacks. The escalating tensions have also spilled over into street violence in several Israeli cities.



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US Working Closely With India On Covid Crisis: White House Official

While the assistance from the US government has been worth USD 100 million, the private sector has donated an additional USD 400 million, totalling half a billion dollars to India, the official said.

(Insider Bureau)-The US is working closely with India on its continued and emerging needs during the unprecedented second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, a top State Department official has said.

While the assistance from the US government has been worth USD 100 million, the private sector has donated an additional USD 400 million, totalling half a billion dollars to India, State Department Spokesperson Ned Price told reporters at his daily news conference on Tuesday.

"We are continuing to work closely with Indian officials and health experts to identify continued needs and emerging needs in this ongoing crisis," he said.

"I was talking about our catalytic effect in another context earlier... Secretary (of State) Tony Blinken, Special Coordinator Gayle Smith participated in calls the other

week with the US India Business Council and the Chamber of Commerce in an effort to elicit additional supplies from the private sector, which we'd be terrifically gratified to see," Price said.

Earlier in the day, top American senator Mark Warner spoke with India's ambassador to the US Taranjit Singh Sandhu and assured his full commitment for the assistance to India.

"India right now is at the epicenter of COVID-19. This morning I spoke with the Indian ambassador and pledged to do our part to help the Indian people respond to the surge. I will continue working with the Biden administration on this," Warner said after the call.

Warner is Chair of the Senate Intelligence Committee.

"Thanked him for his strong support for India during this

challenging time," Mr Sandhu tweeted.

Congressman Andy Levin said that more needs to be done for India.

"We cannot lose sight of the catastrophe wracking India right now. While the US is starting to work to make vaccines more accessible, we must do more. The Indian people need equipment and other tools now to end this crisis," he said.

Meanwhile, the 4th consignment of more than 78,000 doses of Remdesivir from Gilead Sciences reached India.

"More than 2,61,000 have reached so far, in addition to US Government support of around 1,25,000 doses. More to follow!" the Indian envoy tweeted.

Congresswoman Deborah Ross said that helping India respond to this latest wave is humane and is in the US' national interest as this



pandemic will not end anywhere until it ends everywhere.

"Please consider supporting groups that are providing what is needed locally on the ground," she said. Noting that India is seeing daily new COVID-19 cases at 400,000, and the deaths are catastrophic, Indian-American congressman Raja Krishnamoorthi said that he is pushing the Biden administration to slow this dangerous rise in cases through sharing resources. "A COVID-19 fire anywhere in the world is a threat to us," he said. According to

Price, there have now been six airlifts to India deployed by the USAID in the course of six days. Among the supplies included in those airlifts are 20,000 courses of Remdesivir, nearly 1,500 oxygen cylinders, 550 mobile oxygen concentrators, 1 million rapid diagnostic tests, nearly 2.5 million N95 masks, large scale deployable oxygen concentration system and pulse oximeters, he said. "In addition, USAID immediately allocated funding to purchase locally an additional 1,000 mobile oxygen concentrators," Price added.

Chinese Arrested For Attacking Indian-Origin Woman In Singapore For Not Wearing Mask



(Insider Bureau)-Singapore police have arrested a 30-year-old Chinese man for allegedly assaulting an Indian-origin woman and subjecting her to racial slurs for not wearing a mask while she was brisk walking last week. The man was arrested "for public nuisance, uttering words with intent to wound the racial feelings of others and voluntarily causing hurt," the Singapore Police Force (SPF) was quoted as saying by the Channel News Asia on Tuesday. The woman was walking along a walkway at Choa Chu Kang Drive at about 8.45am on Friday when she was confronted by a Chinese couple who told her to wear her mask properly as a safety measure, police said. "She purportedly got into a verbal exchange with the man. The man allegedly uttered an offensive racial remark and assaulted her, causing her to fall to the ground," the police said. The couple then left the scene and the 55-year-old woman, identified as Hindocha Nita Vishnubhai, a private tutor, was assisted by a passerby. Investigations into the incident are on, police said. If found guilty of public nuisance, the man could be jailed for up to three months, fined up to SGD 2,000 (USD 1,509), or both. For uttering words with deliberate intent to wound the racial feelings of any person, the punishment is an imprisonment term of up to three years, a fine, or both.

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.



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India-UK Migration Pact Overcomes Past Barriers: UK's Priti Patel

Priti Patel highlighted that the move, which includes a new "bespoke" plan for 18 to 30 year olds to apply for a 24-month stay in either country puts youth mobility at the heart of the bilateral relationship.

(Insider Bureau)- A new Migration and Mobility Partnership (MMP) signed between India and the UK recently is an "unprecedented" reciprocal agreement that will overcome the barriers around mobility and migration of the past, British Home Secretary Priti Patel has said.

The senior Indian-origin Cabinet minister, who signed the partnership's memorandum of understanding (MoU) with External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar in London last week,

said the plan to have 3,000 young students and professionals a year access new work experience benefits in either country under the new pact will be up and running "within months".

She highlighted that the move, which includes a new "bespoke" plan for 18 to 30 year olds to apply for a 24-month stay in either country puts youth mobility at the heart of the bilateral relationship.

"This is a very significant

unprecedented scheme that will provide additional benefits to both countries. It is highly symbolic," Patel told PTI in an interview on Monday.

"It shows how our two countries have really developed and advanced our relationship, in a purposeful and transformative way; which to be very candid, we did not have previously. Putting mobility at the heart of this relationship is a real change, a real pivot. We have spent too much time in the past speaking



about mobility barriers," she said.

Under the new pact, both sides have agreed to work towards an April 2022 timeline to bring in new systems in place, with work already underway with the

High Commission in London and Ministry of External Affairs in New Delhi.

"We have worked at pace for this and we are in the process of finalising the timetable around this.

"Biggest Crisis India Has Seen...": Indian-American Entrepreneur's Appeal



(Insider Bureau)- Describing the current COVID-19 crisis as the biggest India has ever faced, an eminent Indian-American philanthropist and venture capitalist from the Silicon Valley has urged the community to help support the Indian people.

India has been severely affected by the unprecedented second

wave of the coronavirus and hospitals in several states are reeling under the shortage of health workers, vaccines, oxygen, drugs and beds.

"This is the biggest crisis India's ever seen. So, what I urge them to do is two things: One is make sure you support your family and friends in India. But this is the one time that everybody should

India has been severely affected by the unprecedented second wave of the coronavirus and hospitals in several states are reeling under the shortage of health workers, vaccines, oxygen,

do more," Indiaspora founder MR Rangaswami, an entrepreneur and philanthropist who lost his sister in Chennai due to COVID-19, told PTI.

Silicon Valley-based Mr Rangaswami said that he has been working around the clock to galvanise as much funds and resources as the community from the US and other parts of the world can do for the people in India, which is experiencing the worst ever public health crisis post-independence.

"This is the one time that we should give more than what we can; more than what we think;

more than what we want to do. This kind of crisis doesn't come across every day," MR Rangaswami said in response to a question.

Indiaspora, a network of eminent leaders, has raised over USD 2.5 million. Over the weekend, he was part of a

"Help Tamil Nadu Breathe" campaign that raised USD 1.5 million. In addition, Mr Rangaswami has been involved in multiple campaigns to raise funds for India, which he says is crucial to save lives not only in India but also in the region and the world.

Josh

India WebTV

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Kerala Woman Killed In Palestinian Rocket Strike In Israel

(Insider Bureau)- A Kerala woman working in Israel was killed allegedly in a Palestinian rocket strike on Tuesday, her family members said.

They said the rocket fell on the residence of 31-year old Soumya in the city of Ashkelon while she was talking to her husband Santhosh, who is in Kerala, over video call in the evening.

"My brother heard a huge sound during the video call. Suddenly the phone got disconnected. Then we immediately contacted fellow Malayalees working there. Thus



we came to know about the incident," Mr Santhosh's brother Saji told PTI. Ms Soumya, hailing from Keerithodu in Idukki district, had been working as a housemaid in Israel for the last seven years, her relatives said. Newly-elected MLA and Nationalist Congress Kerala leader Mani C Kappan condemned the incident. In a Facebook post, Kappan, who is representing Pala seat in the Kerala Assembly, said thousands of Keralites working in Israel were living in fear. He also sought intervention of the Central and state governments in the issue.

Swaminarayan temple in US raided, workers taken from India treated as forced labour: Report

(Insider Bureau)- A Swaminarayan temple in New Jersey, US, was raided by the Federal Bureau of Investigation, Department of Homeland Security, and the US Department of Labour to investigate allegations of forced labour against Bochasanwasi Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sansthan (BAPS), reported The New York Times. Quoting a source, the NYT report said 90 labourers were removed from the site by US federal agencies after Tuesday's raid. In a lawsuit filed Tuesday in US District Court of Newark, six workers alleged that the organisation brought them to the United States from India to work on an extension of the temple situated in Robbinsville, New Jersey. However, they were paid

merely 10 per cent of the hourly minimum wage according to New Jersey law, and forced to live in gruelling conditions. Their passports were allegedly impounded and they were confined to a fenced, guarded area. A majority of the workers were Dalits, said the report. The organisation has, however, denied all allegations, and in a statement said they are "thoroughly reviewing the issues raised". BAPS has been behind scores of temples built around the world. The foundation has close ties with the Bharatiya Janata Party, and Prime Minister Narendra Modi has hailed the spiritual head of the organisation - Pramukh Swami Maharaj - as his "mentor". The PM gave a

eulogy at his funeral. The organisation has also donated the equivalent of about \$290,000 to the construction of the temple in Ayodhya, the NYT report said. What are the allegations? Mukesh Kumar, 37, was among the 200 construction workers flown out to the US by BAPS in 2018. He quit and returned to India after a labourer died due to an illness. Shortly after, Kumar contacted Swati Sawant in 2020, an immigration lawyer who then began investigating these claims. Sawant, a Dalit herself, organised the temple workers and arranged legal teams to take up the case, according to NYT. In the complaint, six men have come forward with the allegations saying they were brought to the US in 2018 and were made to



work long hours often under dangerous conditions. They allege that they were paid \$1 per hour for their work when the minimum wage in New Jersey is \$12 per hour. According to the complaint, the workers were allegedly brought to the US on R-1 Visas that are applicable for clergy and religious workers like missionaries. The labourers were presented to the

US government like volunteers. The complaint further said the workers were made to sign several documents, often in English, and tell US embassy staffers that they were skilled workers or decorative painters. However, the lawyers for the workers say the men were forced to do manual labour on the site and made to work for more than 13 hours a day.

Indian-Origin Man In US Sexually Assaults, Kills Mom On Mother's Day Eve



The suspect is accused of grabbing his mother from behind, choking and punching her until she fell to the floor, prosecutors said. "Once down, the son allegedly continued the attack, strangling and punching his mother before sexually assaulting her," the New York Post reported.

(Insider Bureau)- An Indian-origin man has been charged with killing and sexually assaulting his 65-year-old mother at their home in New York on the eve of Mother's Day, according to media reports. Pushkar Sharma, 28, allegedly carried out the deadly attack on Soraj Sharma at their home in

Jamaica in Bellerose Manor on Saturday morning. The suspect is accused of grabbing his mother from behind, choking and punching her until she fell to the floor, prosecutors said. "Once down, the son allegedly continued the attack, strangling and punching his mother before sexually assaulting her. The

victim lost consciousness and then died," the New York Post quoted the officials as saying. The suspect told police he "woke up the morning before Mother's Day "with an uncontrollable urge to hurt someone," according to a criminal complaint. Pushkar Sharma told police, he continued choking her (mother) until he was pretty sure she was dead, the criminal complaint alleges, reported news agency Press Trust of India. Covered in blood, Sharma gathered his wallet and keys and walked to the 105th Precinct, where he confessed to the unimaginable violence, the New

York Daily News quoted police and prosecutors as saying. Soraj Sharma's daughter found her mother unconscious in the basement, cops said, adding medics rushed her to Long Island Jewish Hospital where she was pronounced dead. What should have been a celebration of Mother's Day became a brutal, tragic nightmare for a Queens family, Queens District Attorney Melinda Katz said on Sunday. Sharma was arraigned on Sunday on murder and sexual abuse charges. He was ordered held without bail, and his next appearance is on May 24, the

report said. Sharma's neighbour Kelvin said he knew Sharma had mental health problems, but he was stunned at the slaying. The family was really nice and friendly. I am shocked to know that the son could've done this, he said. He recalled a past incident when neighbours called police because Sharma was acting erratically. So, it's not the first time. He's been in trouble before, Kelvin said. You can clearly tell that he has some mental health issues. When he had the cops called on him previously, people said that he was not on his medications.

Man arrested in Puerto Rico after killing dog on golf course

Puerto Rico police say they arrested a man accused of shooting and killing a dog that had stolen his ball on a golf course at a well-known resort

Puerto Rico police said Monday that they arrested a man accused of shooting and killing a dog that had stolen his ball on a golf course at a well-known resort. Authorities identified the man as Salil Zaveri and said the shooting occurred Saturday at the Wyndham Grand Rio Mar Resort in the north coastal town of Río

Grande. Police said he used a 9mm gun to shoot the dog several times. Zaveri was released on \$60,000 bond but his passport and driver's license have been seized. He did not immediately respond to a request for comment. Zaveri is a sales and marketing consultant and the CEO of Zaveri Consulting, LLC.



Four Punjab Ministers Seek Navjot Singh Sidhu's Suspension From Congress

Earlier, three other ministers had also urged the Congress high-command for strict disciplinary action against Navjot Singh Sidhu for his "outbursts" against the Punjab chief minister.

(News Agencies)-Four Punjab ministers sought the suspension of Congress leader Navjot Singh Sidhu from the party today for repeatedly targeting Chief Minister Amarinder Singh, alleging that the Amritsar East MLA's attacks might be instigated by the Aam Aadmi Party or the BJP. Earlier, three other ministers -- Brahm Mohindra, Sunder Sham Arora and Sadhu Singh Dharamsot -- had urged the Congress high-command for strict disciplinary action against Sidhu for his "outbursts" against the chief minister.

The cricketer-turned-politician's "provocative and targeted" attacks on the chief minister are an "invitation for disaster" for the

Congress, state ministers Balbir Sidhu, Vijay Inder Singla, Bharat Bhushan Ashu and Gurpreet Singh Kangar said today.

"He (Mr Sidhu) should be immediately suspended, if not expelled, as his continued presence in the Punjab Congress is creating a mess in the party's state unit and diverting its attention from the more important task of gearing up for the polls," they added.

The ministers did not rule out a collusion between Mr Sidhu and opposition parties in the state such as the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

It is quite possible that Mr Sidhu's "targeted" attacks on the chief

minister were instigated by AAP or BJP leaders to create problems in the ruling party to further their electoral agenda in the state, a Punjab Congress release quoted them as saying.

"The manner in which Sidhu had launched the offensive against the state government, particularly Amarinder, suggested a conspiracy against the chief minister," it added.

Mr Sidhu has been repeatedly attacking the chief minister over the alleged delay in delivering justice in connection with the desecration of the Guru Granth Sahib and police-firing incidents in the state in 2015.

Gurpreet Kangar, who joined the chorus for action against Sidhu on



Wednesday, was part of a meeting of three ministers and two MPs, in which they expressed concern over the delay in action against the perpetrators of the sacrilege and police-firing incidents.

Besides Gurpreet Kangar, ministers Sukhjinder Randhawa and Charanjit Singh Channi, and MPs Ravneet Bittu and Partap Singh Bajwa attended the meeting on Monday, amid a political turmoil in the Punjab

Congress. According to the Punjab Congress release, the four ministers said the Amritsar East MLA's verbal assaults on the chief minister were an open rebellion against the party.

Terming Mr Sidhu's "blatant defiance" as an "act of total indiscipline", they said such anti-party activities cannot be tolerated by any political establishment and more so in a poll-bound state.

"More To Life Than Just Image-Building": Did Anupam Kher Criticise Centre?

"Somewhere they have slipped ... it is time for them to understand that there is much more to life than just image-building maybe," Anupam Kher said.

(News Agencies)-Actor Anupam Kher, who has often praised Prime Minister Narendra Modi and is known to be a strong defender of the BJP-led regime, on Wednesday said that he believed the government "had slipped" in the Covid crisis and it was important to hold it responsible.

"Somewhere they have slipped ... it is time for them to understand that there is much more to life than just image-building maybe," Anupam Kher said in what appeared to be a critique of the Centre in an interview to NDTV.

Should the government's efforts have been more about providing relief than managing their image and perception, Mr Kher was asked. How distressing did he find images of Covid-hit families begging for hospital beds, corpses floating in the river and struggling patients?

"I think the criticism is valid in lots of cases and I think it is important for the government to rise to the occasion and do things that they are chosen by people of this country for. I think only an inhuman person will not get affected by... bodies floating. But

for another political party to use it for their gain is also not right," said the national award-winning actor.

"We should as people... Get angry... It is important to hold the government responsible for what has happened."

The words mark an extraordinary departure for the 66-year-old former Film and Television Institute of India chairman whose wife, actor Kirron Kher, is a BJP MP.

About two weeks ago, Mr Kher was trolled for responding to a critique of the government's



handling of Covid with a tweet that said: "Aayega toh Modi hi (but Modi will return)."

With the deadly second wave of Covid leaving many states desperate for oxygen, hospitals

and medicines, Mr Kher is among celebrities who have launched relief efforts. His "Heal India" initiative seeks to help those who need ventilators and oxygen concentrators.

12 Opposition leaders write to PM Modi, blame govt for 'apocalyptic human tragedy'



(News Agencies)-Top off a letter to Prime Minister Narendra Modi to put across nine demands including a free Covid-19 vaccination campaign. They also asked PM Modi to halt the

Central Vista project and instead divert the money to buy oxygen and vaccines. In the letter, the leaders argued that they have "repeatedly in the past" drawn the PM's attention to the measures, they think, are "absolutely imperative" for the Central government to undertake and implement. "Unfortunately, your government has either ignored or refused all these suggestions. This only compounded the situation to reach such an apocalyptic human tragedy," the letter read.

The letter, signed by former PM HD Deve Gowda, Maharashtra CM Uddhav Thackeray, Tamil Nadu CM MK Stalin, Jharkhand CM Hemant Soren, CPIM general secretary Sitaram Yechury and others, said, "Procure vaccines centrally from all available sources - global and domestic" and "immediately begin a free, universal mass vaccination campaign across the country. Invoke compulsory licensing to expand domestic vaccine production. Spend budgetary allocation of Rs. 35,000 crores for

the vaccines." It asked for stopping the Central Vista construction and demanded that all money held in the unaccounted private trust fund, PM Cares must be released to buy more vaccines, Oxygen and medical equipment required.

The letter reiterated that all jobless people should be given at least ₹6000 per month and there must be free distribution of food grains to the needy as over one crore tonnes of food grains are currently rotting in central godowns.

"If Delhi Is Opened Tomorrow, It'll Be Disaster": Top Medical Body Chief

Dr. Balram Bhargava, head of the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR), said in an interview that lockdown restrictions should remain in place in all districts where the rate of infection is above 10% of those tested.

(News Agencies)-The head of the main Indian health agency responding to the coronavirus has said districts reporting a high number of infections should remain locked down for another six to eight weeks to control the spread of the rampaging disease.

Dr. Balram Bhargava, head of the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR), said in an interview that lockdown restrictions should remain in place in all districts where the rate of infection is above 10% of those tested.

Currently, three-fourths of India's 718 districts have what is known

as a test-positivity rate above 10%, including major cities like New Delhi, Mumbai and Bengaluru.

Dr Bhargava's comments are the first time a senior government official has outlined how long lockdowns, which already encompass large parts of country, need to continue to rein in the crisis in India.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government has shied away from imposing a nationwide lockdown because of the economic impact and has left it to state governments.

Several states have introduced varying levels of curbs on

economic activity and public movement to stop the spread of the virus, which are mostly being reviewed and extended on a weekly or fortnightly basis.

"The high positivity districts should remain (shut). If they come to 5% from 10% (positivity rate) we can open them, but that has to happen. That won't happen in six-eight weeks, clearly," Dr Bhargava said in an interview at the New Delhi headquarters of the ICMR, the country's top medical research body. Referring to the capital, one of India's hardest hit cities where the positivity rate reached around 35% but has now fallen to about 17%, Dr Bhargava



said: "If Delhi is opened tomorrow, it will be a disaster." India is in deep crisis in the current wave of COVID-19 infections with around 350,000 cases and 4,000 deaths being reported daily. Hospitals and morgues are overflowing, medical staff is exhausted and oxygen and drugs are running short. Many experts say the actual case tallies and deaths

could be five to 10 times higher. PM Modi and other top political leaders have faced a public backlash for addressing mass election rallies where no major COVID-19 safety protocols were followed. The federal government also didn't intervene to stop a religious festival in March that was attended by millions of devout Hindus.

Maharashtra Lockdown Likely To Be Extended Till May 31, Says Minister

Maharashtra reported 46,781 new coronavirus cases and 816 deaths on Wednesday. 58,805 patients were discharged in the last 24 hours.



number of coronavirus cases despite infections slowing down in the past few days. Maharashtra reported 46,781 new coronavirus cases and 816 deaths on Wednesday. 58,805 patients were discharged in the last 24 hours. The positivity rate has fallen to 17.36 per cent while the fatality rate is down to 1.49 per cent, the health department said.

Pune reported the 9,536 and 74 deaths while Mumbai saw 2,104 cases and 66 deaths.

India is in deep crisis in the current wave of COVID-19 infections with around 3.5 lakh cases and 4,000 deaths being reported daily. Hospitals and morgues are overflowing, medical staff is exhausted and oxygen and drugs are running short.

Many experts say the actual case tallies and deaths could be five to 10 times higher. Despite being the global hub of vaccine manufacturing, India has managed to fully inoculate just 2.5 per cent of its population till Monday as Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government has been accused of not buying enough shots in time.

(News Agencies)- Maharashtra is likely to extend its lockdown till May 31, minister Rajesh Tope said on Wednesday after a cabinet meet as the state continued to grapple with a high

"Should We Cry Or Laugh?": Akhilesh Yadav On Cow Dung As Covid 'Cure'

Samajwadi Party chief Akhilesh Yadav tweeted: "Should we cry or laugh over this..."

(News Agencies)- Samajwadi Party chief Akhilesh Yadav on Wednesday joined a chorus of voices commenting on a video from Gujarat's Ahmedabad - a video that shows men gleefully covering themselves in cow dung and urine in the belief it will protect them against COVID-19.

A bemused Mr Yadav tweeted: "Should we cry or laugh over this..." Attached to his tweet was a video from a report by news agency Reuters that identified a school called the Shree Swaminarayan Gurukul Vishwavidya Pratishthanam,

where some people go once a week to slather cow dung and urine over their bodies, hug cows and practice yoga. The video showed a group of about a dozen men squatting shirtless in a field with buckets of liquified cow dung in front of them. Each man dug his hand into the buckets and smeared handfuls of the dung all over their body and head, before standing in a circle and praying. "... even doctors come here. Their belief is that this therapy improves their immunity..." Gautam Manilal Borisa, a participant of the ritual, told Reuters. Mr Borisa, who is

an associate manager at a pharma firm, claimed the practice helped him recover from COVID-19 last year. Doctors and scientists have repeatedly warned against alternative treatments for COVID-19, saying that they can lead to a false sense of security and further complicate health problems. "There is no concrete scientific evidence that cow dung or urine boosts immunity against COVID-19," Dr JA Jayalal, the head of the Indian Medical Association, told Reuters. "People should also understand that using excreta of



cows is bound to increase the chance of some zoonotic or infectious disease spreading," he added. The Reuters report is not the first time that cow dung or urine has been offered by certain sections of the Indian society as a viable treatment for, or protection against, the SARS-

CoV2 virus. As recently as last week a video shared by news agency ANI showed Uttar Pradesh BJP MLA Surendra Singh, a controversial figure who last month was accused of making sexist remarks, claim that drinking cow urine had protected him from COVID-19.

Eid ul Fitr 2021: Clerics Urge People To Celebrate Eid At Home Amid Covid

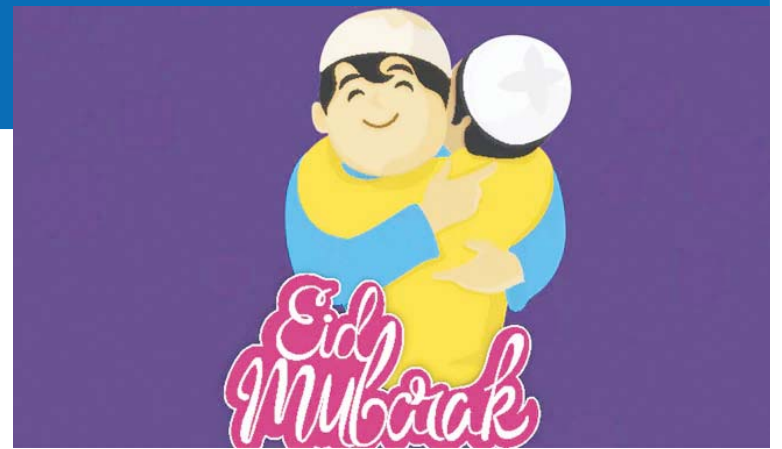
Muslim clerics across the country have urged people to celebrate Eid at home amid the Covid crisis this year

(News Agencies)-Eid ul Fitr is being celebrated amid the horrific coronavirus pandemic for the second consecutive year. Muslim clerics across the country have urged people to celebrate Eid at home. At Jalna in Maharashtra, there will be no large congregations for prayers and social get-togethers on the occasion of Eid-ul-Fitr due to the surge in Covid cases. Clerics requested all community members to celebrate the festival at home in a simple manner. "Amid distress, fear and worry,

we have to celebrate the Eid at home this year," Maulana Sohail, president of the Jamiat Ulema-e-Hind (Arshad Mandi faction), Marathwada unit, told news agency Press Trust of India. The coordinator of Jalna's Holy Quran Centre, Abdul Hafiz, said that meetings and gatherings during this year's Eid are a distant dream considering the prevailing coronavirus situation. He encouraged people to connect with each other virtually. The Maharashtra government has already put guidelines in place.

People have been advised to celebrate Eid ul Fitr in a safe and simple way. Processions, gatherings for prayers are not allowed.

The Shahi Imam of Delhi's Fatehpuri Mosque, Dr Mufti Mohd Mukarram Ahmed also urged Muslims to offer Eid prayers at home and stay safe. According to the Shahi Imam, Eid ul-Fitr will be celebrated on May 13-14 depending the sighting of the Eid moon. Masjid committees in Assam have decided not to have mass



prayers on Eid ul Fitr and asked people to celebrate at home.

Kerala Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan also urged people to celebrate Eid at home. In view of the Ramzan, the Kerala government has permitted meat

shops to function up to 10 pm on Wednesday for home delivery, according to news agency Press Trust of India. Last week, the Mr Vijayan had announced a state-wide lockdown, till May 16, to tackle the second wave of the

"You Must See Where Bodies Come From": Bihar Minister Tweets Centre



Earlier this week, scores of bodies had washed up on the banks of river Ganga in Bihar, spreading shock and anger. It is suspected that the bodies are that of Covid patients.

(News Agencies)-Bihar has knocked at the Centre's door, calling for an investigation into the corpses flowing down the river Ganga, reiterating that they are coming from Uttar Pradesh. Bihar minister Sanjay Jha today tweeted Jal Shakti Gajendra Singh Shekhawat. "You must

definitely see where these bodies have come from. The Bihar government will cooperate in every way in its investigation," his tweet read.

In another of a series of tweets, Mr Jha -- who handles the state's water resources portfolio -- said: "There is no practice of

consigning dead bodies into rivers in Bihar. You know that if a body is thrown into a river, it first drowns and after a time comes to the surface and floats away. These bodies have come from far away. Doctors have said in the postmortem that all the bodies are 4-5 days old".

Chief Minister Nitish Kumar is hurt by the practice of dumping the bodies of suspected Covid patients into the river, which is "inhuman and insulting to Mother Ganga", he posted. His tweet was prompted by the recovery of 10 bodies found at the border, at

a place called Karmanasha, after a net was used yesterday. Earlier this week, scores of bodies had washed up on the banks of river Ganga in Bihar, spreading shock and anger. It is suspected that the bodies are that of Covid patients. In Buxar district, 71 bodies were retrieved from the riverbank. Videos of a bridge near Bihar border in Saran district doing the rounds on social media showed bodies apparently being thrown into the river from ambulances stopping at the spot. Locals said the ambulances belonged to both states. More

bodies have been found in Ghazipur, Uttar Pradesh, around 55 km upriver from Buxar. Yesterday, the chief of National Mission of Clean Ganga issued an order barring the dumping of bodies into the river. "Dumping of bodies/partially burnt bodies/decomposed corpses in the rivers not only causes pollution in the river, but is also unhygienic and increases the risk of spreading infections in the communities inhabiting along the banks of the rivers, warranting emergency measures," the order read.

Assam Police To File 'Attempt To Murder' Case Against Covid Rule Breakers

Assam COVID-19 Restrictions: "Complete lockdown is an option, but we are going gradually in a phased manner. We hope these measures will work in the next two-three days," Jishnu Barua said.

(News Agencies)-People who violate COVID-19 rules may face "attempt to murder" charges, the Assam Police said on Wednesday, as the state government announced new protocols to curb the alarming rise in coronavirus cases in the state.

Urging people to strictly follow all the provisions of the new Standard Operating Protocols or SOPs, Director General of Police Bhaskar Jyoti Mahanta said that if anyone is found violating the rules they will face the strictest of actions including an "attempt

to murder" case.

"Violating the government's orders and SOPs, if anyone or any organisation organises any function or any event, it would be treated as a betrayal against the society. In that case, we would not apply the simple IPC (Indian Penal Code) or provision of the Disaster Management Act, strictest law would also be applied against them," Mr Mahanta said.

"Attempt to murder case like charges would be brought against those organising any function, party, get-together or any kind of

gatherings," the police chief added.

"No crowding would be tolerated in public places, shopping complexes, markets. Police will resort to lathi charge in such cases even during the curfew relaxation period," he said.

Mr Mahanta said that containment zones will be dealt with zero leniency.

"If anyone tries to use COVID-19 excuses to come out and is found violating the SOPs, they will be put into jail," the senior IPS officer warned.

The Assam government on



Wednesday ordered all offices, religious places and weekly markets to be shut for 15 days in urban and semi-urban areas of the state, besides banning the movement of people from 2 pm to 5 am in the wake of rising COVID-19 cases.

Issuing a new set of guidelines in the periphery of 5 km of

municipal areas, Chief Secretary Jishnu Barua said all standalone shops and commercial establishments shall shut down at 1 pm on all days. There shall be a total ban on the movement of individuals from 2 pm to 5 am daily. "A complete lockdown is an option, but we are going gradually in a phased manner.

Indian Army's MM Naravane Speaks To US Army Chief On Defence Cooperation

Officials said General Naravane and General McConville discussed ways to expand cooperation between the two armies in specific areas in view of the evolving regional security scenario.

(News Agencies)-Chief of Army Staff General MM Naravane held a telephonic conversation with his American counterpart General James C McConville on Tuesday, focusing on bilateral military cooperation as well as effectively dealing with the coronavirus pandemic.

Officials said General Naravane and General McConville discussed ways to expand cooperation between the two armies in specific areas in view

of the evolving regional security scenario.

They also deliberated on effectively dealing with the coronavirus pandemic.

"General MM Naravane COAS had telephonic interaction with General James C. McConville, Chief of Staff of the Army US Army on Tuesday and discussed issues of bilateral defence cooperation," the Indian Army said in a tweet.

The Indo-US defence ties have

been on an upswing in the last few years.

In October last year, India and the US sealed the BECA (Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement) agreement to further boost bilateral defence ties. The pact provides for sharing of high-end military technology, logistics and geospatial maps between the two countries.

The firming up of the BECA came two years after the two countries signed another pact called



COMCASA (Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement) that provides for interoperability between the two militaries and provides for sale of high end technology from the US to India. In June 2016, the US had

designated India a "Major Defence Partner" intending to elevate defence trade and technology sharing with India to a level commensurate with that of its closest allies and partners.

A joke on Covid victims: Rahul Gandhi attacks RSS-led positivity push



Congress leader Rahul Gandhi has hit out at the 'positivity push' by an RSS-affiliate outfit amid the ongoing Covid crisis plaguing India and said it's a joke on those families who have lost loved ones.

(News Agencies)- Congress leader Rahul Gandhi has hit out at the 'positivity push' by an RSS-affiliate outfit amid the ongoing Covid crisis plaguing

India and said it's a joke on those families who have lost loved ones.

In a tweet, Rahul Gandhi said, "The false assurance of positive

thinking is a joke on those families and health workers who have lost their loved ones and are suffering this crisis of oxygen, hospitals and medicines."

He further added, "Burying one's head in the sand is not positivity, it is a betrayal of our citizens." Rahul Gandhi was referring to the 'Positivity Unlimited' series of lectures aimed at "infusing confidence and positivity among people" that are being coordinated by 'Covid Response

Team' (CRT), an outfit formed by the RSS and its affiliates in association with various civil services groups.

RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat, Wipro Group founder Azim Premji and spiritual guru Jaggi Vasudev are among the speakers of the positivity programme to boost citizens suffering in the pandemic.

This team is organising the lecture series to infuse confidence in the common man

to fight the pandemic, Lt Gen (retd) Gurmit Singh, the convener of CRT, said in a statement.

These talks would be telecast live on the Facebook page of the Sangh's communication arm Vishaw Samwad Kendra and its YouTube page. India on Tuesday recorded over 4,200 Covid deaths and over 3.48 lakh fresh Covid-19 cases. India's official Covid-19 death toll has now crossed the 2.5-lakh mark while total cases have gone past 2.33 crore.

Record 4,205 Covid Deaths In India In 24 Hours, Total Crosses 2.5 Lakh

Covid-19 Cases Updates: Even as experts stress stepping up vaccinations to fight the surge in cases, states have been scrambling to arrange enough doses

(News Agencies)- India's daily Covid death count hit a new grim record with 4,205 deaths in the last 24 hours; 3,48,421 fresh cases have been added to the active caseload amid the battle against the second wave, which has raised global concern. Here is your ten-point cheat sheet on this big story:

1. Nearly 30 lakh infections have been recorded by the country since May 5. India's total death count passed the 2.5 lakh-mark this morning, Health Ministry data showed. The fresh surge takes active cases to 37,04,099; overall cases rose to 2.33 crore. The positivity rate stood at 17.56 per cent.

2. In the last 24 hours, 19,83,804 samples were tested, the most in a day since the pandemic broke. Per government data, 24,46,674 vaccine doses were administered in a new record since India began the world's largest vaccine drive on January 16.

3. Even as experts stress stepping up vaccinations to fight the surge in cases, states have been scrambling to arrange doses. Delhi and some southern Indian states are considering the global-tender route. Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra and Odisha have already chosen this option.

4. Hit hard by the second wave, nearly 90 per cent of the country is witnessing a high positivity rate, the government said on Tuesday, stressing that 640 districts out of the 734 are above the national threshold level of five per cent.

5. A variant of the virus - B.1.617 - that has been linked to the explosion in cases in India has been found in 44 countries, the World Health Organization has said, days after labelling it as "a variant of concern". The variant was first found in India in October.

6. Shocking images have emerged from areas near the Uttar-Pradesh-Bihar border of



bodies being tossed in to the Ganga, leading to a blame game. Locals say ambulance drivers are throwing bodies of Covid patients into the river.

7. Mucormycosis, a rare but serious fungal infection now affecting coronavirus patients, has raised huge concern in Maharashtra, which has the country's highest overall caseload. "There could be over 2,000 mucormycosis patients in

the state, as of now, and with more and more COVID-19 cases coming up, their number would increase for sure," state Health Minister Rajesh Tope said on Tuesday, news agency PTI reported.

8. Bharat Biotech's Covaxin has been recommended for the next phase of trials by an expert panel for the two-18 age group, PTI reported citing sources.

Transmission Of Coronavirus Through Water Not A Concern, Say Experts

The Ganga and Yamuna are key sources of drinking water for many villages, local bodies along the rivers.

(News Agencies)-Experts on Wednesday said transmission of coronavirus through water is not a concern, after bodies of suspected COVID-19 patients were fished out of the Ganga and Yamuna.

Satish Tare, professor at IIT-Kanpur, said dumping of dead bodies in the Ganga or its tributaries or sub-tributaries is a serious matter, particularly at a time when the country is grappling with the COVID-19

crisis.

The Ganga and Yamuna are key sources of drinking water for many villages, local bodies along the rivers.

The professor, however, stressed that dumping of bodies will not have a significant effect on transmission.

Mr Tare said dumping bodies in the Ganga or its tributaries is not new, but it has come down significantly in the last 10-15 years. Dumping of bodies

primarily leads to pollution of rivers, he said.

Even if the bodies of suspected COVID-19 patients were fished out, there is a lot of dilution that happens (during the flow of water). The effect may not be significant," he said.

"If the water is passed for water supply, then it passes through the water supply system. Normal treatment takes care of it," said Tare, who teaches environmental engineering, water quality and



wastewater treatment. He, however, added that there are patches where people draw water directly from the river. But even during this people do exercise caution. Mr Tare is also associated with the National Mission for Clean Ganga, the apex body under the Jal Shakti Ministry that deals with the cleaning of Ganga, its tributaries and sub-tributaries. On Tuesday, the Bihar government fished out 71 bodies from the Ganges in Buxar district, where these were found floating in the river,

triggering suspicion that the abandoned corpses could be those of COVID-19 patients.

According to Ballia residents in Uttar Pradesh, at least 45 bodies were seen floating at the Ujiyar, Kulhadia and Bharauli ghats in the Narahi area. However, the district authorities did not tell the exact number of bodies found there. On Monday, residents in Hamirpur district spotted five bodies floating in the Yamuna, creating a scare that these were of COVID patients. The bodies were later fished out and cremated.

Case Filed Against 125 For Religious Procession Amid Pandemic In Gujarat

(News Agencies)-The police today registered a case against around 125 people for allegedly flouting COVID-19 guidelines after they took out a religious procession at Palodiya village in Gandhinagar district of Gujarat, an official said.

So far, 15 people have been arrested in connection with the incident that took place around 10 am on Tuesday in Kalol tehsil, Deputy Superintendent of Police (Kalol division), VN Solanki, said. Around 125 men and women had taken part in the procession to offer prayers, he said.

"Despite creating awareness

among rural people against holding such prayers during the COVID-19 pandemic and despite the instructions to sarpanchs (village heads) to inform the police about such gatherings, these people assembled at one place in a large numbers," Mr Solanki said.

The case against those who took part in the procession was registered at Santej police station on Wednesday. While 35 of the participants have been identified, the remaining ones are yet to be identified, he said.

They were booked under IPC sections 188 (disobedience to

order duly promulgated by public servant), 269 (act likely to spread the infection of any disease dangerous to life), and provisions of the Epidemic Diseases Act, he said.

Travel Ban For Hospital Operator Upheld In Karnataka High Court

(News Agencies)-A court on Wednesday refused to let BR Shetty, the founder of troubled hospital operator NMC Health, travel to the United Arab Emirates (UAE), as it upheld a previous ruling.

Shetty's NMC, the UAE's biggest hospital group listed in London, went into administration in April 2020 after months of turmoil over its finances and its disclosure of \$6.6 billion in debt, well above earlier estimates.

"The findings recorded...are based on sound appreciation of facts and law," the two-judge panel said in dismissing Shetty's challenge of immigration officials' decision to stop him from boarding a Nov. 14 flight to the Middle Eastern nation.

He was appealing against a

February ruling by a single judge of the High Court in Karnataka.

"We are yet to examine the reasoned order in detail," Shetty's lawyer, Zulfikar Memon, told Reuters. "However, there is no doubt that we will challenge it in the Supreme Court."

Two sources directly aware of the matter have told Reuters that authorities acted against Shetty on the basis of a complaint by state-run Bank of Baroda. The lender did not immediately respond to a Reuters request for comment.

Bank of Baroda is suing Shetty for backing away from a collateral agreement for debts and additional guarantees. But Shetty has described the pact as a "fraudulent document" in a court document seen by Reuters.

Thinking of Buying/Selling ?



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America's gas panic has a long history

First the scramble for toilet paper, now the gas lines. That's how we know Americans are in a panic. This past week, fearing the fallout from the shutdown of the Colonial Pipeline that supplies the East Coast as a result of a cyberattack, drivers are tanking up by more than 40% in states from Virginia to Florida. At the same time, prices are shooting up, hovering around \$3 a gallon, a price not seen in more than six years and likely to rise in the days to come. Air travel is also being disrupted. On Wednesday, Colonial Pipeline said it had restarted operations, but the panic buying is an important warning with a long history. Nothing seems to scare Americans more than the fear of running out of gas. As a college student put it in Virginia, where at least 8% of stations are shut down and the governor has declared a state of emergency, "There's no gas, and people are getting frustrated." As she waited 45 minutes to tank up, she watched the tension grow. "People are getting into shouting matches," she said. We've seen this dance before.

If you are of a certain age, you surely recall sitting in the back of your family's station wagon (with no seatbelts of course) waiting hours on end in the 1970s to get a gallon of gas. Why the deep-seated fear? At one level, Americans love their cars -- they are a sign of freedom and the open road. At another, we created a suburban landscape that depends on driving everywhere. Americans drive more miles and do so alone more than citizens of any other country. And amid the pandemic, today, Americans have even more desire to take to the road. The postponement of family get togethers and the reduction in air travel has led to ever greater desires to travel by car. Gas prices always go up in the summer. Now the idea that long anticipated travel might be further delayed or interrupted feels intolerable. But the fear comes from something else, something deeper.

In the 1970s, like today, there was a fundamental mistrust of government. The Vietnam War and Watergate made Americans mistrustful of their leaders, a situation made worse when Jimmy Carter, who ran on a campaign of his honesty, seemed unable to deliver on his promise to save Americans from the energy crisis.

Today, too, there is deep distrust of government, made worse by partisan divides. That was clear in the pandemic, as it is too with the vaccine. The fears that we can't count on our leaders to deliver a basic good magnifies any slight shortage. The first "oil shock" came in 1973 in response to the embargo during the 1973 Israeli-Arab War, when Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) cut off exports to the United

States in retaliation of the country's support of Israel. Prices at the pump doubled, and then quadrupled. Just as scary to Americans were the "Sorry, No Gas Signs," that popped up at service stations everywhere. What seemed to scare Americans most was the suddenness of the crisis. "An energy Pearl Harbor" was how one commentator put it. As the pollster Daniel Yankelovich told former President Richard Nixon, who then occupied the White House, "No issue has such a potential for producing social instability of the magnitude of the depression as does the energy crisis. This crisis entails a radical change ... Their lives will be disrupted and altered at the gut level."

"Residents of a small rural village in eastern North Carolina wrote to Nixon, 'People are spending every waking hour worrying over the gasoline situation.' Even as the Watergate scandal was unfolding, polls reported that citizens cared far more about the energy shortage than they did about presidential wrongdoing. The story replayed itself in the summer of 1979 during the second oil shock when the Iranian Revolution reduced supply. As soon as the first shortage appeared, panic buying set in, with the average sale falling from eight gallons to three. The California Energy Commissioner reported chaos: 'People have got into fights. Gasoline station attendants have been hit with pipes.' 'If there was more order and less fear, we'd be able to get by,' he said. 'But people are freaking out.'"

In Levittown, Pennsylvania, local residents staged a full-on riot, chanting, "More gas! More gas!" outside of gas stations as they threw rocks, beer bottles, and cans at the local police and set two cars on fire. "There is a panic at the pumps," said a Miami service station owner. "It's the worst it's ever been." "I had to step between two people," said another owner, in New York. "After waiting on line they got into an argument right at the pumps, about who was cutting in front." At a local station in Brooklyn, a man shot and killed another man in front of his pregnant wife. In both cases, like today, Americans' fear turned a small interruption in supply into a major crisis. In truth, the major oil companies were able to shift around distribution in ways that should have minimized the impact in the 1970s. But panic took hold, and the rush to tank up compounded the situation. Despite exhortations to conserve and save, drivers did the opposite.

Topping off, as it was called, meant that motorists were carrying nearly a month's supply of gasoline in their tanks rather than leaving it in the gas pumps. This current panic seems like it will be short-lived.

Unclaimed Dead Bodies Floating In the Ganges River

As India is reeling from the massive upsurge in Covid-19 cases, a new horrifying event strikes. Dozens of bodies of suspected COVID-19 victims washed up on the banks of the River Ganges in northern India. At least 45 bodies were seen floating in the Ganges in Uttar Pradesh's Ballia and Ghazipur regions. Most of the bodies that are fished out from the river are decomposed and bloated. This led to triggering fears among the locals in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. The local people claimed that they had been complaining about the smell for the past few days. But authorities had only taken action upon hearing the news about the bodies found downstream in the state of Bihar. A second wave of the Coronavirus is devastating everywhere in India and the death rates are rising significantly in recent weeks.

Most of the country's crematoriums have run out of space. The locals believe that the shortage of wood for funeral pyres might be one of the reasons why corpses are being abandoned in this manner. The authorities said that they haven't yet determined the cause of death of the victims. According to the officials in Bihar, the health professionals who are working through the night retrieved 71 such bodies.

Ballia, Uttar Pradesh District Magistrate Aditi Singh said that some bodies have been found in very bad condition under the Ballia-Buxar Bridge. She has also added that the Sub divisional Magistrate and the circle officer are probing into this incident. Singh further noted that funeral rites of the dead bodies will be performed with due respect. Neither Bihar nor Uttar Pradesh is willing to take the blame for these unclaimed dead bodies. Uttar Pradesh's ADG (Law and order) Prashant Kumar told The Indian

Express: "The bodies have been found in Bihar, and it is the responsibility of the Bihar government to investigate them and take further action. It is not right to blame UP." As per the Superintendent of Police, Vipin Tada, the exact number of bodies discovered was not yet known. He added that seeing the wind direction, it looks like the bodies have come from Bihar. Tada said, "The bodies were old. In Bihar, there is a tradition of disposing dead bodies in the river." On the other hand, Buxar, Bihar's SP Neeraj Kumar said

"Some of the bodies could have floated in from UP. It is subject of investigation for Bihar and UP police". The central government has taken serious note of this issue. Union Jal (Water) Shakti Minister Gajendra Singh Shekhawat seeks an investigation by both the states.

Narendra Modi government is committed to maintaining piety and continuity of mother Ganges. The States [Bihar and UP] concerned must take cognizance of the matter immediately," he tweeted. The Uttar Pradesh government has already passed an order directing people to stop Jal Samadhi -- a ritual followed by some communities in which bodies are disposed of, throwing them in the river. "This order is being followed strictly in the state," uttered ADG Kumar. Experts have pointed out that coronavirus transmission cannot happen through water from the bodies of the suspected Covid-19 patients, fished out of the Ganges. Satish Tare, professor at IIT-Kanpur, said that the dumping of dead bodies in the Ganges or its tributaries or sub-tributaries is a serious matter, particularly at a time when the country is grappling with the 2nd wave of COVID-19 crisis.

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Modi govt is in denial & India is back to being a flailing state

Modi government didn't strengthen the foundations of basic governance in the last 7 years. Now, the PM has retreated and ministers are failing, adding to the Covid disaster.

Is India a failed state? Certainly news magazine India Today thinks so. I would humbly disagree. We aren't a failed state yet. For, if we were, the publication wouldn't have said so on its cover, and I wouldn't be writing this article.

If India was a failed state already, we might not have known how badly we were failing. As long as a nation's own media, civil society, even individual citizens are free to bring the bad news to all, hold the mirror to the most powerful ruler in at least four decades, we are not a failed state yet.

What are we then? I might have a more apt description, a flailing state. Writhing in pain, tossing about in desperation, confused, chaotic, poorly-led, on the verge of a disaster. But still looking for answers.

Flailing state, therefore, is a better characterisation for India today, and it's such a pity I didn't invent it. It was economist Lant

Pritchett, currently Research Director at Blavatnik School of Government, University of Oxford, in his much-quoted 2009 paper at Harvard's Kennedy School, provocatively titled, 'Is India a Flailing State: Detours on the four lane highway to modernisation'. Important point is, he said this of India in 2009, when the UPA was in its prime and the growth still red hot on top of a breathless decade. What hadn't caught up was the state capacity to improve governance, the quality of life of the vast majority of our people, and the ability to leverage growth into wider prosperity and social security.

Between 2009 and 2014, under a confused UPA-2, the quality of governance slid steeply. The government was paralysed with contradictions and indecision. As the state flailed even harder, Narendra Modi rose to seize the moment and promised to change it. Minimum government, maximum governance. People

believed him.

Enough of an uncertain, dithering state, he promised in his new India. Through seven years of economic stall, his voters kept their faith in him. Until this virus came back and exposed the reality. That after seven years under Modi, India is an unprecedentedly dysfunctional, worse flailing state.

The 'state', top leadership, its institutions, including the bureaucracy and scientific establishment, are all either missing in action, or scurrying about to cover up, somehow airbrush the image, not alter reality.

Every leader has their key brand propositions. Modi's, besides Hindutva and hard nationalism, included administrative ability, execution and efficient delivery of welfare. We've seen some of that in the past seven years, especially with distribution of welfare benefits to the poorest



and the building of hard infrastructure. But, the foundations of basic governance were not strengthened.

Institutions were weakened, none more so than the Union Cabinet. If this functioned like a normal Cabinet institution, its most effective ministers would be put in charge of this crisis response. Those who failed on the job, would have been shown the door. In such a grave national crisis, you don't put your politics ahead of the life-and-death issues.

I know any mention of Jawaharlal Nehru is triggering for many. But after the debacle of 1962, he acknowledged failure, fired his defence minister V.K. Krishna

Menon and brought in Y.B. Chavan. Soon enough, the Maratha strongman had initiated the Indian military's first five-year modernisation plan. Results were visible in the 1965 war against Pakistan.

From Nehru, Lal Bahadur Shastri inherited a humiliating crisis of food shortages. He took it head on and brought in C. Subramaniam as agriculture minister, who Indira Gandhi continued with. By 1969, we had the Green Revolution.

If we find the Gandhi dynasty troubling, go back to the near-default level economic crisis of 1991. P.V. Narasimha Rao gave finance to then non-politician Manmohan Singh.

It's time to crush Big Tech censorship before Facebook, Twitter and others crush us



Never before has so much power been held by so few. And never before has that power been so egregiously abused. The censorship applied to American news consumers by Facebook, Twitter, Amazon, Google, and Apple must be broken up. They have evolved into massive monopolies that pose a grave danger to democracy by suppressing speech with which they disagree. The staggering wealth and unbridled power of these tech giants allow them to punish political adversaries and protect partisan allies. They do so with

impunity and no regard for the public interest. Examples abound. In October of 2020, Facebook and Twitter shut down the spread of a New York Post story revealing the incriminating content of a laptop owned by Hunter Biden. They blocked millions of voters from reading an accurate story of vital public interest. The move was instrumental in containing damage to Joe Biden's campaign just weeks before the presidential election. Since then, former president Donald Trump has been banned from Facebook indefinitely and banished from

Twitter permanently. Parler, a social network favored by conservatives, was cut off completely when Amazon removed the site from its server, while Google and Apple deleted Parler's app from their app stores.

Digital platforms increasingly dominate public discourse in today's social media environment. The dissemination of speech and information is concentrated in the hands of a few private parties that control online content and platforms. Today's oligarchs enforce their vast and influential dominion with an iron grip. They argue that as private companies they are not required to respect free speech rights and may act as they please. In this they are correct inasmuch as the First Amendment protects against government interference, not private action. Therein rests the dilemma of what to do when private-sector behemoths repress speech and thought in the era of the commanding

internet. There are several options that must be seriously considered and acted on.

The first option is for the government to recognize that these companies constitute clear monopolies in their respective markets -social networking, mobile content and apps, search and advertising, and e-commerce. Their sheer size, the tyranny they exert, and their anti-competitive conduct makes this obvious under any antitrust analysis. As such, a bold move must be made to treat them as public utilities that are strictly regulated such as electric, water, gas and telecommunications companies. This will protect the public from tech abuses and free speech repression. Sen. Bill Hagerty, R-Tenn. has introduced The 21st Century FREE Speech Act that takes aims to do just that. He described how it would work recently in an op-ed for Fox News. So how does this

happen in a bipartisan way? In an honest world, the Biden administration would initiate and lead such action. But it won't since Democrats, and Biden in particular, have been the great beneficiaries of tech censorship. Their progressive views align perfectly with the liberal establishment that operate today's technology companies. Both have a common interest in maintaining the status quo of exploiting unchecked power over public discourse. Manipulating the narrative is their objective. And they're good at it. It is therefore most likely up to the federal courts and, in the end, the U.S. Supreme Court to rectify the wrong. In an opinion last month involving Trump and Twitter that was dismissed as moot, Justice Clarence Thomas laid out a compelling argument that could be used in a future case before the high court to rein in social media companies by treating them as "common carriers" akin to utilities.

Covid-19: Pay attention to rural India

The battle against the coronavirus pandemic will have to be fought in the villages of the Hindi heartland



When Covid-19 first hit India, the biggest fear among both policymakers and public experts was that the pandemic would travel to India's Hindi heartland - primarily across the rural belt of

Uttar Pradesh (UP) and Bihar. Given the size of the two states, the density of population, the abysmal health care infrastructure, and the manner in which the virus could quickly

transmit in these regions, this fear was legitimate. And there was palpable relief when the first wave was, in hindsight, relatively less destructive. There was never any scientific and cogent

explanation for why this was the case, but this did not deter speculative, and clearly misplaced, theories about the innate immunity of those in rural India to resist the virus. It is now clear that the biggest fear of 2020 is the everyday reality of 2021. There is, after all, no innate immunity, and Sars-CoV-2 and its variants are sweeping through the villages and small towns of two of India's most populous states. UP reported 20,000 new cases and over 300 deaths, and Bihar had over 10,000 cases and 72 deaths on Tuesday. But anecdotal reports from local communities, hospitals, emergency wards, crematoriums and graveyards; informal admissions by district and health authorities; pleas for help on social media (even though recourse to Twitter is not the natural default option for many in these areas); and now the tragic sight of bodies floating in the Ganga, confirm that the numbers are much higher. The process of

medical management of Covid-19 is under great strain. Testing is hard, hospital admissions of patients with serious symptoms (with or without a test) are harder, there is an acute shortage of medical supplies, contact-tracing is non-existent, bureaucratic red tape has made care even more difficult, and there is little dignity in death. Given the dense networks that exist between cities and villages, continuous inter-state movement, the return of migrants for Holi and the harvesting season and in response to curbs in bigger cities, the impact of Kumbh, and in the case of UP, untimely panchayat elections, this surge is not unexpected. And the pace of vaccination, the most effective way to fight the disease, is much slower than needed. Away from India's urban hubs, India's Covid-19 trajectory will be decided by what happens in Bihar and UP. The state governments, with help from the Centre, must step up.

4 Routes For India Out Of The Covid Crisis



US President Joe Biden convened the inaugural summit of QUAD nations, consisting of Australia, India, Japan and US, on March 12. Foreign Secretary Harsh Shringla said the other three agreed to finance a vaccine initiative led by India. There was, he cheerily added, "Wholesome appreciation of the Vaccine Maitri Initiative". South Block's optimistic spin took the lead from BJP's top leadership, which, instead of postponing the state elections, were marshalling forces for an all-out attack. Additionally, the Kumbh dates were preponed from 2022, after

debate amongst Hindu clerics, to April, coinciding with Election Commission's irrational month-long election jamboree. Everything was in place for a perfect storm to hit India. Some epidemiologists now claim they had warned the government in writing that a massive second wave was upon us. But the BJP was keen to capture power in West Bengal, the jewel of the East. The Kumbh, if held next year, would have followed the state election in Uttar Pradesh. The BJP could not miss out on a crore-strong religious gathering for political posturing. The question arises

whether the top BJP leadership exists in a bubble that neither internal warnings from scientists, or social media posts or stories in respected international journals, penetrate. Thus, unsurprisingly, the situation swung quickly from the Prime Minister proclaiming India a 'Vishwa Guru' or 'Thought Leader' to India becoming the global Covid hub. Countries began blocking flights from India. QUAD partner Australia added insult to injury by threatening to jail even their own citizens if they returned from India by surreptitious indirect travel. Pictures and videos, many very disturbing, of ill and dying patients, unable to get admission to hospitals, or perishing in hospitals when oxygen ran out, spread across the globe. Questions began being asked about India's partnership with US, as not a vial of vaccine was promised despite millions of doses of Astra Zeneca lying unused in US warehouses, or the slightest public recognition of India's existential crisis. Some blame rests on India, as a

nationalistic government boasting about leading the fight against the epidemic and shipping millions of vaccines to developing nations, was reluctant to acknowledge and accept a national crisis, especially in the mist of important state elections. Finally, US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan tweeted on April 25, promising America was "deploying more supplies and resources". Other nations also quickly rallied when they realised that India was unprepared for the Covid surge created by new variants. Experts concede India had confirmation bias as the political leadership jumped to accepted sero-surveys after the first wave last year. Estimates of those exposed to the virus were 20-30% in Delhi and 50-60% in Mumbai, and were apparently wrong. And with vaccinations commencing, Indian decision-makers calculated they would stay ahead of any fresh wave. But as against World Health Organisation's norm for sequencing to be .3% of confirmed cases, in India the

number was .05%.

In 2001, after the Bhuj earthquake, I was India's ambassador in Abu Dhabi, and material collected by the community was flown to Ahmedabad but got piled up and it was difficult to quickly disburse to the needy. India was now accepting aid after 17 years from 40 odd nations. Each nation sends a different mix of medical equipment and medicines, some with non-English etchings, difficult for end-users to read. Chinese ambassador Sun Weidong claimed 61 flights had been sent in the past two weeks carrying 5,000 ventilators, 21,569 oxygen producers and 3,800 tonnes of medicines. Acknowledging such help from China which has still not withdrawn its troops from Indian areas in Ladakh, presented Delhi with a conundrum. China, in turn, was running down US assistance, late in coming, as well as underscoring Indian weakness for the world to see.



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Numbers are clear. Saving rural UP from Covid catastrophe must be a national mission

Ask a simple question to anyone you meet from rural India: How many persons have died in your village in the last 50 days? Don't bother to ask about the cause of death, just ask for the total number. Also ask: What's the population of your village? And then do a simple calculation: If the number of deaths, from all possible causes, during this period exceeds 1 per 1,000, you are looking at "excess deaths". If it is more than 1.5, you can be sure this reflects a significant deviation, a major disease. If it is more than 2, more than double the number of deaths we would normally expect, we are looking at a calamity.

I asked this question to a few friends from Uttar Pradesh and requested them to call their village. I got information from 14 villages spread across the districts of Varanasi, Unnao, Rae Bareilly, Pratapgarh, Meerut and Bulandshahr. This is not a scientific random sample, but it is not a sample of badly hit villages either. The proportion of deaths was much higher in the poorer and smaller villages of eastern and central UP than in the relatively prosperous areas of the west. Ever since the beginning of the second wave of Covid in the last week of March, these villages have recorded 101 deaths against their combined population of 33,600. That gives a ratio of 3.005 per 1,000 persons during this period, about three times what you would expect normally.

If this ratio is projected for the

entire state of Uttar Pradesh with a population of 23.5 crore, about 4.7 lakh excess deaths could have taken place during this period. These excess deaths could be attributed to the second wave of Covid pandemic. Compare that to the official figures of Covid deaths: just 2.5 lakhs for the entire country and merely thousands for UP since the beginning of the pandemic last year.

Even the unofficial projections don't get the scale of expected deaths. The Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation (IHME), an independent global health research centre at the University of Washington, estimates that by

the end of August, UP may have 1.7 lakh to 2.1 lakh deaths due to Covid.

This looks like a gross underestimate. Even if we take the ratio of deaths per thousand for last 50 days to be a conservative 2.5 (lower than the 3.0 that we found in our crude survey) and project it to just the next 50 days as well, Uttar Pradesh is likely to witness at least 7 lakh additional deaths due to Covid cumulatively in the months of April, May and June. For the entire year, assuming that we don't have a lethal third wave, the figure could be well over 10 lakh deaths. This is not just a calamity; we are in the midst of a public health

catastrophe, one of the worst this century.

Pandemic ravages UP

My colleagues Ravi Chopra, Ankit Tyagi, Rajeev Dhyani, Anmol, and I have also been tracking media reports on how the pandemic is panning out in rural Uttar Pradesh. While we work on a fuller report, our initial impression is that at every stage of response to the Covid-19 epidemic, from testing to

washing up along the banks of Ganga.

Media reports suggest that public as well as private health infrastructure in Uttar Pradesh began crumbling by the middle of April, just when the second wave began. Newspapers are full of reports of shortage and black marketing of drugs like remdesivir and equipment like oximeters, even in the big cities. Ambulances and hearses were



hard to find. Hospital beds were already unavailable by the third week of April. And then, like everywhere else, there is the oxygen shortage. Lack of oxygen

leading to the death of a hospitalised patient was reported as early as 22 April from an Etawah district hospital (Amar Ujala, Agra edition, 23 April 2021). While the crisis of oxygen in the metros gets attention, the situation in the small towns of UP is infinitely worse. There is rampant black marketing of oxygen and even attempts to loot oxygen cylinders.

Shocking response

What was the response of the government? To be fair, a pandemic like this one is a challenge to any government. The challenge is manifold in a state like Uttar Pradesh with dismal medical infrastructure. Granting all these limitations, it

must be said that the response of the UP government has been shocking, arguably the worst response anywhere in the country. For the record, the government announced a slew of measures including steps to augment hospital beds and ICU facilities, oxygen supply, concentrators, availability of medicines and free treatment in private hospitals. Much of this remained on paper. The Allahabad High Court had to step in with strongly worded orders: "We will not tolerate your paper work anymore for tackling the situation. Now you do what we order."

The situation on the ground kept worsening. Finally, the high court had to intervene once again. UP continues to have one of the lowest vaccination rates in the country.

Instead of managing the situation, Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath is fixated on managing perceptions and images. In a video conference with select journalists on 24 April, he asserted that there was no shortage of oxygen in any Covid-19 hospital and that the real problem was hoarding and black marketing. He reportedly asked officials to take action under the National Security Act and "seize the property" of those who spread "rumours" and propaganda on social media and try to "spoil the atmosphere". In one of the most brazen cases of Covid denial, the state government forced school teachers to conduct panchayat elections through the state. More than 577 teachers reportedly died in the process. Despite Supreme Court orders not to harass whistleblowers and critics, the UP government went ahead with booking those who drew attention to the gravity of the situation. Barring a few exceptions, the media in UP has limited itself to pointing out local problems and has not questioned the state government and the CM.

The story of Uttar Pradesh is not unique. Now we know that this second wave of Covid has spread deep and fast in rural India across the country. We hear similar stories of collapse of medical infrastructure in many poorer states. Attempts to invisibilise the number of cases and deaths have been reported from many states, including Gujarat and Delhi.

West Bengal violence shows how police act as a private army of politicians

West Bengal last week saw a number of incidents of post-poll violence - a Union minister's vehicle attacked; some local political leaders injured; properties damaged; women beaten up and thousands forced to leave their homes, with many even going to Assam. The violence is continuing and revenge politics seems to be the main cause. The appeasement or aggression towards the minority community has also played its part. The goonda elements in the state are emboldened with no fear of law because they are assured of political and police protection. The police and its political masters have abdicated their responsibility in enforcing the law and the Constitution. In a free democratic country, the hapless citizen has nowhere to go. They can flee but for how long should they stay displaced? There can't be a worse indictment of any State.

The police inaction

The question arises as to why no preventive or punitive measures, as prescribed by the law, have been taken so far? What were/are the District Magistrates, Superintendents of Police and Police Commissioners of the violence-hit areas doing? To say

that the Election Commission was in charge of the police during the polls is only an alibi. The law doesn't stop functioning during elections. The explanation for inaction is simple. These officials, down to the SHO level, don't want to serve the common public but work as per the wish of their political masters.

Such officials need to be punished. But who will bell the cat? The political executive in the state, of which the police has become a private army with honourable exceptions, will not punish but reward it for toing its line. That leaves the matters into the hands of the central government and the courts. Police being a state subject, the central government, at best, has control only over IAS and IPS officers, not the lower-ranking officials. The central government should set an example by initiating action against those not performing their duty.

Further, the Calcutta High Court should take suo moto cognizance of the violence and order a CBI inquiry into the role of all concerned police and other officials in the administration for dereliction of duty. These cases

should be monitored by the high court itself and exemplary punishments given to the defaulters.

There is going to be a serious fallout of the Bengal violence, and it may become a threat to national security - the increasing communalism. With the minority population dominating several constituencies, political pandering and opposition can only increase tensions in an altered political scenario. A lot of vigil and proactive work is required by all stakeholders to maintain communal harmony.

The second serious fallout is with the appeasement policy in West Bengal. This, coupled with unchecked migration of Bangladeshis, can make matters worse. The state has become a hub of illegal activities - smuggling of cattle and other items.

Police-politician nexus: An all-India problem

Let it also be added that the total political control of the police by political masters is not peculiar to West Bengal but extends to all states in varying degrees, and all political parties have to be equally blamed for it. However, West Bengal today seems to be



heading the chart.

The police in India have become worse than its colonial avatar - all the cries of even the Supreme Court on police reforms have been thrown by the political class into the dustbin. The politicians control the police not only legally but administratively too through various local orders that impact recruitment, postings, transfers, punishments, rewards, among others. The following measures are suggested to improve policing in India. First, the pending police reforms, as ordered by the Supreme Court in 2006, should immediately be implemented. The political control of the police should be removed and the forces should remain answerable only to the law and Parliament. Unless

this is done, our dream of attaining fast economic prosperity and a healthy democracy is not likely to be achieved anytime soon.

Second, there is a case to look into the recruitment process and training of IAS/IPS officers by the Centre because it is these officers who provide the leadership when policing/administrative standards dip. Third, India needs electoral reforms that forbid the entry of criminals in Parliament and state legislatures. Today, politicians with criminal records are present in large numbers in Parliament. If there is no check in another two elections, their numbers will only go up. Then we will have to forget about the police reforms forever because the politicians will never leave control of the former.

The Congress must act, now

The assembly election defeat and the success of defectors can lead to further erosion of the grand old party's base



The Congress Working Committee (CWC) met on Monday to discuss the defeat in the assembly elections, with party president Sonia Gandhi saying that if the party did not "face up to reality", it would not draw the right lessons. Here is the reality. The Congress got decimated in Bengal, failed to capture power in Kerala and Assam,

lost power in Puducherry before the polls and failed to regain it, and is a junior partner in the ruling coalition in Tamil Nadu. To add insult to injury, high-profile defectors who switched ranks have found leadership opportunities in the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) - with Himanta Biswa Sarma (who left the Congress in 2015) now be-

coming the third former Congress leader (after N Biren Singh in Manipur and Pema Khandu in Arunachal Pradesh) to take over as a BJP chief minister. The setback also comes at a time when the question of leadership remains unresolved. Sonia Gandhi is interim president but wants to give way to Rahul Gandhi. He doesn't want to be president but is, for all effective purposes, in-charge. A group of dissenters forced the party to commit to a timeline for organisational elections - but while slated for this summer, it has now been deferred due to the second wave of the coronavirus pandemic. And in any case, the dissenters lack a

leader with the stature to openly, successfully, challenge the leadership of the Nehru-Gandhi family. Through all of this, the Congress appears to sense an opportunity in the Centre's mixed record in managing Covid-19. The fact that Rahul Gandhi gave obvious, but sensible, suggestions on the course of the disease, and that party organisations such as the Indian Youth Congress have done a stellar job in providing relief to citizens, gives the party hope that it can shape some of the political narrative around the pandemic. But in the absence of a clear leadership - the key question is not who becomes party president but who be-

comes the face to take on Narendra Modi in what will once again be a presidential-style contest in 2024 - the party's ability to rise is doubtful. Supplement this with its weak organisation, the shift in incentives for leaders and workers who can sense political opportunities elsewhere, and the erosion in states where the party's base was strong, and the nature of the crisis in the Congress becomes clearer. With noise about a possible non-BJP, non-Congress grouping rising, India's grand old party is once again in a familiar place - the crossroads. Mrs Gandhi's admission must be followed by action.

India's vaccine diplomacy is falling apart. Why PM Modi can't convince EU to waive patents

As External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar returns home from the G-7 foreign ministerial meeting in London - where he was isolated over a false Covid alarm - the news is that India will not be distracted by gloom-doom coverage of the second wave of the pandemic in the Western press, whether in the prestigious Lancet health journal, or in The New Yorker. In an editorial, the Lancet said that "Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government has seemed more intent on removing criticism on Twitter than trying to control the pandemic", while noted journalist Steve Coll wrote in The New Yorker to say that "the coronavirus thrives off of complacent leaders, such as Prime Minister Narendra Modi". But this week, New Delhi has more pressing issues at hand, especially at the World Trade Organization (WTO). The news is that Europe is unhappy about following the United States' lead in waiving Covid vaccine patents, so that companies in developing countries can ramp up production and protect people from the damaging effects of the rapidly mutating coronavirus.

Certainly, the US has kept its word. Along with planeloads of material aid to India, the Joe Biden administration ignored its own pharma giant Pfizer's

concerns last week to support at the WTO the waiver of intellectual property rights on Covid vaccines. US representative to the WTO Katherine Tai tweeted that "extraordinary times and circumstances call for extraordinary measures."

Russian President Vladimir Putin approved the plan. His country has already registered four Covid vaccines - one of which, Sputnik V, has landed in India and is awaiting clearance for manufacturing. Over the weekend, though, all hell broke loose in Europe. At a European Union (EU) summit in Porto, Portugal, several leaders expressed their unhappiness at being dragged by the US into supporting India's demand for patent waiver at the WTO. India-EU, not on the same page - Notably, PM Modi, also on the weekend, held a virtual summit with EU leaders, which included EU Commission president Ursula von der Leyen, European Council head Charles Michel, and Portugal President Antonio Costa - who is of Indian descent, from Goa, and occasionally known as the 'Gandhi of Lisbon' because he turned around a crime-ridden neighbourhood when he was the city's mayor.

Over four tweets, Modi waxed eloquent about the revival of India-

EU negotiations on trade and investment, adding, "Our collaboration is essential to stopping the Covid-19 pandemic and ensuring a sustainable and inclusive recovery in a more digital and greener world."

But the EU was not having any of it. German Chancellor Angela Merkel, who first made her dissatisfaction felt, pointed out that even if there was a waiver of intellectual property rights for Covid vaccines, it would help the developing countries only in the long run. Vaccine production is costly and takes time. India, which needs the vaccines as soon as possible to protect its population, needs much more urgent measures, goes the German argument. French President Emmanuel Macron, whose government signed an agreement with India to sell 36 Rafale fighter jets for Rs 59,000 crore, echoed Merkel. Accusing the US of not sharing its unused stockpile of AstraZeneca vaccine, Macron said, "100 per cent of the vaccines produced in the US are for the American market." Italian Prime Minister Mario Draghi said bluntly, "The fact of liberalising the patents, even temporarily, does not guarantee the production of the vaccine." Both France and Italy asked the US and the UK to



remove the export ban on vaccines. Despite denials by British Prime Minister Boris Johnson, Europeans insist the UK has gone back on its promise to export the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine to the EU. Macron and Draghi are partially right. The US, which only recently promised to export some of the AstraZeneca stockpile that it is not using to India, has invoked various domestic laws preventing its companies from exporting the vaccines, and poured money into domestic pharma giants so as to fast-forward the production of vaccines for its own population. India did nothing of the sort, and exported 6.6 crore doses to 93 countries - enough to vaccinate the adult population of both Delhi and Mumbai - under its Vaccine Maitri initiative, essentially an effort to counter China's expanding vaccine influence

abroad. India seemed so taken with its own efforts it seems unlikely that the Ministry of External Affairs even checked with the Ministry of Health to ask how many doses India could spare. World has questions for India - Over the last few weeks, then, the world has been asking one question: What has India done to contain the pandemic, even as it now demands the world move heaven and earth at the WTO? Apart from Modi arrogantly declaring an early end of the pandemic, New Delhi did not genome sequence enough samples, which would have given the information to enable the scientific tools to deal with the mutating virus, nor did it ramp up vaccine production in time.

Off the record, diplomats are now asking much more. Why is India not buying vaccines from abroad, when, for example, the EU has just signed a deal with Pfizer to buy 1.8 billion doses, at \$23 a dose? Is that too expensive for India? Second, how much money has India allocated for purchasing vaccines? The answer, only Rs 35,000 crore, is just for states to manage their "vaccination drive" and none for the Centre. Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman is now saying that the corpus could go up according to the demand. Fact is, India has recently changed its policy for importing vaccines, except that it is still hampered by too many ifs and buts - including the precondition that imported vaccines will not be used by the government and all authorisations for approvals and licenses will be the responsibility of the importer. Dr Reddy's Labs, so far, is the only Indian company to have signed on with Russia's RDIF for Sputnik V. As India logs in more than 4,000 deaths a day and infections cross 400,000 on a regular basis, there's perhaps just one more question left: How much worse can it get?

Don't dilute green safeguards

Economic growth is a key national imperative. But it will not be possible to sustain high growth by using short-cuts.

Last week, the environment ministry allowed companies in several industries to expand capacity, based on a self-certification that their operations will not increase the pollution load. This is in line with the amendments in the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) notification, 2006, in 2016 and 2020, which introduced the principles of "no increase in pollution load", and exemption from seeking environment clearance if the resultant increase of production capacity was less than 50%. This was expanded in a March 2021 notification, which allowed any amount of expansion - applicable to industries such as coal-washing, mineral



processing, pesticides, fertilisers, and synthetic chemicals such as paint, cement, petrochemicals, and sugar, which already have a gigantic environmental footprint. This fast-track clearance can harm the environment as well as lives and liveli-

hoods. Prior to these exemptions, an EIA could systematically examine both beneficial and adverse consequences of the project and plan for mitigation in the project-planning cycle. Importantly, the local communi-

ties had a chance to voice their opinions. An example is the Andaman water aerodrome project. The green assessment of this new project has established that the site for the construction of the terminal building and associate infrastructure will impact mangroves, which are natural green barriers, and that the local administration has no mitigation plan. A ministry panel has now raised questions, based on this EIA. Economic growth is a key national imperative. But it will not be possible to sustain high growth by using short-cuts. The economy and the environment are interlinked in more ways than one.



Republic TV has become a channel of calm and India Today asking 'where's my vaccine?'

News channels are looking all over the place, trying to make sense of the second Covid wave. Fact is, nobody quite knows.

It's a measure of how confused everyone is about everything related to the coronavirus 'catastrophe' (Mirror Now) in India that news channels are not merely 'gasping' at what they behold, but they're also grasping at straws.

Perhaps they reflect the unorganised-disorganised response of the authorities to what is a petrifying human tragedy - you have only to watch the news to see what India Today calls the 'chaos'.

And in the middle of all the mayhem, Republic TV has become a channel of calm. Given its history of vitriolic broadcasts, this is a warning that something is wrong, very wrong.

Republic TV has been reporting the news, not airing its views: 'Surge in cases in Tripura', 'PM speaks to 4 CMs', 'Aid arrives from S. Korea', 'Covid treatment-effect and impact', 'Metro in Delhi stopped' - that's a sample of its bland, straightforward headlines this week.

And then, this happened: on Monday afternoon, the channel discovered the real cause and culprit of the deadly surge of virus: China's 'biological warfare', attributed to a 2015 report by Chinese military scientists who,

allegedly, investigated weaponising coronaviruses.

According to one Captain (retd) Alok Bansal, the expert chosen by the channel, India's Covid numbers were under control until the India-China standoff at the Line of Actual Control (LAC) last June. Then the graph began to rise, 'not a natural phenomenon' - apparently, China unleashed bio-warfare on India and presumably continues to do so. Channels like Zee News and CNN News 18 also broadcast the news but without the LAC conspiracy theory.

This is just one example of how channels are looking hither and thither, all over the place, trying to make sense of what is happening. Fact is, nobody quite knows.

Take a look at a random choice of Wednesday afternoon stories at approximately 2.30 pm.

On Mirror Now, a video of police beating up a man who stepped out to buy medicines for a patient.

Republic TV said WHO had issued a clarification on the 'Indian' variant - now, there is no such thing.

CNN News 18 considered the possibility of vaccines for youngsters.

India Today interviewed people who had tried and failed to obtain a vaccine slot.

Aaj Tak found people queuing up for vaccination at a Jaipur hospital where no vaccines were available.

Earlier Wednesday, channels had Delhi's deputy chief minister Manish Sisodia telling us the capital had all but run out of vaccines.

A case of vaccines, vaccines everywhere, but not a jab to get? (Apologies, Coleridge). Or, as India Today said, 'Chaos'.

Onto the bodies

And then there were the bodies. Times Now asked, 'Who is to blame for the indignity?' as it screened images of bodies in rivers at five different places in Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh.

'Rivers of life now channels of despair' was its epitaph. On Aaj Tak, we saw the naked bodies bobbing up and down quite clearly despite the mosaic film covering them.

Bharat Samachar claimed there were 1,200 to 1,400-plus bodies floating in the river - the 'stench' from them intolerable to those living by the river bed.

Switch to News X - it said Uttar Pradesh had the "Highest stock

of vaccines", and had "floated tenders to procure 4 crore doses".

Cut to Zee News and a village near Baghpat, UP, where the reporter found no hospitals, government or private. "There is only death," mourned one villager.

Cut to Republic TV: 'WHO praises UP for Covid management'. CNN News18 quotes the UP Chief Minister saying 'Tackled second wave'. Then switch back to Mirror Now where people on the streets in Ayodhya, UP complained that the medical infrastructure is "shoddy".

Confused? So you should be. Vaccination story is no different. The same confusion visits the vaccination story. One moment CNN News 18 is telling us how Covaxin is set for trials on children and in the other it informs that states say they have no vaccines.

India Today asks "Where's my vaccine?" The channel features adults aged above 45 years who try to be vaccinated in Mumbai and Delhi and come a cropper. If there are no vaccines for the 60-plus age group, what will we do for the children - even if Covaxin is approved for them?

Meanwhile, ABP News is in a celebratory mood: 'Covid will lose and lose very soon,' it prophesied, adding that India had vaccinated more people and faster than the US, UK and China. What solace is that to the woman who has spent five days trying to book a vaccine slot but to no avail (News 24), or to the grey-haired wife who is making the rounds of Mumbai to get her husband vaccinated-he took Covaxin and is already 12 days late for the second dose (India TV)? 'Chaos'. - So too is the medical advice that is being freely dispensed across news channels, daily. It is so confusing. News 24 told us the Goa government has said every adult should take the drug ivermectin. Dr. D.N. Rana at Delhi's Sir Ganga Ram Hospital says he took it - he still got the corona. Did it help, asks the anchor, "Can't say," replied the good doctor. Story after story on channel after channel showed us people lining up to buy remdesivir - the drug was being sold in the black too, just like oxygen. But doctors in TV studios, like Dr M.C. Mishra, formerly AIIMS, tell us remdesivir is not part of Corona protocol (Zee News). Huh?

A Faulty System And Beloved Ranjana's Death

On a really hot summer day, in May 1980, a group of women were marching down a small, dusty lane in a workers' colony in Faridabad, enthusiastically shouting slogans as part of a campaign against dowry. They were undeterred that there was not a person to be seen except when a window, shuttered to keep out the searing heat, would open slightly through the march, and a woman would peak her head out to see what the noisy slogans were about. Ranjana and I paused, looked at each other and laughed out aloud with the same thought in our minds - a thought which she voiced. "Only crazy women and Communists out in the noon day sun!"

Ranjana Nirula. Age 75. Communist. Trade union and women's rights activist. Convenor of the All India ASHA Workers' Union. Editor of the journal "Voice of the Working Woman". Beloved friend to many, comrade, mentor to hundreds of young people, fifty years devoted to the struggle for justice. Full of fun and humour, with a dazzling smile, always optimistic even in the worst of times. Ranjana died last night of Covid. She is one of the 4,000, the average number of deaths in India in a single day, a death toll that

is the highest in the world.

Millions of families in India are touched by the dark shadow of Covid. A son, a daughter, a parent, a sibling, a friend, a partner, a colleague in a factory, a neighbour in a village - lost, sometimes in a matter of days. A collective mourning spreads across India. Many have written about the terrible experience of a personal tragedy relating it to the wider issue of policy. So it is with Ranjana too. Questions which need answers and solutions to help cut the suffering of others affected.

What happens when a patient has Covid symptoms but the RT-PCR test is negative? This is the question we faced. The CT scan Ranjana had for her lungs after she developed Covid-like symptoms showed a score of 12/25. Ranjana's doctor advised hospital admission because of serious comorbidities. But because her RT-PCR test was negative, no Covid-designated hospital would admit her. The private hospital where she had earlier been treated for other ailments was not a Covid hospital. They held that even though she had tested negative, since her CT scan showed typical Covid lung damage of 30%, they could not

admit her. So, no hospital - Covid or non-Covid - could take her. Many patients we were told faced the same problem because of the inaccuracy of tests. Either way, the patient suffers. There are patients who may be treated at home through tele-consultation and a provision of oxygen supply. That is what experts constantly say on national television. Don't panic. True. But what about those who like Ranjana need urgent hospitalization? A second RT-PCR test was conducted, but the report was delayed. Meanwhile, the Covid effects worsened and her oxygen level plummeted.

Coincidentally, around the same time as our desperate search for a hospital, the Delhi High Court was hearing a petition on exactly this issue. It directed the Delhi Government that patients with Covid symptoms must be admitted without a positive PCR report. But we found, to our dismay, the order made not a jot of difference to the admission protocols being followed. After the High Court's order, a senior doctor at AIIMS messaged me saying, "Bring patient to emergency for help, but for admission, will require antigen test." This meant that if the antigen test, known for often giving false negatives, erro-



neously said she did not have Covid, she would not be admitted. It was only a week later that the Health Ministry's expert panel woke up to the court order to issue guidelines that lack of a positive test should not hamper admission, but whether anything has changed on the ground is doubtful.

What if the test had not been wrong, what if hospitals had not denied Ranjana admission? Did the delay affect her condition irreversibly?

The government-run Ram Manohar Lohia hospital became our lifeline. Here, a most humane and helpful senior doctor informed us that the hospital had a SARI ward. This is the acronym for "Severe Acute Respiratory Illness". To this ward, the hospital was admitting patients who had Covid symptoms

but not a Covid positive report. They had a very limited number of beds and we were fortunate that a bed did become available. Only a few hospitals have such wards. Surely many more hospitals should also start such facilities of a SARI ward, which serves as a tier of treatment for patients suspected of Covid but without a positive report.

Within two or three days, the test done by the hospital showed that Ranjana was indeed positive for Covid. She was shifted to the Covid ward from the SARI ward. This is where we faced the second issue which is perhaps common to all Covid-affected hospitalized patients and their families: the almost impenetrable wall of separation around a Covid ward or ICU.

Congress Has To Quickly Flank RG With Manmohan Singh

PM Modi has never been more politically vulnerable. Even the proverbial uncles in family WhatsApp groups aren't standing up for him anymore. Some say this is the Modi government's 'Anna moment'. That agitation cost the UPA its street-cred within just two years of returning to power with a bigger mandate. Now, exactly two years after Modi seemed invincible, his poor handling of Covid has opened up a chink in the BJP's armour. If India was against corruption in 2011, today it is united against incompetence. Till now the PM has ridden on his TINA factor - There is No Alternative. This had kept fence-sitters, especially amongst India's affluent middle-class, on the BJP's side in 2019. Now these people are beginning to question their choice. Rahul Gandhi is suddenly getting good press from liberals who considered him a ninny. The political atmosphere is such that there have been no calls for the Gandhis to quit the Congress, despite the party's abysmal performance in the recent assembly polls. However, just a sudden anti-Modi tide is not enough. Several other things have to turn in the opposition's favour for it to put up any serious challenge. The most crucial among these is India Inc. There are two reasons for this. The first, and most crucial, is that they provide the funds for election

campaigns. The second is that India's corporates have a huge influence over a large part of our national media, partly through ownership and partly through advertising. Let us begin with the issue of campaign finance. India had about 91 crore eligible voters in 2019. This is likely to rise to about 96 crore by 2024. If one assumes a similar turnout, we can assume that about 64 crore people will actually vote in the next Lok Sabha elections. If the Congress wants to lead a coalition government at the centre, it will need at least 100 seats and a 25 percent vote-share. That means getting about 16 crore people to vote for the party. Let's look at the math: In 2019, the BJP spent an estimated Rs 27,000 crore and won about 23 crore votes. That means it spent about Rs 1,200 per vote. That's equal to roughly Rs 1,500 per voter in 2024 prices. So, to keep pace, the Congress will need about Rs 24,000 crore to get 25 percent votes in the next election. All it managed to spend in 2019 was Rs 10-12,000 crore, less than half of what the BJP spent. This is because India's moneybags did not trust Rahul Gandhi's politics. His anti-corporate and overtly socialist rhetoric wasn't going to win him any fans in FICCI or CII. This also alienated India's ruling elite - from opinion-builders such as journalists, columnists, lawyers and public intellectuals, to the opinion-con-

suming middle-classes. The consistent bad press that Rahul Gandhi has got over the years has a lot to do with his perceived 'left-wing' tendencies. There is little doubt that the Congress is the only pan-national party that can challenge the BJP. It won close to 20 percent of the popular vote in 2019. The closest that any other non-BJP party came to that was the Trinamool with 4 percent. There is equally little doubt that the Congress will find it very tough to cross 100 seats. So, it needs to position itself as the leader of a new opposition alliance that can together win a majority. The problem with the Congress is that the Gandhis are its only pan-India brand. Rahul is both the party's best bet and its biggest liability. If the Congress wants support from India's ruling elite and a section of the country's big business houses, it will have to ring-fence Rahul with a set of faces that are more acceptable to those who hold money and power. The crucial face here is that of Manmohan Singh. Ever since the second wave began, social media has been full of memes propagating the virtues of the former PM. In any case, even in 2014, India's middle class did not dislike the 'accidental Prime Minister'. They only faulted him for being too gentle and timid.

Congress Proves It Has Zero Interest In Really Changing



it failed in its bid to retain the government. In Kerala, it failed to build on the promise of its performance of the 2019 Lok Sabha elections where it won 15 of the 20 Lok Sabha seats from the state. Not only did it fail to prevent the LDF from forming the government for a second consecutive term, but for the first time in several decades, its showing was as poor as landing 21 of the 140 assembly seats. This despite a vigorous campaign by Rahul Gandhi.

In West Bengal, it had to face the ignominy of not winning a single assembly seat, taking the tally of states where the once mighty party has no representation at all to six - Andhra Pradesh, Delhi, Tripura, Nagaland, Sikkim, and now Bengal. The only consolation for the party to chew on was the fact that it was a part of the winning alliance in Tamil Nadu.

Apart from its dismal electoral record, what appears to worry the average the Congress worker is the seeming inability of its leaders to learn from their mistakes and apply correctives. Though two years have passed since Rahul Gandhi resigned as President, he

continues to call the shots. The party has failed in persuading him to take up the responsibility once again, and in finding a replacement. Sonia Gandhi continues interim chief. The situation is unlikely to be resolved anytime soon with the party having decided at today's session to postpone the elections that were slated for June 23 to elect the new party chief and members of the CWC. So far, the 'G-23 rebel' have kept their powder dry after the election results with leaders liked Ghulam Nabi Azad stressing that what the party needs right now is unity. The ground is slipping rapidly from under the Congress party's feet. Its political footprint across the country has shrunk even further, and it is in power on its own only in Punjab, Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh. The party is no longer in a position to deal with its allies from a position of strength, with allies like the DMK now dictating terms when it comes to seat-sharing.

The first signs of restiveness amongst allies have begun to appear. Lalu Yadav's RJD and Sharad Pawar's NCP rallied behind Mamata Banerjee during

the West Bengal polls even though the Congress was contesting the state elections in alliance with the Left parties. For a party that once ruled the length and breadth of the country, the Congress appears to have forgotten how to win elections. The party's dismal showing has coincided with the rise and emergence of regional parties and leaders like Mamata Banerjee. In 2004 and subsequent general election, the Congress continued to be the core around which anti-BJP forces coalesced. That situation could change now. The Congress, given its dismal electoral performance, can no longer claim the right to lead the Opposition challenge to Modi in 2024. Mamata Banerjee, by virtue of being a three-time Chief Minister, has emerged as a powerful claimant to that position.

Sonia Gandhi was extremely forthright in her opening remarks saying that "the results clearly tell us that we need to put our house in order". It will require a lot more than mere plain speaking for the party to come out of the situation it finds itself in.

The more things change, the more they remain the same - certainly in the Congress party. The party has decided to set up yet another committee to look into its rout in the recent round of assembly elections. Interim party chief Sonia Gandhi told the Congress Working Committee (CWC), the party's apex decision-making body, that she expected senior party leaders from Assam, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Bengal and Puducherry to explain why the party had performed so poorly. This is not the first time that the party chief has commissioned such an exercise. In the aftermath of the 2014 Lok Sabha debacle, a similar exercise was undertaken by a committee

headed by veteran party leader AK Antony. Little is known of its findings or its recommendations. A similar exercise was undertaken again after the 2019 polls, but nothing has changed in the functioning of the party to suggest that any lessons were learnt.

The party certainly has a lot to worry about. In the past seven years, out of a total of 39 state assembly elections, it has won only five assembly elections on its own. Its performance in the states that went to the polls recently was downright poor. In Assam, its audacious gamble of aligning with the AUDF failed to prevent the BJP from coming back to power; and in Puducherry,

Jugaad Can't Fix A Broken System. Time To Rebuild Health Care

Covid-19 related deaths in India are expected to double in the coming weeks. People across socioeconomic classes are being cremated en masse in large holes in the ground. The ordeal doesn't even end with death. Medical bills are piling up, a burden large enough to tip working-class families into multi-generational poverty. Younger adults desperate for vaccines are effectively being forced to pay for them, while those most at risk aren't adequately insured. The state's threadbare safety net has all but collapsed.

In normal times, most Indians use savings, borrow and call on friends and family to pay for health care, assuming it's accessible. Out-of-pocket expenses are among the highest in the world. More than 60% of the population isn't covered by insurance. Government workers can get some protection under a few different plans, but most

others, including the self-employed, pay for their own treatment. Costs are rising because of a growing dependence on private hospitals and clinics.

Two years ago, after several failed attempts at universal coverage, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's administration unveiled what it called the world's largest health insurance plan, targeting over 107 million people - the poorest 40% of the population. It was meant to be a better version of a decade-old policy that fell short in terms of the amount reimbursed and its cap on the number of people enrolled from one household. Under the new plan, families are covered for up to 500,000 rupees (\$6,670) for medical procedures. Eligibility was widened and is based on several "deprivation" criteria in rural and urban areas. Yet the new policy hasn't "effectively improved" access to health care, according to a

working paper by Duke University researchers. To begin with, the eligibility criteria rely on a 10-year-old census, and exclude many potential participants because of inconsistent data. What's more, outpatient services, which account for 60% of out-of-pocket expenditure, aren't included. Another area of concern is the program's dependence on private hospitals. Finally, if the insurance did fully cover its intended beneficiaries, the cost would far exceed budget allocations. For a country battling the most severe surge of the pandemic the world has seen, it's hard to start thinking about long-term changes. India is now considering setting up a fund worth at least 1 trillion rupees to support the uninsured, the Hindustan Times reported last week. Helping the population through a third wave is the obvious priority. But now is the time for policy makers to get



serious about a minimum - and rising - standard of care for everyone. As an alternative model, Taiwan stands out, and not just because of its globally acknowledged success in fighting the Covid-19 pandemic. Although its population of 23 million isn't comparable to India's 1.4 billion, Taiwan's fundamentally strong health care holds valuable lessons. All long-term residents are covered under a comprehensive national

insurance. Co-payments on prescriptions as well as physician visits are reasonable, and capped at about \$7 and \$14, respectively. Hospital stays, too, have cost limits. It wasn't always like this. Before 1995, four out of 10 people in Taiwan didn't have any medical insurance. For all its export-powered boom in the preceding decades, the capitalist society's score in treating preventable deaths was worse than countries behind the Iron Curtain.



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US Looking At Joint Production Of Johnson And Johnson's In India

Last month, the White House said that the US plans to share 60 million doses of AstraZeneca's vaccine globally as soon as they become available, and India expected a significant chunk of the total stockpile.

(News Agencies)-The US is looking at joint production of Johnson and Johnson's COVID-19 vaccine in India and ways to help manufacturers like the Serum Institute of India (SII) to boost production, Daniel B Smith, the Charge D'Affaires of the US embassy, said on Tuesday.

Smith also said that the efficacy of AstraZeneca's COVID-19 vaccine manufactured at a production facility in Baltimore is not yet clear and the Food and Drug Administration has not yet certified that the doses are available for anyone's use or for export.

Last month, the White House said that the US plans to share 60 million doses of AstraZeneca's

vaccine globally as soon as they become available, and India expected a significant chunk of the total stockpile.

At a media briefing, Smith said the US was concerned over the current course of the pandemic in India, not simply because of the humanitarian catastrophe but also due to the fact that it has global implications, noting that the Biden administration was standing with New Delhi to help deal with the crisis.

"I know that there are a number of doses of the AstraZeneca vaccine (with the US). They were manufactured in the US. They were manufactured at a plant outside of Baltimore but there were problems with this plant. So far the Food and Drug

Administration of the US has not certified that these vaccines are available for anyone's use; for export or not," he said.

"So I cannot say when that will happen or what will be done exactly as we go forward on this," Smith said when asked whether the US was going to make available the AstraZeneca vaccine doses to India on an urgent basis. He said the US was eager to supply the vaccine doses to the world but not before it is sure that they are safe and effective.

Smith, who recently served as acting Secretary of State and acting Deputy Secretary of State, was appointed as Charge d'Affaires primarily to oversee and coordinate the US' assistance to India in dealing with



the pandemic.

To a question on joint production of coronavirus vaccines, Smith said the setting up of joint productions takes time and that the US was looking at how it can invest in boosting production.

"Our development finance cooperation is looking at how we can invest so that we can help produce the Johnson and Johnson's vaccine here in India. And I know that there are some private sector production talks

that are underway from pharmaceutical companies to pharmaceutical companies," he said. "We are determined to do all we can as a government to encourage licensing and encourage more production and if there is a need for capital, we will look at what we can provide and whether we can provide assistance," he said.

Smith said India's role in the production of COVID-19 vaccines at the global stage is critical.

Why India ran out of oxygen despite boosting capacity more than 125%



Although the Indian government has claimed a 129 per cent increase in oxygen production since August 2020, the country faced an acute shortage of medical oxygen during the second wave of the Covid-19 pandemic.

(News Agencies)-India's demand for medical oxygen surpassed Brazil's six-fold on May 5.

The difference was perhaps reflective of the huge gap in number of fresh Covid-19 cases in the two countries.

On May 5, Brazil recorded

73,295 and India 4,12,431 new cases.

The Indian government claims to have increased oxygen production by 129 per cent since August 2020.

Oxygen Therapy for Covid-19 Patients

But the unmet demand in the past

weeks is linked to the ferocious second wave that began on March 1. According to WHO estimates, nearly 15 per cent of Covid-19 patients are required to have oxygen therapy.

So, sample these statistics: In its first phase starting March 2020, the pandemic took almost ten months to infect more than ten million people in India. But in the second, the disease took just ten weeks to sicken more than 11 million in the country.

Precisely, India added 10.2 million Covid-19 cases in around 296 days in 2020. And it took only

70 days for the pandemic to infect 11.5 million, or 12 per cent more, in only 70 days since March 1, 2021, available data show. The vertical rise in the number of daily cases in the country now is, therefore, proportionate to the number of patients requiring oxygen therapy. Oxygen Demand in India and elsewhere - PATH, which tracks oxygen demand on the basis of WHO data, reckons that the demand in September 2020 was close to four million cubic metres in India.

It jumped to nearly 17 million

cubic metres on May 5, the PATH tracker shows. September 2020 is when India had fresh cases spiking. And the second wave took an ominous turn after the third week of April this year. Oxygen Outlook in India Mohammad Ameen, who heads PATH India's Primary Health Care, Technology and Innovations section, is hopeful that the country's "severe medical oxygen supply crisis is expected to ease by mid-May with output rising by 25 per cent and transport infrastructure ready to cope with a surge in demand".

Bodies found floating in Ganga. Can rivers spread Covid-19?

The images of bodies floating in the Ganga river are disturbing. More than 70 bodies have been recovered from the river in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. Local reports claim more than 100 bodies have been dumped into the river.

The discovery of bodies has triggered panic over the spread of Covid-19 through Ganga river water. Can rivers spread Covid-19?

This question involves answer to two other critical questions: Does Covid-19 spread from a dead body? Does Covid-19 spread through water?

Does Covid-19 spread from a dead body?

There is lack of clarity whether a dead body is infectious for Covid-19. Many experts dismiss the possibility of a dead body posing a Covid-19 risk. However, authorities continue to have body disposal protocol for Covid-19 cases.

Health agencies in India prescribe utmost care in the handling of the bodies of people succumbing to Covid-19. The guidelines issued by the Union health ministry and the All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS) suggest there is a possibility of coronavirus infection in handling dead bodies.

They prescribe use of personal protective

equipment (PPE) including masks and eyewear, hand sanitisation and also disinfecting of bag containing the dead body. In the UK, the guidance for care of the deceased with suspected or confirmed coronavirus (Covid-19), updated on April 22 this year, provide more elaborate protocols for different group of handlers including health workers, municipal professionals and family members or relatives.

It declares its objective as two-pronged to ensure that:

"The deceased are treated with sensitivity, dignity and respect" - which did not

happen in the case of the deceased whose bodies were found floating in Ganga in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. "People who need to come into contact with the deceased or who work in services providing care for the deceased are protected from infection". In the US, however, the protocol is little different. It makes a distinction from highly infectious Ebola in the cases of deaths occurring from Covid-19. The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) says, "Based on what we know now, it is believed there is little risk of getting COVID-19 from a dead body."

Why WHO called Indian variant of SARS-CoV-2 a global concern

(News Agencies)-Launching a "Together for India" campaign, the World Health Organisation (WHO) on Monday upgraded its concern over the Indian variant of the SARS-CoV-2, the coronavirus that causes Covid-19. The WHO has dubbed the Indian Covid-19 variant as a "variant of global concern".

It is the same variant that was detected in Maharashtra with double mutations. It is now in the same category as the variants detected in the United Kingdom, South Africa and Brazil.

Earlier, the Indian Covid-19 variant was a "variant of interest" (VOI). The elevation from VOI to "variant of concern" (VOC) is done when a SARS-CoV-2 mutant shows evidence of fulfilling at least one of the following criteria:

Easier transmission

Increased severity of illness

Reduced neutralization by antibodies

Reduced efficacy of drugs and treatment

Reduced efficacy of vaccines or vaccine escape ability

The WHO said preliminary studies showed that the Indian

Covid-19 vaccine Covaxin - had said in April that its jab neutralised UK, Brazil and Indian Covid-19 variants. There are three lineages or versions of the Indian Covid-19 variant - B.1.617.1, B.1.617.2 and B.1.617.3. Of these, the B.1.617.2 has been found to be of most concern because of its increased transmissibility. The US's health agency, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has classified all three variants as VOCs.

Classifying a variant as a VOC is the second stage of categorisation a threatening strain. The third stage is 'Variant of High Consequence' (VOHC). A variant is put in this category when it is proven that the virus strain is immune to both treatment protocol and vaccines or preventive protocol.



variant - identified as B.1.617 - spreads easily compared to other variants. WHO epidemiologist Maria Van Kerkhove said the Indian variant also showed a higher resistance to vaccine-enabled immunity.

The Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) - which was a partner in the development of the

How IAF, Navy have pressed transport planes, ships to bring Covid relief to India

(News Agencies)-The Indian Air Force (IAF) has flown 732 sorties with a flying time of over 1400 hours shuttling across the world and within the country transporting Covid relief material over the past month as the country battles the ravaging second wave of infections.

In the 98 sorties abroad, flying 480 hours, the IAF airlifted 95 oxygen containers that have a capacity of 793 metric tons and other relief material like oxygen generators and concentrators from UAE, Thailand, Singapore, Germany, Australia, Indonesia, Israel and UK.

In India, IAF has flown 634 sorties, carrying 403 empty oxygen containers with a capacity of 6856.2 metric ton along with other equipment. The IAF operations to airlift material started April 16 and it was on April 24 that the IAF made its first sortie abroad to pick up oxygen tankers from Singapore.

Within a week, the flying hours have increased from 500 to 1400

hours as of May 12.

The IAF's C17 and IL76 transport aircraft, crucial for heavy lift capabilities, have been pressed into action to ensure quick airlift of bulky oxygen containers and oxygen generation plants to augment the supply of liquid medical oxygen in the country.

The acute shortage of medical oxygen had led to a major crisis across states, that have caused deaths of critical Covid patients over the past weeks. This prompted IAF to launch a war-like mission to airlift oxygen containers.

The Indian Navy has also been part of operations to bring Covid relief material from abroad. Nine warships have been pressed into action and four have till now reached home with oxygen tankers and other material.

Three Indian Navy Ships reached Visakhapatnam, Mumbai and New Mangalore on May 10 with Covid relief supplies from different countries to be distributed in various Indian cities.

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.

Call 311 to report harassment or discrimination.

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

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Maldives Bans Travellers From India, 6 Other South Asian Nations



one month ago.

Authorities said tourist arrivals from the key Indian market and other South Asian countries would stop from Thursday. They have already banned the entry of foreign labourers from around South Asia except health workers.

"These restrictions apply to travellers originating from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka," Maldives Immigration said in a statement. Anyone who has only transited through South Asia would also be included, it added.

Indians have been the largest single group of visitors to the Maldives this year. Bollywood stars such as Alia Bhatt and her partner Ranbir Kapoor are among celebrities to have been pictured using the country as an escape from the pandemic.

Travellers from other countries are still permitted to travel to the Maldives with a negative coronavirus test but are not allowed to have contact with the local population.

A curfew from 9 pm to 4 am has been extended to start at 4 pm as part of measures to counter the virus.

Neighbouring Sri Lanka has also announced a night curfew until the end of the month and ordered a three-day shutdown from Friday as part of its anti-virus campaign. People have been banned from travelling outside of their home provinces after medical experts warned Sri Lanka's healthcare system could collapse unless immediate lockdown measures were implemented.

About 60 percent of the Maldives' resident population of 515,000 has received a shot -- one of the world's highest figures -- but less than a quarter have had two injections, a top UN official said.

(News Agencies)-The Maldives on Wednesday banned travellers from across South Asia in a bid to contain surging Covid-19 infections despite having one of the world's most successful vaccination roll-outs.

Sri Lanka and other countries in the region have also imposed travel restrictions as they battle a new wave of the virus that has hit India and its neighbours.

The Maldives, whose economy relies on tourists visiting its pristine atolls, has suffered a more than 15-fold increase in daily infections in the past week. The Indian Ocean nation, which halted international flights for

more than three months last year, saw a record single-day rise of 1,500 cases on Tuesday -- compared with less than 100 just

PM Modi Speaks With Bhutanese Counterpart, Discusses COVID-19 Situation

(News Agencies)-Prime Minister Narendra Modi held a telephonic conversation with his Bhutanese counterpart Lotay Tshering on Tuesday as the two leaders noted that the coronavirus crisis has further highlighted the special friendship between the two countries. The Bhutanese Prime Minister expressed solidarity with the government and the people of India in their efforts against the recent wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, a statement from the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) said.

Prime Minister Modi conveyed his sincere



thanks to the people and the government of Bhutan for their good wishes and support, it said.

He also appreciated the leadership of Bhutan's King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck in managing Bhutan's fight against the pandemic, and extended his best wishes to the prime minister for the continuing efforts. The leaders noted that the present crisis situation has served to further highlight the special friendship between India and Bhutan, anchored in mutual understanding and respect, shared cultural heritage, and strong people to people links, the statement said.

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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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Pakistan: No More Military Bases for US Afghan Mission

(News Agencies)-Pakistan ruled out Tuesday the possibility of again providing its military bases to the United States for future counterterrorism operations in Afghanistan after U.S. troops leave the conflict-torn neighbor by September 11. Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi made the remarks to reporters in Islamabad, explaining that his government has adopted a policy that allows it to become "only partners in peace" and not join any future U.S. war. "No sir, we do not intend to allow boots on the ground and no [U.S.] bases are being transferred to Pakistan," Qureshi said when asked whether his government is under pressure to give military bases to the U.S. President Joe Biden's administration has acknowledged it is in talks with several Central Asian neighbors of Afghanistan to examine where it can reposition troops to prevent the landlocked country from once again becoming a terrorist base for groups like al-Qaida. But U.S. officials have not named Pakistan, which shares a nearly 2,600-kilometers border with Afghanistan, nor have they commented on media speculation that the subject of bases might be under bilateral discussions. Qureshi noted that Pakistan has also been consistently using its leverage over the Taliban, who have been waging a deadly insurgency against the U.S.-backed Afghan government, to encourage them to stop their violent campaign and negotiate a political settlement with Afghan rivals. The foreign minister said "we feel" the Taliban's engagement in the Afghan peace process would bring and enhance the "international respectability and recognition" that the group required. "If they want to be acceptable, if they want delisting to take place, if they want recognition then engagement, giving up violence and looking for a political solution is in their political interest," he said.

China's population growth is slowing. And that can be a problem for the rest of the world

(News Agencies)- China's slowest population growth in decades may be felt more acutely beyond its borders than within them. The economy will keep humming and incomes can continue to climb, albeit at a slower rate. The rest of us, however, will need to adjust to a persistently slacker pace of global expansion and the prospective ebbing of deflationary pressure. The caricature of China as an unlimited supplier of cheap labor holding down the cost of everything from dishwashers to dolls should be consigned to the history books.

Beijing's once-in-a-decade census showed there were 1.412 billion people in China last year. The annual average growth of 0.53% in the past decade was the slowest since 1953. Longstanding trends became more pronounced: The working-age population slumped to 63.4% from more than

70% a decade ago, while the share of residents aged 60 and above jumped. More than half of Chinese citizens now live in cities. While it's possible that China's headcount will actually decline in a few years, that doesn't mean a crisis is looming. Some of the world's wealthiest economies have

resisted prodding by officials to churn out more kids. Yet each has first-class infrastructure, great schools, high standards of living and a niche in technology supply chains that gives them a shot at long-term prosperity in the pandemic era.

China need not fear for its commercial viability just because this inevitable byproduct of progress has caught up with it. After all, it's a relatively common pattern of economic development: Living standards rise, people spend more time in school, get married



wrestled with population retreat - or something close to it. Japan's population peaked in 2010 and South Korea logged its first dip in 2020. Singapore reported its first decline since 2003 last year. Each of these nations has long contended with an aging society and a diminished fertility rate, while citizens have consistently

later, wrestle with more expensive living costs and want to spend more on the children they do have. Even if Beijing has taken steps to reverse the damaging one-child policy imposed under Mao Zedong, I doubt it will make much difference. The broader global trend may be too entrenched for even Beijing's state muscle.

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Japan to bar entry of foreigners from India, Nepal, Pakistan



(News Agencies)-The Japanese government said Wednesday it will bar the entry of foreign nationals who have been in India, Nepal or Pakistan in the 14 days prior to their arrival in Japan, amid the spread of more contagious variants of the novel coronavirus. The measure, effective Friday, comes as India continues to struggle with a surge of infections due to coronavirus variants, sparking fears they may have spread to neighboring countries such as Nepal and Pakistan. Permanent residents and their families, as well as the spouses or children of Japanese nationals who leave Japan by Thursday with re-entry

permission will be exempted from the measure. Foreign nationals with special permanent resident status will also be exempted from the entry ban covering the three South Asian countries. At present, Japanese nationals and foreign residents arriving from about 35 countries and regions, including India, Nepal and Pakistan, are required to submit proof of negative COVID-19 tests taken before, upon and after arrival.

People arriving from the three countries are also required to quarantine for six days at designated facilities, while those arriving from the rest of the listed countries and regions are required to do so for three days.

As India surges, Bangladesh lacks jabs, faces virus variants

(News Agencies)- India's surge in coronavirus cases is having a dangerous effect on neighboring Bangladesh, with health experts warning of imminent vaccine shortages just as the country should be stepping up jabs and as more contagious virus variants are beginning to be detected. On Saturday, health authorities said that for the first time, a coronavirus variant originally identified in India was found in Bangladesh, without providing further details. For weeks, South African variants have dominated the samples sequenced in Bangladesh. There are concerns that these versions spread more easily and that first-generation vaccines could be less effective against them. Experts say that declining infections in Bangladesh over the last two weeks compared to March and



early April - for reasons that aren't fully understood - provided the perfect opportunity for the nation to scale up vaccinations. "This is the time to vaccinate, keep infections low and make sure that new variants don't emerge here," said Senjuti Saha, a scientist at

the Child Health Research Foundation in Bangladesh, who is also sequencing the virus. However, India has banned the export of vaccines as it grapples with the crisis at home. The Serum Institute of India was supposed to supply 30 million doses - 5 million a month - to Bangladesh by June. But the institute has only supplied 7

Pakistani PM: No talks until India restores Kashmir autonomy

(News Agencies)-Pakistan's Prime Minister on Tuesday ruled out talks with neighboring nuclear-rival India, saying they cannot happen until New Delhi restores the semi-autonomous status of the disputed Himalayan region of Kashmir.

Imran Khan's remarks were apparently meant to suppress recent speculation of secret talks between the two sides. They were fueled by local media reports claiming that secret Pakistan-India negotiations had resulted in the February announcement when the two sides pledged to adhere to a 2003 cease-fire agreement on the divided Kashmir.

Since then, Pakistan's opposition had demanded Khan publicly explain his policy on India and state whether his government was engaged in any secret talks on the divided region. Kashmir is split between Pakistan and India and claimed by both in its entirety. The two sides have fought two of their three wars over Kashmir since



gaining independence from Britain in 1947.

Khan was responding to a question in a live tele-chat dubbed "Prime Minister On Call With You." He said he wanted to assure the Kashmiri people that there will be no talks between Pakistan and India until New Delhi reverses a 2019 step under which Kashmir was stripped of its semi-autonomy status. India's move to take direct control of the Indian-administered sector of Kashmir sparked unrest.

There was no immediate comment from India.

Though there have been no public talks, the militaries of Pakistan and India in February pledged to adhere to a 2003 cease-fire agreement. It remained a mystery how the announcement came about until the United Arab Emirates acknowledged it played a role in getting the two sides to agree to the truce amid escalating tensions. Since then, the cease-fire has largely been holding.

COVID-19 claims 40 more, infects 1,140 in Bangladesh



(News Agencies)-Bangladesh logged an additional 40 deaths and 1,140 infections from COVID-19 in the past 24 hours on Wednesday, counting the death toll to 12,045 and infections to 7,77,397.

Among the deceased, 27 were male and 13 female patients.

A Directorate General of Health Services release came up with the latest COVID-19 data.

Some 15,296 specimens

were tested in the timeline.

Bangladesh had tested a total of 56,77,222 specimens as of May 12.

A total of 2,928 patients were declared free from novel coronavirus infection in the past 24 hours totalling the recovery to 7,18,249.

Bangladesh on March 8, 2020 reported the first COVID-19 positive cases while the first death was logged ten days later on March 18, 2020.

million doses and has suspended further shipments since February. "It's caused a real problem," said Dr. A.S.M. Alamgir, a scientist with the government's Institute of Epidemiology, Disease Control and Research. Fearing shortages, the government late last month stopped allowing people to register for a first vaccine dose, and the administration of second doses is also being hampered. The densely populated country of 160 million is desperately seeking new avenues for vaccines other than India, and is attempting to produce Russian and Chinese vaccines at home by bringing technology from both countries. Bangladesh is expecting 500,000 doses of Chinese vaccines next week as a gift from Beijing, and has also sought help from the United States.

67 killed in Gaza, 7 killed in Israel as UN warns conflict could turn into 'full-scale war'

(News Agencies)-The worst violence in years between Israelis and Palestinians showed no signs of letting up Wednesday, as continued Israeli airstrikes and Hamas rocket fire prompted the United Nations to warn the conflict could mushroom into "full-scale war."

Israel's bombing campaign in Gaza has now killed at least 67 people, including 17 children, and injured more than 388 more, according to the Gaza-based Palestinian health ministry. Israel says at least 15 of the dead were Hamas militants.

"Stop the fire immediately. We're escalating towards a full-scale war," tweeted UN Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process Tor Wennesland.

"The cost of war in Gaza is devastating & is being paid by ordinary people. UN is working w/ all sides to restore calm. Stop the violence now."

Militants in Gaza have fired more than 1,000 rockets into Israel since the latest flareup began Monday afternoon, injuring more than 200 Israeli civilians, the Israeli military said Wednesday. A six-year-old boy became the seventh Israeli fatality when a rocket fired from Gaza struck a residential building in Sderot, according to an emergency responder. Around 130 rockets hit Tel Aviv last night, forcing Israel's main international airport, Ben Gurion to close.

Many of the rockets were intercepted by Israel's Iron Dome

air defense system, but several struck Tel Aviv, setting a bus ablaze and killing one Israeli woman. Thousands of Israelis spent the night in bomb shelters.

An Israeli soldier was also killed on Wednesday when Palestinian militants fired an anti-tank missile from Gaza, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) said in a statement. Two soldiers were injured in the same incident, the IDF said. In Gaza, which has few bomb shelters and no air defense system, several buildings and apartments were damaged by Israeli airstrikes. One of those strikes destroyed Al-Shorouk Tower, a 14-storey building in the southern Gaza strip on Wednesday evening, the third high-rise to be targeted in recent



days. The IDF said the tower housed Hamas military intelligence offices, as well as infrastructure used by "the terror organizations to communicate tactical-military information."

People in Gaza were in a "state of panic" due to the ongoing Israeli bombardment,

said Ashraf al-Qidra, the Palestinian health ministry spokesman in Gaza. Al-Qidra said Israel had deliberately targeted civilian homes and crowded residential neighborhoods, adding that 43% of the victims of strikes in Gaza were children and women.

California to effectively end mask mandate when state fully reopens next month, Gov. Newsom says



(News Agencies)-Gov. Gavin Newsom said California will effectively end its mask mandate next month when the state plans to fully reopen after more than a year of Covid-19 restrictions.

In an on-camera interview with KTTV Los Angeles reporter Elex Michaelson posted on Twitter, the governor was asked,

"Are we looking at masks after June 15?"

"No. Only in those settings that are indoor -- only in those massively large settings where people around the world, not just around the country, are convening, and when people are mixing in real dense spaces," Newsom replied. "Otherwise,

we'll make guidance recommendations, but no mandates and no restrictions on businesses large and small."

California currently requires the use of masks in indoor settings outside of one's home, including on public transportation, regardless of vaccination status. Fully vaccinated people, however, are not required to wear masks outdoors, except when attending crowded events.

Last month, state health officials announced the June 15 target date to fully reopen the state amid falling Covid-19 infection rates and low hospitalizations, shelving its color-coded tier system that dictates re-opening by county based on infection rates.

California's mask mandate, however, would remain in place at least "in the short run," Newsom said at the time.

Spokespersons for the governor's office and California Department of Public Health did not respond to CNN requests for comment Wednesday.

About 52% of California's population has had at least one dose of a Covid-19 vaccine, including 89% of those over age 65, according to CDC data. After a startling outbreak in December and January, the state has had a 7-day average of less than 2,000 new daily coronavirus cases for the past two weeks.

Current CDC guidance is that vaccinated people do not need to wear masks outdoors, except in large gatherings, but should

continue to wear masks inside. The guidance says unvaccinated people should wear masks in almost all situations where other unvaccinated people may be present.

However, Dr. Jonathan Reiner, CNN medical analyst and professor of medicine and surgery at George Washington University, said Sunday he thinks the CDC has been too cautious in continuing restrictions on vaccinated people, who are far less likely to get infected, spread the virus or require hospitalization.

"It's time for the CDC to start embracing this kind of bifurcated strategy and perhaps giving the unvaccinated a hint of what life can be like if they become vaccinated," he said.

A tiger seen roaming a Houston yard is nowhere to be found 3 days later. A 'Tiger King' star says she's extremely worried

(News Agencies)-A Bengal tiger named India still hasn't been found, three days after it was spotted in a Houston neighborhood and taken away by a man accused of murder.

"I am extremely worried about what happens with this tiger and the people around it," said Carole Baskin, founder of Big Cat Rescue and star of the Netflix series, "Tiger King."

"This has become commonplace in Texas," she told CNN on Wednesday.

Owning a tiger is a violation

of Houston law, but it is legal under Texas state law with certain restrictions.

When Jose Antonio Ramos discovered the tiger Sunday on his front yard, he thought it was part of a TV commercial -- with ample security and safety measures nearby.

But it wasn't.

Ramos gingerly stepped outside "just to really make sure that what I was seeing was accurate, and basically to take a snapshot of it and alert authorities." His hands trembled

as he shot photos and video. The tiger "was making full eye contact with me," Ramos had earlier told CNN.

After posting photos on a neighborhood email forum, Ramos said an off-duty deputy who lives nearby showed up and kept his weapon trained on the tiger.

That's when a neighbor came out of a house and pleaded with the deputy not to shoot the tiger, Ramos said.

That neighbor, identified by police as Victor Hugo Cuevas,

then straddled and grabbed the tiger and tried to move it away from others, cell phone video taken by Maria Torres and provided to CNN affiliate KTRK shows.

When other officers arrived at the scene, Cuevas -- who happened to be free on bond for a murder charge -- put the tiger in a white SUV and drove off, Houston Police Commander Ron Borza said.

Cuevas, 26, then fled with the tiger, authorities said. He is not India's owner, his attorney said.

Cuevas was soon arrested, Houston police tweeted Monday, adding: "The whereabouts of the tiger are not yet known." The deputy may have averted a tragedy, Baskin says. Baskin commended the off-duty deputy who kept his gun pointed at the tiger but did not shoot. "I was so impressed with the deputy that showed up on the scene because he did exactly the right thing, and he showed amazing restraint in not shooting that tiger," Baskin said.

Yang, Gibson and Torres Team Up to Build Next-Generation Coalition of Bronx Leaders at Borough Hall Campaign Rally

New York, NY -- Today, at a joint-campaign rally on the steps of Bronx Borough Hall, New York City Council Member Vanessa Gibson announced her endorsement of Andrew Yang for mayor of New York City, as he endorsed her for Bronx Borough President.

Said Vanessa Gibson, "Andrew Yang has the bold and creative ideas we need to get our City back on track and ensure that the Bronx is not left behind in the City's economic recovery. He is not beholden to anyone but New Yorkers, and has proven he is willing to do what is necessary to rebuild our city. I am deeply inspired by his vision for our City and this borough, and through a strong partnership, together we will uplift Bronx working families and essential workers who have

gotten us through this pandemic."

Said Andrew Yang, "Anyone who has spent even just five minutes with Vanessa Gibson can feel her incredible passion for improving the lives of New Yorkers -- a passion we bonded over instantly. Her work as chair of the Council Public Safety Committee, advocacy for a tenant's right to counsel, and deep love of the Bronx are unparalleled. I'm so proud to be partnering with Vanessa as our coalition of next generation leaders continues to grow stronger everyday. She is exactly what the Bronx needs in its next Borough President and I cannot wait to work with her in City Hall to bring cash relief to New Yorkers, create a People's Bank, and so much more."

Said Congressman Ritchie Torres, "Andrew Yang and Vanessa Gibson are two political leaders who understand that it's going to take audacious thinking and serious policy proposals to help bring back the City from the depths of the pandemic. They're a dynamic duo who will work together to ensure that City Hall addresses the needs of Bronx residents, many of whom are essential workers who kept the City running in order for New Yorkers to quarantine at home. I am proud to endorse Vanessa Gibson for Bronx Borough President and to be the Co-Chair of Andrew Yang's Mayoral campaign."

Gibson's endorsement comes just after NYS Assemblyman Kenny Burgos recently endorsed Yang's candidacy, and she joins



Congressman Ritchie Torres, Chair of the Council's Committee on Public Safety, Council Member Gibson, the first woman and first person of color to hold, handled oversight of the operations and budget of New York Police Department, the Civilian Complaint Review Board, the District Attorneys offices and the Special Narcotics prosecutor, and Mayor's Office of Criminal Justice.

Patzer Organized 2nd Annual Chinese Food Crawl in Bensonhurst



(By a staff reporter) Brooklyn, New York- Recently community leader Steven Patzer hosted his second annual Chinese Food Crawl beginning at 86 Best Bakery at 12n located at 1957 86th Street for coffee/tea. Each restaurant was picked by Eater as one of the best Chinese restaurants in

Bensonhurst. He organized last year's food crawl in March, 2020 after seeing hateful messages on Facebook and hearing about rocks being thrown through windows of Asian businesses, says Patzer.

"Some of the businesses didn't believe they would last 6 weeks with the dramatic drop in

business down to almost nothing," Patzer said. "Even takeout business was dismal, partly due to prejudice against the Chinese community."

"People thought we were nuts for organizing the first food crawl at the beginning of the pandemic, but we knew our Chinese neighbors needed our support," said Patzer. "We watched carefully how long we were in each business, ate mainly outside, and required all participants to hand sanitize before each course."

We're happy to report the same 6 Chinese restaurants are still open. Mr. Bun was just voted number 6 in NYC for soup dumplings by Secret NYC.

The second food crawl was coordinated with the NYC Restaurants Open Facebook group. Michael Quinn, co-owner of Feltman's hot dogs, started the group to showcase restaurants trying to survive amidst the COVID pandemic. "We cannot take the restaurant industry for granted," says Quinn. "It's a harsh industry which faces many challenges including high rents and the cost of employees. They need support from our government and our community."

We had a wide showing of support from EMTs, communities from Coney Island to Bay Ridge, and local community advocates ready to

share information, Patzer said. We could eat indoors, and both restaurant owners and complete strangers would buy food, coffee, and tea for us. They were just so grateful we were showing our support for local businesses in the Asian community.

Michael Quinn filmed most restaurants for Facebook Live and Patzer encourages everyone to join Quinn's group to look for local restaurants to support.

"This year's food was crawl was humbling," says Patzer. "Support for the Asian community is here and we all have to do our part, especially when it involves dumplings from Mr. Bun."

Chickens are in short supply. Blame Tyson's roosters

(News Agencies)- Chickens are in short supply. Part of the blame goes to Tyson's roosters.

The meat processor, which sells poultry along with beef and pork, said that its chicken volumes have been low in part because the roosters it uses for breeding are not meeting expectations. "We're changing out a male that, quite frankly, we made a bad decision on," said Donnie King, Tyson's chief operating officer and group president of poultry, during an analyst call on Monday. The company had an "unexpected decline" in hatchings earlier this

year because of the type of roosters it used, King explained. Tyson chose the type because of certain characteristics that improved its offspring chicken's quality for meat, Gary Mickelson, a spokesperson for Tyson, told CNN Business in an email. But, he noted, it led to fewer eggs and lower hatch rates than the one Tyson used to employ.

To increase its chicken supply, Tyson (TSN) is switching back, a process that takes some time. The company declined to share what will happen to the rejected roosters, or how many are being

swapped out. There are other reasons for the tight US chicken market. One is that demand for chicken sandwiches is growing. As Americans reveal their appetite for chicken by buying more sandwiches, more chain restaurants add the item to their menus or expand their offerings.

Another: A February winter storm that devastated Texas and "affected our operations broadly," said King. "We essentially lost a week across our entire poultry enterprise." The business is also seeing turnover and absenteeism at its plants, he said. Some of



Tyson's plants emerged as Covid-19 hotspots during the pandemic.

What to know about the political drama raising fears over El Salvador's democracy

(News Agencies)-The future of El Salvador's democracy is under global scrutiny after lawmakers teamed up with populist president Nayib Bukele over the weekend to replace every judge on the Constitutional Court, the highest branch of the country's judiciary system.

Here's everything you need to know about what's happening in the Central American nation, and Washington's close eye on the situation. What happened in El Salvador? Drama unfolded in the halls of power in capital city San Salvador late Saturday, when the country's Legislative Assembly voted to dismiss the five judges who form the Constitutional Court. The motion had been proposed by the New

Ideas party of El Salvador's president Nayib Bukele, which has held a strong majority of 56 out of 84 seats since a landslide victory in legislative elections last March.

Lawmakers from New Ideas alleged the constitutional court was impeding the president's ability to confront the Covid-19 pandemic. Bukele's critics, however, say he has veered into authoritarian rule. In March last year the Constitutional Court ruled that it was illegal to incarcerate citizens who had defied lockdown orders, a court rule the president publicly rejected. The institutional clash re-emerged this week as the five judges ruled the vote on their firing unconstitutional. Lawmakers responded by

ordering the removal of the country's attorney general Raul Melara.

Eventually, the legislative branch prevailed: Melara presented his resignation shortly afterwards, and on Monday, five new judges took office in the Constitutional Court. Questions remain over the legality of the weekend's events, but the reshuffle has effectively placed put the president firmly in control of all the country's highest public institutions.

Who is Nayib Bukele?

Shortly after the congressional vote, the 39-year-old Bukele celebrated by tweeting "FIRED" in all caps, followed by five clapping hands emojis. Across the weekend, the President took to Twitter to defend the congressional decision, urging



the international community to stay out of the strife. "We are cleaning house," he wrote.

Bukele, a right-wing populist, rose to power in 2019 on an anti-corruption platform, promising to "drain the swamp" of Salvadorean politics. He is the first president since 1989 not to come from one of the country's two main political parties, the

conservative ARENA party and the leftwing, former guerrilla movement, FMLN. In his presidential campaign and first year of his presidency, Bukele presented himself as an admirer and close ally of former president Donald Trump, who tweeted praises of the young leader for "working well with us on immigration."

Colombia's bloody protests could be a warning to the region



(News Agencies)-Tensions have hardly dissipated in Colombia after President Ivan Duque withdrew a controversial fiscal reform proposal this weekend. More than a week of violent protests have seen at least 24 people killed, the country's Ombudsman Office reported Wednesday, and the demonstrations have evolved into a broader popular show of anger.

Thousands of people are still taking to the streets to protest against police brutality and the economic cost of the pandemic amid Colombia's extreme inequality. And with both issues common across South America -- and exacerbated by the pandemic -- many international observers are watching Colombia's cycle of protest closely for signs of deeper

regional effects. **An economic cautionary tale** - Duque was the first president in the region to launch a tax overhaul to help his country's pandemic-ravaged economy get back in shape. But rigid opposition from Colombia's workers' unions and social movements is a cautionary tale for any other president who plans to follow a similar route.

While both the European Union and the United States have pursued enormous investment plans to rebuild their economies post-pandemic, many countries like Colombia, where the economy is dependent on exports and already burdened by a ballooning foreign debt, do not have the capacity to undertake a similar expansion plan.

Such countries need to increase revenues through taxes in order to be able to spend -- and even

to maintain vital social programs like cash support for the unemployed and credit lines to businesses struggling with the pandemic.

Before he withdrew his tax reform plan, Duque stressed it was of pivotal importance for the state to increase its fiscal revenues. "The reform is not a whim, it's a necessity to keep the social programs going," he said.

But critics argued the tax hikes -- like a proposed VAT increase on everyday goods -- would disproportionately impact middle and working classes and escalate inequality even more. Their concerns took root in an economy already decimated by Covid-19, where frustration has been mounting as record increases in cases and deaths prompt authorities to impose new lockdowns, stifling the country's

vast informal labor market. More than 3.6 million Colombians fell back into poverty during the pandemic according to recent figures released by the country's statistics authority, while the number of families that cannot afford to eat three times a day tripled in the same period of time. But the now-withdrawn tax hike will leave a big hole in the state finances, and Duque's government will have to look for alternatives to try and pass reforms to repair the very inequality that currently fuels much discontent.

Human rights concerns Colombia's ongoing protests have also prompted fear and outrage at law enforcement's handling of demonstrators -- a concern echoed by rights organizations and foreign observers.

Covid-19 outbreak reported near Laos casino run by alleged crime boss

(News Agencies)-Authorities in Laos have reported a significant Covid-19 outbreak near the notorious Kings Romans casino, whose Chinese owner is accused by the United States of trafficking people, wildlife and drugs. Officials said a cluster of cases in Tonpheung district was traced to people who illegally entered the area, ignoring lockdown rules, according to the Vientiane Times, a state-run English-language newspaper. The paper also reported that a district task force accused locals of illegally

bringing foreigners into Laos from neighboring Myanmar and Thailand. Coronavirus cases have been spiking in landlocked Laos and the rest of Southeast Asia in recent weeks. A surge of cases that emerged in Laos' capital, Vientiane, was tied to festivities during the traditional religious new year holiday celebrated throughout Southeast Asia, in mid-April. Laos' first official Covid-19-related death was reported Sunday. To date, authorities have identified at least 1,327 Covid-19 cases in the

country, including 730 in Vientiane and 284 in Bokeo province, which is home to Tonpheung district and the Kings Romans casino. Of the nationwide cases, 1,088 are active. Laos' borders have been officially closed since last year as part of the country's efforts to stop Covid-19 from spreading. However, sources told CNN that couriers continued to ferry people illegally into the country. One former travel agent said, though crossings are officially suspended, people were illegally

transporting a small number of tourists and Thai casino employees from Thailand across the Mekong River into Laos. The agent, who requested anonymity to discuss sensitive and illegal activity, said casino employees based in Thailand have stopped traveling to work and "won't come back until the Covid situation improves." "They still want to keep their job at the casino," the agent said. Another source told CNN bars and nightclubs next to the casino appeared open as recently as January, and were

playing music loud enough that it could be heard in Chiang Rai province, across the Mekong River in Thailand. Neither country had major Covid-19 outbreaks at the time. Entertainment venues in Laos were ordered to close on April 12, according to the US Embassy in Laos. Kings Romans and Tonpheung are both located in a 100-square-kilometer (39-square-mile) area called the Golden Triangle Special Economic Zone (GTSEZ), a swathe of territory managed by a Chinese national named Zhao Wei.

MAori leader removed from New Zealand parliament after performing haka dance



(News Agencies)-The co-leader of New Zealand's Māori Party has been removed from parliament for the second time this year, after performing a ceremonial dance during a debate about indigenous rights. Rawiri Waititi interjected while Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern was taking questions from lawmakers on Wednesday, accusing the country's opposition party of "racist propaganda and rhetoric." After a tense exchange with the Speaker, which resulted in his microphone being turned off, Waititi began the traditional Māori haka and was asked to leave. The haka, a ceremonial war dance performed before events

including New Zealand rugby matches, is intended as a challenge to opponents and a rallying cry before heading into battle.

The interruption came while Judith Collins, the leader of the right-wing opposition New Zealand National Party, was putting questions to Ardern on indigenous sovereignty.

Collins' party has been critical of Ardern over the issue and has opposed the recently announced Māori Health Authority -- which Ardern's government created to redress inequalities in the nation's healthcare service -- according to CNN affiliate RNZ. It is the second time in a matter of months that Waititi has been ejected from parliament. In

February, he was ordered to leave after refusing to wear a necktie. The politician argued the requirement suppressed indigenous culture, and parliament subsequently dropped the rule. "Over the past two weeks, there has been racist propaganda and rhetoric towards tangata whenua," Waititi said during his first point of order on Wednesday, using a Māori term that refers to New Zealand's indigenous population. "That not only is insulting, but diminishes the manner of this House."

The Speaker responded that he felt nothing out of order had been said during the weekly Question Time debate, in which Collins was quizzing Ardern. "I'm asking the member to make sure that if

he has a point of order, it is a fresh and different one," the Speaker later added, as Waititi refused to take his seat.

"Fresh and different point of order, Mr. Speaker," the Māori Party co-leader replied.

"When it comes to views of indigenous rights and indigenous peoples, those views must be from indigenous people ... they can't be determined by people who are not indigenous," he said, criticizing a "constant barrage of insults" toward the population.

During that exchange, Waititi's microphone was turned off. "The member's mic is off so he will resume his seat," the Speaker said. In response, the politician began the haka before quickly being ordered to leave.

Death toll rises to 85 in Afghanistan girls' school bomb attack

(News Agencies)-The death toll in a bomb attack that targeted schoolgirls in Kabul on Saturday has risen to 85, Afghan officials told CNN on Monday. Another 147 people were wounded in the attack in front of the Sayed Al-Shuhada school, said Danish Hedayat, head of media for the second vice president of Afghanistan.

A car bomb was detonated in the neighborhood of Dasht-e-Barchi, and two more bombs exploded when students rushed out in panic.

There has been no official claim of responsibility yet. The Taliban has denied being behind Saturday evening's blasts.

Conflict is raging in Afghanistan, with security forces in daily

combat with the Taliban, who have waged war to overthrow the foreign-backed government since they were ousted from power in Kabul in 2001.

Although the United States did not meet a May 1 withdrawal deadline agreed in talks with the Taliban last year, its military pullout has begun, with President Joe Biden announcing that all troops will be gone by September 11.

But the foreign troop withdrawal has led to a surge in fighting between Afghan security forces and Taliban insurgents. Critics of the decision say the Islamist militants will make a grab for power and civilians live in fear of being subjected once more to brutal and oppressive Taliban

rule. Some of the girls 'could not be found'

The area where the blasts happened is home to a large community of Shiites from the Hazara ethnic minority, which has been targeted in the past by Islamic State, a Sunni militant group.

Officials said most of those killed were schoolgirls. Some families were still searching hospitals for their children on Sunday.

"The first blast was powerful and happened so close to the children that some of them could not be found," an Afghan official, requesting anonymity, told Reuters.

On Sunday, civilians and policemen collected books and school bags strewn across a



blood-stained road now busy with shoppers ahead of celebrations for Eid al-Fitr next week.

Bodies were still being collected from morgues as the first burials were conducted in the west of the city. Some families were still gathering Sunday outside hospitals to read names posted

on the walls, and checking morgues.

"The entire night we carried bodies of young girls and boys to a graveyard and prayed for everyone wounded in the attack," said Mohammed Reza Ali, who has been helping families of the victims at a private hospital.

25 killed in Rio de Janeiro drug raid

(News Agencies)-Twenty-five people, including one police officer, were killed in a police anti-drug raid in a slum on Thursday in Rio de Janeiro, according to state police, despite a Supreme Court order banning such operations other than in "absolutely exceptional" circumstances during the pandemic.

Human rights groups and academic researchers say the widely criticized raid in the Jacarezinho favela was among the deadliest operations in the history of Rio de Janeiro, a state

of 17 million that in 2020 alone tallied 1,239 people killed by the police, according to the state government's Institute for Public Security (ISP.)

In a press conference late Thursday, a spokesman for the Rio de Janeiro Civil Police said the purpose of the operation was to prevent drug traffickers from forcing minors to join gangs. "We went to that community to guarantee the rights of that population that lives under the dictatorship of drug trafficking," Felipe Curi, director of the General Department of

Specialized Police said. According to the Civil Police, 200 officers took part in the operation authorities said followed months of investigation and aimed to prevent drug traffickers from forcing minors to join gangs. The raid led to the arrest of six people and the seizure of 20 guns, in addition to what the police called "abundant amounts of drugs." Curi said that 24 of the dead were criminals and drug dealers who attempted to kill the police officers, though he did not offer evidence to back that claim nor

information on police attempts to arrest them.

Curi also claimed the raid did not violate the ban because the Public Ministry, a prosecutorial body, had been notified beforehand, something the court said police departments must do if they are to carry out extraordinary raids.

However, the Public Ministry said in an official statement that it was notified of the operation after it was already underway. The ministry also said it will investigate any alleged abuses committed during the raid.

The deadly raid provoked widespread outcry among Rio de Janeiro civil society, with many labeling it online as #ChacinaDoJacarezinho, or, #TheJacarezinhoMassacre, a reference to the low-income community where it took place.

Marcelo Freixo, a congressman representing Rio for the Socialism and Liberty Party, condemned the operation on his Twitter account. "This public security policy is INSANITY that needs to be stopped."

Why the world needs to help Modi govt figure out the risk from Covid variant B.1.617

menace. Out of pure self-interest. Of the many changes in the pathogen, the two of greatest concern affect a portion of the spike protein, called the receptor binding domain, that's key to the virus getting into human cells. A new study has found that an entry driven by the B.1.617 spike protein was "partially resistant against neutralization by antibodies elicited upon infection or vaccination with the Comirnaty/BNT162b2 vaccine." That's the official name for the Pfizer-BioNTech shot. Although not in use in India, it's one of the main lines of defense in developed countries.

India, too, needs to do its part. Even as it struggles to provide hospital beds, oxygen and antivirals to its gasping citizens, New Delhi must step up genome surveillance to figure out - for itself and the rest of the world - what exactly is going on. Plans being laid for reopening and economic recovery everywhere could depend on it.

The efficacy of vaccines in dealing with variants isn't a new concern. Researchers have fretted about everything from B.1.1.7 in the U.K. and B.1.351 in South Africa to P.1 in Brazil and B.1.429 and B.1.232 in California. (Yes, the naming system is completely bonkers.) So far, the news has been



mostly good. As Sam Fazeli, a pharmaceuticals analyst for Bloomberg Intelligence, recently noted, there is some evidence from nonhuman studies that booster shots will neutralize both the original virus and its altered version. As for reports of

"breakthrough infections" in Israel, or vaccinated people being struck by the new variant, as Fazeli notes, we shouldn't worry too much as long as symptoms are mild or nonexistent and hospitalization isn't required.

A small-scale study of 123 doctors, nurses and other

later discharged, I learned from one of the researchers. It's not known if this group was exposed to B.1.617. That's just one more thing we don't know amid the reigning chaos in India. People are scrambling to find a hospital bed or an oxygen cylinder. Or - if they're well - a vaccine shot. Crematoriums are full, and scared villagers are dumping bodies into the river, just as their forefathers did during the 1918 Spanish Flu, a scene economic historian Chinmay Tumbhe describes in his book, *The Age of Pandemics*.

Simply allowing the coronavirus to run its course in a population of 1.4 billion would be morally reprehensible. It would also be dangerous: The longer it takes to tame India's second wave, the higher the risk of a variant that does escape vaccine protection. One-sixth of humanity can't be ignored without a massive hit to a global economy that's impatient to reopen. Ask Silicon Valley managers supervising large software

projects for global corporations: Their engineering teams in India are in disarray. Or take last week's Group of Seven meetings in London, billed as the first face-to-face powwow in two years. Two members of the Indian contingent, invited as guests, tested positive, leading to self-isolation for Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, the foreign minister. A PR disaster for the host, but also a reminder that it can't be business as usual for the world until the Indian situation comes under control.

For neighboring Asian economies, the risk is far greater. Thailand has extended its ban on travelers from India to Bangladesh, Nepal and Pakistan. Australia was so alarmed it controversially refused entry for even its own citizens coming home from India. Hong Kong got spooked when 51 passengers on a single flight from New Delhi early last month tested positive - for 43% of them, the disease showed up two weeks into their mandatory hotel quarantine. The city decided to conduct genome sequencing to gauge the threat. More recently, a 29-year-old Indian engineer coming into Hong Kong from Dubai was charged by authorities for allegedly giving misleading information after 1,200 residents had to be quarantined because of the variant threat he represented.

Singapore's largest active cluster, at one of the city's big hospitals, is being chalked up to B.1.617.2. This sub-lineage of the Indian variant is more infectious and "causing larger clusters than before," the Straits Times reported Education Minister Lawrence Wong as saying. As countries help India with everything from vaccine stocks to oxygen, they should in return ask for honest reporting of case and fatality data - and much greater genomic scrutiny of the emerging variants than is currently being conducted. In a country that takes pride in being the world's pharmaceutical capital, local labs are more than capable. But they simply can't assess the threat by sequencing a little more than 11,000 samples out of 22 million-plus cases.

Secret Service recovers \$2 billion in fraudulently obtained Covid-19 relief funds



year into the pandemic, the Secret Service has opened 690 cases regarding unemployment insurance fraud, on top of another 720 Economic Injury Disaster Loan and Paycheck Protection Program fraud investigations and inquiries. "The amount of unemployment insurance benefits provided in response to the COVID-19 pandemic is unprecedented in the history of

the nation's unemployment insurance system," said Larry Turner, the acting inspector general for the Labor Department. "Unfortunately, the significant increase in benefits made the program a target for those seeking to defraud government programs." In a recent hearing in front of House lawmakers, Secret Service Director James Murray said the agency's approach to recovering

stolen funds has evolved over the last year from stopping scams to building robust prosecutions. Murray also noted the size of the Covid-relief packages from Congress are extraordinary and the work to root out fraud will continue long after the virus slows.

"We've probably made more than 120 arrests specific only to Covid fraud," Murray said. "This is not something that is going

to go away. The size of these packages are so notable and the opportunities that exist are going to be persistent, we're going to be addressing Covid fraud for many years to come."

In March, the Justice Department announced federal investigators identified more than \$500 million in fraud and charged 474 people with crimes related to stealing from Covid-relief designated funding. Among the top targets by prosecutors were fraudsters trying to steal from the Paycheck Protection Program, with people running schemes ranging from exaggerating their business expenses to concocting fake companies to get funding. In one Texas case, a man pleaded guilty to seeking \$24.8 million in PPP loans using the names of 11 different companies to make loan applications to 11 lenders. He managed to obtain \$17.3 million in forgivable loans and used the money to buy homes, jewelry and luxury cars.

Reason That India Is In Dire Straits... ": What Dr Fauci Told US Senate



(SAI Bureau)-"India made the "incorrect assumption" that it was finished with the COVID-19 pandemic and opened up prematurely that has left the country in such "dire straits", America's top infectious disease expert Dr Anthony Fauci has told senators. India has been severely affected by the unprecedented

second wave of the coronavirus and hospitals in several states are reeling under the shortage of health workers, vaccines, oxygen, drugs and beds." The reason that India is in such dire straits now is that they had an original surge and made the incorrect assumption that they were finished with it, and what

happened, they opened up prematurely and wind up having a surge right now that we're all very well aware of is extremely devastating," Dr Fauci told the US Senate Health, Education, Labour and Pensions Committee during a hearing on Tuesday on the COVID-19 Response. Dr Fauci, who is the Director of the US National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID), is also the chief medical advisor to President Joe Biden.

Chairing the hearing, Senator Patty Murray said that the surge of COVID-19 that is devastating India is a painful reminder really that the US can't end the pandemic in America until it ends it everywhere. "I'm glad the Biden administration is leading that

global fight by rejoining the World Health Organization and funding global vaccine efforts and committing to donate 60 million AstraZeneca vaccines to other countries by July 4," she said. "India's outbreak underscores the need for a robust public health infrastructure in the US to respond appropriately to this pandemic and future outbreaks, as well," Senator Murray said as she asked Dr Fauci what can the US learn from India's outbreak. "One of the important things is don't ever underestimate the situation," Dr Fauci said as he referred to India's incorrect assumption and premature opening up. "The second thing is preparedness with regard to public health,

preparedness, which we, as a lesson learned for future pandemics, have to realise that we need to continue to build up our local public health infrastructure, which over the last decades we have let actually in many respects go into disarray, likely because of our successes in controlling so many diseases," Dr Fauci said. "The other lesson that is learned is that this is a global pandemic that requires a global response, and one has to pay attention to the responsibility that we have, not only for our own country but to join with other countries to make sure that we have the access to interventions, particularly vaccines throughout the world," he said.

India's New Covid Cases Have Peaked, Shows Cambridge Tracker

32% higher than the world's previous peak reported by the U.S. last year but with just a fraction of the testing and vast undercounting -- and official data suggest daily deaths could continue near the unprecedented 4,000-level.

Health services remain overwhelmed and several hospitals face a shortage in oxygen supplies. With the state being criticized for failing to ensure critical needs including oxygen and medicines, businesses are suspending

operations and offering employees time off "to heal."

A variant of the virus first identified in India appears to have higher rates of transmission and preliminary evidence suggests potentially reduced effectiveness of certain antibodies, the World Health Organization said in its latest report.

The nation has reported more than 300,000 new infections for more than 20 straight days. The numbers are probably vastly undercounted, experts say.

A recent risk assessment of the

situation in India conducted by WHO found that resurgence and acceleration of COVID-19 transmission in India had several potential contributing factors, including increase in the proportion of cases of SARS-CoV-2 variants with potentially increased transmissibility; several religious and political mass gathering events which increased social mixing; and, underuse of and reduced adherence to public health and social measures," it said.



Meet the workers who put food on America's tables - but can't afford groceries

on the amount of orders from the bodegas - packaging warehouses which supply the country's supermarkets with fruits and vegetables harvested by crews of undocumented mostly Mexican farmworkers. Villarreal works six days a week, sometimes seven, putting food on Americans' tables but earns barely enough to cover the bills and depends on food stamps to feed her own family. Every day is a hustle: she gets up at 4.30am to make packed lunches for her colleagues, charging them \$5 each for homemade tacos, before heading to the fields for a 7 o'clock start. She skips breakfast.

Healthcare is a major struggle for farmworkers: Villarreal takes diabetes medication a 'legal'

friend buys from a cheap pharmacy across the border, rather than take time off to attend a nonprofit local health clinic. It's the wrong dose, but better than nothing she reckons. "I feel like I'm from here, my children are all American, but I don't have the paperwork, and that makes everything hard," said Villarreal, 45, wiping the sweat on her long sleeved hoodie which offers some protection from the harsh sun rays.

About half of the 2.5m farm hands in the US are undocumented immigrants, according to the US Department of Agriculture (USDA), though growers and labor contractors reckon the figure is closer to 75%.

Advertisement

Even before the pandemic, farms were among the most dangerous workplaces in the country, where low paid workers have little protection from long hours, repetitive strain injuries, exposures to pesticides, dangerous machinery, extreme heat and animal waste. Food insecurity, poor housing, language barriers and discrimination also contribute to dire health outcomes for farmworkers, according to research by John Hopkins Centre for a Livable Future.

After long days in the fields, Villarreal sleeps on an old couch in the kitchen-lounge as part of the house was left uninhabitable by a fire and a hurricane. Her 11-year-old son, who has ADHD, sleeps on the other couch, while two daughters share a bedroom

where water leaks in through the mouldy roof. The eldest, a 16-year-old who wants to be a nurse, and her six-month old baby sleep in a room with cindered walls. The house is a wreck, but there's no spare money for repairs.

Many undocumented farmworkers have been toiling in the fields for years, pay taxes and have American children, yet enjoy few labor rights, have extremely limited access to occupational health services and live under the constant threat of deportation.

In truth, farmworkers here are never harassed while working in the fields, which advocates say suggests a tacit agreement with growers to ensure America's food supply chain isn't disrupted by immigration crackdowns. It's

everywhere else that these essential workers, who kept toiling throughout the pandemic, are not safe. Last summer, Villarreal (and her three teenage daughters) contracted Covid-19, which left her struggling to breathe. Rather than risk going to an emergency room, a relative with legal immigration status crossed the border to Reynosa and purchased a small tank of oxygen. In the end, Villarreal was off work sick for a month without pay, used up all her savings and took out a loan.

"I should take better care of myself but I don't have the time and I can't afford to lose wages." Villarreal has lived in the Rio Grande Valley for 26 years and hasn't stepped foot in Mexico for the past 19. She's never had a mammogram or a pap smear.

Colonial hack: How did cyber-attackers shut off pipeline?



How can a pipeline be hacked? For many people, the image of the oil industry is one of pipes, pumps and greasy black liquid. In truth, the type of modern operation Colonial Pipeline runs is extremely digital.

"US pipeline hackers 'didn't mean to create problems' The ransomware surge ruining lives

Pressure sensors, thermostats, valves and pumps are used to monitor and control the flow of diesel, petrol and jet fuel across hundreds of miles of piping.

Colonial even has a high-tech "smart pig" (pipeline inspection

gauge) robot that scurries through its pipes checking for anomalies.

All this operational technology is connected to a central system.

And as cyber-experts such as Jon Niccolls, from CheckPoint, explain, where there is connectivity, there is risk of cyber-attack:

"All the devices used to run a modern pipeline are controlled by computers, rather than being controlled physically by people," he says. "If they are connected

to an organisation's internal network and it gets hit with a

cyber-attack, then the pipeline itself is vulnerable to malicious attacks." How did the hackers break in?

Direct attacks on operational technology are rare because these systems are usually better protected, experts say. So it's more likely the hackers gained access to Colonial's computer system through the administrative side of the business.

"Some of the biggest attacks we've seen all started with an email," Mr Niccolls says.

"An employee may have been tricked into downloading some malware, for example.

"We've also seen recent examples of hackers getting in using weaknesses or compromise of a third-party software." Hackers will use any chance they get to gain a foothold in a network."

Hackers could potentially have been inside Colonial's IT network for weeks or even months before launching their ransomware attack. In the past,

criminals have cause mayhem after finding their way into the software programs responsible for operational technology.

In February, a hacker gained access to the water system of Florida city and tried to pump in a "dangerous" amount of a chemical. A worker saw it happening on his screen and stopped the attack in its tracks. Similarly, in winter 2015-16, hackers in Ukraine were able to flick digital switches in a power plant, causing cuts affecting hundreds of thousands of people. How can this be stopped? The simplest way to protect operational technology is to keep it offline, with no link to the internet at all. But this is becoming harder for businesses, as they increasingly rely on connected devices to improve efficiency. "Traditionally, organisations did something known as 'air gapping'," cyber-security expert Kevin Beaumont says. "They would make sure that critical systems were run on separate networks not linked

to outward facing IT." However, the nature of the changing world now means more things are reliant on connectivity."

Who are the hackers?

The FBI has confirmed DarkSide, a relatively new but prolific ransomware gang thought to be based in Russia, was responsible.

It is unusual for criminal groups to attack "critical national infrastructure" - but experts such as Andy Norton, from cyber-defender Armis, says it is a growing concern. "What we're seeing now is the ransomware gangs are maturing," he says.

"Where there is critical public service on the line, there is more chance of them getting the ransom paid." Interestingly, the group posted something of an apology for the hack on its darknet website. Although not directly referencing Colonial, it referred to "today's news", saying: "Our goal is to make money and not creating problems for society."

Chainsaw massacre: tree poaching hits Canada amid lumber shortage

Two tree stumps signaled to Larry Pynn that something was wrong.

Jutting from a mossy forest floor in western Canada, the fresh stumps were the final remnants of two western red cedars that had been chopped down by chainsaw. Nearby, a set of deep tire tracks ran for nearly a kilometer in the mud before terminating at the main road.

"I immediately suspected that this is the work of poachers," said Pynn, a journalist who lives nearby. "These are clearly valuable trees and they were likely cut because of that."

Since January, local officials on central Vancouver Island say at least 100 trees have been illegally chopped down. As lumber prices across the continent soar - prompting a flurry of memes and conspiracy theories - ecosystems full of valuable old growth trees have increasingly become a target for poachers.

The section of forest Pynn found the stumps in is part of a municipally owned 5,000 hectare swath of woods known locally as Six Mountains. The area, popular with hikers and

mountain bikers, is also home to the endangered coastal Douglas fir ecosystem, which is on the verge of vanishing after centuries of logging and urban development.

Days after discovering the two stumps, Pynn

spotted more trees in another section of the municipal forest reserve that had suffered a similar fate - and a menacing face carved into one of the stumps.

The first trees he spotted in the forest were probably worth close to C\$1,000 (\$824) each for the raw wood. But the current fine for removing wood from the forest stands at C\$200. "It's the same fine if you litter - there's no deterrence," said Pynn.

Poaching isn't new to the area, but the scope and frequency have worsened in recent months, says Shaun Mason, a forester with the municipality.

While Douglas fir are often taken as firewood, he speculates poachers could be targeting cedar because of high lumber prices, which have nearly tripled over the last year - but has no firm evidence.



Timber marking systems are widely used to track the provenance of wood - and as a rule, mills won't accept timber that hasn't been marked. If the wood is milled down into boards, tracing its origins is nearly impossible.

"It'd be illegal, but if someone had a sawmill set up on their property and someone said, 'Hey, I could get some cedar, would you mill it for me? You know, obviously, it's not on the up and up, but it definitely could take place," said Mason.

The poachers have used a number of tricks to hide their work, including placing moss over fresh stumps and covering tracks of their vehicles into the forest. Pynn suspects the culprits are operating under the cover of darkness.

The brazen thefts have left residents outraged and some have suggested banding together to patrol the area at night - a move Pynn says is probably

too risky. "I'm not sure it's a great idea for people to be out in these areas at three in the morning," he says. In response to the thefts, the municipality has put up new signage, is patrolling the area daily and is looking at how to increase fines and installing

video surveillance. Police have also been made aware of the issue. In recent weeks, the municipality has received dozens of tips from residents.

While the spike in poaching has centred on the small municipal reserve, Mason says the issue is probably far more widespread on Vancouver Island.

"It's happening all over the place. We just happen to have ungated, unfettered access, not that far from a main road or highway," he said. "So we tend to be the easiest targets."

For Jens Wieting of British Columbia's Sierra Club, the spate of felled trees speaks to a broader crisis within the province. He points out that on Vancouver Island, the scale of legal old-growth logging still far outstrips recent poaching. If governments want to shift behaviour, far steeper fines are needed, he says.

"Maybe, with a change in perspective, people who might be tempted to make an extra buck by poaching trees won't do it because they get a sense that it would be wrong - and that the consequences could be bigger and more serious."

Israel and Palestine: What is the history of the conflict between them in the Middle East

The dispute goes back thousands of years and encompasses a basic, but ancient point of contention.

On one side is Palestine which sits along the Mediterranean coast, a 140-mile stretch of land north of Egypt and west of the country it considers its most hated enemy.

On the other side is the state of Israel, created by an agreement between a collection of nations following the Second World War, and carved out of the ancestral lands of the Palestinian people.

From the time of the beginning of the Israeli state, Arabs in the Middle East have decried the actions of the United Nations in the formation of the Jewish homeland. While Israel held fast to its claim to the region around the holy city of Jerusalem, Arabs claimed the land was theirs and had always been, including Jerusalem, which is central to the tenets of Islam.

Here is a look at the past 100 years of turmoil in the Middle East between Palestinians and Israelis.

1910-1923

At the end of the First World War in 1918, Britain was put in charge of the area. The League of Nations, a precursor to the United Nations, issued a mandate which formalized British rule over parts of the Levant, which was the region that comprises countries to the east of the Mediterranean. Part of the mandate called on Britain to establish a Jewish national homeland there. The mandate went into effect in 1923 and established an area called Mandatory Palestine.

Britain was given this duty at the end of World War I when the winning European and regional powers divided up what was the former Ottoman Empire. Britain was given the area known as Mesopotamia (modern-day Iraq) and Palestine (modern-day Israel, Palestine and Jordan).

Following the mandate, Jewish migrants headed to Mandatory Palestine and began populating the area. Tensions arose in the area as Jewish institutions were established.

Over the next 20 years, British support for the mandate and the establishment of an inde-



pendent Jewish state waned.

1940s

A year after World War II ended, Britain granted Jordan independence. The United Kingdom declared that it would terminate the mandate in Palestine on May 14, 1948.

The United Nations, which had been formed after the end of WWII, took up the "Question of Palestine." The body drafted a Plan of Partition that was approved by its General Assembly on Nov. 29, 1947.

The United Nations plan called for a partition of Palestine into two sections: an independent Jewish state and an independent Arab state. Jerusalem was carved out of the partition and made an internationalized territory.

While the diplomats at the U.N. and Jewish immigrants to the region signed on to the plan, it was rejected by most of the Arab world.

One day after the partition, war broke out between Israel and five Arab countries: Jordan, Iraq, Syria, Egypt and Lebanon. When the fighting, which became known as the 1948 Arab-Israeli War, ended, Israel had more territory than envisaged under the Partition Plan, Egypt was given control of the Gaza Strip and Jordan annexed the West Bank and eastern Jerusalem.

That arrangement lasted for nearly 20 years and saw up to a million Jewish refugees come to the new state of Israel.

1960s

In 1967 the Six-Day War broke out. At the end of that war, Israel occupied East Jerusalem and has kept it since then.

1970s

Tension grew in the ensuing

years and in 1972, Palestinian "Black September" gunmen took the Israeli Olympic athletes hostage at the Munich Olympics. Two of the athletes are murdered initially, and seven others died during a failed rescue attempt by German authorities.

A year later, in October 1973, Egypt and Syria launch a coordinated attack against Israeli forces in the occupied Sinai and Golan Heights. Israel was able to repel Egypt and Syria.

In May 1977, Menachem Begin was elected prime minister. By November of that year, he and Egyptian President Anwar Sadat, along with American mediators and President Jimmy Carter, were working together to craft the Camp David Accords. The peace plan saw Israel's withdrawal from Sinai and Egypt's recognition of Israel. The accords also pledged Israel to expand Palestinian self-government in the West Bank and Gaza.

1980s

In June 1982, Israeli forces invaded Lebanon in order to expel the Palestine Liberation Organization. The PLO had tried to assassinate the Israeli ambassador to Britain.

Three years later, in 1985, Israel withdrew from Lebanon while remaining in a narrow "security zone" along the country's border.

In December 1987, the Hamas movement was born. Hamas directed violent attacks against Israel.

1990s

In 1990, the area became more crowded when Jews were allowed to emigrate from Russia to Israel. Some one million Russian Jews moved to the region. In October 1991, the Madrid

conference brought Israel, Lebanon, Syria, Jordan and Palestinian representatives together for the first time since 1949 to talk about the region and its future.

In 1992, Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin vowed to stop the settlement expansion program. Rabin opened secret talks with the PLO to work toward an agreement. The meetings with PLO leader Yasser Arafat led to the Oslo Declaration. The Declaration aimed to create a plan for Palestinian self-government. In the spring and early summer of 1994, Israel withdrew from most of Gaza and the West Bank city of Jericho. The PLO administration moved in and set up the Palestinian National Authority.

In September 1995, Rabin and Arafat signed an agreement for transfer of further territory to the Palestinian National Authority. By May 1996, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu pledged to halt further concessions to Palestinians. Netanyahu went on to sign the Hebron Protocol and Wye River Memorandum, which removed troops from the West Bank. In May 2000, Israel withdrew from southern Lebanon. In March 2002, Operation Defensive Shield was launched on the West Bank after an increase in Palestinian suicide bombings in Israel.

Three months later, Israel began building a wall in and around the West Bank.

Once again, world powers intervened to work for peace in the Middle East when the United States, the European Union, Russia and the United Nations proposed a road map to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The proposal included an inde-

pendent Palestinian state and a freeze on Jewish settlements in the West Bank.

In September 2005, all Jewish settlers and military personnel were withdrawn from Gaza.

In 2006, clashes with Hamas and Lebanon drew Israeli attacks and escalated into the Second Lebanon War.

In November 2007, the Annapolis Conference proposed a "two-state solution" for the first time. In December 2008, Israel launched a month-long invasion of Gaza to prevent rockets from being launched.

2010s

In May 2010, pro-Palestinian Turkish activists were killed as Israelis boarded a ship while trying to break a blockade of Gaza.

In November 2012, Israel launched a seven-day military campaign against Gaza-based groups that had for months launched rocket attacks against Israeli cities.

In July and August of 2014, Israel responded to attacks by armed groups in Gaza with a military campaign by air and land.

In September 2016, the U.S. provided Israel with a military aid package worth \$38 billion. In February 2017, the Israeli Parliament passed a law that retroactively legalized dozens of Jewish settlements that had been built on private Palestinian land in the West Bank, and four months later, work began on the first new Jewish settlement in the West Bank in more than 25 years.

President Donald Trump recognized Jerusalem as the capital of Israel in December 2017. Palestine and the rest of the Arab world signaled their disapproval. Trump recognized Israeli sovereignty over the Golan Heights.

In 2019, the US said it no longer considered Israeli settlements in the West Bank to be illegal.

2020s

On August 13, 2020, Israel and the United Arab Emirates reached a peace deal that will lead to full normalization of diplomatic relations between the two nations and calls for Israel to suspend its plans to annex large parts of the occupied West Bank.

**Courtesy
By Debbie Lord, Cox Media**

Dozens killed in conflict between Israel and Hamas fueled by airstrikes and rocket barrages

Israel killed a string of senior Hamas military figures Wednesday and pounded three multistory towers as it hammered the Gaza Strip with airstrikes and militants in the territory fired rocket barrages. Dozens have died in the worst violence since a 2014 war, with no resolution in sight.

The fighting has taken on many hallmarks of that devastating 50-day conflict between Israel and Hamas, but with a startling new factor: a burst of fury from Israel's Palestinian citizens in support of those living in the territories as well as counterviolence by Jewish Israelis.

In response, Israel deployed border guards in two mixed Arab-Jewish cities that saw unrest in previous days, including the burning of a Jewish-owned restaurant and a synagogue, the fatal shooting of an Arab man and attacks on Arab-owned cars. It was a rare use of the paramilitary force, which normally puts down protests by Palestinians in the West Bank and east Jerusalem.

Palls of gray smoke rose in Gaza, as Israeli airstrikes struck apartment towers and blasted multiple Hamas security installations. In Israel, hundreds of rockets fired by Gaza's Hamas rulers and other militants at times overwhelmed missile defenses and sent air-raid sirens and explosions echoing across Tel Aviv, Israel's biggest metropolitan area, and other cities.

The death toll in Gaza rose to 65 Palestinians, including 16 children and five women, according to the Health Ministry. At least 365 have been wounded, including 86 children and 39 women. Seven have been killed on the Israeli side by rocket fire, including the first death of an Israeli soldier in this round of conflict. The other deaths have been civilians, including three women and two children, one of them a 6-year-old killed in a rocket strike on an apartment building in the city of Sderot. Dozens in Israel have been wounded.

Islamic Jihad confirmed the deaths of seven members, and Hamas confirmed the death of a top commander and an unspecified number of others. The



Israeli military says at least 30 Palestinians killed so far were militants. There was no sign that either side is willing to back down. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has vowed to expand the offensive, saying it "will take time." Hamas has called for a full-scale intifada, or uprising. The last such uprising began in 2000 and lasted more than five years. The latest eruption of violence began a month ago in Jerusalem, where heavy-handed police tactics during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan and the threatened eviction of dozens of Palestinian families by Jewish settlers ignited protests and clashes with police. A focal point was the Al-Aqsa Mosque compound, a site sacred to Jews and Muslims.

Hamas, claiming to be defending Jerusalem, launched a barrage of rockets at the city late Monday, escalating the ground tensions into a new Israel-Hamas punching match.

Since then, militants have fired more 1,050 rockets from Gaza, according to the Israeli military, and Israel has conducted hundreds of strikes in the tiny territory where 2 million Palestinians have lived under a crippling Israeli-Egyptian blockade since Hamas took power in 2007. Two infantry brigades were sent to the area, indicating preparations for a possible ground invasion.

On Wednesday, Israel stepped up its targeting of Hamas' military wing. The military and internal security agency said they carried out a "complex and first-of-its-kind operation" that killed the Hamas commander in charge of Gaza City, the highest-ranking Hamas military figure killed by Israel since 2014, and several other senior militants

involved in rocket production.

Israel has struck 350 targets and killed at least 30 militants since Monday night, 14 of them on Wednesday, Israeli military spokesman Lt. Col. Jonathan Conricus said. In one of the fiercest attacks, Israeli fighter jets dropped two bombs on a 14-story building in Gaza City, collapsing it. The building,

located on the busiest shopping street in the Roman neighborhood, housed businesses in addition to offices for Hamas' Al-Aqsa satellite channel. Airstrikes also brought down a 12-story office building that housed Hamas offices as well as other businesses, and heavily damaged a nine-story building with residential apartments, medical companies, a dental clinic and, Israel said, Hamas intelligence offices. In both cases, Israel fired warning shots, allowing people to flee. Soon after, Hamas fired 100 rockets at the Israeli desert town of Beersheba in what it said was retaliation. Samah Haboub, a mother of four in Gaza, said she was thrown across her bedroom in a "moment of horror" by an airstrike on an apartment

tower next door. She and her children, ages 3 to 14, ran down the stairway of their apartment block along with other residents, many of them screaming and crying.

"There is almost no safe place in Gaza," she said. One strike hit a taxi in Gaza City, killing a man, woman and driver inside, and a second strike killed two men nearby on the street, witnesses who brought the bodies told The Associated Press at the hospital. Several other bystanders were wounded. In the Israeli city of Lod, a 52-year-old Arab Israeli citizen and his 16-year-old daughter were killed when a rocket from Gaza hit the courtyard of their home. An Israeli soldier was killed in a strike by an anti-tank missile from Gaza.

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US funds make Israel's bombardment of Gaza possible. When will they be halted?

The headlines speak mainly of "clashes", "conflict", and "casualties on both sides". The politicians recite bromides about Israel's "right to defend itself" - a right that Palestinians seemingly do not have. The US government calls for "all parties to deescalate", with no acknowledgment that it is US funds - \$3.8bn a year - that, in part, make Israel's bombardment of Gaza possible. This is the familiar American routine when Israel goes to war.

Yet before Israeli airstrikes and Hamas rockets came to dominate the news, what happened over the last week in Jerusalem was perhaps the most substantial Palestinian mass uprising in the city since 2017 - when Palestinian demonstrations led Israeli police to abandon their attempt to install metal detectors at the entrance to the Al Aqsa Mosque in occupied East Jerusalem. Then, as now, it was an uprising centered in Jerusalem but about much more. And though US public attention has been diverted, the Jerusalem uprising is still ongoing. That is important not to forget. It was not a coincidence that the uprising began in Jerusalem. Occupied East Jerusalem exemplifies in miniature the Israeli government's endeavor to secure "maximum territory, minimum Arabs", as David Ben-Gurion saw the goals of the Zionist movement. Israel has pursued this goal in East Jerusalem - which it occupied in 1967 and formally annexed in 1980 - by making it nearly impossible for Palestinians to obtain permits to build homes, leaving thousands of people vulnerable to displacement and their homes slated for demolition. East Jerusalemites, who are not citizens of Israel but legal residents, face stringent residency requirements that make their legal status precarious. The Israeli government has also empowered Jewish settlers to seize properties inside Palestinian neighborhoods such as Silwan, Abu Dis, a-Tur, and Sheikh Jarrah - part of an explicit strategy to "Judaize" the eastern part of the city.

Israeli officials are increasingly bold about telegraphing these goals to the global public. "This is a Jewish country," said Fleur Hassan-Nahoum, British-born deputy mayor of Jerusalem, to the New York Times, "[o]f course there are laws that some people may consider as favoring Jews - it's a Jewish state." But if Israeli officials are open about the discriminatory logic at Zionism's core, most US politicians continue to deny it.

Indeed, that discriminatory logic is on full display especially in Sheikh Jarrah, the East Jerusalem neighborhood where Israeli settlers are trying to evict several Palestinian families from their houses. These eight families, who fled their original homes during the war of 1948, have lived in the neighborhood for more than half a century. Now, Israeli settler orga-

nizations - funded significantly by American Jewish donors - are claiming that because such homes were once owned by Jewish groups, the Palestinian families must be forced out. Yet no reciprocal right exists for Palestinians seeking restitution for properties they left behind



during the Nakba, when roughly 700,000 Palestinians were expelled or fled their homes during the 1948 war. Under Israel's Absentee Property Law, the property of Palestinian refugees is controlled by the Israeli state.

The ongoing Israeli efforts to cleanse Jerusalem of a Palestinian presence,

particularly in Sheikh Jarrah provided the spark for the latest uprising. But it was not only in Sheikh Jarrah where Palestinians have also resisted other Israeli efforts to excise them from the city landscape. After Israeli forces set up barricades at the Damascus Gate esplanade

- a popular place for Palestinians to gather, especially during Ramadan, and a main point of access to Jerusalem's Old City - successive nights of largely youth-led demonstrations eventually led the Israeli police to remove the metal gates (though not before Israeli police allowed far-right Jewish extremists to

march through the streets of Jerusalem chanting, "Death to Arabs!").

Like in 2017, Palestinian access to the Al Aqsa Mosque has also been a focal point of the protests. Over the past week and a half, Israeli police have repeatedly stormed the Haram al-Sherif/Temple Mount complex, firing rubber-coated bullets, tear gas, and stun grenades at Muslim worshipers: videos on social media show Israeli forces shooting flashbangs and less-lethal rounds directly at people praying. Israeli police violence has injured several hundred people during these nightly raids, which have also taken place on some of the holiest nights of Ramadan. Elsewhere in East Jerusalem, Israeli police have soaked the streets and buildings with foul-smelling "Skunk" water, a chemical crowd dispersal tool. And under the tolerant eye of the Israeli police, Jewish settlers and far-right activists have attacked Palestinian protesters, going so far as to open fire on them with live ammunition. It was the repeated Israeli police incursions into the Al Aqsa Mosque, combined with rising settler violence in Sheikh Jarrah and other East Jerusalem neighborhoods, that prompted a response from Hamas, the Islamist group that rules the Gaza Strip.

Israel draws up plan for Gaza ground attack as mob violence spreads

Israel's military is drafting a plan for a possible ground operation in Gaza, as it presses ahead with a fierce air offensive on the enclave and as Hamas, the militant group that runs Gaza, fires volleys of rockets deep into Israel. Meanwhile, racist mob attacks have continued to spread through Israel in the worst Arab-Jewish chaos for years. Overnight on Wednesday, far-right Jewish mobs took to the streets across the country searching for Arabs, while there were reports of attempted shootings as Palestinian citizens of Israel clashed with police.

British Airways joined several US airlines in suspending flights to Ben Gurion airport on the outskirts of Tel Aviv. "The safety and security of our colleagues and customers is always our top priority, and we continue to monitor the situation closely," BA said. Other flights to Israel were cancelled or diverted to an airport near Eilat in the south of the country. It appeared to be the first time Israel had used Ramon as an alternative to Ben Gurion due to conflict.

The ground attack plans, which are in their initial stages and have not been approved, would be presented on Thursday to the military heads, who would consider whether to submit them to Israel's government, an army spokesperson said. Plans to intensify the operation came as Israel's prime minister, Benjamin

Netanyahu, told cabinet colleagues the country had rejected a Hamas proposal for a ceasefire. The offer of a truce was made on Wednesday via the Russian foreign ministry, which quoted a senior Hamas official as saying that the Islamist group was ready to halt attacks on a "mutual basis", Ynetnews reported. Early on Thursday, thousands of Israelis went into shelters after warning sirens sounded in Tel Aviv, the economic capital in the middle of the country, and also - for the first time since the unrest escalated this week - in the Jezreel valley in the north.

There was no immediate word of any casualties from the pre-dawn salvo, and later reports suggested the sirens in the north were false alarms. The Israeli military has carried out hundreds of airstrikes in Gaza since Monday, killing four senior Hamas commanders and a dozen more Hamas operatives. Two high-rise buildings containing flats and offices in Gaza City were targeted. More than 1,500 rockets have been launched from Gaza, according to the Israeli military.

More than 80 Palestinians have now been killed, including 17 children, according to the Gaza health ministry. Seven people had been killed in Israel, medical officials said, including a five-year-old boy killed by shrapnel on Wednesday in the frontier town of

Sderot.

As the crisis continued to worsen, the US energy corporation Chevron said it had shut down the Tamar natural gas platform off the Israeli coast as a precaution. Israel said its energy needs would continue to be met.

While the conflict raged, Israel appeared on the brink of losing control of its mixed cities. Netanyahu has called on Jews and Arabs to cease attacks on each other. "It doesn't matter to me that your blood is boiling. You can't take the law in your hands," he said. However, Netanyahu previously pledged to restore order "with an iron fist if needed", and his public security minister, Amir Ohana, has appeared to encourage mob violence.

On Wednesday, Ohana called for the release of a Jewish man arrested in connection with a fatal shooting of an Arab man in the city of Lod, after a synagogue and other Jewish property was torched. Ohana said, without providing evidence, that the shooter "acted in self-defence". He added that "law-abiding citizens carrying weapons" were an aid to authorities.

Later on Wednesday, a mob of far-right Israelis dragged a man they thought was an Arab from his car and beat him until he lay on the ground motionless and bloodied.

Heavy artillery fire on Gaza escalates violence as clashes between Arabs and Jews rock Israeli cities

Gaza came under heavy artillery fire early Friday morning, amid reports -- later conclusively denied -- that the Israeli army had launched a possible ground invasion of the Strip.

An army tweet, which said simply "IDF air and ground troops are currently attacking in the Gaza Strip" -- which coincided with the start of a sustained new round of artillery and airstrikes -- led many news organizations to report that a ground war, much-discussed in Israeli media on Thursday, was underway.

A clarification came about an hour or so later. "There are currently no IDF ground troops inside the Gaza Strip," army spokesman Lt. Col. Jonathan Conricus told CNN early Friday local time.

A CNN producer inside Gaza reported heavy incoming artillery fire from Israeli forces as well as dozens of airstrikes.

United Nations officials inside Gaza said dozens of people had fled their homes in the north and east of the enclave to seek refuge in schools -- belonging to the United Nations relief agency for Palestinian refugees -- which are considered designated emergency shelters.

Just a few kilometres away, residents in the Israeli town of Ashkelon were fleeing to their bomb shelters again, as sirens wailed warning of a fresh barrage of rockets.

Earlier in the day, Israel's defense minister Benny Gantz warned that Israel has "many, many more targets" and no time limit on its military operations against Gaza, as the Israeli military and Palestinian militants continued to exchange deadly airstrikes and rocket bombardments.

Israel has called up 7,000 army reservists so far, he added. Most analysts believe that the current build-up of a single division's worth of armor and infantry is not sufficient to conduct such a major incursion.

Militants in Gaza have fired more than 1,750 rockets toward Israel since the latest flareup began Monday afternoon, of which hundreds have failed or been intercepted by Israel's Iron Dome defense system. Israel has responded with devastating



airstrikes in Gaza.

Israel's bombing campaign in Gaza has now killed at least 109 people, including 28 children and 15 women, the Gaza-based Palestinian Health Ministry reported Thursday. At least 621 people have sustained injuries as a result of Israeli airstrikes this week, the Health Ministry added. Seven Israelis have been killed and more than 200 have been injured since Monday, the Israeli military said. A six-year-old boy was killed Wednesday when a rocket fired from Gaza struck a residential building in Sderot, according to an emergency responder.

Addressing Israeli troops Thursday, Gantz said: "I say explicitly: we will continue to defend and continue to attack until the fire is stopped and we will ensure long-term silence." Rioting and violent clashes between Arab and Jewish citizens also swept across several Israeli cities this week, leading Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to warn against "lynching" by either community.

In Bat Yam, south of Jaffa, graphic video Wednesday night showed a Jewish right-wing mob trying to lynch an Arab driver. Police say the man was dragged from his car before the assault began. Video shows about 20 people hitting him with metal objects and kicking him in the head repeatedly. He was taken to hospital where his injuries were described by police as moderate.

In Acre, north of Haifa, a lynching attempt by an Arab mob left a Jewish man critically wounded,

according to Israeli police. A police spokesman said the mob attacked police officers with stones before attacking the victim with stones and iron bars. Israel's Ambassador to the UN, Gilad Erdan, wrote to the Security Council on Thursday urging it to strongly condemn what he called terrorist attacks from Gaza, as well as to support Israel's "right to defend itself," according to a statement.

A day earlier, the Palestinians wrote to the UN Security Council President and the General Assembly President appealing for the Council to live up to its responsibility to maintain international peace and security. The United States has objected to a proposed Security Council statement and has so far blocked any action by the body, instead preferring more direct diplomacy. A requested Security Council meeting on the crisis will not take place Friday because the US blocked the session, according to two UN diplomats. The US indicated it might accept a meeting next week, said one UN diplomat.

No ceasefire for now

An Israeli foreign ministry spokesperson ruled out a ceasefire with Hamas in Gaza on Thursday.

"We don't think this is the right time for a ceasefire," Lior Haiat told CNN. "This is the time where Israel should defend itself and attack the terror infrastructure of Hamas... and we will get to a point where Hamas will understand that launching this kind terror attack on Israeli civilians is not effective for the future."

Asked on whether any mediating countries have sent representatives to Israel, Haiat said "he does not have this information ... but a ceasefire is not on the table for Israel now." A senior Hamas official, Izzat Al Rishq, told CNN earlier Thursday that Egypt, Qatar and the United Nations were communicating with Hamas over mediation to end the fighting.

"We in Hamas have told them that they should speak to the enemy to stop the aggression first and after that, Hamas will decide," Al Rishq said.

"We stress that we have the ability to sustain ourselves for the long haul and respond to the aggression (for) as long as it takes."

Fueled by controversy over planned evictions of Palestinian families in Jerusalem, and restrictions at a popular East Jerusalem meeting point as Ramadan began, conflict between Israelis and Palestinians boiled over this week, escalating rapidly into one of the worst rounds of violence between the two sides in the last several years. Netanyahu slammed the communal violence in Israeli cities Wednesday as "unacceptable" and said he had ordered the police to adopt emergency powers, to reinforce with Border Police units, and to impose curfews where necessary.

"Nothing justifies the lynching of Jews by Arabs and nothing justifies the lynching of Arabs by Jews," he said in a statement. "To the citizens of Israel I say that I do not care if your blood is boiling. You cannot

take the law into your own hands," Netanyahu added. "You cannot grab an ordinary Arab citizen and try to lynch him -- just as we cannot watch Arab citizens do this to Jewish citizens."

"We are very, very worried about this deterioration," Israeli lawmaker Aida Touma-Suleiman in Acre told CNN's Hala Gorani in a live interview late Wednesday evening local time.

"The tear gas is filling the houses, and the situation is insecure. There has been attacks on Arab citizens in different cities today," she said. "I'm really, really worried about this city (Acre). The same is happening in Haifa. The same is happening in Lod. There are different attacks on different citizens."

The Israeli-Arab lawmaker went on to say: "I'm not sure that the police is able or even willing to control the situation."

Decades of coexistence 'trampled'

Fury over the situation has fueled fierce protests in the central Israeli city of Lod, where Israeli police reported Wednesday that people were throwing rocks at passing cars and blocking roads into the early hours.

The mayor of Lod, Yair Revivo, said decades of coexistence had been "trampled."

He said Arab-Israeli rioters had been "burning synagogues, Talmud Torah, dozens of vehicles, burning garbage containers, destroying Israeli flags and worse, lowering the Israeli flag and hoisting the Palestinian flag, on a night of riots that injured policemen and residents who found themselves besieged." Meanwhile an Arab-Israeli resident of Lod, Wael Essawi, told CNN that a mosque was stormed by Israeli police and Jewish residents during prayers on Tuesday night before tear gas was fired and cars were set ablaze. "We couldn't do anything but we opened the windows so we can breathe... it was very intense," Essawi said. Another resident, Khaled Zabargah, said that following a Palestinian demonstration on Monday against Israeli policies in Jerusalem, thousands were hit with tear gas, stun grenades and rubber bullets before Israelis started throwing stones and beating the group.

"A Hell Out Here": COVID-19 Ravages Rural India

Boosted by highly infectious variants, the second wave erupted in February to inundate hospitals and medical staff, as well as crematoriums and mortuaries. Experts still cannot say for sure when the figures will peak.

India's coronavirus death count crossed 2,50,000 on Wednesday in the deadliest 24 hours since the pandemic began, as the disease rampaged through the countryside, leaving families to weep over the dead in rural hospitals or camp in wards to tend the sick.

Boosted by highly infectious variants, the second wave erupted in February to inundate hospitals and medical staff, as well as crematoriums and mortuaries. Experts still cannot say for sure when the figures will peak.

State leaders clamoured for vaccines to stop the second wave and the devastation that it has wrought, urging Prime Minister Narendra Modi to help them procure urgent supplies from overseas.

Deaths grew by a record 4,205 while infections rose 3,48,421 in the 24 hours to Wednesday, taking the tally past 23 million, health ministry data showed. Experts believe the actual numbers could be five to 10 times higher.

Funeral pyres have blazed in city parking lots, and bodies have washed up on the banks of the



holy river Ganges, having been immersed by relatives whose villages were stripped bare of the wood needed for cremations.

Lacking beds, drugs and oxygen, many hospitals in the world's second-most populous nation have been forced to turn away droves of sufferers, while tales of desperate relatives searching for someone to treat dying loved ones have become sickeningly commonplace.

Although the infection curve may be showing early signs of flattening, new cases are likely to fall off slowly, according to virologist Shahid Jameel.

"We seem to be plateauing around 400,000 cases a day,"

the Indian Express newspaper quoted him as saying. "It is still too early to say whether we have reached the peak."

Indians need vaccines "here and now", West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee, said in a letter to PM Narendra Modi. India has fully vaccinated barely 2.5% of the population.

Delhi had run out of its reserves of shots and had to close down several centres, Deputy Chief Minister Manish Sisodia told reporters.

India is using the AstraZeneca vaccine made at the Serum Institute in the western city of Pune and Covaxin by Bharat Biotech but production is well

short of the millions of doses required.

The country accounts for half of COVID-19 cases and 30% of deaths worldwide, the World Health Organization said in its latest weekly report.

The full impact of the B.1.617 variant found in India, which the WHO has designated as being of global concern, is not yet clear, it added.

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson said his government was looking at all possible solutions to tackle a surge in cases of the coronavirus variant first detected in India, including in the northern English town of Bolton. "It may be more transmissible ... maybe even considerably more transmissible," he told parliament.

Rural Spread

Daily infections are shooting up in the Indian countryside in comparison to big towns, where they have slowed after last month's surge, experts say.

More than half the cases this week in Maharashtra were in rural areas, up from a third a month ago. That share is nearly

two-thirds in the most populous, and mainly rural, state of Uttar Pradesh, government data showed. Television showed images of people weeping over the bodies of loved ones in ramshackle rural hospitals while others camped in wards tending to the sick. A pregnant woman was taking care of her husband who had breathing difficulties in a hospital in Bhagalpur in the eastern state of Bihar, which is seeing a case surge its health system could barely have handled at the best of times.

"There is no doctor here, she sleeps the whole night here, taking care of her husband," the woman's brother told India Today television. In a corridor outside, two sons were wailing over the body of their father, saying repeatedly that he could have been saved if only he had been given a bed in an intensive care unit. At the general hospital in Bijnor, a town in northern Uttar Pradesh, a woman lay in a cot next to a garbage can and medical waste. How can someone get treated if the situation is like this?" asked her son, Sudesh Tyagi. "It is a hell out here."

Parshuram Jayanti 2021: 10 Interesting Things To Know About Parshuram

Here are 10 interesting things to know about Lord Parshuram. The day coincides with Akshay Tritiya on April 14

Parshuram Jayanti in on April 14. Lord Parshuram or Parshuram avatar, the sixth incarnation and the warrior form of Lord Vishnu, is believed to be immortal. According to mythology, Parshuram, the son of sage Jamadagni and Renuka, was born on this day. Parshuram Jayanti coincides with the auspicious Akshaya Tritiya and falls on the third day of the Full Moon phase or Shukla Paksha in the month of Vaishakh. Legends say, Lord Parshuram descended on earth to remove the evil. This avatar of Lord Vishnu is believed to be an aggressive one and an expert in warfare.

Parshuram Jayanti: 10 interesting things to know about Lord Parshuram

1. Parshuram was a

devotee of Lord Shiva

2. He had received a Parshu or an axe-like weapon from Lord Shiva as a boon

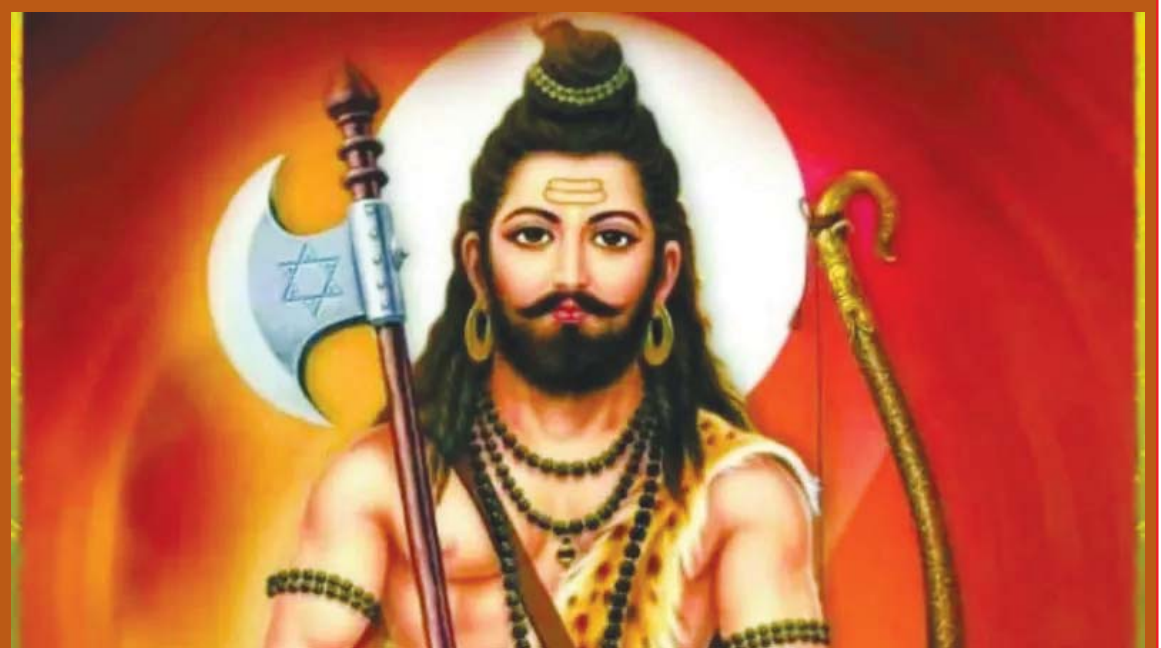
3. According to legends, Lord Shiva also taught Parshuram the art of warfare

4. Parshuram's father was Rishi Jamadagni and he is known to be the first warrior Brahmin

5. Legends say, Parshuram could not be defeated in warfare after he was blessed with Lord Shiva's weapon

6. Parshuram is believed to have taught the skills of using weapons to famous characters of the Mahabharata like Bhishma, Dronacharya and even Karana.

7. It is even believed that he still lives on the earth and will



teach warfare to Kalki, the tenth form of Lord Vishnu

8. Like Lord Shiva, Lord Rama, Krishna and other gods, Parshuram is not worshipped.

9. He is believed to be born at the Janapav hills in Indore and there is still a Shiva temple on the hilltop where Parshuram is believed to have meditated and

worshipped Lord Shiva.

10. Legends about Parasurama often talk about anger and violence, and the ill effects of anger.



Covid's second wave exposes the abject failure of the Indian state



Massed pyres and serpentine queues of shrouded bodies. Gasping, terrified men and women pleading to be accepted as patients. The broken and bereaved mourning their dead. In New Delhi today, as in any Indian metro, the roads are silent, the bazaars are shuttered. But approach any hospital and you'll rediscover the familiar clamour of the Indian street, rising to a crescendo in the once hushed ICUs—now rent with the shouts and moans of the desperate and the dying. Of course most of us are hunkered in our homes, carpeing our diems and visiting such scenes through our screens when we're not fielding calls and text messages from family and

friends, or friends of friends, pleading for a hospital bed, an oxygen cylinder, Remdesivir, more oxygen. Expressing our sympathies on Facebook and WhatsApp. The second wave of Covid-19 is still cresting but by now we have all been touched by its terrors, and all too many of us by its sorrows—and the dismal realisation that we are in the midst of a recurring nightmare, a tragedy foretold. We have bitter memories of the days when we were lulled by bromides of idiocy—remember the one about Indians' superhuman immunity? Remember clanging steel utensils? Remember telling the world that India had beaten Covid-19? That was in January, and in the

four months between that moment of monumental hubris and today's 380,000 new infections and 4,000 daily deaths lies a chronicle of missed opportunities. This despite the central government having a phalanx of empowered groups and task forces comprising top officials and experts for Covid management (see accompanying graphic). It was a time for action, for prioritising the obvious: doctors, hospital beds, Covid medicines and vaccines, oxygen, viral research and Centre-state coordination. You could say the Indian state is Covid's biggest victim but that would be a stretch.

The fact is that the state and those who run it have failed us—in

a once-in-a-lifetime Himalayan Blunder kind of way. However, it still exists, with all its branches quite intact and we must rely on it to rise to the challenge of quelling the current surge and preventing a threatened third wave of Covid-19 infections. That's a process that should begin by taking stock of just where and how it failed.

In the following pages, we expose the sorry tale of neglect, apathy and failure of our political leadership. The institutional collapse and bureaucratic cowardice that facilitated super-spreader religious festivals and the political carnival of an eight-phase election campaign even as the second wave of a pandemic was

breaking. The narcissism that enabled our leadership to ignore the warnings of expert groups. Their inability to form bipartisan alliances between the Centre and the states in the middle of a national calamity. Now that some of the loudest voices in the land have gone quiet, the government's silence over the anguished and angry questions being raised over its management of Covid's second wave can be deafening. Our reports offer some answers to these questions and suggestions from experts on how to find a way out of this continuing tragedy of errors. Most of all, we need action from the government—and fast.

'Black fungus' is appearing more frequently among COVID-19 patients in India. What to know about the deadly infection.

A rare but serious fungal infection is appearing more frequently among COVID-19 patients in India as coronavirus cases soar to more than 350,000 per day, according to Johns Hopkins University data.

Mucormycosis, also known as "black fungus," is caused by a group of molds called mucormycetes, which tend to live in soil and decaying organic matter, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. It's a life-threatening infection with a mortality rate between 46% among people with sinus infections and 96% with spread disease.

In the past decade, doctors have seen only a handful of cases in India. But in the past month, they're reporting tens of thousands of cases, said Dr. Bhakti Hansoti, associate professor in the department of emergency medicine and international health at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health. "We've seen this skyrocket in recent weeks," she said. "It consumes a lot of resources especially during this pandemic right now in India where health care resources are stretched at the limit." The most common form of the infection

seen among COVID-19 patients in India is rhinocerebral mucormycosis, an infection that starts in the sinuses and can spread to the brain. Symptoms include one-sided facial swelling, headache, nasal or sinus congestion, black lesions on the nasal bridge or upper inside of the mouth, and fever, according to the CDC.

Symptoms of mucormycosis tend to appear two to three weeks after COVID-19 infection, Hansoti said.

This type of mucormycosis occurs more frequently among patients with diabetes, which is why health experts say cases are spiking in India where one in six people have the chronic disease, according to the International Diabetes Federation Diabetes Atlas published in 2019.

"Diabetes is the No. 1 risk factor for this," Hansoti said. Up to 75% of mucormycosis cases occur among COVID-19 patients with diabetes, she added, with as many as 45% undiagnosed until they show up to the hospital. The Indian population has a high prevalence of uncontrolled diabetes due to the lack of routine screening," she said.

In addition to this risk factor,

health experts say, immune-suppressing steroids prescribed to control inflammation from COVID-19 create an opportunity for fungal infections to take hold. "That's the goal of going on steroids, to turn down the volume on the immune system," said Dr. Michael Angarone, associate professor of medicine at Northwestern Medicine.

Protection against COVID-19: What level of antibodies protect against the coronavirus? Researchers are rushing to find out. Another COVID-19 vaccine? Novavax plans to present US data on its COVID-19 vaccine as soon as this month, but manufacturing will delay deliveries.

Many COVID-19 patients in India with breathing difficulties are being prescribed steroids as oxygen becomes a scarce resource, Hansoti said. Additionally, people there can bypass doctors and obtain steroids through a pharmacy without a prescription.

"Some of it is the doctors throwing (steroids) at patients because there's a critical need for oxygen," she said. "And ... the health system isn't built to monitor and report across the country. You can go to any



pharmacy in the mall and ask what you need."

The structural integrity of the lungs also can be compromised by the coronavirus and ventilators, making it harder to fight off fungal infections, Angarone said.

"Once it starts to grow inside the lung, it becomes very difficult for our anti-fungal therapies," Angarone said. "(Mucormycosis) infections to the lung tend to be harder to treat in that the anti-fungals that we have to use may not work as well as an anti-bacterial for bacteria."

Fungal infections tend to be more aggressive and destructive, creating big cavities in the lungs, and can take up to weeks to treat, he said. In some instances, they can spread to the liver, brain and eyes. Many

patients in India have required surgery to stop the spread of infection to the brain. In some cases, an eye has had to be removed, Hansoti said.

Fungal infections are cropping up not only in India but in Europe, South America and the United States, as well. However, instead of mucormycosis, which is less common outside of India, doctors are seeing cases of aspergillosis.

Aspergillosis is caused by aspergillus, a common mold that lives indoors and outdoors. According to the CDC, this type of fungal infection is not as life-threatening as mucormycosis. A 2018 study found the one-year survival for people who had invasive aspergillosis was 59%.

The black fungus nightmare facing India's coronavirus patients



On being told, on a recent sultry morning in Mumbai, that both her eyes would need to be removed, Neelam Bakshi, 47, could not cry. Her eyes were too stiff, dry, and swollen from the 'black fungus', mucormycosis.

"It took a while for my words to sink in. Then she said simply 'I won't see my children again' and

went quiet," said Dr Renuka Bradoo, the specialist treating Bakshi.

The deadly and often disfiguring disease is usually exceedingly rare. But as a second wave of coronavirus infections sweep India, Maharashtra - the state worst affected by Covid-19 - must now cope with an explosion of mucormycosis

cases too. Dr Bradoo, who heads the ear, nose and throat (ENT) department at Sion Hospital, said there had been an "exponential" rise in cases of the fungal infection, calling it "an epidemic within a pandemic". Bradoo's colleague, eye surgeon Dr Akshay Nair, said he had scooped out more eyes than he ever thought possible since the second wave erupted at the start of April. "It's a nightmare inside a nightmare," he said.

Normally, mucormycosis affects patients who are immunocompromised owing to uncontrolled diabetes or certain cancers. The current outbreak, though, has attacked Covid-19 patients with diabetes who have been put on steroids to control the virus which in turn has pushed up their sugar levels and compromised their immune systems. After

recovering from the virus, they are discharged and go home only to find, a few days later, one or two strange, but not too alarming, symptoms - a slight discharge from the nose, a headache, a slight numbness in the cheekbone. The infection starts in the sinuses. In two to four days, it can invade the eyes. If not caught at this stage, it can reach the brain. Since the early symptoms are not too alarming, patients usually consult a doctor fairly late, when they find it hard to open or move their eye. It is often a week or longer before they finally see an ENT doctor who can diagnose it. By this time, the only treatment is aggressive surgery requiring the removal of one or both eyes or the upper jaw. Once it has spread to the brain, nothing can be done. The mortality rate is

50 per cent. On May 12, Maharashtra's Health Minister Rajesh Tope said the state had recorded up to 2,000 cases of mucormycosis. Speaking from Pune, ENT surgeon Dr Murarji Ghadge, sounded emotionally drained. The outbreak was "rampant and devastating", he said. "Last night, I had to operate to remove a patient's eye at midnight before the infection reached the brain. At 3am I was operating on another patient," he said. "Today I will be removing the entire upper jaw and cheek of a young woman. It is mutilating. I have never seen anything like it." In neighbouring Gujarat, ENT doctors who previously saw one or two cases of the infection a year are now seeing six to eight cases per day.



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Iron ore is saving Australia's trade with China. How long can it last?

Wine and wheat. Lobsters and logs. Beef and barley. If Australia exports it, China has likely put up barriers to entry over the past year, as diplomatic relations between the two countries rapidly deteriorated. Now, one commodity is almost single-handedly keeping the trade relationship afloat: iron ore.

Australia is the world's largest producer of iron ore, mining more than 910 million metric tonnes in the 2019-2020 financial year, according to the Australian government, almost twice as much as its nearest competitor Brazil.

Iron ore is a vital component in the production of steel, and with China embarking on a \$500 billion infrastructure spending spree to help the economy recover from the pandemic, Beijing's need for it has never been greater.

Diplomatic relations between Australia and China fell into a deep chill one year ago, after Prime Minister Scott Morrison called for an independent investigation into the origins of the Covid-19 pandemic which threatened to challenge Beijing's narrative of the viral outbreak.

The Chinese government said Morrison's request was "political manipulation," and since then Australian exports to China have faced growing barriers to entry.

Overall Chinese investment in Australia plunged 62% in 2020. And tensions are still getting worse. On Thursday, Beijing announced the "indefinite suspension" of the China-Australia Strategic Economic Dialogue, which only met for the first time in 2014.

But experts said that unlike wine and coal, it would be tough for China to find new sources of iron ore any time soon. That means Australia's largest source of trade revenue may be secure.

"Australia is the largest iron ore producer in the world and on the other hand China is the largest steel producer in the world," said Heiwai Tang, professor of economics at Hong Kong University Business School.

"It isn't that easy for them to get into a new round of trade wars over this particular product."

The mining boom

For more than two decades, China and Australia have helped rapidly grow each others' economies through a soaring

trade in raw resources, especially iron ore and coal.

In 2000, at the beginning of China's economic boom, Australian exports to the country were just over 6 billion Australian dollars (\$3.6 billion). Fifteen years later, China is Australia's largest trading partner by far in terms of exports and total value of trade -- overtaking Japan, the US, South Korea and New Zealand -- with exports of almost 92 billion Australian dollars (\$74 billion).

Some economists claim the mining boom in Australia helped the country avoid recession during the global financial crisis in 2008.

The trade has remained strong over the years, despite rising political tensions between Beijing and Canberra - including new legislation designed to limit foreign interference, introduced by Australia in 2017.

By 2019, almost two-thirds of China's iron ore came from Australia, more than it imported from Brazil, South Africa and India combined, according to the Observatory of Economic Complexity.

At the same time, iron ore made up almost a quarter of



Australia's entire exports in 2019, 81.7% of which went to China.

The lack of diversity in Australia's exports leaves it vulnerable to any major impact on its main sources of revenue, experts said. And while there could be other markets for the country's iron ore, they might take time to develop.

"China's making up around four-fifths of Australian iron ore exports, so what that tells me is we don't have too many other destinations that we do business with in a big way," said Sean Langcake, principal economist at BIS Oxford Economics in Sydney.

But economists said while Australia may eventually locate new buyers for its iron ore, it would

be much more difficult for China to find new sources of iron ore to power its economy.

Alternate sources

Experts said Australia's iron ore has two main advantages for Chinese buyers: it is high quality and reliable.

Australia produces a higher amount of hematite iron ore than any other country, which contains a larger quantity of usable iron than itabirite or magnetite. According to lobbying group the Minerals Council of Australia, hematite usually contains more than 50% iron compared to as low as 16% in magnetite.

Economist Langcake said it was easier and cheaper to process ore with a higher iron content, making it more attractive to steel producers.

Why the Congress sees a revival opportunity in the Covid crisis



While the Covid pandemic has emerged as the biggest challenge to the Narendra Modi-led BJP government at the Centre, the principal opposition party, the Congress, is looking at this crisis as a catalyst to revive itself. If Congress insiders are to be believed, this crisis has given the party an opportunity to connect with the people and present it as an alternative to Modi and the BJP, at a time when the prime minister's popularity has taken a hit because of the mishandling of the Covid crisis. Even dissenters within the Congress, who had been warning about the decimation of the

"Gandhi family-run" party, are now relenting that the pandemic may give the party another chance of revival without having to do any hard work towards revamping and restructuring the party. "In India, people vote to throw someone out of power. When they are angry, they don't really see who they are voting for. So, any non-BJP force may get lucky," says one of the senior Congress leaders in the group of 23 leaders-popularly known as 'G23'-that had written a letter to party chief Sonia Gandhi last August and sought an organisational overhaul and accountable leadership. In fact,

they believe that the current crisis may give Rahul Gandhi another opportunity to return to the helm of Congress affairs in an official capacity, despite the party's continuing electoral debacles. Since 2014, when Modi first stormed into power, the Congress has witnessed a series of reverses, the latest being the disastrous performance in four of the five assembly elections held recently in Assam, West Bengal, Tamil Nadu, Puducherry and Kerala. Even in Tamil Nadu, where the party is a junior ally of the DMK, which dethroned the incumbent AIADMK government, the credit for the party's success-winning 18 of the 25 seats it contested-went to the DMK's popularity and performance.

Taking note of these serious setbacks, in the Congress Working Committee (CWC) meeting held on May 10, party president Sonia Gandhi said: "We need to candidly understand why we failed to dislodge the incumbent governments in Kerala and Assam, and why we drew a

blank in West Bengal. These will yield uncomfortable lessons, but if we do not face up to the reality, if we do not look the facts in the face, we will not draw the right lessons." Sonia even announced that a committee will be formed-within 48 hours, as later revealed by party general secretary (organisation) K.C. Venugopal-to examine the reasons behind the losses. This is a welcome step, but the 'G23' leaders believe that Gandhi family loyalists are not ready to learn any lessons and that this is yet another step to deflect attention from the real issues. They claim that until and unless the Congress settles the issue of central leadership, the party cannot revive the state units. While Sonia is the president, Rahul Gandhi, the Lok Sabha MP from Kerala's Wayanad, remains the de-facto leader and face of the party even though he quit as Congress president two years ago, owning responsibility for the 2019 Lok Sabha election debacle. Since then, several electoral setbacks have led many within the party to

question the leadership credentials of Rahul. "Who do you blame for the rout the party faced in Kerala where Rahul led from the front?" asks one of the 'G23' leaders who had earlier demanded an election to the post of the Congress president, since Sonia has been functioning as interim president. Responding to their demands, the CWC had asked the party's Central Election Authority (CEC) to make arrangements to elect the next president. The CEC accordingly submitted a plan, scheduling the election on June 23. However, in the May 10 CWC meeting, all members unanimously agreed to defer the election process considering the current pandemic. The 'G23' leaders, who also argued that this is not the right time to hold an election, however, say that Gandhi family loyalists deliberately proposed a date knowing well that others would not have any option other than rejecting the idea of holding elections in the middle of a raging pandemic.

Covid-19: Top economist says India might face 'serious livelihood crisis'

Noted economist Jean Dreze has warned that India might face a 'serious livelihood crisis' due to the impact of the second Covid-19 wave. He added that the working class population may suffer more this time in comparison to the situation last year.

India might be heading towards a "serious livelihood crisis" as the situation seems to be worse this time for the working class amid the COVID crisis and local restrictions by states already add up to something close to a nationwide lockdown, according to noted economist Jean Dreze.

In an interview, he also said the government's target to make India a USD 5 trillion economy by 2024-25 was never a "feasible target" and was just to pander to the "super-power ambitions" of

the Indian elite.

About the impact of the second wave of COVID on the Indian economy, the eminent economist said the situation today is not very different from what it was around this time last year as far as working people are concerned.

"The economic consequences of local lockdowns may not be as destructive as those of a national lockdown. But in some respects, things are worse this time for the working class," he opined.

Further, the eminent economist

said the fear of infection is more widespread and that will make it hard to revive economic activity. "Despite mass vaccination, there is a serious possibility that intermittent crises will continue for a long time, perhaps years. Compared with last year, many people have depleted savings and larger debts. Those who borrowed their way through last year's crisis may not be able to do it again this time," he observed.

SERIOUS LIVELIHOOD CRISIS' Dreze also pointed out that last year there was a relief package



and today relief measures are not even being discussed.

"On top of all this, local lockdowns may give way to a national lockdown relatively soon. In fact, they already add up to something close to a country-

wide lockdown. In short, we are heading towards a serious livelihood crisis," he said.

Also Read | National lockdown, just not in name: Almost 98% of India is under some form of lockdown

WhatsApp privacy policy May 15 deadline is now sheer blackmailing for users



Deferred earlier after outrage from users, WhatsApp's new privacy and usage policy, is now set to be enforced from May 15. Unlike last time when the new policy was mandatory for using WhatsApp, the new one offers some concessions but at the cost of features, which is almost like blackmailing users.

WhatsApp is finally implementing its latest privacy policy with a new usage agreement with a plan to share more data of WhatsApp users with parent company Facebook. The deadline to accept a new privacy policy for WhatsApp users is May 15. The policy, first

told to users in early 2021, created a lot of controversy. This time, however, WhatsApp has said that accepting the policy is not mandatory, but if users don't accept it, they will lose access to some of the top features of WhatsApp. In other words, yet again, WhatsApp is telling its

users that accept it or else The whole thing started with an in-app notification in early January that prompted WhatsApp users to accept the new "Updated Terms and Privacy Policy". Then the backlash from users began. Users, in particular, objected to one thing: the high-handed way in which WhatsApp forced users to accept the new privacy policy. It said that users have to accept the policy or else they will lose access to the app and they will no longer be allowed to use WhatsApp.

Facebook and WhatsApp, on

their part, explained that the new privacy policy was necessary because WhatsApp had to share some info with Facebook to implement the e-commerce features in the app. It was also necessary for the app to make the business accounts function better. The company said that it was all for the benefit of users. It argued that the changes in data sharing with Facebook enabled by the new privacy policy ONLY concerned the business accounts and the chats users would do with such accounts.

However, most users were not

convinced. They saw that WhatsApp was going to share more data with Facebook and that spooked them. They also did not like the fact that WhatsApp was telling them to accept the policy or else lose access to the app. So, a stalemate was reached. WhatsApp pushed the deadline for the new privacy policy to May 15. It also promised to do a better job examining its privacy policy for users. Now the May 15 deadline is approaching. Unlike last time, this time WhatsApp has changed the tactics.

Zomato braces for 50k crore IPO, but only 7% Hindi heartland users order through it weekly

The Covid-19 pandemic has devastated millions of lives and livelihoods. It has also wrecked the economy and destroyed a vast majority of small and medium businesses. But the pandemic has also proved to be a blessing in disguise for some businesses such as technology companies that have enabled people to continue their lives from their homes. The ability to order food from home is one such business. Food delivery companies such as Zomato, Swiggy, and others have benefitted enormously from the Covid lockdown-induced boost to people ordering food online. Their businesses are booming so much that Zomato even wants to list itself in the stock market at a

whopping Rs 50,000 crore valuation. Its chief rival is Swiggy, which has also seen a huge boost to its business. Or so it seems at least to the majority of readers of this column who have probably used Zomato or Swiggy extensively during the lockdown. But what percentage of Indians are really aware of these food delivery companies and how many use them on a weekly basis? Prashnam decided to find out.

The survey

First, we recognise that food delivery apps may only be an urban phenomenon. So, we identified 52 urban districts (as defined by the Census) in four large states in the Hindi heartland - Bihar, Madhya Pradesh,

Rajasthan, and Uttar Pradesh.

We asked people the following two specific questions in these places in the local language:

Q1. What is Zomato?

It is an app like TikTok

It is a place in South India

It is a food delivery app

I don't know

Q2. Did you use Zomato to order food last week?

Yes/ No Can't answer.

To put these in context, we decided to ask the same questions about Swiggy. A total of 2,829 adults responded to the Zomato survey while 2,652 responded to the Swiggy survey. What we found is that the majority in urban areas in these four Hindi states do not know what Zomato and Swiggy are.



About 48 per cent of the respondents (weighted by population) knew that Zomato is a food delivery app. While only 37 per cent knew that Swiggy is a food delivery app. There was not much difference in awareness levels across these four states. Weekly usage Of those that knew about these

apps, roughly only 10-14 per cent had ordered food through these apps in the past week. About 14 per cent of the respondents said they had ordered food through Zomato in the previous week. To put it in context, only 48 per cent of people in urban districts in these states knew what Zomato was.

These meteorites landed on Earth after a 22-million-year voyage

For the first time, scientists have been able to precisely map the flight path of an asteroid that landed on Earth and trace it back to its point of origin. The boulder-size fragment's journey to our planet began 22 million years ago, according to new research.

The asteroid, known as 2018 LA, appeared like a fireball in the skies over Botswana on June 2, 2018, before breaking apart and landing in the Central Kalahari Game Reserve.

Prior to breaking up in Earth's atmosphere, scientists determined that the asteroid was about 5 feet (1.7 meters) in diameter, weighed 12,566 pounds and had been traveling at 37,282 miles per hour.

As the asteroid broke up 27 km (16.7 miles) above ground, it was 20,000 times brighter than the full moon," said Christian Wolf, study coauthor and associate professor from the Australian National University's Research School of Astronomy and Astrophysics, in a statement.

The study published last week in the journal *Meteoritics and Planetary Science*.

Researchers were able to locate the fragments, called meteorites,

and study them. Their findings provide new insights into the history of our solar system.

Tracing an asteroid

The asteroid was discovered to be on an impact trajectory with Earth on June 2, 2018, and eight hours after it was detected, it appeared over South Africa with a flash.

The asteroid was first spotted by the University of Arizona's Catalina Sky Survey, appearing like a faint dot of light zipping among the stars. The astronomical survey is part of NASA's Planetary Defense program and searches for asteroids approaching Earth.

"Small meter-sized asteroids are no danger to us, but they hone our skills in detecting approaching asteroids," said Eric Christensen, study coauthor and director of the Catalina Sky Survey program, in a statement.

Peter Brown, professor and Canada Research Chair in Planetary Small Bodies at Western University in Ontario, worked with the Western Meteor Group to analyze sound waves from the fireball as it crossed into Earth's atmosphere.

The asteroid had one-thirtieth of the energy of the atomic bomb

that was dropped on Hiroshima during World War II.

"The infrasound shockwave measured in South Africa was not as strong as expected from U.S. Government sensor detections of the bright light," Brown said in a statement.

Data from the Catalina Sky Survey, as well as ANU's SkyMapper telescope in New South Wales, were able to map the asteroid's journey to Earth.

This is only the second time scientists have been able to observe an asteroid in space before it impacted Earth. The first was asteroid 2008 TC3 in Sudan 10 years earlier, according to Peter Jenniskens, lead study author and meteor astronomer at the SETI Institute and NASA's Ames Research Center.

"I could hardly believe my eyes when I came upon a little object that appeared to be moving across images taken by SkyMapper," said Christopher Onken, study coauthor and ANU SkyMapper project scientist and astronomer, in a statement.

"These last images before the asteroid entered Earth's atmosphere were SkyMapper's biggest contribution. They helped to pinpoint both the search area



for the meteorite fragments on Earth and the meteor's origin in space."

Meteorites among the wildlife

Data from multiple astronomical observations, along with video recorded of the fireball, helped researchers determine the meteorites had fallen in the Central Kalahari Game Reserve, where wildlife like leopards and lions live.

The Botswana Department of Wildlife and National Parks and the country's Department of National Museum and Monuments helped the researchers search and stay safe in their quest to locate the fragments.

On the last day of the search,

Lesedi Seitshiro from the Botswana International University of Science and Technology found the first one. It weighed 0.6 ounces (18 grams) and was only about 1.2 inches (3 centimeters) in size.

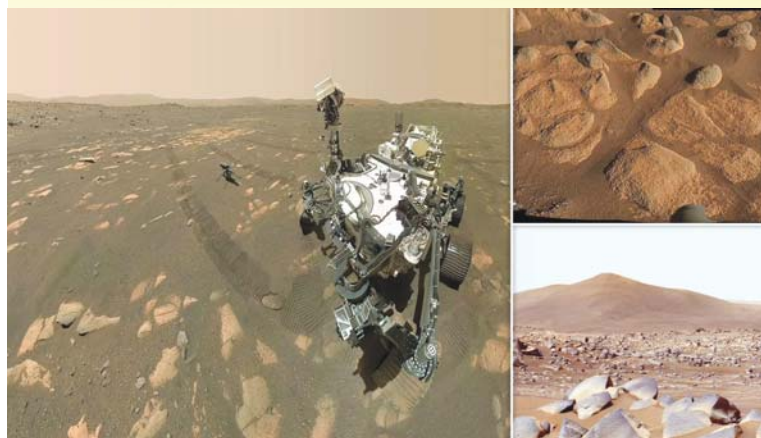
"The meteorite is named 'Motopi Pan' after a local watering hole," said Mohutsiwa Gabadirwe, study coauthor and geoscientist at the Botswana Geoscience Institute, in a statement. "This meteorite is a national treasure of Botswana."

Gabadirwe is now the curator of the Motopi Pan meteorite.

The researchers uncovered a total of 23 fragments within a few months of the event.

Finding home

'I'm a bot on a mission!' NASA's Perseverance rover switches from on-scene photographer to science investigator as it begins testing one of Mars' ancient lakebeds for signs of life



NASA's Perseverance rover has switched from photographing the Ingenuity helicopter's test flights, to searching for signs of long gone Martian life.

The US space agency confirmed that the SUV-sized rover has started to test the ancient lakebed in the Jezero crater by focusing its science instruments on rocks.

A camera called WATSON on the end of the rover's robotic arm has taken detailed shots of the rocks,

with extra data coming from a pair of zoomable cameras.

The Perseverance team tweeted: 'The time has come: I'm switching from on-scene photographer to science investigator. Did this ancient lakebed ever have life?'

The tools I brought will help begin the hunt. I'm a bot on a mission.' The rover arrived on Mars on February 18 and since landing has focused on testing its instruments, as well as recording and relaying data on Ingenuity flights.

Now that Ingenuity has moved from a technical demonstration, to taking up the new role as a scout for Perseverance, the 'science can begin,' the agency explained.

Using its suite of cameras, Perseverance has been taking images of rocks on the floor of the crater, which was once a lakebed billions of years ago.

What insights they turn up will help scientists create a timeline of when an ancient lake formed there, when it dried, and when sediment began piling up in the delta that formed in the crater long ago.

Understanding this timeline should help date rock samples - to be collected later in the mission - that might preserve a record of ancient microbes.

A camera called WATSON on the end of the rover's robotic arm has taken detailed shots of the rocks for scientists to study.

A pair of zoomable cameras that

make up the Mastcam-Z imager on the rover's 'head' worked to survey the terrain, and a laser instrument called SuperCam has zapped some of the rocks to detect their chemistry.

These instruments and others allow scientists to learn more about Jezero Crater and to home in on areas they might like to study in greater depth.

One important question scientists want to answer is whether these rocks are sedimentary like sandstone, or igneous and formed by volcanic activity. Each type of rock tells a different kind of story, NASA explained.

Some sedimentary rocks - formed in the presence of water from rock and mineral fragments like sand, silt, and clay - are better suited to preserving biosignatures, or signs of past life.

Igneous rocks, on the other hand, are more precise

geological clocks that allow scientists to create an accurate timeline of how an area formed.

One complicating factor is that the rocks around Perseverance have been eroded by wind over time and covered with younger sand and dust.

On Earth, a geologist might trudge into the field and break a rock sample open to get a better idea of its origins, said Ken Farley, Perseverance project scientist.

"When you look inside a rock, that's where you see the story," he added.

While Perseverance doesn't have a rock hammer, it does have other ways to peer past millennia's worth of dust.

When scientists find a particularly enticing spot, they can reach out with the rover's arm and use an abrader to grind and flatten a rock's surface, revealing its internal structure and composition.

Let's go to explore a magical place

*Come to the lap of
Nature, Explore Hiking,
Dare Camping on 100
Acres of Unexplored &
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I recovered from Covid-19. When can I start working out?

If you have recovered from Covid-19 and are wondering whether you can just about attempt to resume your mini-workout sessions at home, here's the answer.



Covid-19.

SLOW AND STEADY

Soon after recovery, it is important for you to understand that you must not rush with your fitness session since Covid makes your body weak. Do not exert yourself. "Go for a slow and steady exercise schedule which will not exhaust your oxygen reserve in the lungs," Dr Ijen Bhattacharya, physician and diabetologist from Ghaziabad, told IndiaToday.in.

WORKOUT ROUTINE

You may resume routine work at home but do not stress yourself, Dr Ijen Bhattacharya said, adding that "breathing exercises and Pranayam are good. You may also do brisk walking for 15-30 minutes on every alternate day at home itself." If you enjoy doing

intense workouts, hold on for a month. Around 30 days after recovering from Covid, "you can do push-ups and muscle-building exercises," he said.

FOR ASYMPTOMATIC PATIENTS

To begin with, it is crucial to assess the impact of the virus on the individual and their body. "If the patient has been asymptomatic, then start off with brisk walking for 15-20 minutes as this can get your muscles moving. This is also a good form of exercise since the intensity can be regulated by the individual," Dr Meenakshi Sharma of Paras Hospitals, Gurugram, told IndiaToday.in.

BOOST YOUR IMMUNITY

You've beaten Covid and that's great news, but you must

continue to consume immunity-boosting drinks and healthy food to strengthen your system. "Steam inhalation and practicing deep-breathing exercises are the best ways to help rebuild and stabilise immunity," Dr Meenakshi Sharma added.

HYDRATE YOURSELF

Don't forget to drink 8-10 glasses of water every day. "The most important thing is to keep yourselves hydrated (200 ml water every half an hour). Also, exercise according to your own limitations and don't overdo," Dr Ijen Bhattacharya added.

India recorded a new high of 4,14,188 new Covid-19 cases on Friday, taking the caseload to 2,14,91,598, according to the Union Health Ministry.

The worst long-term side-effect of Covid-19 is undoubtedly weakness. Although symptoms disappear after recovery, most people complain of a lingering sense of fatigue, with limited ability to exercise or even perform daily activities. Several patients also experience muscle pain long after recovery. If you are a fitness enthusiast, this can work against you because we are sure you don't

miss your workout sessions for the world but of course, Covid stopped you. Now, if you have recovered from Covid-19 and are wondering whether you can just about attempt to resume your mini-workout sessions at home, here's the answer.

IndiaToday.in consulted two doctors, who advised exercise routines that you can follow, if you wish to regain your physical strength after recovering from

Recovered from Covid-19? Here's what you should do and keep in mind

Here is everything you need to know about possible complications that may arise post Covid-19 infection and what precautions one should take before resuming normal life.

Just recovered from Covid-19? It may not be wise to let your guard down since an increasing number of people are continuing to experience symptoms after their initial recovery from the disease in the second wave.

These post-Covid health conditions or complications have come to be known as "long Covid" or "long-haul Covid". In such cases, a patient continues to experience symptoms of the disease four weeks after initial recovery.

Some of the complications being witnessed in patients recovered from Covid-19 include impact on lungs, kidneys, heart, and cases of a black fungal infection, called mucormycosis.

When can we say that a Covid-19 patient is cured and can resume normal life?

Dr Syamasis Bandyopadhyay, Senior Consultant Physician and Rheumatologist, Director Medical Services, Apollo Hospitals, said if a Covid-19 patient has ILI (Influenza-like illness) symptoms, then within 10 days of onset of symptoms he becomes non-

infectious. "After 17 days from the onset of symptoms, he can resume normal activities while maintaining Covid-appropriate behaviour. For SARI (severe acute respiratory infection) cases, the patient becomes non-infectious after 20 days and he/she can resume normal life depending on the extent of their lung damage and other issues," Dr Syamasis Bandyopadhyay told IndiaToday.in.

Why are some people seeing post-Covid complications?

Covid-19 is a viral illness which,

unlike many other viral illnesses, has the potential to cause long-term sequelae involving multiple organs, especially the lungs. Available data indicates that about a quarter of those with Covid-19 suffer from symptoms 4-5 weeks after testing positive, and about 1 in 10 experience symptoms after 12 weeks, Dr Abhishek Bansal, Director (Dept of Orthopaedics), Diyo Hospital, told IndiaToday.in "While there is no conclusive evidence, people may experience post-Covid conditions due to persistence of



the virus in some parts of the body that are sheltered from the immune system," Dr Bansal said. What complications may arise after I get cured of Covid-19? Covid-19 is known to affect multiple organs and body systems, including heart and blood vessels, lungs, kidneys,

skin, brain and nerves. Some of the warning signs of lingering Covid conditions are continuous shortness of breath, chest pain, breathing trouble, reappearance of fever, fatigue, painful joints or muscles and dizziness on standing, said Dr Syamasis Bandyopadhyay.

I am suffering from depression. How should I deal with Covid isolation?

If someone contracts the Covid-19 virus, the road to recovery is not an easy process. First, the person needs to isolate themselves from other members in their house. This puts patients in a tough spot because now, their daily life comes to a halt and social interaction becomes limited. If this person has been diagnosed with clinical depression before, things can become more severe for them.

In case you or someone around you is going through such similar feelings, then this article is for you. IndiaToday.in recently got in touch with clinical psychologists to talk to them about what a person suffering from depression should do to deal with Covid isolation. A clinical psychologist from Delhi, Dr Samridhi Khatri, said that this is an important problem during Covid times. She said, "There are various grades

of depression - mild, moderate and severe - depending on the severity and changes due to Covid. Additionally, Covid might push a moderately depressed person to severe depression. In such cases, it is essential to continue with Activities of Daily Living (ADLs) - eating, sleeping and bathing. It is difficult to do these things, but one should not stop doing them."

CONTINUE WITH YOUR

TREATMENTS- Dr Parul Adlakha, a clinical psychologist from Delhi, said, "A Covid-patient diagnosed with depression should continue with their treatment more than ever right now - be it by attending their therapy sessions or eating medication given by their doctors. It is necessary because when a clinically depressed person is in isolation, the circumstances are bound to affect their mental health.

Without Remorse movie review:***Magnetic Michael B Jordan can't save Amazon's flimsy franchise-starter***

Without Remorse movie review: Michael B Jordan stars in director Stefano Sollima's franchise-starter, out on Amazon Prime Video.

A lot of people watched Sicario, but no one was more impressed by the film than director Stefano Sollima, who has since dedicated his career to mimicking it. Not only did Sollima direct the actual sequel - Sicario: Day of the Soldado - but he also brought the same, spare style to his terrific crime series ZeroZeroZero, and now, to Amazon's Without Remorse. But what worked marvellously in the past has proven to be the absolute worst approach this time around. Sollima's minimalist style simply doesn't translate to Tom Clancy's maximalist world - the Ryanverse. He has dealt with themes of institutional corruption before, but he puts that on the back burner in Without Remorse, a film that is stitched together by a series of action set pieces with the barest hints of a plot. As an action director, his bare-bones style

leaves a lot to be desired. In many ways, Sollima represents the utopian ideal of what many, including myself, often desire of mainstream Hollywood - filmmaking that refuses to conform to familiar old tricks. But there's a reason why Nicolas Winding Refn never actually directed a James Bond film, despite having come very close at one point - as tantalising as the prospect might sound, finding a common ground between his arthouse sensibilities and Bond's bombast would have been too wide a chasm to cross.

The closest analogy I can think of also involves Refn, and his 2011 cult classic Drive. Marketed as an action-heist film in the vein of the Fast & Furious franchise, the film earned a 'C-' CinemaScore from audiences, despite glowing critical reviews. An angry woman actually filed a lawsuit against the distributor for

the 'misleading' trailer that they cut. I can imagine baffled Boomers tuning into Without Remorse and contemplating legal action as well. Not because it's bad - it isn't; it's mediocre - but because it really isn't what you'd expect.

A blatant attempt to appeal to a younger demographic - as has become rather common these days, the protagonist has been racially overhauled here - Without Remorse bears little resemblance to Clancy's Cold War thrillers. Michael B Jordan stars as John Clark, the writer's second most popular character, after Jack Ryan, who has a series that airs on the same streamer. Previously played on film by Willem Dafoe and Liev Schreiber, John Clark gets an origin story in Without Remorse. It establishes, in its opening scene, not only his formidable physicality, but also his



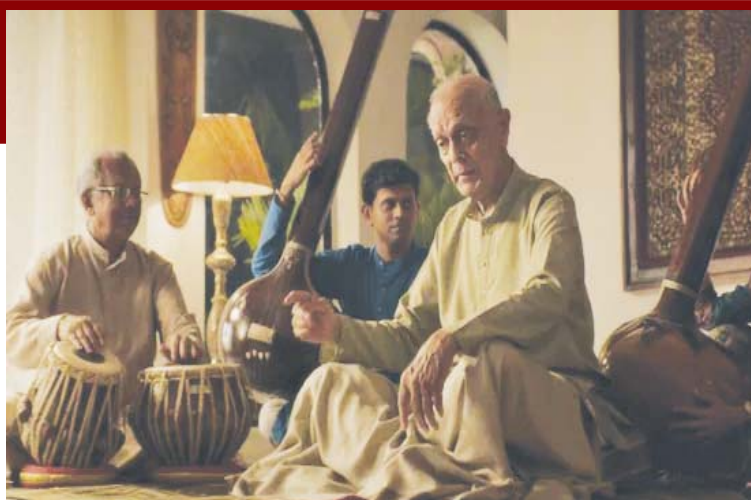
ideology. We watch as multiple members of his SEAL team are assassinated one by one, in abruptly structured scenes. When they come for Clark, they find his pregnant wife instead. Her brutal murder compels him to go rogue. This might seem like a tired trope in spy thrillers, but it's really radical, if you consider it in an Indian context. While our industry has virtually made it impossible to question institutions, here's a movie, muddled as it might be, that features a protagonist who not only actively turns his back on his nation, but also questions how men and women like him have

been exploited by it. "I'll show them what a pawn can do to a king," he says in one scene, before unleashing a tirade of vengeful violence that attracts the attention of the President and his cronies.

But Without Remorse, before being dumped on Amazon, appears to have been designed as a PG-13 film. There is violence - the movie devotes more time to gunfights than actual conversations - but it's all very sanitised. The pacing, meanwhile, makes it seem like an assembly cut - not at all elegant like its protagonist, but almost mechanical.

The Disciple movie review:***A demanding drama from master-in-the-making Chaitanya Tamhane***

The Disciple movie review: Director Chaitanya Tamhane's new film, out on Netflix, is a demanding drama about obsession; another major step in the creative evolution of one of India's most promising young filmmakers.



The music in The Disciple brings to mind that scene from La La Land, in which Ryan Gosling's Seb, a lifelong devotee, explains jazz to Emma Stone's Mia, who thinks of it as elevator music. "It's not relaxing," Seb says, on the verge of losing it. "It's conflict, and it's compromise, and it's new, every time. It's very, very exciting." There are several scenes in The Disciple, director Chaitanya Tamhane's second feature film, in which discerning crowds gather to watch a performance of Indian classical

music. They bob their heads gently, their bodies swaying in near-unison to the 'raagas'. I have read foreign journalists who watched the film at the Venice and Toronto International Film Festivals describe the music as 'soothing', mistaking it, perhaps like Mia, for what you'd hear in the lobby of a Taj, or at Saravana Bhawan. It's likely that you're reminded of Damien Chazelle's films while watching this one, obsessed as it is with obsession. But thematically and tonally, Tamhane's follow-up to his modern

masterpiece Court has more in common with Japanese cinema. "Till the age of 40, we didn't think of anything but practice," the aspiring 24-year-old musician Sharad Nerulkar's 'guruji' tells him in one scene, after Sharad displays a hint of impatience. Guruji isn't a hothead like JK Simmons' instructor from Chazelle's Whiplash, but more reserved, like chef Jiro Ono, whose relationship with his son was documented so thoughtfully in Jiro Dreams of Sushi. Guruji's expectations of Sharad aren't dissimilar to what the greatest sushi chefs demand of their apprentices - years of dedication perfecting knife work and rice-making, before they can even attempt crafting the actual dish. Sharad reminded me of director Goro Miyazaki, a man who reluctantly followed in his illustrious father's footsteps, but

learned some time later that he simply wasn't cut out for it. Like Studio Ghibli's internal affairs, succession plays a key role in The Disciple as well. Sharad grew up hearing his father wax lyrical about the legendary Maai, an idealistic singer who refused to perform for crowds, or allow her music to be recorded. One of Maai's disciples was Sharad's own Guruji; this isn't conveyed in as many words, but it's almost as if Sharad believes that he belongs to some sort of holy bloodline. Conquering the world of classical music isn't merely his artistic ambition, but a spiritual quest. He is a samurai, a monk who goes on nighttime bike rides in Mumbai, almost as an act of meditation. On his rides, filmed entirely in slow-motion, he listens to rare recordings of Maai's lectures, in which she speaks about resisting temptation -

Bollywood is but a block away - and the importance of remaining 'lonely and hungry'. Later, when he is getting pictures taken for his website, the photographer asks him to loosen up a little. "Smile, you enjoy singing, don't you?" he asks. The look on Sharad's face suggests that the photographer might as well have asked for his mother's hand in marriage; it's been a while since he 'enjoyed' doing anything. As languidly paced as it is, there is a claustrophobic quality to The Disciple that is hard to ignore. Like its protagonist, the film never takes it easy; Sharad has no friends to speak of, he has no hobbies, no real job, and no interests beyond singing. There's a sense that he's continuing down this demanding path because of an escalation in commitment - he has invested far too much energy into this to turn back around.

Why Dua Lipa is Hotter Than Hell! Singer

25, born in London to Kosovan refugee parents came back to the UK ALONE at 14 to become a star and now has the world at her feet with BRIT awards, No. 1s and a celeb boyfriend

Dua Lipa dominated the Brit Awards last night, walking away with the best female solo artist and the coveted best album gongs. At just 25 years old, the stylish songstress has firmly established herself as one of Britain's biggest pop stars - realising a dream that started when she was a primary schoolgirl in Camden.

Born in London to Kosovar-Albanian parents who fled conflict and political instability in the Balkans, Dua attended a small state primary school and had her first taste of performing while taking Saturday classes at the world-renowned Sylvia Young Theatre School. After spending a few years in Pristina after her father's job as a marketing manager took them back to his native Kosovo, Dua bravely decided to return to the UK alone at the age of 14 in pursuit of her dreams of pop stardom. In 2014, after achieving 4 A-Levels at a Camden all-girls sixth form college, the talented teenager had signed with Warner Bros. Records. Now, just seven years later, she is preparing to tour the world with a No. 1 album - and has

picked up three Grammy awards, an Evian brand ambassadorship and a celebrity boyfriend in Anwar Hadid along the way. Born in London in 1995, Dua is the eldest daughter of Dukagjin Lipa and his wife, Anesa, who is of Bosnian and Kosovan descent. Dukagjin, a former rocker who shares his daughter's love of music, is the son of well-known historian Seit Lipa, who served as head of the Kosovo Institute of History. 'Once the Serbians came in, they wanted a lot of the historians to rewrite the history of Kosovo,' Lipa told the Observer in 2018. To change it - that Kosovo was always part of Serbia and never part of Yugoslavia. 'And my grandfather was one of those people who wouldn't, so he lost his job, because he didn't want to write a history that he didn't believe to be true.' He was an acquaintance of Besim Sahatçiu, the late grandfather of pop star Rita Ora, who was born in Pristina. This week Dukagjin shared a photo of the two men enjoying lunch together in the 1960s. Seit died of a heart attack in 1999, the year the Kosovo War ended. Besim died in 2005.

Dukagjin was training to be a dentist and Anesa a lawyer before leaving Kosovo but they gave up their professions to flee their home country in search of somewhere safer to raise a family.

They settled in Hampstead, north London. After Dua, whose name means 'love' in Albanian, came daughter Rina, now 17, a model, and son Gjin, 15, who has a 190,000-strong Instagram following.

To earn money, Dukagjin and Anesa picked up jobs waiting tables at cafes and bars. Her father took night classes in business and Anesa retrained in travel and tourism.



Beyonce is a vision of cool as she serves major leg in low-cut black dress with thigh-high slit



She's not just a musical sensation, but a style icon. And Beyonce was looking fierce once again in an edgy slideshow posted to her Instagram account on Wednesday. The chart-topper, 39, served major leg in a low-cut belted black dress with thigh-high slit. The Crazy In Love songstress flashed her cleavage and sexy black lace lingerie as she posed with an air of confidence for the camera. Despite being floor-length, the dress was quite

revealing with its plunging neckline and long slit. Accentuating Beyonce's fabulous body, the dress was cinched at the waist with a black leather belt and dazzling buckle. She took the glamour to a whole new level with huge metallic earrings and matching choker necklace. Enhancing the cool vibe were her petite, metal-rim shades. She wore her brunette tresses down in a silky, glossy style that cascaded down past her waist. Finishing off the look was a black clutch and leather heels. Not pictured in the photos was Beyonce's husband Jay-Z, 51, and their three children, Blue Ivy, nine, and their

fraternal twins Rumi and Sir, three. In a rare interview with the Sunday Times Style, the rapper opened up about raising a family with Beyoncé amid the pandemic, which he said gave them a chance to 'really connect.' 'In the beginning it was time for everyone to sit down and really connect, and really focus on family and being together, and take this time to learn more about each other,' he explained. 'And then, as it wore on, it's like, "OK, all right, what is the new normal?"... If anything came from this, it's that we have to recognize that we're all connected. It's a metaphor for how connected we are.'



Kim Kardashian flashes peace signs while modeling a brown leather strapless top with matching slacks from the comfort of her closet

She's moving on from the reality show which made her a household name.

But Kim Kardashian made sure to carve out some personal time as she modeled a brown leather ensemble from the comfort of her closet. The 40-year-old social media savant flashed peace signs while wearing a strapless top with suede slacks as she navigates a host of new changes coming her way this year. Her brown leather top featured stitched braiding along the hem and cups, which she paired with high-waisted slacks. She wore a massive gold cross on a brown choker, and added a few chunky gold rings to complete her ensemble. Kim simply captioned the series with a brown box emoji, possibly a nod to the cardboard color or uniforms worn by UPS delivery employees.

Her dark brown hair was parted down the middle and worn in natural waves, and she showed

off her flawless complexion with effortless glam.

Kim recently broke down in tears as she revealed the 'excruciating decision' to end filming her family's show to the crew during a n episode of



thing that we have ever done and we can't even express the appreciation that we have for you along the way.'

Kim could barely speak as she clutched her neck: 'I just want you guys to know how much we really appreciate you guys each and every one of you for spending time away from your families to be with our crazy family.'

The reality star also split from her estranged husband West after almost seven years of marriage, and in a new teaser clip for Keeping Up with the Kardashians, Kim admits she's ready to put the past behind her. In the video - which shows a range of highlights for the upcoming final ever episodes of the E! reality series - Kim's mother Kris Jenner tells her: 'I just want you to be happy and joyful.' And Kim replies: 'Yeah, and I'm ready too.'

Salman Khan asks fans to say no to piracy ahead of Radhe release

Salman Khan's Radhe: Your Most Wanted Bhai is all set to release tomorrow, May 13. Ahead of the big release, Salman has shared a special video, taking a commitment from everyone to watch Radhe on Zee5 and say no to piracy in entertainment.

SALMAN KHAN SHARES SPECIAL VIDEO

Salman shared a special video to send out the message. He wrote,

"No piracy in entertainment... #Radhe." In the clip, Salman mentions how many people put in lots of efforts to make one film and it is very upsetting when some people take to piracy to enjoy that film.

ABOUT RADHE

Along with Salman Khan, Radhe also stars Disha Patani, Randeep Hooda and Jackie Shroff in pivotal roles. The movie is presented by Salman Khan films in association

with ZEE Studios. It is produced by Salman Khan, Sohail Khan and Reel Life Production Pvt. limited.

The movie will release in over 40 countries, including a theatrical release in major overseas markets on May 13, on the occasion of Eid. The film will be available on ZEE5 with ZEE's pay per view service ZEEplex on the Zee5 OTT platform and all leading DTH operators.

Ab limited resources mein happiness dhundh rahe hai: Kamna Pathak

We've been living in unprecedented times owing to the outbreak of Covid-19, but the vaccination drive is restoring hope in many, including Kamna Pathak. The actor wishes to combat myths and misguided information, and persuade the masses to get vaccinated. "Vaccination doesn't come with a guarantee of not contracting the virus, but the symptoms are mild.

I've witnessed it in my family," says the Happu Ki Ultan Paltan actor, whose parents tested positive even after being inoculated, but swiftly



recovered. She goes on to caution people to steer clear of incorrect information being shared online:

"Log kehte hai ye karlo, ye kha lo, ye peelo... itne nuskhe nikaal diye sabne, but I'd say stay away from this." Being away from family, especially during testing times like these, is tough. Such is the case for Pathak, too, who is currently in Mumbai, away from her family in her hometown Indore, Madhya Pradesh. "Mental stability is a challenge, but I have had plenty of learnings since the last lockdown.



Why the world needs to help Modi govt figure out the risk from Covid variant B.1.617

(SAI Bureau)- If you haven't heard of B.1.617 yet, chances are you soon will.

This particular Covid-19 variant is at least partly behind the overwhelming second wave in India, the current global epicenter of the pandemic. The World Health Organization has now raised B.1.617 from a "variant of interest" to a "variant of concern." Authorities like Public Health England are already treating it as the latter, meaning there's something worrying about one or more of the

criteria on which a virus is judged - including how fast it transmits, how many it kills, and whether it evades detection or makes vaccines less effective. The stakes underlying these threat thresholds have risen beyond guessing the true extent of the unfolding disaster in India. Whether daily fatalities and new cases are, as



officially reported, around 4,000 and 400,000, respectively, or closer to 25,000 deaths and between 2 million and 5 million infections, as Brown University School of Public Health's Ashish Jha estimates, the rest of the world needs to help the country combat this

(Contd on page 34)

Meet the workers who put food on America's tables - but can't afford groceries



(SAI Bureau)-In the piercing midday heat of southern Texas, farmhand Linda Villarreal moves methodically to weed row after row of parsley, rising only occasionally to stretch her achy back and nibble on sugary biscuits she keeps in her pockets. In the distance, a green and white border patrol truck drives along the levee beside the towering steel border wall. For this backbreaking work, Villarreal is paid \$7.25 per hour, the federal minimum wage since 2009, with no benefits. She takes home between \$300 and \$400 a week depending

(Contd on page 35)

Colonial hack: How did cyber-attackers shut off pipeline?



(SAI Bureau)- Investigators at the largest fuel pipeline in the US are working to recover from a devastating cyber-attack that cut the flow of oil. The hack on Colonial Pipeline is being seen as one of the most significant attacks on critical national infrastructure in history. The pipeline transports nearly half of the east coast's fuel supplies and prices at pumps are expected to rise if the outage is long lasting.

(Contd on page 35)

India's New Covid Cases Have Peaked, Shows Cambridge Tracker

(SAI Bureau)-The number of new coronavirus infections in India has peaked, according to a new tracker developed by researchers at Cambridge Judge Business School and the National Institute of Economic and Social Research.

"But there is substantial variation among states and union territories in their trajectories, with cases continuing to increase over the next two weeks in areas such as Assam, Himachal Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and Tripura," the researchers wrote. The projections are based on



reported numbers and are in line with those from some other experts, including Prime Minister Narendra Modi's advisers. India reported a record 414,188 new cases on May 7 -- about

(Contd on page 35)

Secret Service recovers \$2 billion in fraudulently obtained Covid-19 relief funds



(SAI Bureau)- Federal officials from the US Secret Service have helped recover around \$2 billion in fraudulently obtained Covid-19 relief funds and seized more than \$640 million from accused fraudsters, the agency said Wednesday. One

(Contd on page 34)

Chainsaw massacre: tree poaching hits Canada amid lumber shortage



(Contd on page 35)