



The South Asian



INSIDER

Looking to Buy/Sell ?

We know the difference between Home & House



**Nlight
Real
Estate**

Sharanjit Singh Thind
Real Estate Broker/Notary Public

Tel: 516 NLIGHT8

Vol. 20

Issue 7

Friday 17 April to 21 April 2021

\$1

www.thesouthasianinsider.com

Global Conflict Triangle?

US think-tank flags possibility of India-Pakistan, India-China war

- A US think tank forecast reads "Although a general war between India and Pakistan is unlikely, crises between the two are likely to become more intense, risking an escalatory cycle".
- Report also warns that India and Pakistan may stumble into a large-scale war neither side wants, 'especially following a terrorist attack that the Indian Government judges to be significant.'



Story on
Pages
32-34



Insurance

Tel : 516 NLIGHT 8 (516 654 4488)

Indian-American Healthcare Workers In Green Card Backlog Protest At US Capitol



(Insider Bureau)- Urging American lawmakers to pass a legislation that ends the archaic per country quota for legal permanent residency in the US, a group of frontline Indian-American healthcare professionals, stuck in

the 150-plus-year Green Card backlog, held a peaceful demonstration in front of the Capitol. A Green Card, known officially as a Permanent Resident Card, is a document issued to immigrants to the US

as evidence that the bearer has been granted the privilege of residing permanently in the country. In a joint statement on Monday, the Indian-American doctors said that they are in a 150-plus-year Green Card backlog due to archaic country caps that allows no nation to get more than seven per cent of employment-based green cards. "India is a land of a billion plus people but the number of green cards it gets is the same as a country as small as Iceland. There is no cap on H-1B visa though and Indians make 50 per cent of the H-1B work force. This discrepancy between H-1B and green cards has created an

inhuman backlog that is adversely affecting our professional and personal lives," they said. Indian IT professionals, most of whom are highly skilled and come to the US mainly on the H-1B work visas, are the worst sufferers of the current immigration system which imposes a seven per cent per country quota on allotment of the coveted Green Card or permanent legal residency. The protesters said that the fairness bill removes country caps and allots green cards as a first come first serve basis. It passed in the House of Representatives by 365 votes in 2019 and its Senate equivalent S386 passed the Senate in

2020. Now the bill is back to the House as a modified version.

They urged Congresswoman Zoe Lofgren to bring it to vote as a bipartisan solution to end the suffering of skilled professionals. "The Green Card backlog is taking a toll on the frontline health care workers and their families. They are living in fear and anxiety," Dr Namita Dhiman, a child and adolescent psychiatrist said. "US President Joe Biden should end the Green Card backlog by allowing USCIS (United States Citizenship and Immigration Services) to utilise unused green cards from the past years for the frontline healthcare workers in the backlog," she said. "COVID-19 has been brutal to frontline healthcare workers and the green card backlog makes it miserable. This is leading to serious mental health issues in this group," Dr Dhiman added. Baltimore-based Dr Santanu Samanta, a radiation oncologist, said he feels threatened about the consequences to his family and his job, if there is no change brought in the Green Card system.

Never Saw Anything Like Covid: Indian-Origin Professor Behind HIV Research

(Insider Bureau)-World-renowned South African Indian-origin academic Prof Hoosen Mahomed "Jerry" Coovadia has described the COVID-19 pandemic as something he has never seen in a career of over six decades. Prof Coovadia, now retired at 80, was speaking from his residence in Durban after the launch of the 7th edition of his seminal textbook

"Paediatrics and Child Health", 37 years after he first published it. "Coronaviruses have been around for a long time, but I've never seen a disease like COVID-19," he told the weekly Saturday Independent as he confirmed that both he and his wife Dr Zubie Hamed have been vaccinated against the deadly

virus. According to Johns Hopkins University tracker, the number of confirmed cases in South Africa are 1,557,527 and 53,256 people have died. Internationally acknowledged for his groundbreaking research in HIV/AIDS transmission from mother to child, Prof Coovadia said COVID-19 in children was

mostly mild, but could be worse if there were other underlying conditions such as tuberculosis. Prof Coovadia's research, which focused on the subject of breastfeeding reduced transmission of HIV/AIDS infections to children from 40 mothers per 100 births to just one per hundred.

US Authorities Probing Death Of Indian Techie, Pregnant Wife In New Jersey

(News Agencies)-US authorities are investigating the tragic death of an Indian couple, who was found dead in their New Jersey home due to an apparent stabbing. Balaji Bharat Rudrawar, a 32-year-old IT professional and his wife Arati Balaji Rudrawar, 30, were found dead at their apartment in the Riverview Gardens complex of North Arlington borough in New Jersey. Officials in the Indian Consulate in New York termed the

incident as very tragic and said they were in touch with the family of the couple. Bergen County Prosecutor Mark Musella said in a statement that the North Arlington Police Department and the Bergen County Prosecutor's Office Major Crimes Unit were investigating the deaths of the two individuals found inside an apartment located at 21 Garden Terrace, North Arlington.

Indian-Americans Welcome New Rules On Overseas Citizens of India Cards

(Insider Bureau)-The OCI cardholders will now be required to get their document re-issued only once at the age of 20 instead of multiple times needed to be done currently, according to the Indian Union Home Ministry. Washington: Indian-American community have welcomed the Indian government's decision to simplify the process of maintaining Overseas Citizens of India (OCI) cards, saying more overseas citizens will now opt for this form of residency. The OCI

cardholders will now be required to get their document re-issued only once at the age of 20 instead of multiple times needed to be done currently, according to the Indian Union Home Ministry. Highly popular among overseas Indians, the OCI card provides long term visa-free travel and stay in India and gives the cardholders a host of privileges normally not given to a foreign national. So far India has issued about 37.72 lakh OCI Cards.



1 in 7 children faces hunger.

There's more than enough food in America for every child who struggles with hunger. Help get kids the food they need by supporting Feeding America, the nationwide network of food banks. Together, we can solve hunger™. Join us at FeedingAmerica.org



Nirav Modi's Extradition To India Cleared By UK Government

(Insider Bureau)-Scam-accused billionaire Nirav Modi's extradition to India has been cleared by the British government. UK Home Secretary Priti Patel signed the extradition order on Thursday.

Nirav Modi, 50, is a step closer to extradition but still has the option of legally challenging it within 28 days before the UK High Court. The process may take months or even years, as seen in the case of liquor baron Vijay Mallya, who went to court against his extradition order signed back in February 2019. Earlier, the UK Westminster court had allowed the extradition plea and sent the case to the Home Secy.

The jeweller is wanted by Indian courts for fraud and money laundering in the ₹14,000-crore Punjab National Bank (PNB) loan scam.

While clearing his extradition to India, a UK judge in February dismissed arguments like his mental health worsening during

the pandemic and poor Indian prison conditions.

"I do not accept that Nirav Modi was involved in legitimate business. I find no genuine transactions and believe there is a process of dishonesty," the judge said.

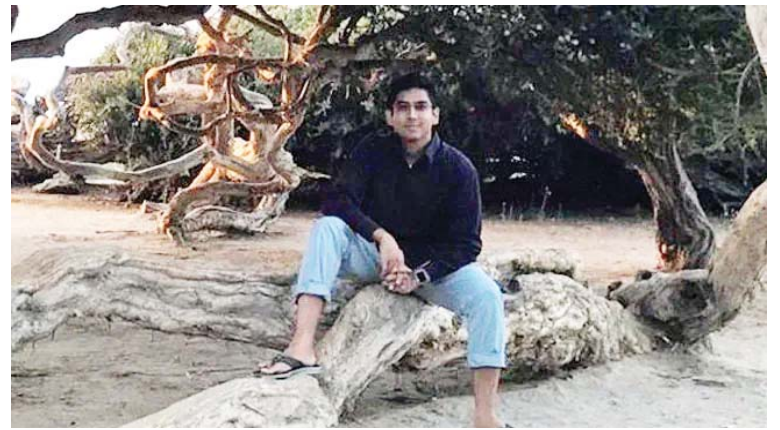
"Many of these are a matter for trial in India. I am satisfied again that there is evidence he could be convicted. Prima facie there is a case of money laundering." Nirav Modi, once the celebrity jeweller to movie stars in India and abroad, was arrested in 2019 from a metro station in London on an extradition warrant. He was repeatedly denied bail as he was seen as a flight risk.

Nirav Modi is facing two sets of criminal proceedings; the CBI case relating to illegal letters of undertaking or loan agreements used to clear crores in loans to the jeweller, and the Enforcement Directorate (ED) case relating to the laundering of the proceeds of that fraud.

As Sanjeev Gupta Rose From Trader to Tycoon, Several Banks Backed Away

(Insider Bureau)-British industrialist Sanjeev Gupta's companies seemed to be prospering until his main lender, Greensill Capital, imploded last month. But long before Greensill collapsed, several banks had cut off the commodity trading business of Mr Gupta's Liberty House Group.

Four banks stopped working with Mr Gupta's commodity trading business, starting in 2016, after they became concerned about what they perceived to be problems in bills of lading - shipping receipts that give the holder the right to take possession of a cargo - or other paperwork provided by Liberty, according to interviews with 18 people directly involved in the trades, as well as internal communications seen by Bloomberg News. The banks include Sberbank PJSC, Macquarie Group Ltd, Commonwealth Bank of



Australia and ICBC Standard Bank. Goldman Sachs Group Inc also stopped working with Mr Gupta's companies around that time.

In 2018, Sberbank sent a team to scour the brightly colored containers stacked in the port of Rotterdam, looking for the ones full of nickel that the bank had financed on behalf of Liberty. Yet each time investigators located one of the containers, they found it had already been emptied, according to two people involved in the matter.

After checking about 10 of them, they gave up, the people said. Sberbank confronted Sanjeev Gupta at a meeting weeks later. He promised that his company would pay back the roughly \$100 million it owed, the people said.

"At some point certain discrepancies were spotted within documentation and logistical data, which made Sberbank discontinue all operations with the company," the bank said in an emailed statement. "The issue was settled in pre-trial format."

Josh India WebTV



Geeta Saxena
Show Host (Prime Time News)

joshindiatv@gmail.com

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

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

Stay home except to get medical care

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



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

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



Call ahead before visiting your doctor

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



Wear a facemask if you are sick

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



Cover your coughs and sneezes

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



Clean your hands often

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



- Soap and water:** Soap and water are the best option, especially if hands are visibly dirty.

- Avoid touching:** Avoid touching your eyes, nose, and mouth with unwashed hands.

Avoid sharing personal household items

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



CS 176129-A 03/26/2020

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

A fundraising event was held recently for Kate Murray, Town Clerk, Town of Hempstead (Former Supervisor, Town of Hempstead and former New York State Assemblywoman). Event was organized by Deepak Bansal of Indian Visa Center in Hicksville. Fundraiser was attended and supported by prominent figures and names of South Asian community, including Zahid Syed of SAPAC, Bobby Kalotee, Chairman, Nassau County Human Rights Commission, Mohinder Singh Taneja of American Diversity Forum, Sharanjit Singh Thind, Publisher of The South Asian Insider Weekly, Jasbir Jay Singh of Hum Hindustani, Pinky Jaggi of LILC and many others. Event was held at Rajbhog in Hicksville.



Few highlights from Holi-Hola Celebrations hosted recently by The Indian Panorama weekly in Glen cove.



Photo courtesy : Pinky Jaggi LILC Facebook

Mysuru: Rs 20 lakh collected via fundraiser to help rebuild library owned by daily-wage worker

After a library owned by a daily wage worker in Mysuru was burnt down on Friday, a fundraiser was set up to help him rebuild the library. As of Monday, Rs 20 lakh has been collected for the work.

(News Agencies)-After miscreants burnt down the library set up by a daily wage worker, Syed Issaq, in Karnataka's Mysuru, a fundraiser has been started with the goal of raising money and helping him rebuild the library.

Syed Issaq, a daily wage worker, had set up a library in Rajiv Nager, near the Ammar Masjid in Mysuru, with the intention to encourage people to inculcate the habit of reading. On a daily basis, around 100-150 people would visit this library. Since 2011, Issaq had managed to

increase his collection of books, primarily in Kannada, to around 11,000. The collection included around 3,000 copies of Bhagavad Gita, over 1,000 copies of Quran and Bible, and thousands of books on various genres sourced from donors. On Friday, Issaq was informed about the fire at the library. When he rushed to the spot, the library was already reduced to ashes.

"It was in the wee hours of the morning when a man living near the library premises informed me that a fire had broken inside.

But it was too late by the time I got there. I could do nothing but stand there helplessly as the flames only got higher and engulfed the whole building," Issaq said.

He added that "A wealth of knowledge that I spent so much time putting together has been lost."

The Udayagiri police arrived at the scene soon after and have now registered an FIR and opened an investigation into the incident of fire.

However, Issaq refuses to give up and said, "Yes, the library



has been burnt down, but my spirit hasn't and I will rebuild it all over again. I couldn't go to school or have the privilege of learning to read and write as a child, which is probably why I am so passionate about

others learning to do so." To help Issaq rebuild the library, a fundraiser has been set up with the goal to raise Rs 25 lakh. As of Monday evening, Rs 20 lakh has been raised to help him out.

India Clears Way For Foreign-Made Vaccines, Wants Applications Soon



Russian-made Covid vaccine Sputnik V has been cleared for emergency use by the Drugs Controller General of India.

(News Agencies)-The government has decided to fast-track emergency approval for Covid vaccines used in western nations and Japan, after the world's biggest surge in cases in the country. The plan is to increase the pace of vaccination with a bigger pool of vaccines.

Here are the Top 10 points in this

big story:

"We hope and we invite the vaccine makers such as Pfizer, Moderna, Johnson & Johnson and others...to be ready to come to India as early as possible," said VK Paul, chairman of the National Expert Committee on Vaccine Administration.

Vaccines authorised by the

World Health Organization or authorities in the US, Europe, the UK and Japan "may be granted emergency use approval in India, mandating the requirement of post-approval parallel bridging clinical trial", the health ministry said.

With this, companies will not need to conduct small, local safety trials for their vaccines before seeking emergency approval.

Russian-made Covid vaccine Sputnik V has already been cleared for emergency use by the Drugs Controller General of India.

Limited doses of the vaccine will likely be available by the end of

this month or early next month. Five more vaccines are expected to get approval this year. The list includes Johnson and Johnson (Bio E), Zydus Cadila, Serum's Novavax and a nasal vaccine from Bharat Biotech.

Since last week, several states said their vaccine stocks were running low. The list includes Maharashtra, Punjab, Delhi, Telangana and Rajasthan. Union health minister Harsh Vardhan, however, said Maharashtra were creating panic to deflect attention from its own inability to control the infection.

Later, Prime Minister Narendra Modi made it clear that there

should be no political blame game on vaccination. "I told you that you shouldn't worry a bit if the number of cases is high. Don't be under any kind of pressure that your performance is bad," he said.

The country is also trying to step up vaccination with PM Modi's call for a four-day "Tika Utsav". India had started the world's largest vaccination programme on January 16 and so far, more than 10 crore doses have been administered.

Over the last 24 hours, the country logged 1,61,736 fresh Covid cases, pushing the s caseload to over 1.36 crore.

Covid-19 protocol tossed away at Haridwar Kumbh Mela as 31 lakh throng for holy dip | Ground report

No masks, no social distancing and Covid-19 protocol tossed away. This was the scene at the Haridwar Kumbh Mela on Monday as nearly 31 lakh people thronged to the Kumbh Mela for a holy dip in river Ganga at Haridwar's Har Ki Pauri.

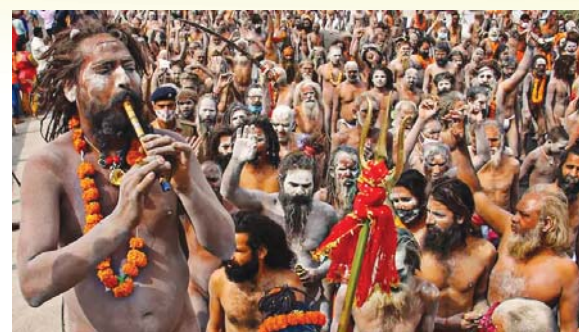
Of course, the Uttarakhand government made tall claims that it would ensure the best arrangements are in place to manage the crowds. But ground reality in Haridwar on Monday was quite different.

Uttarakhand Director General of Police (DGP) Ashok Kumar said they had expected the crowd to be even bigger.

"Had it been an ordinary year, the gathering would have seen more than 50-60 lakh people. It appears that people were apprehensive and aware of the

Covid-19 situation. This is perhaps why the footfall is significantly low this year," the DGP said.

The Haridwar Kumbh Mela



It is for the first time in the history of the grand religious congregation, held on the banks of the Ganga in Haridwar once in 12 years, that its duration has been curtailed to just one month due to the

pandemic.

In normal circumstances, Kumbh is held for nearly four months. Its last edition was held in Haridwar from January 14 to April 28 in 2010. Between April 1 and 30,

there will be three major bathing dates (shahi snan or royal baths) on April 12, 14 and 27. Besides the shahi snan dates when people descend in droves on the banks of the Ganga in Haridwar for a holy bath, a heavy turnout of devotees is also expected on the occasion of Chaitra Pratipada on April 14 and Ram Navami on April 21. The notified Kumbh Kshetra (Kumbh area) covers various places in Haridwar, Dehradun and Tehri districts.

Limitations in handling such large crowds: Haridwar DM

As per official data, nearly 31 lakh people offered prayers and took a dip in the Ganga between Sunday midnight and Monday 3 pm. Speaking to India Today TV, the Haridwar district administration said while it has made the best efforts to control the situation, there are limitations when handling such large crowds. Haridwar District Magistrate (DM) and officer in-charge of the Kumbh Mela, Deepak Rawat said, "We are appealing to the people and making them aware about Covid-19 safety protocol. We are asking people to wear masks but ensuring social distancing in this very small area (where the Kumbh Mela is being held) is going to be a really challenging task."

'Inconsistencies in evidence': Bombay HC grants bail, suspends sentence of elderly couple convicted in POCSO case

Bombay High Court recently granted bail to and suspended the sentence of an octogenarian couple accused of sexually assaulting a minor from their building in 2013.

(News Agencies)-The Bombay High Court has granted bail to an octogenarian couple sentenced to 10 years of rigorous imprisonment for sexually assaulting their four-year-old neighbour in 2013 and suspended their punishment after finding inconsistencies in the evidence of the witnesses against the two.

In March, the special Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) court had convicted and sentenced the 87-year-old man and his wife, 81, to 10 years in prison for offences punishable under Section 6 (aggravated penetrative sexual assault) of the

POCSO Act.

Advocate Dinesh Tiwari appearing for the elderly couple submitted that the allegations against the couple are false and baseless. He also pointed out that there are several inconsistencies in the evidence of witnesses.

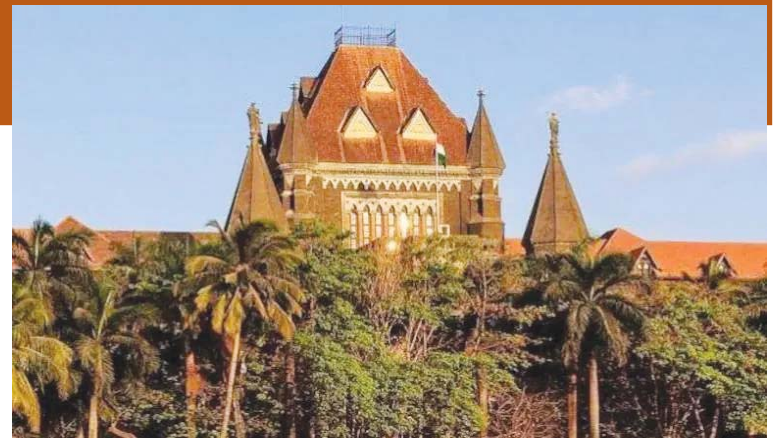
The couple had filed an appeal before the high court against their conviction and sought suspension of their sentence and enlargement on bail, pending the hearing and final disposal of their petition.

Dinesh Tiwari said that the mother of the girl, who had registered the complaint, had initially stated

that the man, affectionately called 'dada' by the girl, had sexually assaulted the minor and subsequently his wife had done the same. However, the four-year-old minor had said that it was only the 87-year-old man who sexually assaulted her.

While pointing towards the medical evidence on record, Dinesh Tiwari said that the reason for falsely implicating the octogenarian couple was for taking over their house in which they are staying.

Thus, Dinesh Tiwari pleaded that considering the age of the couple and the fact that they were on bail during the trial, the sentence



should be suspended and they should be granted bail. Justice Revati Mohite Dere of Bombay High Court, after going through the details of the case, observed that the couple had not abused or misused the liberty given to them during the earlier bail granted to them.

The court also observed that "Prima facie, having considered the evidence on record, the applicants [elderly couple] have made out a case for suspending their sentence and enlargement on bail."

The court ordered the couple to be released on a personal bond of Rs 25,000 each.

Study shows Indians among most optimistic about early return to pre-Covid normal



(News Agencies)-Indians are among the most optimistic globally in terms of their expectations for a return to pre-COVID normal, with over 70 per cent expecting it to happen in less than a year, a new study said on Monday.

Importantly, the survey was con-

ducted just before the COVID-19 pandemic was seen moving towards a new peak in India and some other countries.

The survey, conducted by global market research major Ipsos for the World Economic Forum (WEF) with a sample size of over 21,000 globally between Febru-

A new study has shown that Indians are globally among the most optimistic about an early return to the 'pre-Covid normal'. Over 70 per cent of Indians expect it to happen in less than a year.

ary 19 and March 5, showed that Indians were the most optimistic (24 per cent) on expectations for the 'return to normal' happening in within 1-3 months and also for it to happen in 3-6 months (21 per cent).

Besides, a further 23 per cent of Indians said they expect a return to pre-COVID normal in 6-12 months, but people from several countries, including Saudi Arabia, China and Brazil, scored better on this timeframe.

An estimated 15 per cent of Indian respondents said they expect the return to normal to take

more than 12 months, 6 per cent said it would never happen and for 11 per cent it was already the case.

Global findings

Globally, a majority of people at about 60 per cent are hopeful that the pandemic will be contained within the next year, but expectations vary widely by country, the WEF said, citing the survey results.

Respondents in China, India, Russia and Saudi Arabia said they believe it will take a year to return to normal, while Japan, France, Italy and South Korea

believe it will take longer.

One out of two adults globally said their emotional and mental health has gotten worse since the beginning of the pandemic, but nearly one in four said it improved since the start of 2021.

Over 70 per cent of adults in Saudi Arabia, Russia, India and mainland China are confident their life will return to pre-COVID normal within a year.

In contrast, 80 per cent in Japan and more than half in France, Italy, South Korea and Spain expect it will take longer.

2 drug peddlers held in connection with Sushant Singh Rajput drug case

Two drug peddlers have been held by the Narcotics Control Bureau (NCB) in connection with an investigation related to the Sushant Singh Rajput case.

(News Agencies)- The Narcotics Control Bureau (NCB) has apprehended two alleged drug peddlers in connection with the ongoing drug probe related to the Sushant Singh Rajput case. The duo was apprehended during a raid carried out by NCB Mumbai Zonal Director Sameer Wankhede and his team on Monday. These raids were conducted in Malad, Santacruz and Parel.

Sources say the duo could be

arrested soon. During questioning, one of the accused reportedly told the cops that he wanted to become a policeman, but ended up peddling drugs.

In March, the NCB filed a 2,000-page chargesheet in the Sushant Singh Rajput drug case. Thirty-three people, including actress Rhea Chakraborty, her brother Showik, actor Arjun Rampal's partner's brother Agisialos, along with some foreign

nationals, were charged in it. The agency also submitted 50,000 pages in soft copy format in a pendrive to the court, and had relied on statements of 200 witnesses. The NCB is currently searching for one of the prime suspects in the Sushant Singh Rajput drug case, also known as case number 16/20.

Sources say that while investigating the case, the agency learnt that a drug supplier from Dubai was



controlling the supply chain of drugs like marijuana buds, which were also supplied to Sushant Singh Rajput. The druglord running this supply chain is identified as Sahil Shah alias Flacko. He reportedly

controls his supply through peddlers working for him in Mumbai. NCB Zonal Director Sameer Wankhede said the agency had identified Flacko months ago, and had learnt that he operated from Dubai.

15-year-old sexually assaulted by 5 men for six months in Tamil Nadu, 3 arrested

A 15-year-old girl sexually assaulted by five men for six months in Cuddalore, Tamil Nadu. Three accused have been held while two are yet to be arrested.



The incident came to light when the victim's health deteriorated. Her uncle had asked her about her poor health after which she narrated the incident to him. The victim was staying at her uncle's house in Cuddalore as her father was working in Chennai.

The victim's uncle had registered a case at a nearby police station and the five accused, all between the age 19-21, have been charged under various sections of POCSO Act.

Three accused have been arrested and police are on the lookout for the other two accused, Ranjith and Raga.

(News Agencies)-Three men, aged between 19 and 21 years, have been arrested for sexually assaulting a 15-year-old girl for six months in Cuddalore, Tamil Nadu. The victim was staying at her uncle's place when she was

allegedly threatened and sexually assaulted by five men. Out of the five, three accused -- 21-year-old N Dheena, 19-year-old S Vignesh, 21-year-old V Honestraj -- have now been arrested.

Red Fort violence case: Delhi Court reserves order on actor Deep Sidhu's bail plea

(News Agencies)-A Delhi court on Monday reserved its order on the bail application of Punjabi actor-activist Deep Sidhu, arrested in connection with the violence that broke out at the Red Fort in New Delhi during the farmers' tractor parade on the Republic Day. Special Judge Neelofer Abida Perveen said the order on Sidhu's bail plea will be pronounced on April 15.

Sidhu's counsel told the court that mere presence of Deep Sidhu did not make him part of unlawful assembly and that he was an honest citizen who was part of a protest.

The public prosecutor representing the Delhi police claimed that Sidhu participated in the protest with the intention to create violence and disregard the national flag and that he was the main instigator of unlawful assembly.

Deep Sidhu was arrested from Karnal in Haryana on February 9 by SWR Range of the Special Cell. Police said Deep Sidhu was instigating a group of farmers to storm the Red Fort on the Republic Day over the new farm laws passed by Parliament last year. Deep Siddhu was named in an FIR by the Delhi Police.



Sushil Chandra appointed new Chief Election Commissioner

Sushil Chandra, who was appointed Election Commissioner in February 2019, weeks before the Lok Sabha election, succeeds Sunil Arora as India's Chief Election Commissioner.

(News Agencies)-President Ram Nath Kovind on Monday appointed Election Commissioner Sushil Chandra to take over as Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) from Sunil Arora, whose tenure ended on April 12.

In a statement, the Law Ministry said, "The President appointed Shri Sushil Chandra the senior-most Election Commissioner, as the Chief Election Commissioner in the Election Commission of

India."

The Ministry also said that Sushil Chandra would assume charge from Tuesday, April 13 and that notification to that effect had been issued by the Legislative Department on Monday.

Chandra took office as an Election Commissioner on February 15, 2019, ahead of the Lok Sabha elections, after retiring as the chairman of the Central Board of Direct Taxes

(CBDT).

He is set to demit office on May 14, 2022, and will oversee the conduct of assembly polls in Goa, Manipur, Uttarakhand, Punjab and Uttar Pradesh.

While the terms of assemblies in Punjab, Goa, Uttarakhand, and Manipur are set to end on March 2022, the term of Uttar Pradesh will end on May 14, 2022.

New assemblies have to be constituted before their five-year term ends.



India closely monitoring Chinese surface-to-air missile batteries deployed close to LAC

During high-level talks, the Chinese side showed reluctance in disengaging from the remaining friction points at Gogra Heights, Hot Springs, Depsang plains and CNN Junction near Demchok.



(News Agencies)-During high-level talks, the Chinese side showed reluctance in disengaging from the remaining friction points at Gogra Heights, Hot Springs, Depsang plains and CNN Junction near Demchok.

The Chinese surface-to-air missile batteries, including their HQ-9 air-defence system with a strike range of 250 km, continue to be deployed close to Indian territory in Ladakh.

Top government sources told India Today TV that the Indian agencies are closely monitoring

these air-defence batteries, which may pose threat for Indian fighter aircraft and helicopters operating in the region.

"The Chinese People's Liberation Army has continued deployment of surface-to-air missiles, including the HQ- and HQ 22, close to the Indian territory," they said.

The HQ-9 air-defence missile system can track and hit targets at a distance of around 250kms.

"We are keeping a close watch on the air-defence systems and other assets positioned there," the

sources said. Even though the two countries have disengaged from Pangong Lake area, the deployments by both sides remain firm.

During the high-level talks, the Chinese side showed reluctance in disengaging from the remaining friction points at Gogra Heights, Hot Springs, Depsang plains and CNN Junction near Demchok. India has also made it clear that it would consider de-escalation only if there is disengagement by the Chinese from the friction points. The Indian Army

and other security forces have also started returning to the summer deployments in the Ladakh and other mountainous areas along the Line of Actual Control. Both the armies have many troops deployed at the border since last year. The deployment of formations and troops in Sugar sector, Central sector, and north-eastern borders have also been strengthened. Due to Indian tactical operations along the southern bank of Pangong Tso, Indian Army managed to secure disengagement from the Finger area.

CBI opposes bail plea of RJD chief Lalu Prasad Yadav in Dumka treasury case

In a counter-affidavit filed in the Jharkhand HC, the CBI has opposed the bail of RJD chief Lalu Prasad Yadav in the Dumka treasury case pertaining to excess withdrawal of Rs 3.13 crore.

(News Agencies)-The Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) has opposed the bail plea of RJD chief and former Bihar chief minister Lalu Prasad Yadav in the Dumka treasury case.

The Jharkhand High Court on Friday postponed the bail plea hearing of former Bihar Chief Minister and Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) supremo Lalu Prasad by a week. The bail plea was moved in relation to the fodder

scam case. The high court postponed the bail plea to April 16 after the CBI sought time to file its reply on the matter.

The CBI said in a counter-affidavit in the Jharkhand High Court that Lalu Prasad Yadav has not served half of the sentence awarded to him in connection with the unlawful withdrawal of Rs 3.13 crore from the Dumka treasury during the 1990s in Bihar. The RJD

chief was sentenced to seven years in prison under two different sections.

The CBI, in its submission, quoted Article 427 of the CRPC which states that if someone is convicted under different sections, the sentence has to be served successively not concurrently. If the terms are served successively, half of the sentence will come to 7 years.



The RJD chief has claimed that he has already served 3.5 years in jail. The sentence awarded to him in the Dumka treasury case would be served concurrently or successively.

On behalf of the RJD chief, his counsel Prabhat Kumar said that the Jharkhand High Court has already granted bail to Lalu on the ground that he has completed half of the sentence awarded to him in the Dumka treasury case.

On February 19, the court rejected the bail plea as Prasad Yadav had fallen short by 1 month and 17 days to complete half of his sentence. After completing the said period in jail, he once again sought bail in court.

Sunanda Pushkar death case: Court reserves order on framing charges against Shashi Tharoor

(News Agencies)-A Delhi court on Monday reserved its order on framing charges against Congress MP Shashi Tharoor in connection with his wife Sunanda Pushkar's death case. Special Judge Geetanjali Goel, who is likely to pronounce order on April 29, heard arguments from the counsel appearing for Delhi Police as well the Congress leader.

During the arguments, while police sought framing of several charges, including 306, Senior Advocate Vikas Pahwa,

appearing for Tharoor, told the court that the investigation conducted by the SIT completely exonerated the politician of all the charges levelled against him.

Pahwa sought Tharoor's discharge in the case, saying there was no evidence against him to prove the offence punishable under either section 498A or 306 of IPC.

Chronology of the case Pushkar was found dead at Delhi's Leela Palace hotel on the night of January 17, 2014.

The couple was staying in the hotel, as the official bungalow of Tharoor was being renovated at that time. Tharoor was charged under sections 498A and 306 of the Indian Penal Code by Delhi police, but was not arrested in the case. He was granted bail on July 5, 2018.

6 killed, 3 injured as minibus breaks into two after falling into rivulet in J&K's Doda



(News Agencies)-Six passengers were killed and three others were injured as a minibus broke into two after skidding off the road and falling into a rivulet in Jammu and Kashmir's Doda district on Monday.

An Indian Air Force (IAF) helicopter from Jammu was deployed for an operation to airlift the injured and retrieve the bodies.

The incident took place on the Machipal Kahara road in J&K's Doda.

They said the accident took place as the driver of the minibus lost control of the vehicle while negotiating a blind curve. The vehicle broke into two parts before landing on the Kalnai river bed, an official said.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi expressed anguish over the loss of lives in the bus accident. PM Modi said all possible assistance is being provided to the injured and prayed for their speedy recovery, the PMO said in a tweet.

Thinking of Buying/Selling ?



Baldev Singh

Associate Broker/Notary Public

146-20 34 av. Flushing NY 11354

Cell : 917-224-7395

Email : josanalbaldev@yahoo.com

How Biden is Pushing Migrants to Jump the Border

In the weeks after Joe Biden's inauguration, migrants across the city of Tijuana began to leave the various shelters and apartments where they'd been living in favor of an open-air encampment just north of the city's center. It's not a cheerful place; people have little to eat and there's no running water. But it has a crucial location: It's right next to the El Chaparral Port of Entry, the nearest legal crossing into the United States. Anticipating that the doors to the U.S. might soon open, they set up at the very foot of the country's entrance. In February, Rosemeri, an asylum seeker from El Salvador, says she pitched a tarp next to just two others. By early March, it had grown into a shantytown of more than 1,000 people, and today as many as 2,000 migrants - most of them families with children - brave the elements each day and night. Together, the makeshift community decided on a name for the tent city: La Esperanza, The Hope. Rosemeri, like most people in the camp, is not a new arrival to Tijuana. She left her home in El Salvador in 2019, fleeing threats against her life from the gang that controls her neighborhood. Her plan was to request asylum in the U.S. But by the time she arrived at the southern border last April, a month into the Covid pandemic, it had been closed indefinitely to asylum seekers by a Trump administration public health order. Since then, she and tens of thousands of others have had no choice but to wait in northern Mexico, shuffling from shelter to shelter for months, hoping for a change in policy.

"We are Salvadorans, Hondurans, Haitians, Cubans, Mexicans, Nicaraguans," she told me of the residents of La Esperanza. "We are here, all of us, waiting." The early months of Biden's administration have been shadowed by a major increase in immigration, with border agents encountering more than 100,000 people attempting to cross unauthorized in February and more than 170,000 in March, a 15-year high. Critics on the right blame the president's welcoming rhetoric, saying that after Donald Trump's hard-line tack toward the border, it's no wonder migrants are rushing in under supposedly softer leadership. But migrants themselves have a very different view: The issue isn't Biden extending a hand; it's that he hasn't figured out what he wants to do - and has kept the legal pathway closed in the meantime. Despite promising a new approach, Biden has left the effective asylum ban in place, with few exceptions. Realizing they have no prospect for legal entry into the U.S. anytime soon, many migrants like the ones here, stuck in Tijuana without a safe home to return to, are making the painful decision to try to cross the border outside the proper channels. "We want

to do this the right way," insists Rosemeri. The problem for people like her is that there is currently no "right way."

The Biden administration says this is all a work in progress. "We're in the middle of a global pandemic, and it's going to take time to rebuild robust asylum processing infrastructure at our borders," an administration spokesperson told me in an interview last month. The White House did not respond to specific questions for this story. Republicans in Washington have been saying Biden is too lenient, but people on the ground in Mexico suggest the root of the recent rise in unauthorized border crossings is actually the president's prolonged maintenance of the most restrictive of his predecessor's policies: the near-complete cutting off of asylum, a form of legal immigration.

"We want the authorities to simply tell us how we will be processed," Rosemeri says. It's a common refrain among migrants I spoke with. But they have no idea when such guidance will come. The only options available at the moment are to keep sticking it out in squalid and often unsafe conditions until they're eventually let into the U.S. - not knowing when that day will come - or to try to make their own way across the border. Many of the people living in La Esperanza, including Rosemeri, stressed their commitment to following the law, explaining that one of the reasons they're waiting at the official border crossing point is to demonstrate their desire to enter in a respectful, legitimate manner. But that commitment is being tested as weeks become months.

"This is a closed borders crisis, not an open borders crisis," says Alex Nowrasteh, director of immigration studies at the libertarian Cato Institute. "When people don't have the option to enter lawfully, they're going to eventually try to come unlawfully. And the fact that the president has laid out no real timeline for getting American immigration laws back to normal is just going to increase the uncertainty and illegality of actions along the border."

"For many migrants stuck waiting in Mexico, the status quo is bleak. One Honduran woman traveling with two teenagers told me, 'I can't feed my children, and it's so dangerous in this city.' Tijuana has one of the highest murder rates of any city in the hemisphere, and vulnerable, poor migrants are often the targets of predatory kidnapping, theft and rape. 'I just need [the U.S.] to tell me when we can cross,' she pleaded. The mother then described what so many others also told me: At night, mysterious men in nice cars drive up to the camp.

Better communication: What India needs to tackle Covid second wave

There was never any doubt that India will face a second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. What was not known was when, and how big it would be. Now we know that the second wave is here. It is "faster and higher" - all that we hoped it would not be. The possibility that this is a surveillance bias, as we are now counting people with the disease better due to ramped-up testing facilities as compared to the early stage of the first wave cannot be entirely discounted. Even adjusting for that fact, this wave appears to be bigger than the first one. So, what explains it? The size of any epidemic is a function of three things - the size of the pool of the susceptible population, the pattern of contact between the members of the population (frequency, mix, closeness and duration) and probability of spread during that contact (infectiousness of the agent). Let us have a look at each of these in the current context.

The newer variants of the virus have the potential to change the infectiousness both ways, and there is some early indication that the infectiousness has increased in the second wave. But this is unlikely to be an important reason for the large second wave. However, this is an area where constant vigilance is required.

As many people have already been infected in the first wave, the pool of susceptibles should be smaller. Serosurveys also support this as they found that about 25 per cent of people had already been infected nationally. However, this is an average and hides significant variations by state, age and place of residence. Populations with lower seroprevalence

become the potential pool for the second wave. For example, while the first wave in Mumbai was driven by slum dwellers, this time around, it could be the residents of apartments. Given India's large population base, the actual number of people are sufficiently large to enable multiple waves till we achieve a more even spread of protected people.

The persistence of protectiveness of antibodies of those already infected and their cross-protectiveness to newer strains is not well established, though the lack of it is unlikely to be a major contributor to the second wave. It should also be emphasised that vaccination would reduce the pool of susceptibles. However, the current level of vaccination coverage is not sufficient to make a significant difference to this wave, given the fact that we are already riding it. It is a good strategy to prevent the next wave, if we can achieve substantial coverage with it. We also know that it prevents severe disease and hence reduces the death toll.

With the removal of most restrictions, the probability of contact between individuals has risen sharply. We can all see crowded marketplaces, malls and restaurants; public transport is functional. When I visited a park last month, I was surprised that it was fully crowded with hundreds of families and elders, with little use of masks and no social distancing being followed. While a return to normality is needed, and with it some increase in cases is inevitable, what can and should be avoided are super-spreader events like a crowded park, the Kumbh mela, election rallies, etc.



ISSN No. 1554 06X

Editor in Chief & Publisher :

Sharanjit Singh Thind

Editor (Political Affairs-India) :

Aruna Singh

Chief Photographer : Vijay Shah

Editorial Intern: Roubin Singh Thind

Special Correspondent :

Gagandeep Singh (India)

Web Coordinator : Harpreet Singh

A Publication of Media Partners Capital, Inc.

REGD & MAILING OFFICE :

P.O Box 7005 Hicksville New York 11801

Phone: 917 612 3158

editor@thesouthasianinsider.com, thesouthasianinsider@gmail.com

www.thesouthasianinsider.com

Disclaimer The South Asian Insider is a weekly newspaper published every week by The South Asian Insider. It's available in community & religious centers, ethnic grocery stores and also available by mail, email & online to subscribers. The opinions, beliefs and viewpoints expressed by the various writers, authors and forum participants in The South Asian Insider do not necessarily reflect the opinions, beliefs and viewpoints of the Editor. All advertisers advertising in The South Asian Insider assume responsibility for accuracy of their advertisements. The South Asian Insider and/or people associated with it are not responsible for any claims made by the advertisers and don't endorse any product or services advertised in The South Asian Insider. We strongly urge consulting your lawyer before buying/contracting/hiring through the ads published in the newspaper. We are in the business of selling space and claims made by the advertisers are not authenticated or confirmed by an independent source

Covid-19: How to halt the second wave

India Today Editor-in-Chief talks about how we got to the second wave of Covid and how we can tide over the crisis, in the April 19, 2021 edition of the India Today Magazine.

In the first week of March, with the daily cases of Covid-19 reduced to a trickle, officialdom was busy patting itself on the back for having conquered the virus, unlike many advanced countries. The euphoria did not last long. In just 24 hours on April 6, India crossed 115,312 infections, the largest number of daily cases after the United States and the highest since the pandemic began. On April 2, we recorded 713 deaths, our highest number of deaths in a single day. A little over a year after India imposed the world's harshest lockdown to break the rising wave of infections, we seem to be back to square one.

Hospitals are rapidly filling up and major metros have declared night curfews. In fact, what we are seeing is everything short of a complete lockdown. The 871-point dip in the stock market on April 5, even as cases surged, is a warning of how a Covid resurgence could threaten our economic recovery. For a

country that believed Covid-19 was a nightmare we had put behind us, this is a hard place to be in.

How did we get here?

The biggest culprit, it can now be said, is our own complacency. When the number of daily infections began dipping, Indians shed caution, social distancing, hand hygiene and masks. Other factors played a part too. Government health agencies that should have been tracking the virus and treating patients let their guard down. Even when the vaccine came, we did not move swiftly to inoculate the maximum number of people.

Even though India has vaccinated over 75 million people with one dose, the top five states with high active caseloads are yet to vaccinate even 15 per cent of their population. Nationally, the figure is even lower, at 6 per cent. In contrast, Israel has administered at least one dose to 59 per cent of its population, Bhutan 62 per cent, the UK 47 per cent and the US 32 per cent. India has had a

major vaccine success story in eradicating smallpox, a virus with a case fatality rate of one in four persons, far deadlier than Covid. In just a year between 1974 and 1975, the country went from having over 80 per cent of the world's smallpox cases to completely eradicating it. As India Today reported in its June 15, 1977 issue, the Indian campaign was a massive effort that involved in the final phase over 152,000 field workers fanning out across the country to vaccinate people.

The irony is that a country that has conducted one of the world's most successful vaccination programmes against smallpox and polio, and happens to have the world's largest vaccine manufacturing facility, is now struggling to immunise its population. We are also a country that seamlessly and efficiently conducts the world's largest elections, a mammoth task of planning, coordination and physically moving tens of thousands of people. Yet, we



have failed to apply these lessons to our vaccination programme. This is, of course, the first time that a vaccine has arrived in the midst of a pandemic, but clearly, not enough thought seems to have gone into giving the doses urgently to halt the second wave. The task of administering vaccinations was at first restricted to the public sector before the private sector was roped in. It took us about a month to go from healthcare and frontline workers to those above 65 and those with co-morbid conditions. We adopted a policy of stratifying the vaccine administration even when there were sufficient stocks of the vaccine. Instead, India exported 60 million vaccine doses, only

marginally less than the 70 million doses it used to vaccinate its own people. Vaccine diplomacy has its merits but surely not at the cost of one's own citizens.

The virus is now upon us. Worse, this second wave has been triggered by four different strains of the original China variant that caused the first wave in 2020. There is only a very thin silver lining to the second wave and that is the fact that like last year our case fatality ratio remains the lowest in the world. The virus is changing its behaviour and becoming more infectious, but it is not becoming deadlier. Fortunately, we are also not as badly prepared this time as we were last year.

Pakistan And The Curious Case Of Rollback Khan



Within a span of a day, Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan, went from announcing his decision to import sugar and cotton from India, to immediately rolling back the policy. Even though one does observe that the rollback happened on April 1, a day celebrated as Fool's day, when pranks are played out, the rollback of the policy to procure sugar and cotton from India, was not a prank. Two obvious questions get raised on this curious case of policy rollbacks by the Pakistani government. First, why

did a government that is backed by the all-powerful Pakistani army, decide to import products from India and thereby benefit India? And second, why did this strong Pakistani government have to rollback the policy within a day? The answer to the first question is contrary to the portrayal that this was a peacenik move from the Pakistani government. The decision to import sugar and cotton from India, was a decision made in desperation. The Pakistani economy has been ravaged not just by COVID, but

by a massive Chinese debt, mismanagement of the economy, corruption, creaking infrastructure and misallocation of resources, where a significant portion of the resources are sucked up by the Pakistani army and for funding terrorism. The impact of that has been a surge in inflation and massive impact on one of the largest industries in Pakistan, the textiles industry. Data released by the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics showed that higher food prices, particularly those of essential commodities, were the largest driver of overall inflation. Food inflation in Pakistan had touched 14.6% in January of this year, driven by shortages in wheat and sugar. A commission was setup to enquire in the sudden disappearance of wheat and sugar from the markets and the outcome was predictable - it was due to mismanagement of wheat procurement and due to cartelization by the sugar mills. Clearly, to get inflation back under control, the

government desperately needs to get cheap sugar from somewhere. This is a matter of legitimacy for the government. And this is where India, the Pakistani army's bogeyman for justifying their existence, comes in, to save the Pakistani government from losing their legitimacy, by supplying cheap sugar.

And hence, in spite of the current government being backed by the Pakistani army, it was with the blessings of the Pakistani army, that Imran Khan had to ask for Indian sugar, camouflaged in the face-saver of being a peace overture. If Pakistan really wanted trade to be opened up with India, it would have picked up polypropylene, reactive dyes, pharma and tea instead of sugar, as these items form the largest share of Indian exports to Pakistan. So clearly, peace was not the driving factor. Internal exigencies were the driving factor for this policy move.

But why cotton? Cotton does not

lead to food inflation. So why did Pakistan become desperate to import cotton from India? It is because cotton feeds one of the largest industries of Pakistan, the textiles industry. Textile industry is critical for the Pakistani economy. It accounts for roughly 45% of total exports of Pakistan and employs 20% of all workers in Pakistan. With shortage of cotton having a crippling effect on the textile industry in Pakistan, it became critical for the Pakistani army to allow Pakistan to import cotton from India.

Then why did Pakistan reverse these policies within a spate of 24 hours? It seems that the Pakistani power stakeholders are so blinded by their own fabricated adversarial position with India, that a set of powerful stakeholders in Pakistani governance structure, was able to steamroll the government in backtracking on this trade policy, a policy that was critical for saving Pakistani economy and jobs.



What India Needs To Correct To Ensure Jobs For Young People

Nobel Laureate Professor Amartya Sen in his seminal "theory of capabilities" says that for development in a country to take place, it is necessary to make people use their livelihoods to produce the living conditions they aspire to. In this philosophical paradigm, mere economic growth does not bring in development; often, people accept working and living in deplorable conditions in urban and semi-urban India due to limited livelihood opportunities that are available in more serene landscapes. An estimated 90 million students and young people will be joining the workforce by 2030, many of whom have been brought up in the faith and belief that a formal education will propel them into a world of economic security better than their parents'. All too often, when faced with the harsh reality of the gap between their education or training, and the skills and tactical need of engaging in an actual livelihood, despondency and dejection sets in, weakening our social fabric. So, does the present system of education and skill-based training allow our youth to achieve their aspirations and quest for a better life? In search of an answer, Future Forward Skills Mission (FFSM), a project founded by Tata Trusts, Child Fund of India and UNDP and ThoughtArbitrage

Research Institute (TARI), attempted to develop a district livelihood framework that helps forecast skills required over the medium term, built broadly around three pillars that bridge and balance the gap between supply of labour (i.e. job seekers), demand (from industry, own or self-created opportunities, local GDP, consumption etc.) and institutional (government, banks, educational, civil society etc.) enablement. The framework was tested in two districts in South India: Kurnool in Andhra Pradesh and Raichur in Karnataka, one of which is included in Niti Ayog's classification as an aspirational district.

The FFSM project analysed big data, based on Google searches of online job postings, over a 15-year period in these two districts in South India to understand perspectives and the aspirations of livelihood. The analysis shows that searches across the two districts follow a similar trend for the first 10 years i.e. 2004 to 2014, where the interest was mainly in jobs in local manufacturing industries, e.g. agricultural processing, mining and metals, chemicals etc. Around 2014, though, there a major shift toward services, starting with those that support existing local businesses like logistics, transportation, repairs.

From 2018, the interest was mainly around services industries in lifestyle, beauty, fitness, renewables, hospitality, with some jobs showing over 200% increase in interest.

But skill-based training courses offered in the two districts were slow to recognize this shift in livelihood preferences. Paradoxically, most government-sponsored skill programmes in the two districts were usually full; this could be due to the stipend paid to students for enrolment, rather than an acknowledgement of their utility.

Further, the choice of sectors or industries chosen for training or imparting skills are often not aligned to the future growth plan of the district and related economic factors like the composition of GDP, urbanization rate, consumption, flow of investment and credit, all of which drive growth. Near uniformity of the course content of skill programmes across districts, without being tailored to local conditions, creates courses that can certainly be delivered quickly but are rarely effective in creating worthwhile learning outcomes.

The ratio of enrolment to trained and then certified in both districts is below 50%, which shows that students are unable to achieve a level of skill that allows the institution to certify them. Data

on placement is even more dismal (below 25%); for those that do get placed, there is little data to show how many of the students retained their jobs after they completed their probation period. This is a fallout of the structure of government skill programmes, which mandates the placement of students for a minimum time period - a 'gameable' and bendable clause! The question which is largely unanswered in the programme is whether the pedagogy creates sustainable, cognitive and upgradable skills. In most programmes, the skills imparted are significantly rudimentary and rarely upgradable. Worryingly, most jobs targeted by such programmes such as stocking goods on a retail rack or running basic stock ledgers in a logistics company will vanish with the next wave of automation.

Stakeholders such as local industry associations and individual business owners in both districts unanimously agreed that candidates who graduate from skill programmes are not sufficiently trained for the roles and salaries they seek, and employers have to spend up to six months and incur significant costs to make them ready for employment. What are the key learnings from the FFSM

project? 1) The skills imparted should be primarily absorbed in local districts so that people do not need to travel far for employment. Often, the available jobs for a certain level of skills do not pay enough to cover the higher cost of living in a city, and migrants end up living in penury. Localized absorption is also important, keeping in mind the recent move by many states for reservation of jobs for locals, even in the private sector.

2) Skill programmes can only be tailored for the district if the demand for jobs or livelihood is built on the comparative and competitive advantages of the district, its expected growth and composition of GDP, government programmes to support livelihood (such as 'doubling farmers income by 2022'), available institutional credit, the state of industrialization, income levels of citizens, maturity of service industry, etc.

3) The curricula of skill courses must be designed not only by academicians but also include inputs from people who have real experience in running businesses. Apart from a strong technical domain and cognitive knowledge, training in soft skills like communication and business acumen will prepare job-seekers to succeed in dynamic working situations threatened by innovation and automation.

**Some Call us a Media House
Others call us an Institution to learn from**



**Delivering News,
Uncompromised
& Unbiased for the
Last 19 years**

**Email: editor@thesouthasianinsider.com
www.thesouthasianinsider.com**



Scenes At Kumbh Mela Defy Covid Crisis In India

As I left my hotel to cover the Kumbh Mela at daybreak, roads had been blocked to traffic to clear the routes. Thousands of devotees could be seen heading to the ghats.

When I reached "Har ki Pauri", the most popular ghat, the sight was unbelievable.

It was hard to tell this is a country with the second highest number of Covid cases and with a record surge in daily cases each day. Social distancing seemed like a distant concept as approximately one lakh people waited to take a dip in the Holy Ganga before the ghats were cleared to make way for the Sadhus and their

akhadas. Tens of thousands of devotees have gathered for the holy dip on Somwati Amavasya, the most auspicious day of the Kumbh Mela.

The Kumbh Mela takes place every 12 years in Uttarakhand's Haridwar. This time, it is taking place alongside a raging pandemic but it would be hard to tell from the crowds.

IAS officer Deepak Rawat, who is in charge of the annual event,

claimed that by 4 am, more than 6 lakh devotees had already taken a dip in the river and a similar number would do so later in the day.

Mr Rawat has been visiting the Ghats and meeting sadhus to ensure smooth operations and Covid-appropriate behaviour as much as possible. He admitted that distancing was a huge challenge when the priority was to avoid any stampede-like

situation, which is not uncommon in such religious gatherings.

Through the day, Sadhus kept pouring into the Ghats with no concern whatsoever for virus safety rules. Just a day ago, the head priest, Mahant Narendra Giri of the Akhada Parishad, tested positive. The crowds are good for business in normal times. But even local people are worried as they watch the steep rise in Covid cases in Haridwar in the past few

days.

The Uttarakhand police chief, who was present to oversee Kumbh preps during the Shahi Snan (big dip), ruled out fining people on a day when lakhs are gathering in a small city. It was a sensitive situation, he said, and had to be dealt with carefully. What we don't see in TV visuals are the equally frightening sights of crowds buzzing at the markets, hotels or local restaurants.

The perils of the ordinance route

The ordinance route undermines the law-making process, deprives citizens from articulating their grievances through representatives in Parliament when the bill is first conceived and tabled, and presents a fait accompli of sorts. Unless critical, the government must resist promulgating ordinances. As this newspaper reported on Tuesday, based on PRS legislative research data, the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government, in its seven years in power, has promulgated 76 ordinances. The United Progressive Alliance government, in 10 years between 2004 and

2014, promulgated 61 ordinances. A charitable reading would suggest that the higher figure indicates the government's desire to expedite legislation to meet challenges. A less charitable reading would suggest that this is in line with the executive's disregard for the legislature. To be sure, an ordinance — promulgated when Parliament is not in session — has to be passed within six weeks once a session starts.

This is also a route that other governments have adopted. And in many cases, ordinances are essential. But this does not take away from its weaknesses. For

one, the government has promulgated ordinances on issues that perhaps did not have the kind of urgency that was claimed. Two, while ordinances are passed as laws subsequently, this too is often done in a hurry — PRS data shows that only 25% of the bills went to parliamentary committees between 2014 and 2019, compared to 71% between 2009 and 2014. So not only are more laws being brought in without legislative approval at the outset, they are also not going through adequate scrutiny. And finally, the ordinance route undermines the law-making process, deprives



citizens from articulating their grievances through

representatives in Parliament when the bill is first conceived and

tabled, and presents a fait accompli of sorts. Unless critical, the government must resist promulgating ordinances.

Prince Philip was flawed. He was also family

In 2016, Queen Elizabeth II turned 90. Devoted subjects crowded outside Buckingham Palace to cheer. One told a newspaper that they'd come to celebrate "the mother of the nation." Most British queens have at some point been imagined as national mothers. Queen Victoria's brood of nine children were central to her image as head of a model family. The tomb of the first Queen Elizabeth, engraved in Westminster Abbey in 1606, describes her as "Mother of her country, a nursing-mother to religion and all liberal sciences" -- even though she famously had no children of our own.

The death of Prince Philip, consort of the Queen Elizabeth, "father" to her "mother," feels to many of us here in Britain like a death in the family. Britain's *I* newspaper this morning announced the news as the death of "the nation's pater familias."

If you're American and reading this, it probably sounds absurd. We normal Brits will never have this family's riches, their tax advantages, their soft political and social influence. Why do we buy into this medieval rhetoric about being family? Why do we care? Haven't we moved on from Tudor images of sacred kingship?

Part of the answer is about familiarity. Prince Philip, often known by his title as Duke of Edinburgh, was the husband of the reigning monarch for nearly 70 years; he is the father, grandfather and great-grandfather of the next three heirs to the throne. Only those of his own generation can recall a time when he wasn't a part of the public landscape. Like the death of Pope John Paul II in 2005 or Elizabeth Taylor in 2011, the death of the queen's consort is one those great passings that ruptures our sense of the world's continuity. The world is dark, unstable and changing rapidly: the loss of the Duke of Edinburgh will feel to many British people like a farewell to an old order.

There is more here, however, than the mere death of a long-lived celebrity. In Britain, we have a tendency to project our private family dynamics onto the royal family. Like our own family, they are born into a relationship with us -- unless like Philip, they



marry in young and stick around for decades. We pore over photos of the royal children being walked by hand to their first day at school; we watch their weddings and cry over their funerals. As our families adapt to an evolving world, they adapt too, but in public. It is the price paid for the royal family's greatest trick: pretending to be normal.

Some normality. The children born into the royal family are public property from birth. (When Prince Harry recently complained to Oprah Winfrey about being "born into the position," he was talking more specifically about life as a target of violence, but constant threat is a direct result of this lifelong scrutiny.) This is a tangibly different kind of fame than that of the American politician who enters public life as an adult -- or even the child movie star. Every British child born in the same year as a royal baby will mark life's milestones against a little prince or princess. Even the rest of us identify broadly with the generation of the royal family to whom we are closest. Our lives run parallel to theirs.

The ways we identify with royals can look trivial. As a young woman, Queen Elizabeth set her hair into her familiar helmet of loose curls, a style she has barely changed for decades. My own grandmother, a year apart in age, copied the look -- so did thousands of women across the country. When I look at Queen Elizabeth, I see my late grandmother staring back at me. I suspect I'm not alone. My grandmother's sister, on the other hand, reminded me of Queen Elizabeth's sister, Princess

Margaret -- both of them glamorous party girls born into a world which expected little of them but decorative flirtations with men; both left without moorings when the glamor dried up. They were women of their time.

Some parallels feel more tangible. Prince William was born just a few years before I was. In the year he married Kate Middleton, my long-time university boyfriend and I were planning our wedding; now they chat at public engagements about the same early parenthood experiences that mark the lives of almost all my 30-something friends. We all watched their



wedding; now many of us feel invested in their kids. We watched them fall in love at college, cried over their break-up, cheered for their reunion -- why we wouldn't we claim their offspring as our own?

Prince Philip navigated this public scrutiny with pragmatism, despite his visible frustration with it and some missteps along the way. He always made clear that he understood a price needed to be paid for privilege. To many, he seemed like the ultimate insider. But in the royal household "Phil

the Greek," like many other royal in-laws, started off as an outsider. He was the son of a deposed royal family -- nephew to Greece's King Constantine I, who was removed from power for the second time by a military junta in 1922 -- as opposed to a ruling royal house.

I listened as a BBC report on Friday morning described him as lacking an establishment education, not having been to Eton or having served in a Guards Regiment of the Army. Instead, he'd merely been to Gordonstoun, a "minor" private boarding school, and served in the Royal Navy, a socially inferior branch of the armed forces. This is what

Her parents and their courtiers worried that this energetic and ambitious young man would tire quickly of playing second fiddle to a female head of the family -- and they were not entirely wrong.

He was in this, and in much else, typical of a certain elite male generation. He epitomized the glamorous masculinity of the young World War II generation; like many vets, he struggled to adapt to his own irrelevance in the anti-climax of Britain's gray post-war years. But he found new energy as part of a generation of civic entrepreneurs, spearheading redevelopment programs and founding the Duke of Edinburgh's Award, which encouraged community service and self-reliance amongst young people. He was another royal model with whom a generation of men could identify, through the good and the ill.

Even Prince Philip's marriage seemed to represent the moral example of a particular aristocratic generation. His partnership with Queen Elizabeth was one of lifelong devotion. "The Crown" recently caused controversy by dramatizing rumors that Philip had sought the company of other women -- something that he always denied. But whatever the truth, it was in many ways irrelevant to their mutual commitment. The two embodied a generation and a set of mores. Philip and Elizabeth made things work and spent 73 years together; three of their four Baby Boomer children underwent painful divorces. This is the British family in microcosm.

Prince Philip was the patriarch of this family -- our family. Even in death, he shared a trauma with the rest of the nation. Isolated first at Windsor Castle, then in hospital, he was prevented by Covid quarantines from spending his last few months surrounded by his wider family. This is perhaps why the obituaries in Britain will be generous to him. (The BBC's airwaves were flooded this morning with euphemistic references to his regular "gaffes"; or what the rest of us call expressions of racism.) He

A Forensic Examination Of Prashant Kishor's 'Agar Vote Hai'

Politics is not just the art of the possible, it is the art of what is linguistically possible - or impossible. The recent brouhaha over the comments of the political advisor to the Trinamool Congress, Prashant Kishor, on who will win the election in Bengal offers us a classic case of how a tiny particle of language, if ignored, can lead to major missteps in interpretation. In the present instance, that almost invisible element is the Hindi word agar (if). This word occurs in the phrase agar vote hai (if there are votes), with which Mr. Kishor prefaces his 'explosive' remarks.

Controversy broke out as soon as the two or three minutes of an allegedly hour-long recording of the 'Clubhouse' chat were made public. This heated debate has thus far focused on the content of what Mr. Kishor said, on his role as a trusted aide of Mamata Banerjee and whether he should at all have been speaking to journalists in these last, tense stages of the Bengal election. Was Mr. Kishor being characteristically frank - or uncharacteristically irresponsible? What sort of urgent 'damage control' measures now need to be put in place by the Trinamool Congress? In response to these agitated queries, Mr. Kishor has in turn asked for the whole transcript to be re-

leased.

As a linguist, however, my point does not have to do with the 'who', 'what', or 'whether' of this intriguing turn of events. That is for political pundits. My contention, rather, is that - whether his request for the release of the entire recording is acceded to or not - the shape of the conversation that Mr. Kishor had can in fact be more or less reconstructed from that simple phrase with which he begins his analysis in the bit of recorded conversation we already possess: agar vote hai.

I do not know the exact context of this Clubhouse chat, but as an ordinary speaker of everyday Hindi, my inference, like that of most other hearers, would be that such a phrase was likely to have been used in reply to some sort of question about where the votes for the BJP would come from in Bengal. To this, or perhaps some other preceding question, Mr. Kishor provides a quite specific, on-record answer:

Agar vote hai, toh Modi ke naam par vote hai, vote hai toh Hinduon ke naam par vote hai, polarization, Modi, Hindi bhasi, SC, yeh factor hai. [Translation: If there are votes, then they will be cast in the name of Modi, if there are votes they will be cast in the name of Hindus. Polarization,

Modi, Hindi speakers, the Schedule Caste vote, these are the factors.]

Later, Kishor elaborates on his answer. Votes for the BJP in Bengal, he says, will come from the SC Matua community in the 24 Parganas district, 75% of which will vote for the BJP. In addition, impetus for the BJP would inevitably derive from the not negligible anti-incumbency feeling against a government that's been in power for over a decade, the desire to taste a new BJP brand of laddoo (sweetmeat) not tasted before in Bengal, and a simmering resentment against perceived 'Muslim appeasement'. Kishor also repeatedly emphasizes the undeniable popularity of Mr. Modi as a national leader whose 'cult' status appeals to a cross-section of Bengali voters, just as it does to voters in other Indian states.

What is important to note here is that agar logically indicates possibility, not certainty. The fact that Mr. Kishor, consciously or unconsciously, kicks off his analysis with the structure 'agar A, toh B' means that from the beginning, he is not so much 'conceding defeat', but rather, conceding that his premise is intrinsically speculative. This is because agar (if) in Hindi always collocates with toh (then), just as 'if' does with 'then' in English. The relationship here



is one of clause dependency, where an outcome is not certain, but depends on a particular set of factors (for example, the Hindi-speaking vote, the SC vote, whether enough Bengalis are enamored of the PM, etc.). Other factors (for example, the women's vote, the Muslim vote, Bengali sub-nationalism, fear of homogenization, etc.) could lead to other outcomes. They could outweigh the first set of 'factors' in numerical terms. This is what the linguistic logic of the 'if-then' structure in any language indicates.

Am I placing too much emphasis on a miniscule element of language? Is not the actual content of what Mr. Kishor said more crucial? My answer is that syntax hardly ever lies. It can be ma-

nipulated, of course. To quote a well-known example from previous research, a newspaper headline that says "17 killed in Riots" takes advantage of the structure of the passive in English grammar that allows 'agent deletion'. This clause omits the agent. It does not say 'by Hindus/insurgents/police', etc. and in this way implicitly avoids apportioning blame. Much the same could be said of agar vote hai. It implies that the speaker is presenting aspects of a scenario and predicting outcomes on the basis of his perception of 'factors' on the ground - but not that X or Y will certainly win." April is the cruelest month", wrote TS Eliot in The Wasteland after the devastation of World War II.

India's new vaccine regime

The emergency use authorisation granted by India's drugs regulator to Sputnik V, and the government's decision to fast-track similar approvals, conditionally, for any Covid-19 vaccines that have the same in the United States (US), United Kingdom (UK), Europe, and Japan, or which are in the World Health Organization's emergency use listing is welcome

The emergency use authorisation granted by India's drugs regulator to Sputnik V, and the government's decision to fast-track similar approvals, conditionally, for any Covid-19 vaccines that have the same in the United States (US), United Kingdom (UK), Europe, and Japan, or which are in the World Health Organization's emergency use listing is welcome. This is a definite step towards increasing access to, and availability of, vaccines - and it is something that the government could have considered a few months ago. There are more things the government

can do to enhance access. Vaccine-making is a complex, expensive, and risky business. One of the few things the Donald Trump administration got right was its decision to plough billions of dollars of government funds into vaccine-makers. New Delhi may not want to do billions, but it should take steps to boost the capacity of vaccine-makers, streamline government orders, and arrive at a price that is fair to everyone concerned. This requires working with companies, including many in the private sector, not something that comes easily to an administrative machinery that has,

over decades, largely distrusted businesses. The result is usually policies that handicap businesses, where they should be empowering them, and the ultimate price is usually paid by the citizens. Testing is a classic example. With the State regulating prices, there has been little incentive for companies to build scale or invest in technology. And so, even as a second wave threatens to drown India, the country finds itself short of Covid-19 testing capacity. This has resulted in delays, not just in identifying those infected by the virus, but, more importantly, in isolating



them so that they cannot spread the disease to others. Sure, the government has to ensure that no one engages in profiteering, especially in the midst of a pandemic, but it should not come in the way of a business making honest profits. The government should follow up on its approval to Sputnik, and the decision to accelerate approvals to vaccines

approved in other countries - both steps advocated by many, including this newspaper - with a clear vaccine policy. This should cover all aspects, from capacity building to purchase planning to pricing to even open-market availability. And it must have a singular objective - making sure every Indian who wants a vaccine gets one.

Republicans are politicizing the border and children's lives

Like the children arriving at our border every day, my grandmother came to the US from Mexico at seven years old seeking a better life. She worked as a maid, a cook and a babysitter to provide for her family. Two generations later, one of her grandsons is serving in Congress and the other had the opportunity to serve in President Barack Obama's cabinet. The children arriving at our border today are seeking the same safety and opportunity she sought. Instead of treating them like national security threats, we should treat them humanely, and work to improve the conditions in their home countries so that more families aren't compelled to follow in their footsteps. Over the last month, several Republicans in Congress have traveled to our southern border to try to draw attention to an increase in asylum seekers presenting themselves to border patrol. Texas officials like Sens. Ted Cruz, John Cornyn and Gov. Greg Abbott have used these trips to fear-monger constituents about children seeking asylum and gaslight Americans about who really created the challenge

at our border today.

They're spreading lies about what's happening on the border, about migrants spreading Covid-19, and about which president is to blame for the current influx of unaccompanied children seeking refuge. Their hypocrisy is disturbing and detached from reality, but it's not at all surprising. Republicans' trips, speeches, and statements are nothing more than cynical political stunts that attempt to rewrite the history of former President Donald Trump's failed immigration agenda. Republican lawmakers and leaders in Texas, like Abbott, are selling a bill of goods that, unfortunately, many in the media have been eager to buy. As a lifelong Texan and as the grandson of immigrants, I won't be gaslit into forgetting the damage Trump did to our immigration and asylum systems. For four years, the Trump administration worked against providing asylum, attacked documented and undocumented immigrants, froze aid to Central America, and reduced our capacity to care for those seeking refuge from violence and disaster. And what

did Republicans leading the current outcry do? Nothing. They were with Trump every step of the way.

In 2018, Republicans supported Trump's "Zero Tolerance" policy, which mandated that all migrants be criminally prosecuted and thousands of children be separated from their parents. That same year, Trump instituted the 'Remain in Mexico' policy, officially known as Migrant Protection Protocols, that directed non-Mexican asylum seekers to return to Mexico as they awaited hearings in the US. Also in 2018, the Trump administration enacted metering policies to grind the asylum process to a halt and leave thousands of refugees in tent cities along our border. I saw the human tragedy of these policies when I traveled to Matamoros, Mexico, in 2019. I spoke to a mother with a 20-day-old baby on her lap, who told me the story of her long journey to the United States while she swatted flies off of her newborn. And the inhumanity didn't stop there.

In 2019, Trump froze hundreds of millions of dollars in foreign aid to Central America, a decision that then-former Vice President



Joe Biden said would "increase migration to our Southern border, not reduce it." Last year, while Trump bungled the federal response to the coronavirus, he used the pandemic to invoke Title 42, an obscure public health provision allowing US Customs and Border Protection to turn away over thousands of migrants at our border. Trump used the resource to expel more than half a million would-be asylum seekers without due process according to a Los Angeles Times analysis, including 15,000 children who arrived alone seeking our protection. It was unprecedented, immoral, and ruled illegal by a federal judge who ordered the Trump administration in November to accept minors

seeking asylum. The Biden administration has continued expelling most single adults and families at the southern border, but it is admitting migrant children.

However, the same Republicans, including Abbott, who are demagoguing our border did not make a peep in Trump's last nine months in office, when there was a 359% increase in border encounters and a 690% increase in unaccompanied minors seeking asylum. While some immigration reporters may have called attention to the increases at the time, there was no wall-to-wall cable coverage or debates about the use of the word "crisis."

Why Biden should be careful about courting India's Modi government



Hindu nationalist government and its allies have presided over rising violence and discriminatory policies affecting the Muslim population and pursued a crackdown on expressions of dissent." Many human rights criticisms of China echo in India. While Delhi is not despotic like Beijing, the negative rights trend in India is alarming and could make any partnership with Washington untenable. Indian government policies have singled out Indian Muslims, potentially forcing millions into statelessness. The continued enforcement of cow slaughter laws penalizes Muslims, as well as Christians and Dalits, for offending certain Hindu religious interpretations. Authorities regularly turn a blind eye to deadly assaults on Muslims, even in Delhi. And in something hard to believe in the 21st century, multiple Indian states now must approve religious conversions and interfaith marriages. While not as severe as actions

taken in Hong Kong, India's robust and active civil society is also under pressure. The government uses the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA) as a weapon to strangle disfavored NGOs and non-profit groups. Compassion International was shut down in 2017 over baseless allegations of forcibly converting children to Christianity. While scoring points for Modi's Hindutva base, it hurt the desperately poor who received aid from the organization. The FCRA was also used against Amnesty International, halting its inconvenient reporting of human rights abuses.

And now the strong-arm response to farmer protests follows this trend. Certainly because of these challenges, the joint statement from the Quad did not refer to human rights, something almost boilerplate in US pronouncements. Due to India's size and location, both the Obama and Trump administrations courted India, wanting mar-

kets opened and security partnerships strengthened. But the rights environment has worsened over time, with only muted US criticism. Former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo declined to name India as a "country of particular concern" (CPC) for religious freedom violations, despite calls by advocates. However, he and then-Secretary of Defense Mark Esper did sign agreements in October to deepen military cooperation and intelligence sharing between the US and India. The Biden administration appears to be charting a middle course. The State Department only issued a mild critique in February on the farmer protests crackdown, but Secretary Austin raised concerns about human rights violations against minorities, something notable from a Secretary of Defense. Incorporating human rights across the bilateral relationship is smart, and President Biden would be wise to avoid an "all carrots" courtship of India.

The United States is putting on a full-court press to deepen ties with India. President Joe Biden included India in the first-ever heads of state meeting of "The Quad," an exclusive group that also includes Japan and Australia, and Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin visited Delhi as part of his first trip abroad. All in an effort to find friends in Asia to counter expansionist China. But while Beijing crushes dissent at home and flexes its muscle

abroad, is India the right US partner to ensure stability, prosperity, and freedom in the region? Democratic India appears as a logical and natural ally. However, the regressive actions of Narendra Modi's government put the answer in doubt. India's atmosphere has darkened since Prime Minister Modi came to power in 2014. Freedom House recently downgraded the country to "partially free," citing a "multiyear pattern in which the



The ONLY temple in the world outside India
dedicated to Shri Shani Maharaj

Shri SHANI DEV Mandir, New York Sarvamangala Shri SANEESWARA Temple, New York

*Regular Poojas' and
Homams' are conducted on
daily basis:*

Special Poojas:

- + Sri Saneeswara
homam
- + Sri Saneeswara -
parikara pooja
- + Sri Saneeswara
harati
- + Sri Navagraha Homa
- + Poornima: vrata
Pooja
- + Pradosham Pooja
- + Sri Sankatahara
chaturthi Pooja
- + Sri Satyanarayana
Vratha
- + Birthdays / Wed-
dings / Upanayanam &
More... ..



**1616 Hillside Avenue, Temple Suites
New Hyde Park NY 11040
Ph: 718 740 9400 / 516 358 9400
Email: temple.navagraha@gmail.com**

Temple Hours: 8.00 am to 9.00 pm

The Temple entrance is in the western side parking lot behind Hot Breads & Maharajas in New Hyde Park NY

Functions of the space:

*Temple / Community Events / Senior Social Day Care Center /
Art & Music School / Library / Spiritual Lounge / Gift Shop*

www.NavagrahaUSA.com

If Mamata's Banned, What About These Acts By PM And Shah?

I have been involved in elections in India from the third general election for the Lok Sabha held in 1962 as a young magistrate and then in 1967 as a Collector. Then there was a gap. Since 1984, I have directly participated as a candidate in elections for both the state assembly and the Lok Sabha. And all the elections I have conducted and contested have been in Bihar and later Jharkhand - states known for electoral malpractices and violence. Let me confess that I have never seen an election in all my life like one taking place now in West Bengal.

Mamata Banerjee of the Trinamool Congress (TMC) has been in power in Bengal for ten years. It is natural for her to defend her turf and convince people to give her a third term. The Left and the Congress have over the years ceded ground to the BJP, which has now emerged as the main challenger to the TMC. They had won only three seats in the last election but during the intervening period of

five years, they have used (or misused) their vast resources in terms of money and muscle power to position themselves as the real opposition in Bengal. And as always, it has converted these democratic elections into a war. The responsibility for conducting elections in India is cast upon the Election Commission of India which is supposed to be an impartial body. No free, fair and impartial election is possible if this quality of the Commission is compromised. Unfortunately, like all other constitutional bodies today, the Commission too has lost its elan and is not the body it was envisaged to be by the Constitution. Its impartiality has been seriously under question for sometime now and after the mindless action of a 24-hour ban against the Chief Minister of West Bengal, it seems to have lost whatever credibility it had.

This is an unprecedented step, even in the chequered history of the Commission. She has been punished for words and sentences uttered by her. I am

not going into the details here. But the words she spoke are far less objectionable than the utterances of the Prime Minister and the Home Minister. I am aware of the fact that asking for votes in the name of community, caste, religion, sect or region is forbidden. But what happens when the Prime Minister goes to the neighbouring country of Bangladesh in the midst of elections and visits a shrine and temple of a certain community, returns to India, and openly tells that community in West Bengal of his exploits in Bangladesh? Is he not openly and unabashedly asking for their votes on the basis of caste? The 'Jai Sri Ram' invocation is a purely religious slogan which is freely used in election rallies by the BJP leaders to rouse the masses in order to garner their votes. Does it not amount to inciting religious sentiment? The Prime Minister and Home Minister openly incite the people to punish the TMC because it is encouraging minority communalism. Are they not, by



making this charge, openly asking the majority community to vote for it? In the road shows of the Home Minister and other BJP leaders, people dressed as Hindu gods and goddesses can be clearly seen. Is that not asking for votes in the name of a particular religion? Or is it that these people are too high and mighty for the Election Commission to even consider suitable action against them? Why did the Commission decide to hold the West Bengal elections in eight phases in the first instance? Was it not done to help the Prime Minister and

Home Minister continue campaigning on an extended basis? In this day and age, when news travel fast and is mostly live, what was the reason for not stopping the Prime Minister and the Home Minister from campaigning on the days when polling was actually taking place? The PM did not visit Nandigram on the day of voting, but he was elsewhere in Bengal, and as the polling was taking place in Nandigram, he was telling his audiences that Mamata Banerjee had already lost the election in Nandigram.

Mamata's Big Drawback - Her Failure To Mature As A Politician



Singur. Faded brown fields stretch outside the ramshackle town. A broken wall here, piles of concrete water pipes there. It was here, in this once fertile land, that the Tata Nano automobile factory was to be built. It was here, in 2006-2007, that the anti-land acquisition protests of Singur snowballed into a movement that dislodged the 34-year-old Left Front government and swept Mamata Banerjee and her small party, the Trinamool Congress, to power. Today, 14 years later, Singur's locals tell me the agitation was a big blunder. Youths whose fathers had been protestors say

they would all have been far better off if the Tata factory had come up. "We want jobs, shilpo, (industry), karkhana (factory) and karmasanstha (employment), but industry is scared of Didi, and as long as she's here, big industry won't come to Bengal." It's a similar refrain even among Mamata's strong supporters. In the 2016 polls, according to a Lokniti-CSDS poll, 48% women voted for the Trinamool, making women a crucial Mamata votebank. Today, young women at Visva Bharati University say they still admire Didi, but they're worried about the lack of jobs and lack of industry after the Singur

protests. Yet, if there were no Singur agitation, there would have been no Didi. Love her or hate her, Mamata Banerjee dominates the 2021 Bengal assembly polls. This election is entirely about her.

A decade ago, in the 'tsunami' Bengal assembly polls of 2011, I travelled on the campaign trail with her in her white Innova, as she whirled through Bengal like a kal baisakhi (gusty rainstorm). Gargantuan crowds yelled "Didi, Didi." Firing them up, she screamed, "Do you want the CPM out?" "Yes, yes!" they roared back. She was exhilarated at the response. "I am a simple man," she told me as we munched on biscuits in the car. Year after painful year, she had been a lone battle-axe, taking on the Left in violent street fights. "Every part of my body is operated on," she told me, "my brain, my belly, my arms, my back. I've been close to death so many times. The CPM tortured me for years."

Her struggles have toughened her - but also made her suspicious,

unpredictable. Just a year after her breathtaking 2011 victory, in 2012, she tore off the mic and stomped out of a TV show I was hosting because students asked her questions she did not like. Didi is quick to anger, and in her first term, Jadavpur University professor Ambikesh Mahapatra was jailed for circulating cartoons of her; another academic, Partha Sarathi Ray, was arrested for participating in protests. She had promised to rid Bengal of the suffocating fear of the Left, but today there is the same crippling fear of the Trinamool's local commissars.

Yet, Bengal is visibly transformed. There are impressive new roads and several new bridges. Kolkata's streets and pavements are cleaner than ever before, new construction is everywhere. Once-destitute villages are dotted with brightly-painted pukka homes. According to a Trinamool report card, the average per person income in Bengal more than doubled from ₹ 51,543 in 2010 to ₹ 1,09,491

in 2019. This still lags behind other states - and big industry is still not coming to Bengal. However, well-designed welfare schemes like Kanyashree (financial assistance for women's education), Krishak Bondhu (assistance to farmers) and the flagship Swasthya Sathi (health insurance upto ₹ 5 lakh) have worked well. The phrase "kaaj hoyechhe" (work has been done) is heard from many.

Why then is Mamata Banerjee so vulnerable to a rampaging BJP, and why is the saffron party, which stood at zero just a decade ago, now looking so dominant in Bengal? The answer lies in Mamata Banerjee's own "jhograti" or "fighter-cock" style of politics, and the manner in which she has outsourced her party to local Trinamool strongmen. Her government has notched up some solid achievements, but she is unable to project them in a rational, focused manner. Her quarrelsome, confrontational style detracts from her considerable achievements.



NEW FORMS OF THE VIRUS, SAME FIGHT!

It's been a long year of change. And now, even COVID is changing—with new forms of the virus called variants that may spread more easily. But one thing is the same: our determination to help slow the spread of COVID. If we remain vigilant and continue what we've been doing—wearing masks, keeping 6 feet apart, and getting vaccinated when it's our turn—we can beat this virus together.

Learn more at [cdc.gov/coronavirus](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus)



Brought to you by the
U.S. Department of Health
and Human Services.

**WE
CAN
DO
THIS**

Why foreign university collaborations could be the game-changer for higher education in India



(News Agencies)-An important aspect of improving higher education in India is 'internationalisation'. Before the pandemic, 'brick and mortar' format seemed to be the obvious way to implement this, but the Covid challenge has gotten educational institutions to innovate and bring the best of international education to the country. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 stipulates that foreign universities can set up campuses in India. The decision had been long-awaited.

C. Raj Kumar, founding vice-chancellor of O.P. Jindal Global University in Sonapat, Haryana,

is of the view that there will be greater avenues for international universities to explore partnerships with Indian

Nikki Haley just *totally* flip-flopped on Donald Trump's 2024 candidacy

(News Agencies)- Nikki Haley sent a clear message to Donald Trump on Monday: If you run for president, I'm out.

"I would not run if President Trump ran, and I would talk to him about it," Haley said in response to a question from The Associated Press during a news conference at South Carolina State University when asked if she would support another White House bid from

universities to set up teaching, learning and research programmes through micro hubs at Indian university campuses instead of setting up a campus in itself. "This would allow them to use our large network of universities to expand their horizons and enable Indian students to have the best from the entire world under a single roof. Creative forms of collaboration, through dual degree programmes and online degree programmes, will further facilitate greater opportunities for

foreign universities in India without having to go the campus route," says Kumar.

A collaborative call

It's time India opens up new avenues for the education sector; if good international universities decide to set up their campuses here, as a result of the NEP 2020 decision, it will have a great impact on the sector. According to Aman Mittal, additional director, Lovely Professional University, Punjab, "The new entrants will bring in best practices of global education to

India, leading to Indian universities also improving their standards. I can say this because we already have collaborations with more than 200 universities around the world and we have learned a lot while working with them." Indian students who travel abroad for quality education will be able to find such options within the country. Educationists feel that when new players enter any sector, competition definitely increases. But, as seen in the past, it has only helped the sector grow.

Trump. "That's something that we will have a conversation about, at some point." Asked whether she would support Trump if he ran again, Haley responded simply "yes."

That represents a MASSIVE shift from what Haley was saying about Trump -- and his future in politics - - just a few months ago.

"We need to acknowledge he let us down. He went down a path he

shouldn't have, and we shouldn't have followed him, and we shouldn't have listened to him. And we can't let that ever happen again." Haley told Politico's Tim Alberta in February. She added of Trump: "He's not going to run for federal office again. ... I don't think he's going to be in the picture. I don't think he can. He's fallen so far." Which is different than what she said on Monday! Like, a lot

different! So, what changed? Let me walk you through my theory. Haley talked to Alberta -- blasting Trump and predicting that he would never run again for office -- in January, with the images of the January 6 US Capitol riot very much top-of-mind. (Alberta's piece was based on a series of interviews with Haley over several months and didn't come out until early February.)

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.

NYC
Health

Bill de Blasio
Mayor
Olena Barbot, MD
Commissioner

Mamata vs EC: Will voters be swayed by Trinamool chief's renewed street fighter avatar?

(News Agencies)-Till 2011, Election Commission was the go-to place for Mamata Banerjee, as she filed repeated complaints against the CPI(M)'s alleged intimidation and rigging. Fast forward 10 years, and on the opposite side of the spectrum, the Trinamool Congress supremo sat on a dharna against the poll panel perhaps the first time a sitting chief minister has done so in India's electoral history. Old-timers will remember TN Seshan, the former chief election commissioner (1990-96), who tried to clean up Indian politics with an iron hand. The reforms he introduced were hated by several leading politicians. Under him, the poll panel had disqualified nearly 2,000 candidates cutting across political parties for not being able to furnish statements on income and properties. The conflict between Seshan and former West Bengal CM Jyoti Basu was well known. Seshan was a vocal

opponent of the CPI(M)'s "regimented style of rigging" (a term then often used by Mamata), so much so that Basu once said he's not Seshan but Alsatian. Then in the Congress, Mamata



was quite fond of Seshan. Today, as the EC imposed a 24-hour campaign ban on her, Mamata landed at the Mahatma Gandhi statue on central Kolkata's Mayo Road against the poll panel's "unconstitutional and

undemocratic" decision. That the area comes under the defence ministry and she reportedly had no permission for the dharna is another matter. The ban was against her remarks on central forces and a statement following the Sitalkuchi violence that allegedly had religious overtones.

Lately, the Trinamool has been accusing EC of acting in connivance with the Centre. Party insiders say this is a well-thought-out strategy in the aftermath of the Sitalkuchi incident. In fact, many in the ruling party have termed it the BJP's Nandigram moment, referring to the 2007 police firing on anti-land acquisition activists that spelled doom for the powerful Left regime. "So far, there has been no evidence that the mob tried to snatch rifles from CISF jawans as they are claiming. It is standard operating procedure to shoot at the legs to injure, and not on the chest to kill.

Lessons for security forces from a successful counter-ambush against Maoists

(News Agencies)-Two years ago, Maoists ambushed 25 BSF (Border Security Force) troopers in the jungles of Chhattisgarh's Kanker district, killing four of them. The ambush could have been far worse but for the fact that the security forces carried out a determined counter-ambush-that is foiling an attack and forcing the Maoists to retreat. What happened in the 'Mahla encounter' is critical to understanding the weapons profile, equipment and training required to defeat the most lethal tactic in the People's Liberation Guerrilla Army (PLGA)'s arsenal-the ambush.

An ambush allows over a hundred trained guerillas concealed in the jungle, arrayed in a 'U' formation around the security forces. The U is then looped like a net with withering fire being brought down onto those trapped in the kill zone and the guerillas gradually closing in to finish off the trapped troopers.

On April 4, 2019, men from the Alpha company (around 125 troopers) of the BSF's 114th Battalion were deployed on an

area domination and road protection party in north Bastar. The security forces were alert to attempts to disrupt the upcoming Lok Sabha elections. The party of 25 troopers, led by inspector Gopal Rong, had divided itself into three groups and were moving in a 'Y' formation, approximately 200 metres away from the road. Two groups were on the right and left flanks and the third ground was on the road in the rear. They were just a kilometre away from their Company Operating Base (COB) in the dense jungles of Abhujmad. The COB had been established in 2018 to disrupt the activities of the Maoists and had already beaten back four attacks over the past year. As the 25-man party began moving ahead that morning, their left flank came under heavy fire from the Maoists. They had walked into an inverted 'U' ambush in a box of 700x700 metres. It was an elaborate trap. Their guerillas were dressed in 'ghillie suits' (a netting of leaves and rags usually worn by snipers) to merge into the forest.

Invest in First Mortgages

**EARN 8-15%
ANNUALLY ON WELL
SECURED, SHORT TERM,
1ST MORTGAGE LOANS.
MONTHLY DIVIDENDS**

Learn about Investment Opportunities

B-1 Business Visas

EB-5 Investor Visas

Hotel - Land - Business

Investment/Partner Opportunities

For details & disclosures

WREAM

Whitestone Real Estate Asset Management Corp.

Phone: 917 612 3158 Email: whitesone1979@gmail.com

Real Estate Broker/Investor/Private Lender Since 2009



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.



Why foreign university collaborations could be the game-changer for higher education in India

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 provides for international universities to set up campuses in India, which can be a win-win for both students and the sector at large

An important aspect of improving higher education in India is 'internationalisation'. Before the pandemic, 'brick and mortar' format seemed to be the obvious way to implement this, but the Covid challenge has gotten educational institutions to innovate and bring the best of international education to the country. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 stipulates that foreign universities can set up campuses in India. The decision had been long-awaited.

C. Raj Kumar, founding vice-chancellor of O.P. Jindal Global University in Sonapat, Haryana, is of the view that there will be greater avenues for international universities to explore partnerships with Indian universities to set up teaching, learning and research programmes through micro hubs

at Indian university campuses instead of setting up a campus in itself. "This would allow them to use our large network of universities to expand their horizons and enable Indian students to have the best from the entire world under a single roof. Creative forms of collaboration, through dual degree programmes and online degree programmes, will further facilitate greater opportunities for foreign universities in India without

having to go the campus route," says Kumar.

A collaborative call

It's time India opens up new avenues for the education sector; if good international universities decide to set up their campuses here, as a result of the NEP 2020 decision, it will have a great impact on the sector. According to Aman Mittal, additional director, Lovely Professional University, Punjab, "The new entrants will



bring in best practices of global education to India, leading to Indian universities also improving their standards. I can say this because we already

have collaborations with more than 200 universities around the world and we have learned a lot while working with them."

How Centre's tough stand on MSP payment punctured arhtiya's strike in Punjab

The Punjab government, which was speaking the language of arhtiyas (commission agents who facilitate the transaction between a farmer and actual buyer) till Saturday, has been brought to its knees by the central government's stand on the issue of the MSP payments through

Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT). The Punjab government was insisting that the payment be made through the commission agents or arhtiyas, but the Union government had made it clear that no further relaxation will be given to Punjab -- the only state routing the MSP

payments through the arhtiya community.

Sources said the Union government had threatened not to procure food grains from Punjab in case the government did not transfer the MSP payments directly to the farmers' accounts.

The Punjab government was told that the procurement of food grains was an arrangement between the farmers and the Union government and the Punjab government was just an agency. It had no option but to cave in as the Union government's decision might have further annoyed the farmers.

**TEXT AND
WHATEVER
JUST
DON'T
TEXT
AND**



STOPTEXTSSTOPWRECKS.ORG



WE THANK OUR CUSTOMERS FOR THEIR TRUST & LOYALTY

28 YEARS OF EXCELLENT CUSTOMER SERVICE



INDO US EXPRESS, INC.

HICKSVILLE, NEW YORK

WORLDWIDE COURIER  FREIGHT-FORWARDER

DOMESTIC & LOCAL DELIVERY

CALL US AT: 212-447-5720 or FAX 516-932-3750

ALTERNATE NUMBER: 347-538-7041

OR EMAIL US: INDOUSEXPRESS@GMAIL.COM

www.indousexpress.com

GREAT SERVICE, 7 DAYS A WEEK, 365 DAYS A YEAR!

AUTHORIZED AGENT FOR:

UPS - FedEx - DHL - USPS - Amazon

CALL ABOUT OUR SPECIAL RATES

TO & FROM INDIA/WORLDWIDE



Protests across Pakistan after far-right TLP leader arrested

Protests began after Saad Rizvi, leader of the Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan party, was arrested by police in Lahore.

(News Agencies)- Protests have erupted in several cities across Pakistan after police took into custody the leader of a far-right religious party known for holding mass demonstrations over the issue of "blasphemy".

On Monday evening, several major intercity highways were closed by police as protests broke out in Pakistan's largest city of Karachi, the eastern city of Lahore, outside the capital Islamabad and in several other areas.

Local media reported clashes between police and protesters in Lahore and elsewhere.

The protests began after Saad Rizvi, leader of the Tehreek-e-

Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) party, was arrested by police in the eastern city of Lahore on Monday, his party said.

"The central leader of Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan Hafiz Muhammad Saad has been arrested," said senior party leader Syed Zaheer ul Hassan Shah in a video message posted on social media.

It was unclear what charges Rizvi was being held on.

Shah alleged that the government had "violated" an agreement signed with the party in February to stave off the threat of further protests over perceived "blasphemy" by French President Emmanuel Macron.

In November, the TLP called off a sit-in protest that had blocked a major highway into the capital Islamabad over the issue of remarks by President Macron that had been considered Islamophobic.

At the time, the government signed a deal with the party wherein it promised to consider expelling the French ambassador, banning all French goods from Pakistan and guaranteeing an amnesty to all TLP protesters arrested during those demonstrations.

In February, the government signed a new agreement with the TLP after the group threatened fresh protests due to



perceived inaction on the previous deal. The new agreement promised to put the question of expelling the French ambassador to Pakistan and other issues before parliament to make a decision before April 20. The arrest of Rizvi, who succeeded his father Khadim Hussain Rizvi as head of the TLP after the latter died of natural

causes suddenly in November, appears to be a pre-emptive move ahead of the expiration of the April 20 deadline, with the issues of the deal not presented before parliament so far. "The government has violated the agreement [with TLP] and has descended on hooliganism, in a return to its customary ways," said TLP senior leader Shah.

Elite privilege consumes \$17.4bn of Pakistan's economy: UNDP

In an exclusive interview with Al Jazeera, UNDP's Kanni Wignaraja says Pakistani leaders have promised action over the damning UN report.



(News Agencies)-Economic privileges accorded to Pakistan's elite groups, including the corporate sector, feudal landlords, the political class and the country's powerful military, add up to an estimated \$17.4bn, or roughly 6 percent of the country's economy, a new United Nations report has found.

Released last week, the UN Development Programme's (UNDP) National Human Development

Report (NHDR) for Pakistan focuses on issues of inequality in the South Asian country of 220 million people.

The report uses the prism of "Power, People and Policy" to examine the stark income and economic opportunity disparities in the developing country.

"Powerful groups use their privilege to capture more than their fair share, people perpetuate structural discrimination through

prejudice against others based on social characteristics, and policies are often unsuccessful at addressing the resulting inequity, or may even contribute to it," says the report.

Kanni Wignaraja, assistant secretary-general and regional chief of the UNDP has been on a two-week "virtual tour" of Pakistan to discuss the report's findings, holding talks with Prime Minister Imran Khan and other top members of his cabinet, including the ministers of foreign affairs and planning.

She says Pakistani leaders have taken the findings of the report "right on" and pledged to focus on prescriptive action.

"[In our remarks in meetings] we

focused right in on where [...] the shadows are, and what is it that actually diverts from a reform agenda in a country," she told Al Jazeera in an exclusive interview.

"My hope is that there is strong intent to review things like the current tax and subsidy policies, to look at land and capital access."

The paradox of privileges The biggest beneficiary of the privileges - which may take the form of tax breaks, cheap input prices, higher output prices or preferential access to capital, land and services - was found to be the country's corporate sector, which accrued an estimated \$4.7bn in privileges, the report

says.

The second and third-highest recipients of privileges were found to be the country's richest 1 percent, who collectively own 9 percent of the country's overall income, and the feudal land-owning class, which constitutes 1.1 percent of the population but owns 22 percent of all arable farmland.

Both classes have strong representation in the Pakistani Parliament, with most major political parties' candidates' drawn from either the feudal landowning class or the country's business-owning elite.

The UNDP's Wignaraja noted that this creates a paradox where those responsible for doling out

Vaccines sell out in Pakistan as the private market opens, raising concerns of inequality

(News Agencies)-Pakistan is in a tight spot: Covid-19 cases are surging during a third wave, hospital beds are filling up, and the government vaccination program is progressing slowly due to delayed deliveries and limited supplies. So last month, it became one of the few countries to allow the private sector to import and sell vaccines. Initial sales of the Russian Sputnik V vaccine in the first weekend of April caused a

frenzy, with crowds rushing to vaccination centers and queuing for hours for their shot. Several centers sold out in days. Others that had initially allowed walk-ins switched to online sign-ups after being inundated with people. Many online booking systems have since been paused, as clinics slowly work through a backlog of inquiries. One major importer is private pharmaceutical company AGP Pharma, which has received 50,000 doses of the

two-shot Sputnik vaccine. Other companies and private hospitals are in the process of applying and placing orders. The government has received 2.56 million doses of vaccines, all from China, according to local reports citing the health ministry. About one million people have been vaccinated with those shots since February, mostly in priority groups such as health care workers and those above age 50 -- leaving a huge percentage of the country's



238 million residents left waiting, according to official figures. The private vaccines, however, are open to everyone -- and many

people, otherwise ineligible for the government's program, are now hoping to secure a slot in private clinics.

Afghan talks in Istanbul to be postponed: Turkish Foreign Ministry



(News Agencies)-The Afghan peace conference that was scheduled to take place in Istanbul on April 16 is now expected to be postponed to April 24, Turkish Foreign Ministry sources said on Tuesday.

In response to a question posed by Daily Sabah regarding the

Taliban's latest announcement that it would not participate in the talks, the Foreign Ministry stated that they expect that the talks will be delayed and will likely be held on April 26.

A Taliban spokesperson said Monday that the religious militia would not attend a peace conference tentatively planned for

later this week in Turkey, putting U.S. efforts to set in place a peace plan anytime soon in jeopardy.

U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken previously said he wanted to see a peace agreement between Afghanistan's warring sides finalized at a conference hosted by Turkey and attended by top officials from both the Taliban and the Afghan government. The Afghan government, U.S. and Turkish officials had said that they intended to begin the conference Friday. It was to last 10 days. No new date for the Turkey conference was officially set but time is running out on a May 1 deadline for the withdrawal of U.S. and NATO troops from Afghanistan in keeping with a

deal the Trump administration made with the Taliban more than a year ago.

After the Taliban's announcement, Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu held a constructive phone call with Blinken, Foreign Ministry sources said Monday.

The two ministers discussed bilateral issues, the Afghanistan peace process and the planned meeting in Istanbul, as well as developments in Syria and the Middle East, sources said, calling it a "constructive and fruitful meeting." Meanwhile, NATO foreign and defense ministers are also expected to hold a video meeting on Wednesday on Ukraine and Afghanistan, chaired by NATO Secretary-General Jens

Stoltenberg and with U.S. defence and foreign ministers present at the military alliance's headquarters, two diplomats said.

Previously, President Joe Biden has said he is committed to ending America's longest war but the U.S. is reportedly looking for a three- to six-month extension. Until now the Taliban have refused, warning of "consequences" if Washington reneges on the deal and the withdrawal timeline. Last month, Blinken gave both the Taliban and the Afghan government an eight-page proposed peace plan, which they were to discuss, revise and review and come to Turkey ready to cobble together an agreement.

Afghanistan's crystal meth boom is rooted in this plant



In a quiet building at the back of a government compound in the north of Kabul, Afghanistan's capital, Khalid Nabizada sits at his desk. Behind him are four screens, each showing a room packed from floor to ceiling with crystal

methamphetamine-just a small portion of the amount seized by Afghan police in drug busts in 2020.

Nabizada has been head of the Counter Narcotics Police of Afghanistan (CNPA) forensic laboratory for 17 years,

processing more than 60,000 drug samples. These days, methamphetamine takes up most of his time. It's the fastest-growing illicit drug in Afghanistan, he says. And while demand is high, the price is dropping.

"International buyers know it can be made easily and cheaply here, the chemicals used are not controlled, and this ephedra plant is everywhere," he says, turning a wiry, green branch in his fingers. Ephedra-known as oman in some areas of the country and bandak in others-has grown wild and abundantly across Afghanistan's mountainous central highlands for centuries. Today, the plant is behind the dramatic growth in the methamphetamine industry in

Afghanistan.

Around the world, most meth is made from synthetic ephedrine, a decongestant found in cough and cold products. And before 2017, producers in Afghanistan opted for this precursor as well, Nabizada says. They usually obtained ephedrine, or the related chemical pseudoephedrine, from store-bought medications. But sourcing enough to support meth production is slow and expensive. So in 2015, Afghanistan's producers began experimenting with extracting ephedrine from the ephedra plant, and by 2018, most local meth labs were using the plant. The switch sparked rapid growth in the industry and a corresponding surge in profits that

are making their way to the coffers of the Taliban. Data from the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) suggest that Afghanistan has in a short period become a producer and supplier of relatively large quantities of low-cost ephedrine and methamphetamine. The unregulated output has the potential to rival the value of the country's infamous levels of poppy-derived opiates. A growing number of methamphetamine manufacturing facilities operate across Afghanistan, in western Farah and Herat, as well as Nimroz Province, which borders Iran-areas, Nabizada says, that are not fully under government control.

Pakistani transgender woman finds a niche in tailoring

(News Agencies)- As Pakistani transgender woman Jiya measures customers at her tailoring shop in a brand new Karachi market, her eyes gleam with the prospect of a busy Ramadan season and her ambitions to expand. Already, Jiya, 35, who goes by a single name like many trans people in Pakistan, has broken ground by opening a public shop to make clothes for women and transgender women.

Other trans people running tailoring businesses have tended to do so out of their homes, wary of ostracism in a country with many conservative Muslims.

Many landlords were reluctant to give a shop to a transgender woman, Jiya told Reuters at The Stitch Shop in the southern port city. She finally secured one in a new market, which she opened with two other trans women in March in time for the start of Ramadan in mid-April.

The Islamic holy fasting month is traditionally a busy period for tailors as people buy new clothes to mark the Eid al-Fitr festival that ends Ramadan.

For Jiya, who studied at an all-boys' school and learned tailoring with the help of her fellow transgender women, opening her shop marks the start of her

ambition.

"We want to expand this business. We want a boutique with Eastern and Western designs, all types of dresses," she said.

Many of her customers are women, who said they preferred a transgender woman to make their clothes, a change from most other tailoring shops run by men.

"I felt comfortable while she took my measurements," customer Farzana Zahid said.

Pakistan's parliament recognised the third gender in 2018, giving such individuals fundamental rights such as the



ability to vote and choose their gender on official documents.

A 2017 census recorded about 10,000 transgender

people, although trans rights groups say the number could be well over 300,000 in the country of 220 million.

Japan to release contaminated Fukushima water into sea after treatment



(News Agencies)- Japan will release more than 1 million tonnes of contaminated water from the destroyed Fukushima nuclear plant into the sea, the government said on Tuesday, a move China called "extremely irresponsible", while South Korea summoned

Tokyo's ambassador in Seoul to protest. The first release of water will take place in about two years, giving plant operator Tokyo Electric Power time to begin filtering the water to remove harmful isotopes, build infrastructure and acquire regulatory approval.

Japan has argued the water release is necessary to press ahead with the complex decommissioning of the plant after it was crippled by a 2011 earthquake and tsunami. It says similarly filtered water is routinely released from nuclear plants around the world. Nearly 1.3 million tonnes of contaminated water, or enough to fill about 500 Olympic-sized swim-

ming pools, is stored in huge tanks at the plant at an annual cost of about 100 billion yen (\$912.66 million) -- and space is running out. "Releasing the ... treated water is an unavoidable task to decommission the Fukushima Dai-ichi Nuclear Power Plant and reconstruct the Fukushima area," Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga said of the process that will take decades to complete. The decision comes about three months ahead of the postponed Tokyo Olympic Games, with some events to be held as close as 60 km (35 miles) from the wrecked plant. Former Japanese Minister Shinzo Abe in

2013 assured the International Olympics Committee in pitching for the games that Fukushima "will never do any damage to Tokyo." Tepco plans to filter the contaminated water to remove isotopes, leaving only tritium, a radioactive isotope of hydrogen hard to separate from water. Tepco will then dilute the water until tritium levels fall below regulatory limits, before pumping it into the ocean. Tritium is considered to be relatively harmless because it does not emit enough energy to penetrate human skin. Other nuclear plants around the world routinely pump water with low levels of the isotope into the ocean.

Daunte Wright shooting: Dozens arrested in fresh unrest in Minnesota

(News Agencies)-About 40 people were arrested just north of Minneapolis in a second night of unrest over the police shooting of a black man.

Protesters in the city of Brooklyn Center defied a curfew and threw objects at police, who responded with flash grenades and tear gas.

Police said Daunte Wright, 20, was shot and died after an officer mistook her gun for a Taser during a traffic stop.

The shooting came as the high-profile George Floyd murder trial continues.

This report contains strong language

In a courtroom just a few miles away, ex-police officer Derek

Chauvin is charged with murdering the African American man in May last year.

Derek Chauvin's defence team on Monday asked for jury members to be sequestered - separated from other people - as they might be swayed by the latest events. The judge denied the request.

"A city with unrest in the making

"Timeline of black deaths caused by US police

"How are African-Americans treated under the law?

The officer who shot Mr Wright was named on Monday as Kim Potter, 48, who has worked for Brooklyn Center Police for 26 years.

Mr Wright was pulled over on

Sunday for a traffic violation, but there was a struggle when he tried to get back into his car.

After drawing her gun, apparently by mistake, the officer said: "Holy shit, I just shot him."

What happened overnight?

The curfew went into force at 19:00 (midnight GMT) across four counties with a huge law enforcement deployment.

In a press briefing after midnight local time, Minnesota State Patrol colonel Matt Langer said officers had reached out to organisers to try to keep protests peaceful but "unfortunately... the organisers weren't able to influence the desires of the crowd". Col Langer said officers had been "shelled pretty significantly with



objects" including fireworks. He said protesters had pushed against the fence of the Brooklyn Center police headquarters and a decision had been made to push back the crowd. There were "sporadic" incidents of looting in the area and in other

parts of Minneapolis and neighbouring St Paul.

In response to the unrest, US President Joe Biden said peaceful protest was "understandable" but added: "I want to make it clear again: there is absolutely no justification, none, for looting."

Johnson & Johnson vaccine paused over rare blood clots



(News Agencies)-The US, South Africa and European Union will temporarily stop the rollout of the Johnson & Johnson (J&J) Covid jab, after reports of rare blood clotting. Six cases were detected in more than 6.8 million doses of the vaccine, the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) said.

Johnson & Johnson has paused its EU rollout, which started this week.

It follows similar cases after doses of the AstraZeneca vaccine, which prompted curbs to its use.

The FDA said it was recommending the temporary pause "out of an abundance of caution". It confirmed that one pa-

tient died from blood clotting complications, and another is in a critical condition.

All six cases were in women aged between 18 and 48, with symptoms appearing six to 13 days after vaccination.

Following the advice, all federal sites in the US have stopped using the vaccine until further investigations into its safety are completed. State and private contractors are expected to follow suit.

The US has by far the most confirmed cases of Covid-19 - more than 31 million - with more than 562,000 deaths, another world high.

"Blood clot is 'very rare AstraZeneca side effect'

"What you need to know about vaccine safety

Johnson & Johnson is a US health care company, but the vaccine was developed mainly by a pharmaceutical branch in Belgium with laboratories in the Netherlands, and is also known as Janssen. Unlike some of the other jabs, it is given as a single shot and can be stored at normal refrigerator temperatures, making it easier to distribute in hotter climates or more remote areas.

While many countries have pre-ordered millions of doses, it has only been approved in a few nations.

It was cleared for use in the US on 27 February, but the Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna vaccines have been used more widely. The J&J vaccine has been administered to nearly

seven million people in the US, which is around 3% of the total immunisations given so far. Dr Anthony Fauci, the country's top Covid adviser, said it was too early to comment on whether it could have its authorisation revoked.

South Africa, which was the first country to administer the vaccine, has also paused its use, although no cases of blood clots have been reported in the country. The jab became the preferred vaccine there after studies showed it had a higher protection rate against the South African variant than other jabs. Since mid-February, nearly 300,000 healthcare workers have received it.

Classes canceled at Knoxville school for two days after armed student is killed in encounter with police

(News Agencies)-No classes were held for the last two days at a school in Knoxville after a student was killed and a police officer was shot and injured during an encounter at the high school. A decision about the rest of the week's classes at Austin-East Magnet High School is pending, Knox County Schools Superintendent Bob Thomas said at a press conference.

"We are all devastated by this tragedy," he said, adding that counselors will be made available. The superintendent was speaking after a traumatic day in which officers responded to a call of a potentially armed person Monday afternoon and found the person, later identified as 17-year-old

student Anthony J. Thompson Jr., in the school bathroom, according to a preliminary report from the Tennessee Bureau of Investigation (TBI).

Officers ordered him out but he refused. Following a struggle, Thompson's gun fired, prompting one officer to return fire, the TBI said. Thompson was pronounced dead at the scene.

The officer who was shot and injured, Adam Wilson, was not struck by gunfire from Thompson, according to the TBI's preliminary findings. No further explanation on who fired the shot has been given.

The shooting is just the latest gun violence incident to plague the school, which has already lost

four students in the last few months, the Knoxville Fire Department told CNN in an email Monday.

'Our worst fear'

The investigation is continuing and the findings will be shared with the local District Attorney, TBI Director David Rausch said Monday. Rausch said this is not a "school shooting" but is an "officer-involved shooting at a school," noting that the distinction is important. "It's our worst fear, an active shooter in a school," Knoxville Police Chief Eve Thomas said during the press conference. "We all need to work together to stop the violence," Mayor Indya Kincannon said, according to CNN affiliate WVLT.



"It's a big challenge and we're going to need the whole city to work together."

Austin-East Magnet High School is a Title 1 school, which is a federal program providing financial assistance to "schools with high numbers or high percentages of

children from low-income families," according to the US education department.

The school's website says it has "a performing arts focus that offers resources including visual arts, CTE and rigorous academic courses."

UK deeply concerned by young people's role in Northern Ireland violence



part in violence in Northern Ireland, the British province's minister said on Tuesday, urging all sides to work together to uphold the peace.

Saying he understood the frustration over COVID-19 restrictions and difficulties produced from part of Britain's Brexit trade deal with the European Union, Lewis told parliament: "The violence witnessed last week is totally unacceptable."

"It is tragic and deeply concerning that young people have been engaged in, and encouraged into, this violence."

(News Agencies)- concerned that young people Britain's government is deeply have been encouraged to take

France suspends all flights to and from Brazil due to COVID variant

(News Agencies)- France will suspend all flights to and from Brazil in a bid to prevent the spread of the coronavirus

is getting worse and we have decided to suspend all flights between France and Brazil until further notice," Castex said.



Several leading French doctors have been calling on the government for days to stop all air traffic with Brazil.

A month ago, Health Minister Olivier Veran said

variant first detected there, French Prime Minister Jean Castex said in parliament.

"We take note that the situation

that around 6% of COVID-19 cases in France were from the more contagious variants first found in Brazil and South Africa.

Don't play with fire on Taiwan, China warns U.S.

(News Agencies)-China told the United States on Tuesday to stop playing with fire over Taiwan and lodged a complaint after Washington issued guidelines that will enable U.S. officials to meet more freely with officials from the island that China claims as its own. The U.S. State Department's Friday decision to deepen relations with self-ruled Taiwan came amid stepped-up Chinese military activity around the island, including almost daily air force incursions into Taiwan's air defence zone.

Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian told reporters they had lodged "stern

representations" with the United States.

China urges the United States "not to play with fire on the Taiwan issue, immediately stop any form of U.S.-Taiwan official contacts, cautiously and appropriately handle the matter, and not send wrong signals to Taiwan independence forces so as not to subversively influence and damage Sino-U.S. relations and peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait", he said.

Washington has watched with alarm the uptick in tensions, and on Sunday U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken said the United States was concerned

about China's aggressive actions against Taiwan.

In a written response to Reuters on Blinken's remarks, China's Foreign Ministry said the government had the absolute determination to protect the country's sovereignty.

"Don't stand on the opposite side of 1.4 billion Chinese people," it added.

Taiwan's Defence Ministry on Tuesday reported a further intrusion by Chinese jets into its air defence identification zone (ADIZ) - four J-16 fighters and an anti-submarine warfare aircraft. On Monday, Taiwan said 25 Chinese air force aircraft



including fighters and nuclear-capable bombers entered its ADIZ, the largest reported incursion to date.

Taiwan is China's most sensitive territorial and

diplomatic issue, and a regular source of Sino-U.S. friction. China has never renounced the use of force to bring the democratically ruled island under its control.

Iran to begin 60% uranium enrichment after nuclear site incident



Announcing 60% enrichment, chief nuclear negotiator Abbas Araqchi also said Iran would activate 1,000 advanced centrifuge machines at Natanz, a nuclear plant hit by an explosion on Sunday that Tehran called an act of sabotage by its arch-foe Israel.

However, an Iranian official told Reuters later that "60% enrichment will be in small quantity" only.

"From tonight, practical preparations for 60% enrichment will begin in Natanz; 60% uranium is used to make a variety of radiopharmaceuticals," the semi-official Fars news agency quoted Iranian nuclear agency spokesman

Behrouz Kamalvandi as saying

The International Atomic Energy Agency, the U.N. nuclear watchdog, said it had been informed of Iran's decision.

In Washington, White House press secretary Jen Psaki called Iran's announcement "provocative" and said the Biden administration was concerned, adding that it called into question Tehran's seriousness on nuclear talks.

Last week, Iran and the global powers held what they described as "constructive" talks to salvage the 2015 accord, which has unravelled as Iran has breached its limits on uranium enrichment

since Trump re-imposed harsh sanctions on Tehran.

The deal had capped the level of purity to which Iran can enrich uranium hexafluoride, the feedstock for centrifuges, at 3.67%, far below the 90% needed for bomb-grade material. Iran in recent months has raised enrichment to 20% purity, a level where uranium is considered to be highly enriched and is a significant step towards weapons-grade. Three-five percent is broadly the level required to run civilian nuclear power plants. The biggest obstacle to producing nuclear weapons is accumulating sufficient quantities of fissile material - either 90% enriched uranium, or plutonium - for the core of a bomb.

(News Agencies)- Iran said on Tuesday it will start enriching uranium to 60% purity, a move bringing the fissile material closer to levels suitable for a bomb, after accusing Israel of sabotaging a key nuclear installation. The disclosure came soon before

the resumption of talks in Vienna aimed at reviving Iran's 2015 nuclear deal with major powers, an accord Israel fiercely opposed, after former U.S. President Donald Trump abandoned it three years ago. A fissile purity of 90% is suitable for a nuclear bomb.

Myanmar activists cancel new year festivities; U.N. urges end to 'slaughter'

(News Agencies)-Opponents of military rule in Myanmar cancelled traditional new year festivities on Tuesday and instead showed their anger with the generals who seized power through low-key displays of defiance and small protests across the country.

The United Nations human rights office said it feared that the military clampdown on protests since the Feb. 1 coup risked escalating into a civil conflict like that seen in Syria and appealed for a halt to the "slaughter".

A Myanmar activist group, the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners, says the security forces have killed 710 protesters since the ouster of an elected government led by Nobel laureate Aung San Suu

Kyi. Protesters were out again on the first day of the five-day New Year holiday, known as Thingyan, which is usually celebrated with prayers, ritual cleaning of Buddha images in temples and high-spirited water-dousing on the streets.

"We do not celebrate Myanmar Thingyan this year since over 700 of our innocent brave souls have been killed," said one Twitter user named Shwe Ei.

The United Nations human rights office said it feared that the military clampdown on protests since the Feb. 1 coup risked escalating into a civil conflict like that seen in Syria and appealed for a halt to the "slaughter". A Myanmar activist group, the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners, says the security

forces have killed 710 protesters since the ouster of an elected government led by Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi.

Protesters were out again on the first day of the five-day New Year holiday, known as Thingyan, which is usually celebrated with prayers, ritual cleaning of Buddha images in temples and high-spirited water-dousing on the streets.

"We do not celebrate Myanmar Thingyan this year since over 700 of our innocent brave souls have been killed," said one Twitter user named Shwe Ei.

Women wearing fine clothes for the most important holiday of the year protested in several towns holding traditional pots containing seven flowers and sprigs that are displayed at this



time, media pictures showed. Many people painted the protesters' three-finger salute on their Thingyan pots. "People's power, our power," women marching on a street in the main city of Yangon chanted as passersby clapped, video posted by the Myanmar Now media group showed.

In some places, people set out dozens of Thingyan pots daubed with messages such as

"Save Myanmar" in silent shows of opposition to the military. There were no immediate reports of violence at any of the protests but information has become scarce because of the junta's curbs on broadband internet and mobile data services. Soldiers shot and killed a man and a woman delivering milk on a motorbike in the northwestern town of Tamu, on the border with India, three media outlets reported.

Biden proposes summit with Putin after Russia calls U.S. 'adversary' over Ukraine

(News Agencies)- U.S. President Joe Biden called on Russian President Vladimir Putin on Tuesday to reduce tensions stirred by a Russian military build-up on Ukraine's border and proposed a summit of the estranged leaders to tackle a raft of disputes.

The White House and the Kremlin reported only the second conversation between the two since Biden took office in January, after Western officials urged

Moscow to end the build-up and Russia, in words recalling the Cold War, said its "adversary" should keep U.S. warships well away from the Crimea region. Russia seized Crimea from Ukraine in 2014 and fighting has increased in recent weeks in eastern Ukraine, where government forces have battled Russian-backed separatists in a seven-year conflict that Kyiv says has killed 14,000 people. In a sign of concern about tensions spinning out of control in the Ukraine crisis, Biden

phoned Putin to propose they meet in a third country while underlining U.S. commitment to Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity. "President Biden also made clear that the United States will act firmly in defense of its national interests in response to Russia's actions, such as cyber intrusions and election interference," the White House said in a statement. "The president voiced our concerns over the sudden Russian military build-up in occupied Crimea and on Ukraine's



borders, and called on Russia to de-escalate tensions," it said.

RUSSIA: BUILD-UP IS THREE-WEEK DRILL

In the first public Russian description of the build-up, Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu

said Moscow had moved two armies and three paratrooper units to its western border as part of a large snap drill meant to test combat readiness and respond to what he called threatening military action by NATO.

Yes, police can pull you over for hanging an air freshener in your car

"accidental." But Minnesota is one of at least several states with laws that prohibit hanging items from a vehicle's rearview mirror or affixing them to the windshield on the grounds that they could obstruct the driver's vision.

"A person shall not drive or operate any motor vehicle with ... any objects suspended between the driver and the windshield, other than: sun visors; rearview mirrors; driver feedback and safety monitoring equipment when mounted immediately behind, slightly above, or slightly below the rearview mirror," Minnesota's law states. Such minor infractions have been questioned by Black motorists and others who view them as a pretext for racially motivated traffic stops. "We have concerns that police appear to have used dangling air fresheners as an excuse for making a pretextual stop, something police do too often to target Black people," the ACLU of Minnesota said Sunday. It called for an independent investigation into the shooting. Wright's death has sparked protests and further inflamed tensions in a city already on edge over the police killing of another Black man. Testimony continued Monday in the trial of former Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin, who is charged in the May 2020 death of George Floyd. Air fresheners in cars have led to legal challenges

Police traffic stops because of dangling air fresheners have already led to several court challenges.

In September 2018, police pulled over two Black men in Chicago

shaped air freshener obstructed the driver's view. Both men were sentenced to prison.

In October 2012 WNBA star Seimone Augustus, then a player with the Minnesota Lynx,

A Roseville police spokesman told ESPN the traffic stop had nothing to do with race and that Augustus was only issued a warning.

Virginia just added another provision to its law

"dangling object" near a car's windshield used to be grounds for a valid stop, but a new law that went into effect on March 1 changed things, said Andrew Flusche, a traffic attorney in Stafford, Virginia.

"Virginia still penalizes dangling objects, but the police now must have another justification to first stop the vehicle," he said.

"Dangling object stops are a classic example of a pretextual stop, where the police are looking for a valid reason to stop a motorist for something else -- such as suspicion of DUI or maybe to try to search the vehicle," Flusche said. Police say 'pretext' stops are necessary to fight crime. So-called "pretext stops" allow police to use minor traffic infractions or broken taillights as grounds to investigate motorists for more serious crimes. Police have defended the stops as crucial for fighting possession of illegal drugs, weapons possession, human trafficking and drunken driving. But civil rights groups say the tactic unfairly targets Black drivers. In 2018, the American Civil Liberties Union sued the Bakersfield Police Department in California after its officers jailed a Black man who was driving a car that had an air freshener hanging from its rearview mirror. The police also demanded personal information from the man's passengers, the ACLU said.



for having an air freshener hanging from a rearview mirror. During the stop officers found weapons in the vehicle, and the men were each charged with unlawful possession of a firearm by a felon. The men did not allege they were racially profiled. But they moved to suppress the evidence, arguing that the air freshener was not sufficient probable cause for the officers to pull them over.

Last year a federal appeals court ruled that the stop was legitimate, saying police had "reasonable suspicion" to believe that the tree-

complained on Twitter that she had been pulled over at a mall in Roseville, a Minneapolis suburb, for having an air freshener in her car. She said the officer then questioned her about her out-of-state license plates and other crimes in the area.

"Supposedly he stop me for an air freshener hanging in my window, but then went on talking about theft at the mall," tweeted Augustus, who is Black. "And the fact that my car was at the mall with out of town plates ... I thought this was a free country."

Several other states, including California, Pennsylvania and Arizona, prohibit drivers from hanging things that would obstruct their vision near the windshield. Under Arizona state law, it's illegal to have an object near the rearview or side mirrors if it "obstructs or reduces" the driver's view. But a sheriff's deputy was fired in Arizona last year after he pulled over a Black man for having an air freshener hanging from his rearview mirror, then repeatedly asked him if he had drugs in the car. In Virginia, a

Stop public rallies, now

politically sensitive, and economically crucial states. Each day brings in more reports of the impact of the new variants of Sars-Cov-2. And each day brings in tragic stories of human suffering, isolation, even fatalities, devastating for those who have lost their loved ones to Covid-19. There are only two known ways to beat the pandemic. The first is vaccination. More vaccines need to be approved (one was on Monday, and not a moment too soon), more demographic groups need to be able to access the vaccine, more data needs to be

transparently disclosed, and manufacturing capacities need to be expanded. The second is Covid-19-appropriate behaviour - which either stems from a strong sense of citizen responsibility or government diktats, or both. With enhanced restrictions in key urban centres, the State is now trying to nudge citizen behaviour back to the norms of the past year.

But this will not work out unless India's national leaders - political figures who inspire citizens, who have the power to take life-altering decisions, and who have political organisations at their disposal with unprecedented mass

outreach - can credibly communicate the need for social distancing. This credibility is today missing, either because governments have happily allowed mega religious congregations or because political leaders are still - even in the middle of this nightmarish pandemic - addressing hundreds of thousands of people, many of whom are unmasked and jostling for space with each other, in public rallies. To be sure, democracy is a non-negotiable and so is the right of citizens to elect their representatives at regular intervals and the right of political parties to



propagate their views. But political communication must happen in ways that don't risk people's lives, and send out a message of complacency and irresponsibility at a time when caution and responsibility needs to be

exercised. Lives are at stake. An all-party consensus on reconfiguring the tools of campaigning for the remaining phases of Bengal's polls to make it Covid-19-appropriate is worth considering.

Why is the US Navy in India's backyard?

MEA said that the government of India's stated position on the UNCLOS (United Nations Convention for the Law of the Sea) is that 'the Convention does not authorise other States to carry out in the Exclusive Economic Zone and on the continental shelf military exercises or manoeuvres, in particular those involving explosives, without the consent of the coastal state. The warship was 'continuously monitored transiting from the Persian Gulf towards the Malacca Straits'. The US has used FONOPs over the past four decades as a way of asserting its right to sail through the EEZ of several coastal countries.

It is the explicitly worded statement issued by the Seventh Fleet that has caused dismay in New Delhi. "To issue a press release is a change in approach and obviously a deliberate move," says Lt General D.S. Hooda, former Northern Army Commander. It is this change that India will likely have to figure out in the days ahead. Could it be, for instance, a way of telling the Chinese that FONOPs are not China-specific but a principle that the US follows across the world, even with strategic partners.

On April 11 Pentagon spokesperson John Kirby defended the FONOPS saying the move was consistent with



international law but dialed down the rhetoric of its April 7 statement.

"I can tell you that the USS John Paul Jones, a Navy destroyer, asserted navigational rights and freedoms in the vicinity of the Republic of the Maldives by conducting innocent passage through its territorial sea in normal operations within its exclusive economic zone without requesting prior permission," Kirby said.

'Innocent passage' is an UNCLOS concept that allows warships to pass through the territorial sea of countries without notifying or seeking permission provided it does not fire its weapons, fly its aircraft or deploy sensors. While India's laws currently require permission to be taken for military

maneuvers in the EEZ, it allows for innocent passage.

While attention has been focused on the FONOPs that the US has used to challenge China's expansive territorial claims in the South China Sea, what has gone unnoticed is a deliberate US policy to simultaneously conduct operational assertions through the EEZ of even close allies like Japan and South Korea. A study of the annual statements between 1992 and 2021 placed before the US Senate by the Department of Defense reveals only 10 occasions over the last 30 years that the US has not conducted 'operational assertions' through India's EEZ. In the last such drill, in 2019, India was among 21 other countries, including Taiwan, through whose territorial waters

the US sailed its warships. The US Department of Defense identifies "excessive maritime claims" by coastal countries to unlawfully restrict the freedom of navigation and overflight and other lawful uses of the sea as reasons for its FONOP drills. UNCLOS, which came into effect in 1994, recognises the rights of coastal nations to exploit the resources of a 200 nautical mile belt of coastline outside their territorial waters. The US is yet to ratify it as 168 other countries have, because of Section XI of UNCLOS which governs the mining of deep seabed resources. In 2010, India had petitioned the UNCLOS, asking for its EEZ to be extended from 200 nautical

miles to 350 nautical miles, which would greatly increase the area for the exploitation of natural resources. This proposal has yet to be accepted.

Interestingly, the USS John Paul Jones, which left the Persian Gulf, also carried out a FONOP drill through the territorial waters of the Maldives. The US issued a similar statement on the FONOPs through the Maldivian EEZ. The US and the Maldives signed their first framework agreement last September. The agreement was signed by the deputy assistant secretary of defense for South Asia. Earlier, in 2012, the US had proposed a Status of Forces Agreement, or SOFA, with the Maldives. The SOFA was a precursor to the US stationing its forces on Maldivian soil. New Delhi was then not in favour of the agreement and it died a quiet death but is believed to now favour closer ties between the US and Maldives to checkmate China's growing presence in the Indian Ocean region.

"The irony is that the Chinese, who are signatories to UNCLOS, violate it all the time and the Americans, who have signed it but never ratified it, expect everyone else to stick to it," says Rear Admiral Sudarshan Shrikhande, former ACNS Foreign Cooperation and Naval Intelligence.

The SGPC takes aim at the RSS

parent, the RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh) for attempting 'to make India a Hindu Rashtra'. On April 3, it also convened a meeting of the Sant Samaj, Nihang sects, Kar Sewa organisations and traditional Sikh bodies in Amritsar to seek an endorsement of the resolution. Critics say this is a purely political move. "There was no recent incident to trigger [such a] resolution," insists Jagtar Sandhu, an author and commentator. Politics is certainly one factor, since September last year, when the SAD ended its alliance with the BJP, it has struggled to repair the damage it suffered from its initial support for the farm laws. With this resolution, the SAD hopes to win back the support of its Panthic voters. There are two big tests

before the assembly election in February next year, the Delhi Sikh Gurdwara Management Committee (DSGMC) election on April 25 and the SGPC polls in September. In these gurdwara committee elections, the SAD faces a confederation led by heavyweights such as Rajya Sabha MP Sukhdev Singh Dhindsa, former Akal Takht Jathedar Ranjit Singh and former advocate H.S. Phoolka, among others. Sukhbir will also have his hands full dealing with the complex political alliances of Akali Dal leaders. For example, the DSGMC includes members of his own faction who have ties with the BJP, even DSGMC chief M.S. Sirsa draws a pension from the Delhi assembly as a former BJP legislator. Top RSS leaders accuse the SGPC of raking up the 'Hindu

Rashtra' issue to 'cover up its own failures'. They point out that in February and March, the RSS conducted a campaign to collect donations for the Ram Mandir in Ayodhya in 6,660 villages in Punjab. "We didn't face a single incident of confrontation, though this was when the farm agitation was at its peak," insists Rajneesh Arora, the RSS's Punjab prant sah sanghchhalak (province committee leader). The SGPC resolution nonetheless reveals the strained ties between the RSS and the broader Sikh community. The RSS's Sikh affiliates, such as the Rashtriya Sikh Sangat, have attempted to downplay the issue. "Sikh intellectuals and religious leaders are aware of the RSS's stance on Sikhs and Sikhism," says Gurcharan Singh Gill, president of the Sangat. "There is

no difference in philosophy or ideology. This resolution was passed only for political reasons." Alleging a campaign to drive a wedge between the RSS and the Sikhs, Arora says, "Some people are deliberately poisoning minds. There is no animosity between the Sikh community and the RSS."

"The SAD is just playing to the gallery," says Ranjit Singh. "For 23 years, it had an alliance with the BJP and hobnobbed with the RSS, and now it sees the devil in them. If the RSS wants to turn the country into a Hindu Rashtra, let it do so. The SGPC should explain how the RSS has harmed the Sikh community. Such resolutions [for the political gain of the Badal family] only demean institutions like the SGPC." Sikh scholars such as former Rajya

Sabha MP Tarlochan Singh go a step further. "The SGPC needs to realise that neither the RSS nor any of its affiliates have ever tried to convert Sikhs, but there are evangelist groups that are converting Dalit Sikhs (Mazhabis) to Christianity," he says. "Sikhs are standing strong because of the Dalit community, but the SGPC has not been able to ensure education, healthcare and opportunities for them," adds Ranjit Singh. "Evangelist groups are providing for them. It is these factors, not the RSS, that are leading to the exit of Sikhs from the fold." While Sukhbir Badal has refused to directly comment on the SGPC resolution, he is caught between the religious identity of the SAD and the more secular political structure created by his father, Parkash Singh Badal.

Covid 2.0: Pandemic lessons India should have taken from second influenza wave of 1918

There was scarcity of health facilities, doctors and other healthcare providers. Newspapers were full of reports about overwhelmed health services and difficulties faced by people in accessing them. In absence of proven and effective treatment, a few companies made extensive profits by promotion and sale of unproven therapies and treatment. Use of traditional remedies also increased. The estimated number of cases was many folds higher than reported by authorities. In some cities, there were reports of burial grounds filling up and crematoriums overburdened. It was being said that absolute number of deaths was being hidden by authorities. Examinations were postponed or cancelled, and students promoted.

Years after the deadly influenza pandemic of 1918-20, it was



December of 1918 - but was most devastating.

Statistics often fail to convey the human impact of diseases, epidemics and pandemics. One such description appeared in a book titled "Kullu Bhat", published in 1939 and authored by noted

Ganges,) he had observed that "the River Ganges was swollen with bodies". By the time he reached home, his teenage wife was already dead. In the days to follow, his cousin and cousin's wife (both were taking care of

Nirala's wife), an infant nephew and uncle were all infected and died. Nirala was referring to the year 1918 and the influenza pandemic, which actually has) and it should have resulted in better response to a pandemic. In 1918, when the influenza pandemic broke out, the cause of disease was not even known (the influenza virus was identified in 1933). There was no laboratory test to confirm the disease and no vaccine; the World War I was going on; health services were already overwhelmed due to cholera and plague. In 2021, scientific progress has ensured that the entire genome of SARS-CoV-2 was known, a highly reliable laboratory test was available, a few highly efficacious vaccines were administered to people; sophisticated equipments and hospitals were available. The advance of medical and public health science has been remarkable, but people faced the most harrowing time in accessing health services. Doctors and other healthcare providers struggled to cope with new infections.

even a century later. India is in the middle of the second Covid wave, which is turning out to be more dangerous than the first. This is concerning as the world believed health services and medical science have progressed in last the 100 years (which actually has) and it should have resulted in better response to a pandemic.

In 1918, when the influenza pandemic broke out, the cause of disease was not even known (the influenza virus was identified in 1933). There was no laboratory test to confirm the disease and no vaccine; the World War I was going on; health services were already overwhelmed due to cholera and plague. In 2021, scientific progress has ensured that the entire genome of SARS-CoV-2 was known, a highly reliable laboratory test was available, a few highly efficacious vaccines were administered to people; sophisticated equipments and hospitals were available. The advance of medical and public health science has been remarkable, but people faced the most harrowing time in accessing health services. Doctors and other healthcare providers struggled to cope with new infections.

If there is one thing which would be needed soon after the second wave of Covid-19 is over, it is the need to look back and analyse what the Indian healthcare system could have learnt from the past, should have done and should do now, immediately and urgently.

The second wave of Covid-19 has come a few months after the

second wave in other countries, which had a similar situation somewhere in the mid- to late 2020. There was no reason to believe it would be any different in India. The 1918 pandemic data shows that the second wave was deadliest, and it affected and killed more people in a short period than other waves during the entire pandemic. Both flu and Covid-19 are respiratory illnesses. Public health planning should have been strengthened. Though the laxity in people's behaviour was being noted, but from February to April 2021, the government too did not show its resolve to enforce public health measures. While customary guidance on Covid-appropriate behaviour was issued, it was policymakers and elected leaders who tacitly encouraged crowding in festivals (Holi at end March 2021), election rallies in five states (March-April 2021) and religious congregation (Kumbh Mela in Haridwar; March-April 2021).

For policy makers, it was complete disconnect between preaching and practice. If hapless migrants walking on the highway became defining images of India's national lockdown in 2020; millions of people taking holy dip in the Ganges, with no possibility of adherence to Covid-appropriate behaviour on the day India reported its highest ever daily new cases, have become defining images of the pandemic in 2021.

Handling of the Covid pandemic in Indian states, in spite of scientific and public health advances, demands for honest and critical reflections by policymakers and health experts alike. This is needed to respond to the ongoing pandemic and also to prepare India for all future epidemics and pandemics.

The reason Nirala observed swelling rivers was partly unavoidable. But the swelling crowds at election rallies and at holy dips at the height of the pandemic were avoidable and would have been right public health measures. If we would have learnt the lessons from 1918, the impact of the ongoing pandemic could have been mitigated. Now, there are two pandemics to learn from.

SECOND COVID WAVE DAILY NEW CASES



INDIA

DAILY NEW CASES
SEVEN-DAY AVERAGE



Source: MoHFW
Chart by Pulaha Roy



estimated that one-third to half the Indian population was infected and 10-20 million people, then 3-6 per cent of the population, had died. The major damage was caused in a short period from June 1918 to early 1919. The second wave of the pandemic lasted for less than three months -- mid-September to early

Hindi poet and writer Suryakant Tripathi 'Nirala'.

"Come back urgently, your wife is seriously ill", read the Telegram message received by Nirala, who was then in Bengal. He took the next train to his hometown of Dalmau at Raebareli in Uttar Pradesh. When Nirala reached Dalmau (on the banks of River

shortage of firewood for cremation". It is now estimated that in the 1918 flu pandemic, every citizen was affected, every family had at least one sick and one acquaintance who died.

Fast forward to 2020-21, and another read of the first two paragraphs of this article reveals that nothing much has changed

US think-tank flags possibility of India-Pakistan, India-China war



A US think-tank has forecast a 'large-scale war' between India and Pakistan over the next five years. It has also predicted the possibility of India and China 'slipping into a conflict'.

India and China began disengaging troops, tanks and artillery from the northern and southern banks of the Pangong Lake on February 10, after a tense nine-month standoff. India and Pakistan agreed to adhere to a 2003 ceasefire on February 24 this year after one of the largest number of border firing incidents over the past year. Tensions between the three nuclear-armed rivals, however, remain mainly over the world's largest disputed boundary.

The five-year regional outlook was released by the Strategic Futures Group, a think-tank of the National Intelligence Council, on April 7. It warns that India and Pakistan may stumble

into a large-scale war neither side wants, 'especially following a terrorist attack that the Indian Government judges to be significant.'

The report outlines that the ability of Pakistan-based terrorists to conduct attacks, New Delhi's resolve to punish Islamabad after such an attack and Islamabad's determination to defend itself are likely to persist and may increase. 'Miscalculation by both governments could prompt a breakdown in the deterrence that has restricted conflict to levels each side judges it can manage. A full-scale war could inflict damage that would have economic and political consequences for years.'

Similarly, the report warns, India and China may slip into a conflict that neither government intends, 'especially if military forces escalate a conflict quickly to challenge each other on a critical part of the con-

tested border.' In June 2020, a short military exchange that resulted in the deaths of at least 20 Indian soldiers exacerbated the strategic rivalry between Beijing and New Delhi and sharply affected the international perceptions of both countries.

The assessment was released before US President Joe Biden's April 14 statement announcing a US pullout out of Afghanistan by September 11, 2021, the 20th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks. Emphasising that US actions in Afghanistan in the next year will have significant consequences across the region, particularly in Pakistan and India, it warns of the security vacuum emerging in Afghanistan, which could 'result from a civil war between the Taliban and its Afghan opponents, expanded freedom of maneuver for regional terrorist networks, or criminals and

refugees flowing out of the country.' Such an outcome would probably exacerbate political tensions and conflict in western Pakistan and sharpen the India-Pakistan rivalry by strengthening longstanding judgements about covert warfare in Islamabad and New Delhi. An abrupt US exit would also probably amplify concerns that the United States will lose interest in South Asia.

The NIC works under the Director of National Intelligence, the designated leader of the US intelligence community. The post was created in 2004, three years after the attacks of September 11, 2001 exposed coordination issues within the US intelligence community. Though the Strategic Futures Group's judgments do not reflect official US government policy or the coordinated position of the US intelligence community, the ONI (Office of

Naval Intelligence) has also red-flagged a similar scenario before the US Congress. In its annual report submitted to the House on April 9, the ONI said that 'under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, India is more likely than in the past to respond to military force to perceived or real Pakistani provocations, and heightened tensions raise the risk of conflict between the two nuclear-armed neighbors, with violent unrest in Kashmir or a militant attack in India being potential flashpoints.'

China-India border tensions, the report said, remained high despite the pullback of some forces this year. China's occupation of contested border areas since May 2020 is the most serious escalation in decades, which led to the first lethal border clash between the two countries since 1975.

Nuclear War? How Kashmir Could Still Cause an Indo-Pakistan War

The Kashmir question will make the already-dim prospects for a de-escalation in tensions between India and Pakistan even more remote in 2020, raising the chances of conflict between the two South Asian powers. Tensions spiked in February, when, for the first time in nearly five decades, the longtime rivals hit each other with airstrikes. The exchange began after India blamed a Pakistan-based group for a suicide bombing in Indian-controlled Kashmir that month.

Ratcheting tensions up even further, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government - reelected in May - revoked the Jammu and Kashmir state's autonomy in August, prompting strong condemnation from Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan's government. Together, the developments will make for a fraught year for bilateral relations centered on the dispute over Kashmir, where ongoing militant activity could trigger another military confrontation. Moreover, it will limit Modi's ambitions for the territory. A New Legal Status The deadliest attack in the 30-year insurgency in Indian-controlled Kashmir occurred



Feb. 14 when a suicide attacker drove a vehicle-borne improvised explosive device into a paramilitary convoy in the district of Pulwama, killing 40 personnel from the Central Reserve Police Force. Blaming Jaish-e-Mohammed, a Pakistan-based militant group, Modi's government launched airstrikes into Pakistan 12 days later against a purported Jaish-e-Mohammed training camp in Balakot in Pakistan's Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa province, an undisputed territory. Pakistan launched its own counterstrike the next day across the Line of Control, the de facto border dividing Kashmir between both countries. As Indian jets

responded, a dogfight ensued in which Pakistan captured an Indian pilot. Khan ordered his release March 1, allowing the two countries to back away from the brink.

The Pulwama attack occurred during Modi's reelection campaign, giving the prime minister a powerful issue - national security - to use to deflect attention from India's cooling economy. This helped the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) win in a landslide against its rival, the Indian National Congress, becoming the first party other than Congress to clinch back-to-back majorities in the parliament's lower house since

independence in 1947.

Having secured another term, Modi revealed big plans for Kashmir on Aug. 5, namely, the revocation of Jammu and Kashmir state's autonomous status by rescinding articles 370 and 35A of the Indian Constitution (though India's Supreme Court is still considering the legality of this move). The Modi government also divided the former state into two centrally administered territories - Jammu and Kashmir, as well as a separate territory for Ladakh. Pakistan strongly condemned the decision, halting bilateral trade and expelling the Indian high commissioner. Khan even alluded to the possibility of military confrontation between "two nuclear-armed states" if the international community failed to intervene. The majority of attacks in Indian-controlled Kashmir since February have continued to involve the three most active militant groups there: Jaish-e-Mohammed, Lashkar-e-Taiba and Hizbul Mujahideen, all of which have leadership based in Pakistan. They have largely used firearms in their engagements with security forces. This

indicates that the vehicle-borne improvised explosive device used in the February suicide attack, the first incident of its kind in the region since 2005, did not herald a shift in Kashmiri militants' tactics.

While the February airstrikes ostensibly aimed to blunt what India alleges is Pakistani support for cross-border militant attacks in Kashmir, such attacks have persisted. The 54 security incidents in Indian-controlled Kashmir the month after the attacks resulted in 72 deaths, largely unchanged from the 68 deaths in March 2018. No dramatic uptick in militant attacks has occurred since then, but rather a drop-off. Total casualties from security encounters in September, October and November were 86, a significant dropoff from the 308 casualties during the same period in 2018. Of course, this could be an outcome of a heightened security presence in the centrally administered territory, whose new legal status gives the central government greater control over local security operations. But the continuation of attacks in Indian-controlled Kashmir suggests that Indian strikes on its territory might not have deterred Pakistan.

It could also suggest that a significant proportion of insurgents are not coming from Pakistan but are, in fact, locals. While Pakistan could still assist militants based in Jammu and Kashmir, it would struggle to exercise the same control over a localized insurgency than it would one operating from its territory - something that could cause it problems, since India might blame Pakistan for future attacks it had no control over. Doubtless, guaranteeing security will remain Modi's priority for Kashmir in 2020. A vigorous counterinsurgency remains underway there involving multiple security detachments. The government claimed Dec. 3 that infiltration from Pakistan across the Line of Control has increased by 50 percent, creating a pretext for more retaliation against Pakistan should a sizable attack occur in Indian-controlled Kashmir.

India war fears erupt over 'expansionist' China as regional tensions heat up

China and India's militaries have openly squared off against one another during tense border stand-offs along the disputed Line of control which cuts across the Himalayas. China has built up strong economic and military ties with India's neighbors including Pakistan. Now, Professor of International Relations and Asian Studies, Dinshaw Mistry has described how Indian military planners fear China's creeping expansion into neighboring states could trigger an all-out war. China has been accused of using underhand tactics in the South China Sea to further its interests referred to as a 'grey-zone' campaign, in which one force can wear down the resources of another without engaging in open war.

Professor Mistry told Express.co.uk: "There is a



broad sense in the Indian foreign policy establishment about the 'string of pearls' that is one idea that comes up.

"China is making inroads into neighboring countries, so Pakistan is the biggest example but there are different types of mostly economic projects in other countries.

"There are insurgency groups in the north-east of India which cross borders, mostly the Burma border but there is potential for Chinese involvement there." He added:

"It is not really grey-zone but it is more 'string of pearls.'

"Could that trigger a clash between India and China, now again it would trigger more strategic competition than a military clash.

"India which try to counter that strategically through its own economic and diplomatic interactions with those neighboring countries.

The analyst continued: "Unless China uses an [military] asset in a neighboring country."

Professor Mistry told Express.co.uk: "This is where Pakistan is the country where the potential for Chinese military involvement is the greatest."

China is looking to cement military ties with Pakistan in a move to isolate India following the two countries' recent bloody border clashes.

Beijing's military has long-held interests in the country which has been involved in a series of wars with India over the disputed regions of Kashmir. Professor Mistry has warned could in the launch attacks from ports and airbases within Pakistan during a potential future conflict.

Professor Mistry told Express.co.uk: "Chinese cooperation with Pakistan has clearly increased in the last decade or so.

Conflict Between India and Pakistan

With continued violence in Kashmir and a heightened threat of terrorist activity by Pakistan-based militant groups, tensions and concerns over a serious military confrontation between nuclear-armed neighbors India and Pakistan remain high. In August 2019, following a deployment of tens of thousands of additional troops and paramilitary forces to the region, the Indian government moved to revoke Article 370 of the Indian constitution, removing the special status of Jammu and Kashmir. India-administered Kashmir remains under lockdown, with internet and phone services intermittently cut-off and thousands of people detained.

In February 2019, an attack on a convoy of Indian paramilitary forces in Indian-controlled Kashmir killed at least forty soldiers. The attack, claimed by Pakistani militant group Jaish-e-Mohammad, was the deadliest attack in Kashmir in three decades. Two weeks later, India claimed to have conducted air strikes targeting a terrorist training camp inside Pakistani territory. Pakistan retaliated a day

later with air strikes in Indian-administered Kashmir. The exchange escalated into an aerial engagement, during which Pakistan shot down two Indian military aircraft and captured an Indian pilot; the pilot was released two days later.

Background

Territorial disputes over the Kashmir region sparked two of the three major Indo-Pakistani wars in 1947 and 1965, and a limited war in 1999. Although both countries have maintained a fragile cease-fire since 2003, they regularly exchange fire across the contested border, known as the Line of Control. Both sides accuse the other of violating the cease-fire and claim to be shooting in response to attacks. An uptick in border skirmishes that began in late 2016 and continued into 2018 killed dozens and displaced thousands of civilians on both sides of the Line of Control. In 2014, after India's then newly elected Prime Minister Modi invited then Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif to attend his inauguration, there were hopes that Modi's government would pursue meaningful peace nego-

tiations with Pakistan. However, after a brief period of optimism, relations turned sour once more when India canceled talks with Pakistan's foreign minister in August 2014 after the Pakistani high commissioner in India met with Kashmiri separatist leaders. A series of openings continued throughout 2015, including an unscheduled December meeting on the sidelines of the UN Climate Change Conference in Paris. This led to a meeting between national security advisors in Bangkok a few days later, where the Kashmir dispute was discussed. Later in December, Prime Minister Modi made a surprise visit to Lahore to meet with Prime Minister Sharif, the first visit of an Indian leader to Pakistan in more than a decade.

Momentum toward meaningful talks came to an end in September 2016, when armed militants attacked a remote Indian Army base in Uri, near the Line of Control, killing eighteen Indian soldiers in the deadliest attack on the Indian armed forces in decades. Indian officials accused Jaish-e-Mohammad, a group with alleged ties to the Inter-Services

Intelligence-Pakistan's main intelligence agency-of being behind the attack. Later in September 2016, the Indian military announced it had carried out "surgical strikes" on terrorist camps inside Pakistani-controlled territory across the Line of Control, while the Pakistani military denied that any such operation had taken place.

Militants launched attacks in October 2017, against an Indian paramilitary camp near Srinagar, and in February 2018, against an Indian army base in the Jammu region, which killed five soldiers and a civilian. These attacks came amidst a period of increased cross-border shelling along the Line of Control, with more than three thousand reported violations in 2017 and nearly one thousand in the first half of 2018. Violent demonstrations and anti-India protests calling for an independent Kashmir also continued; over three hundred people including civilians, Indian security forces, and militants were killed in attacks and clashes in 2017. After months of Indian military operations targeting both Kashmiri militants and demonstrations, India an-

nounced in May 2018 that it would observe a cease-fire in Kashmir during the month of Ramadan for the first time in nearly two decades; operations resumed in June 2018. In May 2018, India and Pakistan agreed to a cease-fire along the disputed Kashmir border that would restore the terms of their 2003 agreement.

The diversion of jihadi fighters and proxy groups from Afghanistan to Kashmir threatens to further increase violence along the border. If another Mumbai 2008-style attack, where Lashkar-e-Taiba fighters rampaged through the city for four days, killing 164 people, were carried out by Pakistan's militant proxies, it could trigger a severe military confrontation between the two nuclear-armed states.

Concerns

The United States has identified South Asia as an epicenter of terrorism and religious extremism and therefore has an interest in ensuring regional stability, preventing nuclear weapons proliferation, and minimizing the potential of a nuclear war between India and Pakistan.

India, Pakistan held secret talks to try to break Kashmir impasse

Top intelligence officers from India and Pakistan held secret talks in Dubai in January in a new effort to calm military tension over the disputed Himalayan region of Kashmir, people with close knowledge of the matter told Reuters in Delhi.

Ties between the nuclear-armed rivals have been on ice since a suicide bombing of an Indian military convoy in Kashmir in 2019 traced to Pakistan-based militants that led to India sending warplanes to Pakistan.

Later that year, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi withdrew Indian-ruled Kashmir's autonomy in order to tighten his grip over the territory, provoking outrage in Pakistan and the downgrading of diplomatic ties and suspension of bilateral trade.

But the two governments have reopened a back channel of diplomacy aimed at a modest roadmap to normalising ties over the next several months, the people said.

Kashmir has long been a flashpoint between India and Pakistan, both of which claim all of

the region but rule only in part. Officials from India's Research and Analysis Wing, the external spy agency, and Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence travelled to Dubai for a meeting facilitated by the United Arab Emirates government, two people said.

The Indian foreign ministry did not respond to a request for comment. Pakistan's military, which controls the ISI, also did not respond.

But Ayesha Siddiqi, a top Pakistani defence analyst, said she believed Indian and Pakistan intelligence officials had been meeting for several months in third countries.

"I think there have been meetings in Thailand, in Dubai, in London between the highest level people," she said.

'IT IS FRAUGHT'

Such meetings have taken place in the past too, especially during times of crises but never been publicly acknowledged.

"There is a lot that can still go wrong, it is fraught," said one of the people in Delhi. "That is why nobody is talking it up in public,

we don't even have a name for this, it's not a peace process. You can call it a re-engagement," one of them said.

Both countries have reasons to seek a rapprochement. India has been locked in a border stand-off with China since last year and does not want the military stretched on the Pakistan front. China-ally Pakistan, mired in economic difficulties and on an IMF bailout programme, can ill-afford heightened tensions on the Kashmir border for a prolonged period, experts say. It also has to stabilise the Afghan border on its west as the United States withdraws.

"It's better for India and Pakistan to talk than not talk, and even better that it should be done quietly than in a glare of publicity," said Myra MacDonald, a former Reuters journalist who has just published a book on India, Pakistan and war on the frontiers of Kashmir.

"...But I don't see it going very far beyond a basic management of tensions, possibly to tide both countries over a difficult period -



Pakistan needs to address the fall-out of the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, while India has to confront a far more volatile situation on its disputed frontier with China."

DIALLING DOWN THE RHETORIC

Following the January meeting, India and Pakistan announced they would stop cross-border shooting along the Line of Control (LoC) dividing Kashmir which has left dozens of civilians dead and many others maimed. That ceasefire is holding, military officials in both countries said.

Both sides have also signalled plans to hold elections on their sides of Kashmir this year as part of efforts to bring normalcy to a region riven by decades of bloodshed.

The two have also agreed to dial down their rhetoric, the people Reuters spoke to said.

This would include Pakistan dropping its loud objections to Modi abrogating Kashmir's autonomy in August 2019, while Delhi in turn would refrain from blaming Pakistan for all violence on its side of the Line of Control.

Kashmir: Why India and Pakistan fight over it

Nuclear-armed neighbours India and Pakistan have fought two wars and a limited conflict over Kashmir. But why do they dispute the territory - and how did it start? How old is this fight?

Kashmir is an ethnically diverse Himalayan region, covering around 86,000 sq miles (138 sq km), and famed for the beauty of its lakes, meadows and snow-capped mountains.

Even before India and Pakistan won their independence from Britain in August 1947, the area was hotly contested.

Under the partition plan provided by the Indian Independence Act, Kashmir was free to accede to either India or Pakistan.

The maharaja (local ruler), Hari Singh, initially wanted Kashmir to become independent - but in October 1947 chose to join India, in return for its help against an invasion of tribesmen from Pakistan.

" Kashmir profile - Timeline

A war erupted and India approached the United Nations asking it to intervene. The United Nations recommended holding a plebiscite to settle the question of whether the state would join India or Pakistan. However the two countries could not agree to a deal to demilitarise the region before the referendum could be held.

In July 1949, India and Pakistan signed an agreement to establish a ceasefire line as recommended by the UN and the region became divided.

A second war followed in 1965. Then in 1999, India fought a brief but bitter conflict with Pakistani-backed forces.

By that time, India and Pakistan had both declared themselves to be nuclear powers.

Today, Delhi and Islamabad both claim Kashmir in full, but control only parts of it - territories recognised internationally as "Indian-administered Kashmir" and "Pakistan-administered Kashmir".

Why is there so much unrest in the Indian-administered part?

An armed revolt has been waged against Indian rule in the region for three decades, claiming tens of thousands of lives.

India blames Pakistan for stirring the unrest by backing separatist militants in Kashmir - a charge its neighbour denies.

Now a sudden change to



Kashmir's status on the Indian side has created further apprehension.

Indian-administered Kashmir has held a special position within the country historically, thanks to Article 370 - a clause in the constitution which gave it significant autonomy, including its own constitution, a separate flag, and independence over all matters except foreign affairs, defence and communications.

" Why a special law on Kashmir is controversial

" What happened in Kashmir and why it matters

On 5 August, India revoked that seven-decade-long privileged status - as the governing party, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), had promised in its 2019 election manifesto. The Hindu nationalist BJP has long opposed Article 370 and had repeatedly called for its abolishment.

Telephone networks and the internet were cut off in the region in the days before the presidential order was announced. Public gatherings were banned, and tens of thousands of troops were sent in. Tourists were told to leave Kashmir under warnings of a terror threat.

Two former chief ministers of Jammu and Kashmir - the Indian state which encompasses the disputed territory - were placed under house arrest.

One of them, Mehbooba Mufti, said the move would "make India an occupational force in Jammu and Kashmir," and that "today marks the darkest day in Indian democracy".

The BBC is not responsible for the content of external sites. Pakistan fiercely condemned the development, branding it "illegal" and vowing to "exercise all possible options" against it.

It downgraded diplomatic ties with India and suspended all trade. India responded by saying they "regretted" Pakistan's statement and reiterating that Article 370 was an internal matter as it did not interfere with the boundaries of the territory.

Within Kashmir, opinions about the territory's rightful allegiance are diverse and strongly held. Many do not want it to be governed by India, preferring either independence or union with Pakistan instead.

Religion is one factor: Jammu and Kashmir is more than 60% Muslim, making it the only state within India where Muslims are in the majority.

Critics of the BJP fear this move is designed to change the state's demographic make-up of - by giving people from the rest of the country to right to acquire property and settle there permanently.

Ms Mufti told the BBC: "They just want to occupy our land and want to make this Muslim-majority state like any other state and reduce us to a minority and disempower us totally."

Feelings of disenfranchisement have been aggravated in Indian-administered Kashmir by high unemployment, and complaints of human rights abuses by security forces battling street protesters and fighting insurgents.

Anti-India sentiment in the state has ebbed and flowed since 1989, but the region witnessed a fresh wave of violence after the death of 22-year-old militant leader Burhan Wani in July 2016. He died in a battle with security forces, sparking massive protests across the valley.

Wani - whose social media videos were popular among

young people - is largely credited with reviving and legitimising the image of militancy in the region.

Thousands attended Wani's funeral, which was held in his hometown of Tral, about 40km (25 miles) south of the city of Srinagar. Following the funeral, people clashed with troops and it set off a deadly cycle of violence that lasted for days.

More than 30 civilians died, and others were injured in the clashes. Since then, violence has been on the rise in the state.

More than 500 people were killed in 2018 - including civilians, security forces and militants - the highest toll in a decade.

Weren't there high hopes for peace in the new century?

India and Pakistan did indeed agree a ceasefire in 2003 after years of bloodshed along the de facto border (also known as the Line of Control).

Pakistan later promised to stop funding insurgents in the territory, while India offered them an amnesty if they renounced militancy. In 2014, India's current Prime Minister Narendra Modi came to power promising a tough line on Pakistan, but also showed interest in holding peace talks.

Nawaz Sharif, then prime minister of Pakistan, attended Mr Modi's swearing-in ceremony in Delhi. But a year later, India blamed Pakistan-based groups for an attack on its airbase in Pathankot in the northern state of Punjab. Mr Modi also cancelled a scheduled visit to the Pakistani capital, Islamabad, for a regional summit in 2017. Since then, there hasn't been any progress in talks between the neighbours. Are we back to square one?

The bloody summer of street protests in Indian-administered Kashmir in 2016 had already

dimmed hopes for a lasting peace in the region.

Then, in June 2018, the state government there was upended when Mr Modi's BJP pulled out of a coalition government run by Ms Mufti's People's Democratic Party.

Jammu and Kashmir was since under direct rule from Delhi, which fuelled further anger.

The deaths of more than 40 Indian soldiers in a suicide attack on 14 February, 2019 have ended any hope of a thaw in the immediate future. India blamed Pakistan-based militant groups for the violence - the deadliest targeting Indian soldiers in Kashmir since the insurgency began three decades ago.

Following the bombing, India said it would take "all possible diplomatic steps" to isolate Pakistan from the international community.

On 26 February, it launched air strikes in Pakistani territory which it said targeted militant bases." Pakistan shows off disputed air strike site

" Pakistan's dilemma over anti-India militants

Pakistan denied the raids had caused major damage or casualties but promised to respond, fuelling fears of confrontation. A day later it said it had shot down two Indian Air Force jets in its airspace, and captured a fighter pilot - who was later returned unharmed to India. So what happens next?

India's parliament has now passed a bill splitting Indian-administered Kashmir into two territories governed directly by Delhi: Jammu and Kashmir, and remote, mountainous Ladakh.

China, which shares a disputed border with India in Ladakh, has objected to the reorganisation and accused Delhi of undermining its territorial sovereignty.

Pakistan's Prime Minister Imran Khan has vowed to challenge India's actions at the UN security council, and take the matter to the International Criminal Court. In an ominous warning, he said: "If the world does not act today... (if) the developed world does not uphold its own laws, then things will go to a place that we will not be responsible for." But Delhi insists that there is no "external implication" to its decision to reorganise the state as it has not changed the Line of Control or boundaries of the region.



The genetic mistakes that could shape our species

At the time, he was an obscure researcher working at the Southern University of Science and Technology in Shenzhen, China. But he had been working on a top-secret project for the last two years - and he was about to take to the podium at the International Summit on Human Genome Editing to announce the results. There was a general buzz of excitement in the air. The audience looked on anxiously. People started filming on their phones.

He had made the first genetically modified babies in the history of humankind. After 3.7 billion years of continuous, undisturbed evolution by natural selection, a life form had taken its innate biology into its own hands. The result was twin baby girls who were born with altered copies of a gene known as CCR5, which the scientist hoped would make them immune to HIV.

But things were not as they seemed.

"I was kind of drawn to him for the first five or six minutes, he seemed very candid," says Hank Greely, a professor of law at Stanford University and expert in medical ethics, who watched the conference live over the internet in November 2018. "And then as he went on, I got more and more suspicious."

A genetic invention

In the years since, it's become clear that He's project was not

quite as innocent as it might sound. He had broken laws, forged documents, misled the babies' parents about any risks and failed to do adequate safety testing. The whole endeavour left many experts aghast - it was described as "monstrous", "amateurish" and "profoundly disturbing" - and the culprit is now in prison.

However, arguably the biggest twist were the mistakes. It turns out that the babies involved, Lulu and Nana, have not been gifted with neatly edited genes after all. Not only are they not necessarily immune to HIV, they have been accidentally endowed with versions of CCR5 that are entirely made up - they likely do not exist in any other human genome on the planet. And yet, such changes are heritable - they could be passed on to their children, and children's children, and so on.

In fact, there have been no shortage of surprises in the field. From the rabbits altered to be leaner that inexplicably ended up with much longer tongues to the cattle tweaked to lack horns that were inadvertently endowed with a long stretch of bacterial DNA in their genomes (including some genes that confer antibiotic resistance, no less) - its past is riddled with errors and misunderstandings.

More recently, researchers at the Francis Crick Institute in London

warned that editing the genetics of human embryos can lead to unintended consequences. By analysing data from previous experiments, they found that approximately 16% had accidental mutations that would not have been picked up via standard tests.

Why are these mistakes so common? Can they be overcome? And how could they affect future generations?

This might seem like a problem for the future. After all, He has been widely condemned and designer babies are illegal in many countries - at least for now. For years, Lulu, Nana and a mysterious third baby - the existence of which was only confirmed during the scientist's trial - were the only gene-edited people on the planet. But this could be about to change.

Enter "somatic cell" editing, a new technique currently being developed to treat a range of devastating illnesses, from obscure metabolic disorders to the leading cause of childhood blindness. The technology is seen as potentially hailing a huge leap forward in the management of some of the most intractable inherited disorders, as well as common illnesses such as cancer.

"In the whole global accounting of Crispr [gene editing] therapies, somatic cell genome editing is going to be a large fraction of that,"

says Krishanu Saha, a bioengineer at University of Wisconsin-Madison who is currently part of a consortium investigating the technique's safety. "I mean, that's certainly the case now, if you look at where trials are, where investment is." It works like this. Rather than altering a person's genome while they're a fertilised egg or early embryo in a petri dish, this method is intended to alter ordinary cells, such as those in specific organs like the eye. This means the changes should not be inherited by the next generation - but as with all gene editing, it's not quite so simple. "So let's say we are injecting a genome editor into the brain to target neurons in the hippocampus," says Saha. "How do we make sure that those genome editors do not travel into the reproductive organs and end up hitting a sperm or egg? Then that individual could potentially pass the edit on to their children."

At the moment, it's not yet known how likely this is - but Saha explains it's something they're looking into carefully, especially because the treatment looks set to become significantly more widely available over the next decade or so. A gene editor was injected into humans for the first time last year, as part of a landmark clinical trial of the technology.

If reproductive cells did end up being altered, "certainly, we would have individuals that have new gene variants that could be potentially very problematic", says Saha, who says he has colleagues who don't think it will ever be possible to get the risk down to zero - though he also has colleagues who are more optimistic.

A failed experiment

But first - back to the edited Chinese babies, for a masterclass in what can go wrong when the technique is wielded without due caution.

He aimed to provide them with a version of CCR5 that's naturally present in around 1% of Northern Europeans - East Asians tend to carry a different type. This rare variant is missing 32 pairs of letters (or base pairs) of genetic code. So, while the protein it makes would normally sit on the surface of white blood cells, people with this mutation make a stunted type that doesn't quite reach. When this unusual pool of people is exposed to HIV, the virus can't latch on to CCR5 and sneak inside - and consequently they're immune.

This was the goal - but it didn't work out this way.

Instead, both Lula and Nana are carrying CCR5 genes that are entirely new. As usual, each baby has two copies of the gene - one inherited from each parent - but they weren't edited uniformly.

Is Russia going to war with Ukraine?



Sabre-rattling or preparations for war? Since mid-March, there have been many warnings from Ukraine and Western governments that Russia is massing troops in Russian-annexed Crimea and around the eastern Ukraine conflict zone.

Russia's intentions are far from clear, but here's a quick guide to the latest developments.

Is Russia preparing to invade Ukraine?

Multiple sources have reported large Russian military movements towards the eastern Ukraine border and into Crimea, which Russian forces annexed from Ukraine in March 2014. Many of these reports have appeared on Twitter, such as tweets by Jane's intelligence information group about Iskander short-range missiles.

The Kremlin has not given details. President Vladimir Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov said moving troops across Russian territory was an "internal affair". Some of the troops, including units in Crimea, have been on exercises. But Mr Peskov also accused Ukraine of staging "provocations".

Ukrainian intelligence sources told the BBC that the extra forces amount to 16 battalion tactical groups, which would be up to 14,000 soldiers. In total, according to the Ukrainian presidency, Russia now has about 40,000 on the eastern border and about 40,000 in Crimea.

On 13 April Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu accused Nato of "threatening" actions and said Russia had responded by sending two armies and three formations of airborne troops to its western borders, to conduct exercises. He gave no detailed

figures or locations.

So is this an invasion force? It could be, but analysts say a big invasion is unlikely. Infiltration would be more Russia's tried-and-trusted method. Russian special forces without insignia - nicknamed "little green men" - took over Crimea in 2014. Nato Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg called the new Russian build-up "unjustified and deeply concerning" and said it was "the largest massing of Russian troops since the illegal annexation of Crimea".

Ukraine, Nato and Western

all-out war. There are sporadic clashes on the front line.

Since the collapse of communism in 1991, Russian troops have intervened in conflicts in several areas of the former Soviet Union, notably in Chechnya and other parts of the Caucasus.

In April 2014, just after Russia's annexation of Crimea, pro-Russian separatists seized a large swathe of eastern Ukraine's Donetsk and Luhansk regions. Earlier, months of pro-Western demonstrations in Ukraine's capital Kyiv had forced out a pro-

Russia eases passport rules for east Ukrainians

Russia's use of special forces, cyberwarfare and propaganda in this and other conflicts is known as "hybrid warfare" - not a hot war, but not a frozen conflict either. A US special report for Congress last year highlighted the role of the GRU, Russia's military intelligence agency.

There was large-scale combat in 2014, before a ceasefire in 2015. There have been some prisoner exchanges since then.

More than 13,000 people have been killed in the conflict. Ukraine says 26 of its troops have died in Donbas so far this year, compared to 50 in all of 2020. The separatists say more than 20 of theirs have died this year.

Why is Russia threatening Ukraine again now?

Russia-Ukraine analysts including Pavel Felgengauer and James Sherr note several factors exacerbating tensions.

In February, Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky imposed sanctions on Viktor Medvedchuk, a powerful Ukrainian oligarch and friend of President Putin. Ukraine also banned broadcasts by three pro-Russian TV stations.

The Minsk peace deal agreed in 2015 remains far from being fulfilled. For example, there are still no arrangements for independently monitored elections in the separatist regions.

In previous conflicts in what it calls its "near abroad", Russia has sent in troops as "peacekeepers", who have ended up staying. It happened in Moldova and South Ossetia, for example. James Sherr says it could well happen again in Ukraine. It would freeze the position firmly in Russia's favour.

Some speculate that Mr Putin also wants to test US President Joe Biden, who has taken a tougher stance on Russia than his predecessor, Donald Trump, had.

Mr Putin faces parliamentary elections in September and a continuing mass movement supporting his jailed arch-critic Alexei Navalny. So the Kremlin "defending" embattled Russians in Ukraine could go down well with many voters. Navalny might also be marginalised if the Kremlin whipped up patriotic fervour over Ukraine.

Is Ukraine protected by Nato? Not by treaty, as Ukraine is not a member. But Nato has close ties with Ukraine, which has received Western arms including US Javelin anti-tank missiles. So Russia knows that it risks provoking more Western military help for Ukraine.

President Zelensky has urged Nato to speed up Ukrainian membership. But the conflict makes it difficult for Nato to accept Ukraine under the 30-nation alliance's current terms. Nato's Jens Stoltenberg said "it's for the 30 members to decide when Ukraine is ready for Nato membership". But he stressed Ukraine's special partnership with Nato now, which a few other countries also have, including Sweden, Finland and Georgia. "We reject the idea that Russia has a kind of veto on other countries deciding their sovereign path," he said. The Kremlin has long warned Ukraine against joining Nato, and remains bitter that the three Baltic republics joined.

Nato is helping Ukraine's military with modernisation, training and joint exercises, the Nato chief said.



Source: Ukraine National Security & Defence Council

BBC

governments have also long accused Russia of deploying regular units and heavy weapons in separatist-held eastern Ukraine. The Kremlin denies that and calls any Russian troops there "volunteers".

Speaking at Nato HQ in Brussels, Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba said Russia was "openly threatening Ukraine with war and destruction of our statehood". But unlike in 2014, he added, "Russia won't be able to catch anyone by surprise anymore".

Why is Russia at war with Ukraine?

Russian-Ukrainian relations now are certainly hostile, but it is not

Russian president, Viktor Yanukovich.

Mr Kuleba recalled that in 2014 there was a Russian plan to split Ukraine and create an entity called "Novorossiya" (New Russia) - a plan foiled by Ukraine's armed forces.

The conflict zone, known as Donbas, is mainly Russian-speaking and now many of its residents have Russian passports. President Putin says Russia will defend Russian citizens abroad, if they are seen to be at risk.

Will a deal with Russia bring peace to Ukraine?

"It was a shooting range": Ukraine's deadliest day

Under Biden, Pakistan and the US face a dilemma about the breadth of their relationship

After the unpredictability of the Trump years, Pakistan approached Joe Biden's win and the new administration with both expectation and apprehension. It hoped that the administration would buy its pitch for a reset and for broadening relations beyond Afghanistan, but it worried about "baggage" that the Biden team could bring from its experience during the Obama years - the second half of which was a relative low point in the U.S.-Pakistan relationship. Nearly 100 days into the new administration, it appears that redefining U.S.-Pakistan relations isn't going to be quite as easy as Islamabad had hoped, even as Pakistan concertedly pushes a new geo-economic vision. President Biden has not yet spoken to Prime Minister Imran Khan. Nor did Biden invite Pakistan to a planned leaders summit on climate change later this month, though the leaders of India and Bangladesh will be there, and Pakistan was the only country among the world's 10 most populous to not receive an invitation. Its absence is all the more pointed given Pakistan's efforts to mitigate climate change, including its commitment to plant a billion trees. Khan claims he's not bothered. Biden's Special Envoy for Climate Change John Kerry, meanwhile, is currently in the region - visiting India and Bangladesh, but not Pakistan. Separately, Pakistan continues to play a key role in the Afghan peace process.

Trump took a transactional approach to Pakistan, which worked well in some ways. What Pakistan wants now is a relationship with the U.S. that is broader in scope, and includes trade and investment. Will Biden deliver?

WHAT PAKISTAN WANTS

In recent months, Pakistan's civilian and military leadership have together been promoting a new focus on "geo-economics" - an approach that emphasizes regional trade and connectivity, and stresses that Pakistan is open for business. The new focus recognizes that a geostrategic approach only goes so far, and if Pakistan is to rise on the world



stage (as its neighbor India has done), that position will have to be predicated on economic growth.

In tandem, Pakistan says it wants to co-exist with its neighbors and wants a peaceful outcome in Afghanistan. It seeks a potential détente with India: In February, the two agreed to honor a 2003 ceasefire agreement along the Line of Control in Kashmir, and there might be more in the offing on a rapprochement. In a recent speech in Islamabad, Pakistan's chief of army staff, General Qamar Javed Bajwa, notably said: "We feel that it is time to bury the past and move forward." Pakistan also wants a more broad-based relationship with the U.S., one that goes beyond strategic concerns and the war in Afghanistan. It is conveying openness to the West, with its leadership stating that the country's economic fortunes are not wedded to China - and the \$62 billion China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a flagship project of China's Belt and Road Initiative - alone. In his speech last month, Bajwa said: "While CPEC remains central to our vision, only seeing Pakistan through CPEC prism is also misleading. Our immensely vital geostrategic location and a transformed vision make us a country of immense and diverse potential." Pakistan's foreign minister has also said as much: "[Americans] have to understand that our relationship with China is not a zero-sum game for them.

They should come, compete and invest." The problem with this pitch is that Pakistan's regulatory climate is less than ideal for investors.

The foreign minister and other officials have also suggested that Pakistan can serve as an interlocutor in the U.S. relationship with China, harkening back to an approach that worked well half a century ago. But in 2021, the U.S. likely won't take Pakistan up on this.

ATOUGH START

Pakistan's relationship with the Biden administration got off to a bumpy start. On January 28, Pakistan's supreme court upheld a lower court's judgment acquitting Omar Saeed Sheikh, the man convicted of masterminding the kidnapping of Wall Street Journal journalist Daniel Pearl in 2002 - a kidnapping that led to his murder. The Biden administration swiftly denounced the court's decision, calling it an "affront to terrorism victims everywhere, including in Pakistan," adding that the U.S. expected "the Pakistani government to expeditiously review its legal options to ensure justice is served."

The decision came the day before Secretary of State Antony Blinken's first calls with the foreign ministers of India and Pakistan. The juxtaposition of the two readouts presented a sharp, unavoidable contrast. In his conversation with Pakistani Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi, Blinken focused on America's concern with the

Sheikh judgment; in his conversation with Indian Minister of External Affairs S. Jaishankar, he emphasized the importance of the U.S.-India relationship moving forward.

THE AFGHANISTAN FACTOR

The Biden administration looks at Pakistan through the lens of Afghanistan, much like the Trump administration did. Special Envoy Zalmay Khalilzad continues his regular visits to Islamabad and the army headquarters in Rawalpindi for discussions on the peace process. But while the Trump administration privileged Pakistan over all other third parties on Afghanistan, the Biden administration hasn't done so. In a leaked letter to Ghani, Blinken notably mentioned India and Iran as well as Russia, China, and Pakistan as countries that could help in the peace process. The mention of India, in particular, worries Pakistan. Ultimately, at the troika-plus-one (China, Russia, and the United States, plus Pakistan) talks on the Afghan peace process that were held in Moscow last month, Pakistan was the "plus one," but it seems likely that India will play a greater role going forward than it has in the past few years.

The dilemma is that the U.S. wants more from Pakistan on Afghanistan, including to try to get the Taliban to agree to a ceasefire. Pakistan insists that it is doing all that it can, that it has already done a lot by bringing the Taliban to the

negotiating table, and that there are real limits to its leverage over the group. There is truth to those limits, given that the Taliban has evolved away from Pakistani control since the 1990s, and Pakistan's influence over Taliban field commanders, in particular, may be a lot less than we imagine. While Pakistan wants to retain its key position in the Afghan peace process, one it attained precisely because of the leverage it has over the Taliban, Pakistanis tend to begrudge the demand to "do more" to rein in the Taliban, particularly after the U.S. negotiated a peace deal with the group. Across recent U.S. administrations, of course, the thinking has been that Pakistan's support for the Taliban (including sanctuaries for the group in Pakistan) caused the United States to lose the war in Afghanistan. The two countries continue to see past each other, bedeviling the relationship.

Through it all, the U.S. ends up privileging Pakistan's military - its usual partner and the one institution in Pakistan it perceives as effective - over its civilian officials.

THE BIDEN ADMINISTRATION Biden knows Pakistan well through his years on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and as vice president. Pakistanis had hoped that that would be enough for a reset and for widening the scope of the relationship, but the reality is that Biden is too busy elsewhere - with more pressing concerns both domestically and abroad - to focus on Pakistan beyond the Afghanistan issue, at least for now. Pakistani officials have acknowledged privately that the Biden administration "was not giving encouraging signals."

Washington will likely continue to see Pakistan through the prism of countries in its neighborhood: Afghanistan, India, and China in particular. Paradoxically, Trump's unorthodoxy had soothed some of Pakistan's fears; its leaders felt for a time as if America's relationship with Pakistan was decoupled from its relationship with India. That feeling is unlikely to last.



Looking to Buy/Sell ?

We know the difference between Home & House

Honesty, Integrity & Experience



Specializing in Investment & Income Producing Real Estate

Nlight Real Estate

Tel: 516 NLIGHT8



Sharanjit Singh Thind
Real Estate Broker/Notary Public



180 Broadway, PH 3A, Hicksville NY 11801
Email: homes@nlightrealestate.com
www.nlightrealestate.com



Practically everything is getting more expensive in America

Wall Street has been a bundle of nerves about potential spikes in inflation since Democrats passed \$1.9 trillion in economic stimulus last month. And on Tuesday, some of the first signs of inflation came to pass. Consumer prices for March rose 2.6% compared to the same month last year. They were lifted in particular by surging energy prices, including the cost of gasoline — which jumped 22.5% over the last 12 months ending in March. Oil prices got clobbered last year and didn't get back to their pre-pandemic levels until the start of 2021. In March alone, consumer prices climbed 0.6%. That was more than expected, as well as the largest increase since August 2012.

Excluding volatile energy costs as well as food prices, which increased only 0.1% last month, America's consumer prices still rose 1.6% from the previous year, data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics revealed. That was more than economists surveyed by Refinitiv had predicted. Prices for used cars and trucks — which got a big boost during the second half of last year as people across the country bought vehicles in response to travel restrictions — rose 0.5% in March, marking their first monthly increase since October. Year-over-year, used vehicle prices are still up 9.4%.

Other transportation costs including airline fares and public transport also rose in March, jumping 1.8% after three straight

months of declines. That gain was mostly driven by increases in car rental and car insurance prices. Transport costs are still down year-over-year, however. Will higher inflation stick?

The question remains: Is this a temporary sugar rush from the reopening of the economy, or the start of price hikes that could eat into corporate profits and persuade consumers to stop spending?

The jury is still out, but economists predict inflation will continue to heat up over the summer months, especially as people are starting to travel again. Last week's report on producer price inflation, which measures the change in sale prices for goods and services, also came



in above expectations.

Prices are rising as the economy is gathering steam. The great reopening fueled by the continuing release some of the pent-up consumer demand.

Temporarily higher inflation was to be expected. An economy as large as America's can't just be

turned off and on again without any such effects, some economists have noted. But it's important to note the context of the year-over-year comparisons: Prices pulled back significantly after the pandemic hit the United States in March 2020 and shutdowns began, making this year's price increases look bigger.

Vaccine passport apps are about to be everywhere. It could get complicated



As the vaccine rollout continues to accelerate and the broader US economy prepares to reopen, talk of vaccine verification apps has heated up. Tech companies, health care providers and even retail stores are working on digital health pass apps that will allow users to show

proof of vaccination before entering events and businesses. The state of New York is already scanning IBM's Excelsior app at the door of venues such as Madison Square Garden ahead of sporting events; if you've tested negative for Covid-19 or received a vaccine, you can watch a Rangers hockey

game in person.

Vaccine verification apps could play a key role in lifting restrictions, but privacy and security experts say the upcoming rollout will present a handful of challenges over standards, interoperability, personal data and adoption — from both users and businesses. This will be compounded by a deluge of apps potentially coming our way, with the federal government largely saying it will stay out of it. "Less is more," said Alan Butler, president of the Electronic Privacy Information Center. "These are public health related systems that should be managed by public health departments and should be limited in how they're used to that context. We don't want these to be broad data collection systems

for all sorts of different uses that exist far beyond the public health crisis." White House press secretary Jen Psaki recently said there will be "no centralized universal federal vaccinations database, and no federal mandate requiring everyone to obtain a single vaccination credential. ... We want to encourage an open marketplace with a variety of private sector companies and nonprofit coalitions developing solutions." But leaving the process up to the private sector and local governments could present unforeseen consequences. For example, Florida Governor Ron DeSantis already banned the requirement of vaccination proof documents in the state — a move that has the cruise line industry worried about

reopening plans. Jenny Wanger, the director of programs for Linux Foundation Public Health, said "hundreds" of companies are actively involved in making vaccine credential solutions. Her organization is behind The Covid-19 Credentials Initiative, a global community made up of more than 450 technologists, academics and healthcare professionals from more than 100 organizations, that is among the groups establishing standards for vaccine health pass apps. The aim is to set guidelines so apps can be interoperable and open sourced, allowing developers to see what's happening behind the coding to create a more transparent and collaborative process.

Grab is going public in \$40 billion SPAC deal, the biggest on record

Southeast Asia's ride-hailing giant Grab is setting the stage for an eye-popping Wall Street debut. The Singapore-based startup announced Tuesday that it would merge with a special-purpose acquisition company, or SPAC, backed by Altimeter Capital in a deal that would pave the way for a New York listing and value Grab at about \$39.6 billion. That's more than twice the roughly \$16 billion the firm was last privately valued at, and would mark the biggest-ever deal with a SPAC, or blank-check company, according to

Dealogic. The previous SPAC record was held by United Wholesale Mortgage, a US home loan provider, which snagged an \$18.3 billion valuation last fall, according to the data provider. Under the deal, Grab is raising more than \$4 billion in cash from investors including Fidelity, BlackRock, T. Rowe Price, Abu Dhabi sovereign wealth fund Mubadala, and Singapore government investment arm Temasek. US investment firm Altimeter Capital is putting up \$750 million.

Grab plans to start trading on the NASDAQ under ticker symbol "GRAB" in the coming months.

Sign of SPAC frenzy

SPACs are shell companies with limited or no operating assets. They usually go public solely to raise money from investors that is then used to buy existing businesses. These firms used to be sneered at on Wall Street, but have taken off globally in a big way over the past year. More than 310 have already been launched in 2021, already beating last's year total of 257, according to data from Refinitiv. They raised almost \$93 billion during the first quarter of this year alone. Grab is the latest big name to merge with a SPAC as a means of going public. Recently, a slew of major



companies have chosen to take the same route to market, including Playboy, DraftKings, and electric vehicle startups Nikola and Arrival.

According to Refinitiv, 110 SPAC combinations worth \$232 billion were announced during the first three months of the year.

Billionaires and celebrities are

looking for a piece of the action by setting up SPACs of their own. Richard Branson and Peter Thiel, as well as athletes such as Alex Rodriguez and Colin Kaepernick, pop star Ciara, investor Bill Ackman and former White House economic adviser Larry Kudlow, have all gotten in on the act.

Karnan movie review:**Dhanush's film is a powerful, bold portrait of caste-based riots and police brutality**

Karnan movie review: Dhanush plays the saviour of his people in Mari Selvaraj latest film about caste-politicians and the subjugation of marginalised communities.

The violence that permeates the lives of Dalits and the people of marginalised communities is undeniable. The urban society is unaware of the plight of these people who, as shown in the Karnan, have to fight for their rights – right to live, right to education, right to livelihood and better wages. In the Indian social context, there have been many incidents where they have borne the brunt of the government and police's absolute cruelty. Mari Selvaraj's Karnan, which features Dhanush in one of his fiercest roles, is a bold, powerful portrait of a flawed system letting down its people, caste-based riots and police brutality. Loosely based on the 1995 caste-riots in Kodiyankulam; Karnan paints an extremely hard-hitting story of a village fighting for its recognition. It is about the people of Podiyankulam who have been oppressed by everyone around them. From the people (upper

caste) of the neighbouring village to the local collector and the police department; nobody pays heed to the people of Podiyankulam. The film opens with a haunting shot of a young girl dying in the middle of a road – as several vehicles pass by without ever stopping to help. Following this incident, the people of the village meet several concerned authorities and request for the construction of a bus stop, but to no avail. An incident involving a local bus turns into a riot, forcing the police department to intervene and it paves way for events that leave you shocked.

Karnan raises several valid questions – all equally important – about the state of the oppressed community in our society. Through soul-stirring visuals of Theni Eswar, the film gives us a front row seat to the events that led to the infamous Kodiyankulam riots which was allegedly orchestrated by the police. The film throws the spotlight on police brutality and abuse of



power but at the same time, it's also a heart wrenching drama about Dalits being denied even their most basic needs. The film is beautifully empowered by so many metaphors, especially one involving a donkey, and the way they're used to convey the intended message is commendable. While Mari Selvaraj deserves all the praise for his vision, it is Theni Eswar who brings these images to life with his soul-stirring visuals. If Mari Selvaraj's first film

Pariyerum Perumal was about education, Karnan is about agitation. The filmmaker brings forth his inner anger to talk about caste politics and police excesses.

Dhanush as Karnan is one of the prime reasons why the film works, and he's great to watch as the guide to the people of his village. Veteran Malayalam actor Lal gets a meaty part and as Karnan's mentor and has a solid presence. Both Rajisha Vijayan and Lakshmi priya

Chandramouli, two key female characters, play their parts convincingly. Lakshmi as Dhanush's elder brother delivers one of the best performances from the supporting cast. The running commentary about gods and their indifference makes for a very interesting sub-plot. Santhosh Narayanan's music plays a crucial role in accentuating the mood of the film. Karnan will definitely go down as one of the most powerful films of Tamil cinema in recent years.

Vakeel Saab movie review:**Pawan Kalyan shines in this highly commercialised version of Pink**

Vakeel Saab movie review: Pawan Kalyan's hero antics overpower the important message that the story had set out to deliver.

Vakeel Saab
Director: Venu Sriram

Cast: Pawan Kalyan, Anjali, Nivetha Thomas, Shruti Haasan and Prakash Raj
Pawan Kalyan's comeback film Vakeel Saab is the kind of movie that effectively works as a star vehicle with everything needed to pander to the masses. However, as a remake

of Pink, it takes the issue of consent and does it a grave disservice. In spite of Pawan Kalyan's rousing performance, the film becomes another hero-driven story wherein the core message – how 'no means no' – is shrouded in layers of heroism and machismo. The Tamil version of Pink, which featured Ajith in the lead,

struck the perfect balance between star power and the film's feminist message. It gave Ajith the scope to shine as the hero but at the same time, didn't dilute the impact of the story. Vakeel Saab, on the contrary, is a full-blown star-studded drama where the debate about the importance of consent takes a backseat.

Nevertheless, considering the Kalyan's stardom, the film number of people who've been spends time in explaining desperately waiting for Pawan the reason behind why he Kalyan's comeback, it's safe became a lawyer in the first to assume that Vakeel Saab place. A lot of time is wasted has taken the core message in building the backstory of to a wider audience. Vakeel Pawan Kalyan's character and Saab is a safe and highly by the time the story shifts commercialised version of Pink, focus on the main issue, and it allows Pawan Kalyan to boredom creeps in. Thankfully, be in his element and do stuff the second half makes up for he's best known for. The film is the lull that was brought on in a lot more sincere and engaging the first. The courtroom scenes in the second half where most are mostly engaging except for of the court room drama unfolds. the heated arguments between The entire first half plays out like Pawan and Prakash Raj's a Pawan Kalyan showreel, and character which end up as a for his fans, who've been waiting roadside brawl. Among the to see him on screen for the last three versions of this story, three years, it's a treat. Vakeel Saab is more massy Vakeel Saab is about fighting and lightweight. It might lack the right fight, and that's why the seriousness in which it it shies away from the main chooses to address the issue, issue of three independent but it does know how to make women who have been an impact with a star like wronged. To justify Pawan Pawan Kalyan.

Covid strikes television

Sick actors, disrupted shoots, broken plotlines—Indian television faces major challenges from the latest wave of Covid-19 cases

The show may not be going on for cinemas, but it very much continues for general entertainment channels, which have continued to run daily soaps and competitive reality shows through the pandemic. However, it is proving to be a monumental challenge—the latest surge of Covid-19 cases in Mumbai has hit the small screen industry hard, with reports of actors in Hindi TV shows contracting the virus appearing in the news almost every other day. Bhabhiji Ghar Pe Hai actress Shubhangi Atre is

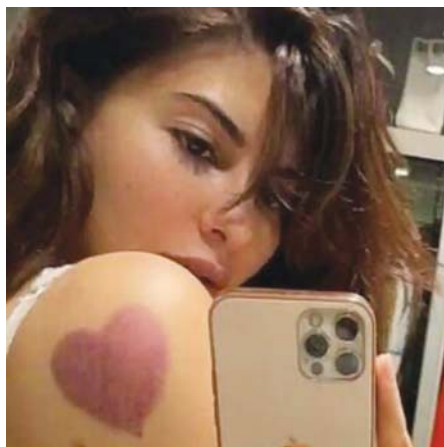
out of action due to Covid-19. So are Aditya Narayan, host of ongoing Indian Idol, Apna Time Bhi Aayega's lead actor Megha Ray, Ye Hain Chahatein's Abrar Qazi, Aapki Nazron Ne Samjha actress Narayani Shastri, Anupamaa actors Rupali Ganguly and Aashish Mehrotra and Molki actors Toral Rasputra, Amar Upadhyay and Priyal Mahajan, among others. Given that actors like these are integral parts of the shows they are in, with their presence required on a daily basis, the TV showrunners find themselves in a tricky spot—having to continue narratives without them. "If an important

track is going on and the actor required is Covid-positive then we put that track on hold and push it till he or she is back," says Rajesh Ram Singh, producer of Cockcrow & Shaika Entertainment which makes the show Ghum Hai Kisikey Pyaar Meiin on Star Plus. Two of its actors—Neil Bhatt and Aishwarya Sharma—and a crew member tested positive in March.

Television was one of the first sectors in the entertainment industry to unlock, with shoots beginning in June of last year. But the current surge appears more challenging for producers.

Jacqueline Fernandez gives sneak peek of her closet as she drops picture after cupping therapy session

Actor Jacqueline Fernandez on Thursday shared a glimpse of her dressing room closet as she posted a picture of herself. In the mirror selfie, she is seen wearing nude makeup and a laced white bra as she flaunts a heart-shaped purple mark on her shoulder, after her cupping therapy session. Behind her, her closet is seen with her clothes and bags. Some cupping marks can also be seen on her side lower back. Captioning the post, she wrote, "I'm hooked!! @physio_bhavika99parekh" followed by emojis. Reacting to the picture, celebrity trainer Dheepesh Bhatt wrote, "Almost thought for a second you got a tattoo!" Many of her fans dropped hearts in the comments section. The actor is also a fitness enthusiast as can be seen on her Instagram feed as she posts a lot of photos from her yoga sessions. Recently, her close friend Shaan Muttathil took to an Instagram story and showed how



easily the actor nailed a headstand and patted her cat at the same time. Jacqueline has a lot of projects lined up. She was last seen in Mrs Serial Killer, the 2020 Netflix release. The actor will be next seen in Bhoot Police and Attack. The 35-year-old is also a part of Cirkus, a Rohit Shetty film, which stars Ranveer Singh in the lead role. She will also be seen in Bachchan Pandey along with

Akshay Kumar and Kriti Sanon. Recently, she began shooting for Ram Setu along with Akshay and Nushratt Bharuccha but it had to be halted after the former tested Covid-19 positive. The Race 3 actor had shared a glimpse of her look for the movie and caption it, "First day of #ramsetu extremely honored to be part of this prestigious film! Thanks to the ace photographer @akshaykumar for capturing this moment #ramsetu." In the candid picture, she was seen in a monochromatic shot wearing a headscarf.

Arjun Kapoor responds to Instagram user's dig at him over donation for child's treatment

Actor Arjun Kapoor on Thursday slammed an Instagram user who took a dig at him after he shared a post asking his fans to donate for the treatment of a child. Taking to Instagram he shared a series of pictures and captioned, "A request for everyone to do as much as they can to help the little boy! Donation link in bio." Responding to it, a user commented, "Well, your one day earning could save him right away!" Arjun replied, "@richasharma09 actually Richa if I was earning



16 cr a day I would definitely not need to post this. But knowing that I can't afford 16cr I have done my part towards helping him & also have put it out there after that...rather be of help and provide a positive move to help him." Another user wrote, "@richasharma09 i said same thing he is jst doing publicity for his own benefits." Responding to him, Arjun wrote, "@arv_7111 actually my friend since u follow me and u would realise I'm doing this for the boys benefit to save his life."



Kiara Advani responds to fan who requested 10-minute meeting: 'Dreams do come true'



A fan of actor Kiara Advani's on Thursday expressed her desire to meet her, saying that it would be her 'dream come true moment'. Kiara responded to the fan. Taking to Twitter, she shared a picture and wrote, "It Wld be my idol @advani_kiara mam ,it wld be a dream come true moment for me. I regret she visited delhi many times during movie shoots and film promotions and i couldnt meet her .But next tym will surely try my best .Hope dream come true Crossed fingers. @advani_kiara mam wanna meet u." Responding to her, the actor tweeted, "Dreams do come true Very very soon." The ecstatic fan further wrote, "Really Grateful and humbled by these words @advani_kiara

mam. Your love means everything to me .And your words brought a big smile to my Face today .My day is made. And meeting u will b best day of my Life. Truly waiting." Kiara often shares glimpses of her life with fans. A few days ago, she posted a throwback video on Instagram Stories, in which she aced a backflip in 2016. She clubbed the video with the Backflip track from Green Eggs and Ham and wrote, "Once upon a time in 2016". Interacting with her followers, she also held a poll asking, "Will I be able to do this again?"

The actor has finished the shooting for Bhool Bhulaiyaa 2 and is gearing up for Shershaah, her first release of 2021, in which she stars opposite her rumoured boyfriend, Sidharth Malhotra. It is based on the life of Param Vir Chakra awardee

and Kargil hero, Indian Army Captain Vikram Batra. Sidharth will play the protagonist and Kiara will be seen as his girlfriend Dimple Cheema. In an interview with Filmfare, Kiara said about Sidharth, "Sid is someone I got to know really well through the shooting of Shershaah. He is someone who is intelligent when it comes to scripts and edits. He is focused when it comes to his work."

She made her acting debut in 2014 with Fugly but rose to prominence after a supporting role in MS Dhoni: The Untold Story, and Karan Johar's Lust Stories in 2018. In 2019, she starred in Kabir Singh which was followed by Good Newwz. She was lauded for her film Guilty, which released in March 2020 on Netflix.

Ananya Panday reveals Suhana Khan is the 'makeup guru' of their squad with Shanaya Kapoor: 'I am the worst'

Actor Ananya Panday, who is childhood best friends with Suhana Khan and Shanaya Kapoor, revealed in a new interview who among them is the best at makeup, and who is the worst. Ananya, the daughter of Chunky and Bhavana Pandey, grew up around Suhana, the daughter of Shah Rukh and Gauri Khan, and Shanaya, the daughter of Sanjay and Maheep Kapoor.

In an interview with Vogue India, she said that Suhana is the 'makeup guru' of their squad. "She

does the perfect winged liner!" Ananya said, before conceding, "I am



probably the worst at it out of everyone."

Ananya continued, "Honestly, I have

a very balanced equation with beauty and makeup. "I feel like I have two personalities. I love being that glamorous girl, dressing up, and getting my pictures clicked. But when I am not working, I want the complete opposite of that. And I like having that balance."

Ananya made her acting debut with Student of the Year 2, produced by Karan Johar's Dharma Productions. She has since appeared in films such as Pati Patni Aur Woh and Khaali Peeli.

Southern Charm star Madison LeCroy sends her well wishes to Alex Rodriguez and Jennifer Lopez after her 'friendship' with the former MLB star sparked controversy

After sparking controversy over her alleged friendship with Alex Rodriguez earlier this year, Southern Charm star Madison LeCroy has sent her well wishes to the former MLB pro and his ex-fiancee Jennifer Lopez in the wake of their split.

'I wish them the best,' Madison, 30, told Page Six when asked about the power couple confirming their separation. Madison was thrust into the spotlight earlier this year after admitting to having had contact with Rodriguez, however described their exchanges as 'innocent.' The controversy all started after Madison was accused of being in contact with a married, ex-MLB player on the reunion episode of Southern Charm.

During the episode, Madison was also accused of sleeping with the unidentified sports star. She denied ever seeing the man in person, although she did admit to DM-ing him. Though the identity of the individual was withheld in the episode, Madison eventually admitted the person in question was Alex. Madison told Page Six at the time that she and Rodriguez 'never met up' but had 'spoken on the phone.' "That's the truth," she said, clarifying they had 'never been physical... never had any kind of anything. Just an acquaintance.' She described the phone calls as inconsistent, and said they had only spoken to each other

'randomly.'

While she would not reveal what was discussed, she described it as 'innocent.'

However a source with knowledge of the situation previously told DailyMail.com: 'Alex has never met or spoken to Madison or anyone from the show.' After weeks of blasting split rumors, Jennifer and Alex confirmed they were going their separate ways on Thursday.

The couple finally released a statement announcing the news, as they told Today: 'We have realized we are better as friends and look forward to remaining so. We will continue to work together and support each other on our shared businesses and projects...



Why is the US Navy in India's backyard?



in Yokosuka, Japan, said that the destroyer USS John Paul Jones asserted 'navigational rights and freedoms approximately 130 nautical miles west of the Lakshadweep Islands, inside India's EEZ or continental shelf' without requiring India's prior consent, consistent with international law. (The EEZ is a 200 nautical mile belt of oceanic territory around a coastal state.) India's demand for prior consent for military exercises or manoeuvres in its EEZ was a claim inconsistent with international law, the release said.

(SAI Bureau)- The US Navy's Seventh Fleet conducted what it calls a Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs) drill through India's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) on April 7. A strong and unusually worded release from the US Seventh Fleet headquartered

The ministry of external affairs (MEA) response on April 9, two days after the US statement, said it had 'conveyed its concerns regarding this passage through our EEZ to the government of the USA through diplomatic channels'. The

(Contd on page 30)

Stop public rallies, now



(SAI Bureau)-India is in the middle of its most serious public health emergency - more serious and severe than last year, when the coronavirus pandemic first struck. Each day brings in a new record of the number of cases (on Sunday, daily cases crossed 170,000). Each day brings in a new set of alarming figures from some of India's largest,

(Contd on page 29)

Covid 2.0: Pandemic lessons India should have taken from second influenza wave of 1918



(SAI Bureau)-In late 1918, when the second wave of influenza pandemic struck India, Mumbai (Bombay) and Pune (Poona) were among the worst affected cities. The disease had soon spread to other parts of the country, though relatively less in the northeast. The rural areas were also affected and nearly all states and districts were reporting more cases, and a bigger peak than the first wave. The younger age group was also affected now. To control the spread, local authorities ordered major restrictions such as closure of cinema halls and other public spaces. They appealed to people to avoid large gatherings and wear masks.

(Contd on page 31)

Yes, police can pull you over for hanging an air



(News Agencies)- Moments and found a gross misdemeanor before police fatally shot Daunte warrant, Gannon said, without Wright during a traffic stop Sunday providing additional details on the in a Minneapolis suburb, he called dangling item or the warrant. He said his mother and told her he'd been the shooting appeared to be pulled over for hanging air fresheners

from his rearview mirror. It's not clear how much of a role the air fresheners played in the traffic stop. Brooklyn Center Police Chief Tim Gannon told reporters Monday that Wright was originally pulled over for an expired tag and that when officers approached his car, they saw an item hanging from the rearview mirror. Officers ran Wright's name

(Contd on page 29)

The SGPC takes aim at the RSS



(SAI Bureau)-As the Sukhbir Badal-led Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) struggles to regain the trust of its core support base in the state, Punjab's rural farmers and religious Sikhs, the so-called Panthic voters, after quitting the NDA alliance over the farm laws in September last year, the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC) has added fuel to the fire. On March 31, it passed a resolution condemning the BJP's ideological

(Contd on page 30)