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Welcome

Democrats unveil Joe Biden's sweeping immigration reform which would put 11 million undocumented immigrants on pathway to citizenship, give DREAMERS immediate status and ban the word 'alien' - but say it is not 'an amnesty'



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Usha Rao-Monari Appointed as Under-Secretary-General, Associate Administrator of UN Development Programme

(Insider Bureau)- Leading investment professional Usha Rao-Monari of India has been appointed by UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres as Under-Secretary-General and Associate Administrator of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).

A statement issued by the UN Spokesperson on Wednesday said that Rao-Monari, senior adviser to Blackstone's Infrastructure Group, is an investment professional with

almost three decades of investment experience, particularly in the infrastructure area.

Rao-Monari previously served as Chief Executive Officer of Global Water Development Partners, a Blackstone portfolio company, and held several senior positions, including Director of the Sustainable Business Advisory Group at the International Finance Corporation, part of the World Bank Group, the statement



said. She currently serves on the Boards of a number

organisations in the field of sustainable development and has held a number of Board and advisory positions in the areas of water, natural capital, biodiversity and environment, it added. Guterres expressed his gratitude and appreciation to Mourad Wahba of Egypt for his

degree in Management Studies from Jamnalal Bajaj Institute of Management in Mumbai and a B.A. Honours Economics from Delhi University. The announcement of her appointment comes just two days after the UN Capital Development Fund (UNCDF), which focusses on providing micro-finance access to least developed countries (LDCs), said Preeti Sinha has commenced her tenure as Executive Secretary of the UN agency. In 2019, Anita Bhatia of India, an experienced leader in the area of strategic partnerships, resource mobilisation and management, was appointed by Guterres as Assistant Secretary-General for Resource Management, Sustainability and Partnerships and Deputy Executive Director of the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women).

commitment as Associate Administrator ad interim and 30 years of service in the United Nations. He also voiced appreciation to Tegegnework Gettu of Ethiopia for his long-standing career at the United Nations and for his significant contributions to the development agenda as UNDP's Associate Administrator.

Rao-Monari holds a Master's degree in International Affairs and Finance from Columbia University's School of International and Public Affairs/ School of Business, a Master's

Indians in UAE can renew international driving permit issued in India: Report

(Insider Bureau)-Indian expats in the UAE can locally renew their International Driving Permit (IDP) issued in India starting Tuesday.

According to a report in Gulf News, the Indian Embassy in Abu Dhabi on Monday announced that it would facilitate

driving license. "After physical verification of the documents, it said, the applicants will be asked to submit duly filled-in Miscellaneous Consular Service Form (EAP-II), the report said.

On whether the same would be applicable for Indians living

(ICWF) charge. The applicant would need to upload all the relevant documents along with the receipt issued by the mission in the Parivahan portal of the ministry and pay the requisite IDP fees online on the same portal.



the re-issuance of IDP to Indian nationals, which were originally issued by the relevant authorities in India with effect from February 15. The move is part of the Indian government's decision to allow Indian Embassies abroad to provide the service in cooperation with the Ministry of Transport and Highways (MoRTH).

In an advisory related to the launch of the service posted on social media, the Embassy -- as quoted by Gulf News -- said: "Those who intend to avail of this consular service may please visit the Embassy during working hours (between 08:30 am to 12:30 pm on all working days from Sunday to Thursday) with their valid passport and expired IDP/ IDP number as well as their Indian

in Dubai and Northern Emirates or not, the Indian Consulate in Dubai confirmed to Gulf News that the same service can be done through an outsourced agency providing attestation services for Indians in Dubai and the northern emirates. A consulate spokesperson said the process, documentation and fees will remain the same for Indians living in Dubai and the Northern Emirates as well. "However, instead of visiting the consulate, they need to visit the IVS office for document submission," he said. On the subject of the cost applicable, the mission said that they also have to provide Dh40 as consular service fee and Dh8 as Indian Community Welfare Fund



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200 Indian-Origin People Occupy Leadership Positions in 15 Countries: Report

The officials on the 2021 Indiaspora Government Leaders List collectively represent more than 587 million constituents and their countries account for an estimated USD 28 trillion in GDP.

More than 200 Indian origin people occupy leadership positions in as many as 15 countries including the United States and United Kingdom. Of these, 60 hold Cabinet ranks, according to the first of its kind-released by a US-based organisation working among Indian Expatriates.

Drawing from government websites and other publicly available resources, the 2021 Indiaspora Government Leaders List on Monday recognised more than 200 leaders of Indian heritage who have ascended to the highest echelons of public service in 15 countries across the globe, with more than 60 of these leaders holding Cabinet positions.

"It is a huge source of pride to have the first woman and first person of colour as the Vice President of the world's oldest democracy be someone of Indian

heritage. We wanted to use this seminal moment on Presidents' Day to highlight a host of others in the diaspora who also are in public service," said Indiaspora founder MR Rangaswami, a Silicon Valley-based entrepreneur and investor.

"These leaders are building a legacy for future generations, and one that extends beyond our community to all of the constituents and communities that they serve," he said in a statement.

The list also includes diplomats, legislators, heads of central banks and senior civil servants from countries with significant histories of Indian Expatriates migration, such as Australia, Canada, Singapore, South Africa, United Arab Emirates, United Kingdom, and the United States. "It is an honour to be included on the 2021 Indiaspora Government Leaders List. As the longest-

serving Indian-American Member of Congress, I am proud to be a leader in the Indian American community, which has become an integral part of American life and society," said congressman Ami Bera, Chairman of the US House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Asia.

With more than 32 million people of Indian-origin or (PIOs) globally, according to India's Ministry of External Affairs, Indians are the largest expatriates population in the world.

The officials on the 2021 Indiaspora Government Leaders List collectively represent more than 587 million constituents, and their countries account for an estimated USD 28 trillion in GDP, demonstrating the impact that these leaders are having globally, Indiaspora said in a statement. "It truly is inspiring to note the remarkable contribution



that government leaders of Indian heritage have made to advance the societies that they now represent," said Rosy Akbar, Fiji's Minister of Education, Heritage, and Arts.

"For a sizable segment of the population, it is government policy addressing social injustices that lead to a transformative path of sustainable socio-economic progress." The list includes immigrants from India, as well as professionals born in countries such as Singapore, South Africa, England, Canada and the US.

"As a proud Indo-Canadian, it is an honour to be included in the 2021 Indiaspora Government Leaders List alongside an accomplished and diverse group of leaders from the India diaspora," said Senator Ratna Omidvar. "I am eternally proud of my Indian heritage but also being Canadian. Canada has given me its protection and its opportunities, and in return, I am committed to making it a better place so that it continues to be a land of protection and opportunity for future Canadians," he said.

UN Capital Development Fund Announces Preeti Sinha As Executive Secretary



(Insider Bureau)-The UN Capital Development Fund (UNCDF) has announced Preeti Sinha as its Executive Secretary, who said focus will be on providing micro-finance assistance to women, youth, small and medium-sized enterprises in under-served communities.

Ms Sinha commenced her tenure as UNCDF Executive Secretary, the highest leadership rank in the institution, on Monday.

Established in 1966, the New York-headquartered organisation provides micro-finance access to least developed countries (LDCs), with the mandate to unlock the full potential of public and private finance.

She will "oversee the organisation's efforts to deliver

scalable impact in order to make the international financial architecture work for the world's frontier and pre-frontier markets; with a specific emphasis on supporting sustainable development for women, youth, small and medium-sized enterprises, smallholder farmers, and other traditionally underserved communities."

In a statement, Ms Sinha said her goal would be to make "C" in UNCDF (capital) to be "highly catalytic in mobilising manifold the public and private finance for the LDCs it serves and in

developing a new era of engagement with capital markets in 2021 and onwards." Ms Sinha succeeds Judith Karl, who retired in February after concluding her 30-year career in the United Nations, the agency said. UNDP Administrator Achim Steiner welcomed Sinha. "UNCDF's support for the world's Least Developed Countries is critical, and I look forward to continuing the strong partnership between our organisations into the future," he said in the statement. Ms Sinha will lead UNCDF's work to harness the

untapped growth potential of the LDCs, to enable and empower communities, local governments and small businesses to address the economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic while building more resilient and inclusive economies, the agency said. As Executive Secretary, Ms Sinha will "oversee UNCDF's 'last mile' finance models that unlock public and private resources, especially at the domestic level, to reduce poverty and support local economic development." Ms Sinha has three decades of

global experience across investment and development finance during which she managed institutional public and private development capital. The UNCDF statement said Sinha served as CEO and President of FFD Financing for Development LLC, a specialist development finance firm in Geneva, focusing on resource mobilisation, donor relations, innovative capital markets, partnerships, strategy, business development, and impact investment advisory to finance the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

2,072 Indians Died Due To Covid Abroad: Government

(Insider Bureau)-A total of 2,072 Indians died due to the coronavirus in various countries with the highest death count of 906 being reported in Saudi Arabia followed by 375 in the United Arab Emirates, the government said on Thursday.

Replying to a question in Rajya Sabha, Minister of State for External Affairs V Muraleedharan said 369 Indians died of

coronavirus infection in Kuwait



while 166 deaths were reported from Oman. An estimated 8.5

million Indians live and work in the Gulf region. Hundreds of thousands of them returned to India following the pandemic.

According to the details provided by Mr Muraleedharan, 34 Indians died in Qatar, 48 in Bahrain and 23 each in Sudan and Nigeria. He said 15 Indians died in Italy, seven in

France, nine in Nepal, six in Iran and seven Indians died to the coronavirus in Iraq.

Replying to a separate question, Mr Muraleedharan said India's policy on Taiwan is clear and consistent. "Government facilitates and promotes interactions in areas of trade, investment, tourism, culture, education and other such people-to-people exchanges," he said.

In Joe Biden's Immigration Overhaul, How H1B Visas Are Impacted

Companies like Alphabet Inc.'s Google, Apple Inc. and Facebook Inc. have for years said they need engineers from countries like India as there aren't enough skilled Americans.

Joe Biden's immigration overhaul seeks to allow more skilled foreign workers into the U.S. without stirring widespread protest from labor groups, whose opposition would all but ruin prospects for what is already one of the president's most precarious priorities.

The sweeping proposal Biden sent to Congress on his first day in office drew quick Republican opposition over its centerpiece: a faster path to citizenship for 11 million undocumented immigrants in the U.S. Another provision would allow more foreign students and workers to enter the U.S. by increasing the number of employment-based green cards. Business groups view the proposal as a way to increase the supply of coders and other skilled tech workers for U.S. companies without raising caps on programs such as the H-1B visa for high-skilled workers. Companies like

Alphabet Inc.'s Google, Apple Inc. and Facebook Inc. have for years pressed to increase the number of tech workers allowed into the U.S., saying they need engineers from countries like India because there aren't enough skilled Americans. But efforts to expand the workforce through H-1B visas have drawn a backlash from unions and immigration opponents, who argue that the companies overlook U.S. talent to hire foreigners at lower salaries.

The Biden proposal seeks to sidestep a conflict with organized labor by leaving the annual H-1B quota untouched. The measure instead clears a path for more foreign workers to eventually enter the country by eliminating a decades-long backlog of people waiting for employment-based green cards, which grant permanent legal residence and are capped at 140,000 per year under current law. "This bill,

signed into law, would be a tremendous improvement for legal immigration in this country," said Todd Schulte, president of FWD.us, an immigration advocacy group founded by tech industry leaders. Business group leaders have discussed an immigration overhaul with Democratic and Republican staff in the House and Senate, according to industry officials working on the issue. The talks have focused on finding areas of bipartisan consensus that can help advance an overall package, including keeping science-technology-engineering-math graduates in the U.S.; providing legal status for so-called Dreamers, undocumented immigrants brought to the country as children; and streamlining the employment-based visa system. So far, labor groups are supporting Biden's approach. AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka praised Biden's



framework as "bold" and said its path to citizenship "will help to raise standards for all workers." The labor group declined to comment on the proposed changes to the employment-based visa system.

Service Employees International Union, which represents mostly lower-wage workers, as well as United Farm Workers, joined a multimillion-dollar advertising and public relations campaign in support of Biden's immigration plan. Nandini Nair, an immigration lawyer at Greenspoon Marder LLP, said Biden's approach goes "a long way" toward satisfying unions' concerns. "You're dealing

with the individuals who are already here in the U.S. versus this narrative that foreign workers are coming to the U.S. and taking jobs," Nair said.

'Real' Tensions

Even so, unions' views on the measure could change dramatically as lawmakers hash out details of the legislation.

Biden's proposes to recapture unused visas from prior years and eliminate per-country caps for employment-based green cards, which could benefit Indian information technology professionals who sometimes wait decades to gain permanent U.S. residence.

Indian Republic Day annual Virtual celebrations held

India Association of Sacramento (IAS), a 15+ year old Indian American community organization in Sacramento, CA from USA, hosted the annual Virtual Indian Republic Day celebrations, their flagship event for 2021, on Tuesday January 26th, at 7PM which was streamed live on Facebook and YouTube simultaneously. As per IAS President Bhaskar Vempati, it was a well-received event viewed by thousands of people including Sacramento, California and all over the world.

In previous years, IAS and rest of the community members joined the Consulate General of India, San Francisco staff at Capitol Building to celebrate the Day. Assembly member Bauer-Kahan Honored India Republic Day at the Capitol Building in 2019 while Assembly member Ash Kalra (D-San Jose) passed a resolution on the Assembly floor in 2018 to honor India's Republic Day. "This year keeping in mind the pandemic of COVID-19 and it's subsequent social distancing rules we have had to modify our celebration of this

important day for all Indian Americans. We came up with very unique and creative ways with multiple initiatives in a 90 minutes long Indian Republic Day Celebration to commemorate this momentous day in a safe way following the 'new norm'. One of our efforts is educating our youth regarding the importance of this important day in the Indian history", said Vandana Sharma, IAS Vice President.

India gained its independence from the British on August 15th, 1947, after almost two hundred years of British rule. The British East India Company came to India in the 17th century to trade with a rich and prosperous India, created an Empire that lasted for two centuries, and then left an exploited and impoverished nation. Republic Day honours the date on which the Constitution of India came into effect on 26 January 1950 replacing the Government of India Act (1935) as the governing document of India and thus, turning the nation into a newly formed republic. The Constitution

was adopted by the Indian Constituent Assembly on 26 November 1949 and came into effect on 26 January 1950 with a democratic government system, completing the country's transition towards becoming an independent republic. 26 January was chosen as the date for Republic day because it was on this day in 1929 when the Declaration of Indian Independence (Purna Swaraj) was proclaimed by the Indian National Congress, according to Ranju Verma, IAS official. Ranju Verma also thanked Shivesh Sinha, Darshna Amin, Madhuri Natu, Romesh Trivedi and other volunteers for their support in coming up with a great sequence of programs.

Program started with wonderful singing of the National Anthems of the USA and India. In the beginning of the program, former IAS president Shivesh Sinha introduced the new IAS executive board -Bhaskar Vempati, Vandana Sharma, Amitab Shaik, Ranju Verma and Gobi Ramaswamy. IAS newly elected President, Bhaskar



Vempati sincerely thanked the previous IAS leaders & volunteers in setting up a great platform for IAS activities and assured that the new board will continue the rhythm and service the needs of the greater Sacramento Indian American Community. The next performance in the program was brought to the audience by Urshita Panda, who sang a lovely song which successfully instilled feelings of nationalism and pride within viewers. Vande mataram sung gorgeously by the IAS Team. Local Indian American teen, Amogh Itagi presented the Instrumental Presentation of the

National Anthem of India. He played Janaganamana with multiple instruments - the tabla, harmonium, recorder, trumpet, and mandolin. Arya Girls Team performed an eye-catching Ganesha prayer dance performance to start the program off with a high-spirited note. Over two dozen dazzling variety Indian cultural programs including patriotic songs have mesmerized the audience. Cultural performances brought enthusiastic applause from the attendees.

By Venkat Nagam

Airfare hike: Domestic air travel raises up to 30 percent in India

By Susmita Ghosh

Domestic air travel just became costlier in India with the new directive of the Civil Aviation Ministry. For the domestic flights, the fare will increase up to 30 percent, which can be a reason of headache to the frequent fliers. The government is also controlling the cap fare till March 31, 2021 in addition to their earlier decision for 80 percent of their domestic capacity to be deployed.

The Central Government imposed a lockdown resulting in the suspension of all scheduled commercial passenger flights on March 25 in the country to contain the spread of the coronavirus. Domestic flights resumed their operations from May 25, 2020. At this time, the central government had imposed a fixed cap for airline ticket price during the pinnacle of the covid-19

pandemic. Indian airlines have been demanding for a long time for their restriction in setting fares to be lifted. During an investor call, Ronojoy Dutta, CEO, IndiGo, stated, "Fares are lower than they should be at this point and again it is because we are not getting enough of our booking period." He also added that adding that with rising cost and low occupancy it was hard for the airline to make money.

The government of India finally announced an increase in domestic airline fare on Thursday. According to them, the fares for air travel would be increased due to hike in fuel prices and the opening of the aviation market post-pandemic. The fuel price has crossed the US\$60 per barrel mark and it consists of 70 percent of the airline's cost. The increased lower and upper fare cap has been placed between

10-30 percent.

For two months, the government had temporarily suspended all the flight operations to contain Covid-19. The hike in price could be beneficial for the domestic airline sector which suffered a huge loss for all four quarters of the pandemic. Most of the airlines have asked the government to eliminate the fare cap system and asked to let free-market economics decide the fair price. The hike in price resulted in almost 3 percent spike in shares of airlines and their shareholders like IndiGo and SpiceJet. Earlier in the pandemic, the government had introduced 7 fare bands (A-G) for airline tickets which were based on the duration of the flight. According to the fare bands, maximum or minimum charges were levied. The government has also issued a new and updated fare band with the increase in fare for domestic travel



from minimum Rs 2000 and maximum Rs 6000 to Rs 2200 and Rs 7800 respectively. In the highest fare band, the minimum and maximum fares have been moved from Rs 6,500 and Rs 18,600 to Rs 7,200 and Rs 24,200.

The civil aviation minister, Hardeep Singh Puri informed at the Rajya Sabha that the price bands on domestic flights would be discontinued as soon as flight services reach levels that were before the pandemic started.

India's domestic air passage traf-

fic is increasing monthly. It saw a 3.5 percent sequential growth in January with more than 7.6 million passengers travelling in a domestic route. The figure is still 41 percent less than that of the previous year. The extraordinary situation called for extraordinary measures. "The floor and the ceiling price on airfares were designed to ensure that airlines, in a situation of limited availability, did not charge an exorbitant price," Puri said.

Biden administration stands by allies in response to India-China deadlock

By Susmita Ghosh

The United States responded to the India-China border controversy when the leaders of the two countries conversed recently. The Biden administration showed their concern regarding Beijing's intention to menace the neighbouring country and proposed peace to resolve the dispute.

India and the USA, two of the biggest democracies in the world, had their fair share of troubles with China. The strained relationship affects political outreach as well as ties with other countries too. The Pangong Lake has been in the centre of dispute since last

nine months while the India-China standoff has been in culture. The Pangong Lake's northern bank contains the palm-like area and spurs jutting into the lake called 'fingers'. While India has been claiming that the Line of Actual Control starts at "finger 8", China disagrees and states that LAC starts from "finger 2." The dispute arrived as the Chinese military reached within 8 km between "finger 8" and "finger 4". The USA National Security Council (NSC) spokesperson Emily J. Horne stated that they have been keeping an eye over the issue and adds, while she

was asked to comment on Chinese intimidation on the neighbouring country, "We are closely monitoring the situation. We note the ongoing talks between the governments of India and China and continue to support a direct dialogue and a peaceful resolution to border disputes."

She also told the PTI that "The United States is concerned by Beijing's pattern of ongoing attempts to intimidate its neighbours," after India-China arranged the bilateral consultation about this military conflict regarding the Line of Actual Control (LAC).

The recent stance of Biden administration is unlike the predecessor, Trump, who took a mixed attitude to the Sino-Indian troubles. He pressed for a trade relationship with China while downplaying the Coronavirus pandemic initially, as well as the Chinese steps to dominate the pro-democracy movement in Hong Kong. With a new administration at help, the USA approach to China was bound to change. The Biden administration expressed their concern recently over the Chinese foreign policy. According to them, Beijing had "ongoing attempts to intimidate

its neighbours," which is worrying. It is also an indication that they are taking the controversy quite seriously.

The US State Spokesperson Ned Price informs, "As always, we stand with friends, we stand with partners, we stand with allies to advance our shared prosperity, security and values and in this case, it's the Indo-Pacific."

In this region, China has an ongoing conflict with countries like Vietnam, Malaysia, the Philippines and Japan over territories in the South and the East China Sea. The region is rich in natural resources like minerals, oils and so on.

International expansion for BJP? Tripura CM comment creates controversy



By Susmita Ghosh

Biplab Kumar Deb, the Chief Minister in a BJP-ruled Tripura, sparked a fresh controversy on Sunday when he made a remark

on politics and policy. This time it is not the national affairs or mythology but on international politics. While speaking at a BJP event in the capital of

Agartala, Deb caused eyebrows to be raised when he announced that the saffron party is planning to expand its footprint into neighbouring countries of Nepal and Sri Lanka. During a party program in Rabindra Satabarshiki Bhavan on Saturday, Deb produced his unique statement. He said that Union Home Minister and senior BJP leader, Amit Shah planned to expand the horizons, overseas. While visiting Tripura, in a tea party with the state leadership, he disclosed that Shah plans to

establish the party in neighbouring countries after winning in most of the states in India. The chief minister of Tripura praised Shah's leadership for making the BJP the 'world's largest party'. He further said that the Bharatiya Janata Party will not only change the trend of government between the Left and the Congress every five years in Kerala but also emerge as the winner in the southern state. He was also confident in his statement that BJP would defeat Trinamool Congress in

West Bengal led by Mamata Banerjee in the upcoming elections. Biplab Deb has often been caught making improper general as well as political statements in the past. Earlier he has stirred a controversy when he compared Punjabis and Jats to Bengalis. At a program in Agartala Press Club, he made a statement that every community in India is known for its certain types and characters. While Bengalis are known for their extreme intelligence, Punjabis and Jats are physically strong but less sharp.

Biden admin opens new vista, firming defence ties with India

By Susmita Ghosh

After the historic win against Donald Trump to become the 46th US President, Joe Biden's administration has begun making its first contract with its Indian counterparts. On Jan 27, National Security Advisor, Ajit Doval spoke to his counterpart Jake Sullivan and the Indian defence minister, Rajnath Singh spoke to the US defence Secretary General Lloyd Austin.

The National Security advisors agreed to work more closely, hence further develop Indo-US relations. As both the nations share similar strategic and security interests and are built on

shared values and etiquettes, this step would highly benefit the ties between the two nations. Furthermore, the conversations also reaffirmed the said interests. Defence minister Rajnath Singh said that in a tele-conversation with Lloyd J Austin, they "exchanged views on bilateral, regional and global issues of mutual interest to strengthen their strategic partnership". They have also highlighted the need to work closely and cooperatively to address challenges that are slated to emerge in the post-COVID era and further expand the Comprehensive Global Strategic Partnership, as per the MEA. As

this development goes underway, India might look forward to more predictability and stability over bilateral issues on matters of trade and diplomacy. However the likeliness of concessions being granted for India shouldn't be expected as the entire world is reeling from the effects of COVID 19 related economic slowdowns and rising layoffs. According to a US readout, "The two (NSAs) reiterated the commitment to the US-India Major Defence Partnership, observing that it is built upon shared values and a common interest in ensuring the Indo-Pacific region remains free and

open." The MEA said in a statement that "(Ajit) Doval underlined that as leading democracies, with an abiding faith in an open and inclusive world order, India and the US were uniquely positioned to work closely on regional and international issues. It includes combating the scourge of terrorism, maritime security, cyber security and peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific region and beyond."

Austin, the first African-American US defence secretary, said that he would also aim to develop and expand the defence collaboration between India and the US through the Quad Security Dialogue along

with other multilateral regional commitments. Once approved, the Biden administration's objective to carry on raising the US defence relationship with India would see mutual benefits.

Austin stated that in his understanding, Pakistan has taken positive measures to address the demands of the US in favour of the peace practice in Afghanistan. Actions against anti-Indian groups like Lashkar-e-Tayyiba and Jaish-e-Mohammed have also been taken by Pakistan, even though this progress is incomplete yet, he said.

Farmers-Police conflict escalates: Cash reward announced for information on Deep Sindhu



By Susmita Ghosh

The Delhi Police have announced a cash reward of Rs 1 lakh for information on Punjabi actor-activist Deep Sidhu. He is wanted for arrest in his alleged connection with Jan 26 violence at the Red Fort. The Delhi Police department that has been probing the violence,

which broke out inside the Red Fort complex on the Republic Day on Wednesday announced a cash reward for the following people. The reward of Rs 1 lakh was announced on Sidhu, Jugraj Singh, Gurjot Singh and Gurjant Singh who hoisted flags at the Red Fort or involved in the act,

according to the police. On the other hand, a cash reward of Rs 50,000 each was also announced for Buta Singh, Sukhdev Singh, Jajbir Singh and Iqbal Singh for allegedly instigating protesters, according to the police. On Jan 26, a tractor rally by the protesting farmers against the centre's three laws, went rogue. The protesters broke off the agreed route and schedules. They then forced their way inside the Red Fort complex and climbed the ramparts. The protesters hoisted a Sikh religious flag on the Red Fort wall. The Delhi Police, who repeatedly appealed for cooperation, urged the protesting farmers to calm down and return to their previously agreed routes. But upon receiving no cooperation, they had to finally resort to firing tear gas and lathi

charging to gain control over the situation. The Delhi Police crime branch has released photographs of 12 people they have been in hot pursuit, as part of Jan 26 violence investigation. The 12 people were identified as the police went through CCTV footage and several video clips of the violence and talking to the head of the forensics team. The people in the photos are seen holding sticks or lathis. The police believe that they were involved in the violence at the Red Fort or in attacking police officers. The farmers have alleged that this was a conspiracy to derail their movement and have Deep Sidhu of leading a "conspiracy". Furthermore, Delhi Police have also filed cases against journalists and some others, including Congress MP Shashi Tharoor, for allegedly misleading people over a farmer's death in central Delhi's

ITO area. Many of the farmer protesters, driving tractors, reached the Red Fort and entered the monument. Some protesters even hoisted religious flags on its domes and a flagstaff at the ramparts, where the national flag is unfurled by the Prime Minister on Independence Day. Actor-activist Deep Sidhu was booked on Jan 27 for inciting violence at Red Fort on Republic Day. He was booked under various sections of IPC, 186 (obstructing public servant in discharge of public functions), 152 (assaulting or obstructing public servant when suppressing riot), 308 (attempt to commit culpable homicide), 353 (assault or criminal force to deter public servant from discharge of his duty), 397 (robbery, or dacoity, with an attempt to cause death or grievous hurt) and 307 (attempt to murder).

Delhi Police arrests climate activist

Susmita Ghosh

In a shocking move that baffled the international community, Cybercrime unit of Delhi police has arrested 22-year-old climate activist, Disha Ravi from her Bengaluru home. She was charged with sedition and conspiracy case for allegedly sharing the 'toolkit'. It is related to the farmers' protests against the Centre's agricultural laws on social media.

According to the police, she allegedly was the one who shared the toolkit document with Swedish environmental activist,

Greta Thunberg. Disha came under police scrutiny after Greta Thunberg tweeted in support of Indian farmers, which according to the police, have led to the Republic Day violence.

Disha Ravi is a graduate from Bengaluru, who is a climate activist. Being very vocal about environmental issues, she regularly writes columns on climate change. She is also one of the founding members of a climate activist group named 'Fridays For Future India'. It is part of the climate campaign Thunberg launched by staging a protest at

her school every Friday in 2018. The Indian wing of Fridays for Future was started by Ravi and she heads the organisation in the country. According to Disha, she started climate activism because she had a front-row seat to watch how the water crisis affected her family. Her grandparents, who were farmers, struggled with climate change.

"We live in a country where dissent is suppressed. We in Fridays For Future India were labelled terrorists for objecting to the draft environmental



impact assessment (EIA) that puts profit over people would consider asking for clean air, clean water and a liveable planet, an act of terrorism." Disha once told Auto Report Africa in 2020.

In the court, the public prosecutor alleged that she collaborated with a pro-Khalistani organisation, the Poetic Justice Foundation to spread disaffection against the Indian State.

India protest: Farmers break Delhi's Red Fort in massive tractor rally

By Susmita Ghosh

In an unprecedented move, a rally of farmers barged into the Indian capital and laid siege to the historic Red Fort complex in Delhi. There was utter chaos, as the farmers broke through barricades and the police were forced to use tear gas shells on the protesters.

On the 72nd Republic Day of India, a huge tractor rally was organised in protest against the agricultural reforms in India. The Delhi police gave permission to hold the Kisaan Parade from 12 and 5 PM. However, the farmers began the march much before time and deviated from the agreed routes, from the Singhu border. Near the central Delhi ITO, one farmer died as his

tractor was overturned. The farmers alleged that it was done as a result of police firing and they started a sit-in protest.

There were constructing visuals from across Delhi on 26th January. The farmers were breaking through barriers at the Singhu border near Haryana, which was the epicentre of protests against the agricultural laws. With chants of 'Jai Jawan Jai Kisan' (Hail the Army, Hail the farmers) numerous farmers rode into the city on tractors, motorbikes, horses and even cranes.

In some places, the locals stood on the side of the road and hurled flower petals on the farmers to welcome them. There were tunes of patriotic songs and dram

beats on which they marched on. However, there were frequent clashes with the police, as they fired tear gas shells near Akshardham, while protesters hurled stones at cops near Mukarba chowk.

In the afternoon, a large group of protesters reached the iconic Red Fort complex. They clashed with the security there, scaled the walls and the domes of the fort and hoisted flags of farmers' union, alongside the National Flag of India.

One protester died and more than 80 police officers were injured in the ensuing chaos. Mobile, internet service was suspended in 5 major areas in Delhi and key metro stations were closed to take control of the situation.

Home Minister Amit Shah held a meeting with Delhi police which is under his jurisdiction, to discuss the situation. Later, he ordered the deployment of additional paramilitary forces in Delhi.

Bengal CM Mamata Banerjee stated her grave concern over the developments in Delhi, as she was sympathetic to the farmers. She stated over the official Twitter handle, "Centre's insensitive attitude and indifference towards our farmer brothers & sisters has to be blamed for this situation."

The opposition leader in central, Rahul Gandhi, also expressed solidarity with the farmers. He urged the Government to take back the

anti-agricultural law for the sake of the country. At the same time, he condemned the outburst, as he stated, "Violence Not Solution To Any Problem"

This event was not an isolated one, but a part of the long protest by the farmers that are taking place around Delhi border, for months now. Now it is to be seen if this incident will escalate the situation there or not. The Farmers' body, the Samyukta Kisan Morcha said it has no connection with "such elements that have violated our discipline". They appealed to all, "not to spoil in any violent action that stains national symbols and pride."

Five given death sentences for Bangladeshi-American blogger murder



By Susmita Ghosh

Five members of a banned Islamist militant group including a fugitive army major Sayed Zia-ul Haq was sentenced to death for killing the prominent

Bangladeshi-American atheist blogger. The verdict was passed by Judge Mojibur Rahman of Dhaka's Anti-Terrorism Special Tribunal court on Tuesday. A sixth convict, Safiur Rahman

Farabi was also sentenced to life in prison. After the verdict, public prosecutor Golam Sarwar Khan said to the media, "Charges against them were proved beyond any doubt. The court gave them the highest punishment". On February 26, 2015, Avijit Roy, a Bangladeshi born US citizen and blogger was hacked to death by machete-wielding Islamic militants. He was returning from a book fair at the Dhaka University with his wife and fellow blogger, Rafida Ahmed who suffered head injuries and lost a finger. Months after the killing of Roy, his publisher Faisal Arefin Dipon, the

owner of Jagrity Publishers was hacked to death at his office at central Dhaka's Shahbagh area on November 31, 2015. The convicts who received capital punishment are Md Mozzammel Hussain alias Saimon alias Shahriar, Md Abu Siddiq Sohel alias Sakib alias Sajid alias Shahab, Md Arafat Rahman and Akram Hossain alias Abir. Besides a fugitive Major Haque, Abir is also on the run. In addition to the capital punishment sentences, these convicts were fined Taka 50,000 (Rs 43,002) each by the judge. According to SITE Intelligence Group, a US

website that monitors extremist groups, Al Qaeda in the Indian subcontinent (AQIS) has claimed responsibility for the murder of the American atheist blogger in Bangladesh. In a video posted on jihadist forums, AQIS leader Asim Umar said his organisation was responsible for the attack. Six of the eight men convicted on Tuesday belong to the al Qaeda-inspired outlawed Ansar Al Islam terrorist group Ansar Ullah Bangla team. According to the police, this domestic militant group was behind the murders of more than a dozen secular activists and bloggers.

Myanmar in the State of Emergency as Military Coup Seizes Power, Detains Suu Kyi

By Susmita Ghosh

-Myanmar's 'Tatmadaw' military removed 24 ministers and assumed power on Monday, Feb 1, in a coup against the democratically elected government of Aung San Suu Kyi. They also appointed 11 replacements for them and declared a yearlong state of emergency. Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Suu Kyi along with other members of her National League for Democracy (NLD) party was detained by the military.

The military announced that they had carried out the detentions because of alleged malpractices during the November 2020 elections. They also claimed that the military is using a clause in

the constitution to reclaim power in a one-year state of emergency. This allegation comes at a time when the 1991 Nobel Peace Prize winner had waning popularity because of her government's treatment of the Rohingya people - as they were subject to state brutality and displacement. As per BBC reports, Suu Kyi's government is now the subject of a genocide lawsuit and an investigation is already in progress by the International Criminal Court for crimes against humanity.

On Monday, Myanmar's military, also known as the 'Tatmadaw', took control over the government and appointed Vice President Myint Swe as the President of

Myanmar for the rest of the year. They also cited Article 417 of Myanmar's constitution, "which allows the military to take over in times of emergency". Interestingly enough, it was the military that drafted their constitution back in 2008 to which the Human Rights Watch described the clause to be a 'coup mechanism waiting to happen'. Presently, phone lines and some television station channels were down, according to youth activist Thinzar Shunli Yi. The internet too along with social media accounts have been temporarily suspended.

With the Union Election Commission (UEC) of Myanmar having accepted the election result, the military has accused their political leaders of



election fraud and they claim that there were millions of irregularities in voter lists, but the UEC had rejected those claims citing lack of evidence. There was high hope riding on Suu Kyi as it was widely believed that she is the one who can balance between the military power and the civilians through the

general election. However, this development crushed any chance of that as the future of the country looks bleak and uncertain now. The streets in Myanmar's cities appeared somewhat calm on the next morning after the coup, as the citizens went to work as usual.

US shows support for Farmers Bill, India retorts the Farmers' Protest 'Must be seen in its Entirety'

The United States embassy in New Delhi on Thursday urged Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government to resume talks with the protesting farmers. There has been an ongoing agitation in the community over the agricultural reforms sparking a month-long protest. The largely non-violent protest had turned violent on Jan 26. Some protesters had broken into the heart of the city after the Republic Day parade and clashed with the Delhi police.

Stepping into a rather sensitive topic for PM Narendra Modi, the U.S. embassy on Thursday made its first comments on the ongoing farmers' protests. They urged the Indian government to resume talks with the protesting farmers. The Biden-led administration said that it encourages difference to be resolved through 'dialogue'. They added that peaceful protests are a 'hallmark' of a 'thriving democracy'. Despite multiple rounds of discussions with the

representatives of farmers thousands of whom, have camped outside, on the outskirts of the capital since late 2020, a proper conclusion yet to reach. Ever since the violence in the historic Red Fort, there has been no information on when talks would resume.

On Thursday, a US Embassy spokesperson said in a statement that 'they encourage any differences between the parties be resolved through dialogue.' They also proffered general support to the government measures to 'improve the efficiency of India's markets and attract greater private sector investment.'

The farmers, on the other hand, argue that three new farm laws would hurt their interests and would instead benefit large firms, hence the protest. But the government claims that these reforms would bring in much-needed boost in investment to the farm sector which employs about half of Indian workforce, but

accounts for a modest 15 percent of its 2.9 trillion dollar economy.

On the other hand, just hours after the Biden administration put forth their statement, India replied that the comments "must be seen in their entirety". They compared the government's reaction also to the violence at the Red Fort with those seen after storming of the US Capitol in early January.

External Affairs Ministry Spokesperson Anurag Srivastava, at a media briefing said that any protests "must be seen in the context of India's democratic ethos and polity". He added that the "ongoing efforts of the government and the concerned farmer groups to resolve the impasse."

He also stated, "The incidents of violence at the historic Red Fort on Jan 26 in India have evoked similar sentiments and reactions as did the incidents on the Capitol Hill on Jan 6 and are being addressed as per our



respective local laws." The US Embassy also had commented on the issue of restrictions and eventual blocking out of internet services in and around the protest sites. "We recognise that unhindered access to information, including the internet, is fundamental to the freedom of expression and a hallmark of a thriving democracy," mentions spokesperson, US

embassy. Finally, Srivastava also said that India had issued a mutual legal assistance request to the US, for investigation regarding the matter of 'Sikhs for Justice and Referendum 2020'. "As per procedure, the request has been sent directly by the concerned authorities to the US Department of Justice (DoJ)," he informed.

By Susmita Ghosh

Union Budget 2021 in India announced



By Susmita Ghosh

Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman presented the Union Budget of 2021 in the Parliament on Feb 1, 2021. She provided a major impetus to healthcare and healthcare infrastructure owing to the current situation the world has been facing. This year's Union Budget was also a special one because, amid peculiar situation like this. The Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman presented the budget of a 'Made in India' tablet, contrary to the usual paper-documents, as a smiling FM couldn't hide her visible excitement. Interestingly, there were no changes in Income Tax

this year. The overall capital expenditure for the Fiscal Year 2021-2022 is Rs. 5.54 lakh crore. The Finance Minister also proposed a new centrally sponsored scheme, PM Aatmanirbhar Swasth Bharat Yojana, with an outlay of about Rs.64,180 crore over six years. This year's budget proposals were said to be resting on six important pillars, like, Health and well-being; Physical, financial capital and infrastructure, inclusive development for aspirational India, reinvigorating human capital, innovation and R&D and minimum government and maximum governance. Further, the Budget allocated for

Health and Wellbeing is estimated to be Rs 2,23,846 crore for FY 2021-22, which is a rise by 137 per cent Y-o-Y basis. This increased allocation is expected to expand and strengthen existing national health institutions. Another major highlight was the increase in the FDI limits in the insurance sector from 49 per cent to 74 per cent. The government now plans to divest two PSUs as well as one insurance company.

Following are some proposed amendments-

- > Individual and corporate tax rates for FY 2021-22 (AY 2022-23) was left unchanged. In a major move, the limit for tax audits under section 44AB has been increased from Rs 5 crore to Rs 10 crore (only where 95 percent of payments are digitised), providing relief to many corporate houses.

- > IT relaxation for senior citizens of 75 years of age and above. IT has been proposed to exempt the senior citizens from filing income tax returns if pension income and interest income are their only annual income source.

- > Reduction in time for IT Proceedings. Except in cases of serious tax evasion, assessment proceedings in the rest of the cases will be reopened only up to three years, against the earlier time limit of six years.

- > Constitution of 'Dispute Resolution Committee'. Those assessed with a taxable income of up to Rs.50 lakh (for small and medium tax payers) and any disputed income of Rs.10 lakh can approach this committee under section 245MA. It will prevent new disputes and settle the issue at the initial stage.

- > Tax incentives to start-ups - The tax holiday for start-ups has been extended by one more year like March 31, 2022.

- > Pre-filing of returns to be on forefront- Pre-filing will be allowed for salary, tax payments, TDS, and so on. Further, details of capital gains from listed securities, dividend income, etc. will be prefilled.

- > Advance Tax on dividend income - Advance tax will henceforth be applicable on dividend income only after its declaration. Tax holidays are

proposed for aircraft leasing and rental companies.

- > Agriculture Infrastructure and Development Cess (AIDC) has been newly imposed on petrol and diesel at Rs 2.5 and Rs 4 per litre respectively.

- > Regarding agricultural products, the customs duty is increased on cotton, silks, alcohol, etc.

- > Exemption of Social Welfare Surcharge on the value of AIDC imposed on gold and silver. Hence, these items would attract surcharge at a normal rate, only on value plus basic customs duty.

With this new budget, we can expect better healthcare facilities and more investment in vaccine research. Oil prices are slated to rise which would pose problems for the common man, along with a decrease in permissible liquid money available for savings, which would also pose a major inconvenience for the common man. Only time can tell how it would affect the economy of India, hence the countrymen can only hope for the best in post-COVID India.

Tata, US-based Moderna together progress towards COVID-19 Vaccine

By Susmita Ghosh

Adhering to Indian government's norms, a foreign vaccine manufacturer is expected to pass the phase 3 test with Indian volunteers, it is licensed outside India though. Tata Group's Medi-venture, TataMD has opened the discussion with US biotech company Moderna to initiate its COVID-19 vaccine throughout the country.

According to the reports from various sources, Tata Group could work together with the R&D organization of the Center - Council of Science & Industrial Research (CSIR) to conduct experimental trials of Moderna's vaccine in India.

As the vaccine manufactured by Moderna is mRNA based, hence

it has 94.1 proven efficacy for treating Covid patients. Not only in the US, but Moderna's vaccine has also been approved for countries like Canada and the UK. When enquired about this, Moderna did not revert to Reuter's request outside their business hours and TataMD did not respond either.

The vaccine made by Moderna can be easily kept at a temperature of 20 degree Celsius, unlike Pfizer's vaccine which must be kept at (-70) degree Celsius or below. As per the reports of the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, it has been said that can be more viable for 3rd world countries like India where the cold chain is limited.

The CDC also confirmed that this Covid vaccine has fewer allergic reactions than other Covid vaccines. More than four million people who received the vaccine, only 10 developed anaphylaxis during the period of Dec 21, 2020 to Jan 10, 2021.

Indian government instructs that if it has to be considered as the nation calls the world's leading vaccination program, every single vaccine manufacturer must carry out further local research. Hence, the vaccine may have to undergo a local trial before coming to the market.

Many Indian firms have tied up with foreign vaccine-manufacturing firms to initiate and supply COVID-19 vaccine throughout the country. Among

them, the central government has approved only two. The Serum Institute by Bharat biotech was approved on emergency vaccination program along with state-run Indian Council of Medical Research and another approved one from Oxford University and AstraZeneca. Dr Reddy's Laboratories in India, in the interim, is developing Russia's Sputnik V vaccine, as well as Johnson & Johnson's volunteer is being tested by Biological E.

There is no separate tie-up between Moderna and any Indian vaccine manufacturers. Its primary supply commitments are to the governments that have pre-ordered the vaccines. India has the world's second-highest

COVID-19 caseload after the United States. But after reaching the highest peak in the month of September, daily cases have declined to a great extent by the end of the year 2020.

According to India's drug controller, the whole effectiveness of the AstraZeneca vaccine, locally brand-named COVISHIELD was 70.42 percent based on trials carried out in foreign countries. But then again, the approval of Bharat Biotech's COVAXIN has faced criticism as a result of the lack of data effectiveness. The COVAX facility wishes to impartially mete out two billion coronavirus vaccine doses in low-and middle-income countries including India by the end of 2021.

PM Modi affirms the commitment with the US



By Susmita Ghosh

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi took the internet by fire after he tweeted that he had a talk with the US President, Joe Biden. Two leaders having a talk isn't a big deal but this time it was the first telephonic conversation between the two. The Prime Minister said that the discussion was about the regional issues focusing on 'our

shared priorities' and expressing commitment to a 'rules-based international order.' The agreement was made on working together to fight against the fatal coronavirus, renew partnership on climate change and rebuild the global economy in a way that benefits the people of both the countries. They took a pledge to stand together as well against

the menace that is the global terrorism. This agreement was pending since Joe Biden acquired his seat. Previously the Indian Prime Minister said in a tweet that the two leaders agreed to further cooperate against climate change. It was the same tweet where Modi had conveyed his best wishes to Biden. With this Modi's office said that the Prime Minister welcomed President Biden's decision to re-commit to the Paris Agreement and highlighted the ambitious targets, India has set in the area of renewable energy. Soon after taking over, Mr Biden has started the process of rollback of the US withdrawal from the Paris Agreement, affected by his predecessor, Donald Trump. A communiqué from the Prime Minister's office further said that

the two leaders made a note that the India-US partnership is firmly anchored in a shared commitment to democratic values and common strategic interests. They recapitulated the importance of working with like-minded countries to ensure a rule-based international order and a free, open and inclusive Indo-Pacific region. "We have a substantial and multifaceted bilateral agenda, growing economic engagement and vibrant people to people linkages. Committed to working with President Joe Biden to take the India-US partnership to even greater heights," added PM Modi. In an early occasion, the US defence secretary, Lloyd Austin spoke to the India defence minister, Rajnath Singh. The US National Security Adviser, Jake Sullivan talked to his

Indian counterpart Ajit Doval as well. As the two countries made a pact to enhanced cooperation on defence, they also focused in working with the security issues in the Indo-Pacific region. Biden emphasised on his ardent desire to defend democratic institutions and norms around the globe. Both of them considered that a shared commitment to democratic values is the bedrock for the US-India relationship as said by the Whitehouse in a readout of the call. It further said that they also decided to resolve the rule of law and the democratic process to be upheld in Burma. The leaders agreed to stay in close touch on a range of global challenges and look forward to what the United States and India will achieve together for their people and their nations.

PM Modi ushers new hope among the farmers, the poor

By Susmita Ghosh

The breaking of farmer's protest has lead to the disarray of disagreements in the Rajya Sabha. The violence that was unfolded by the farmers on the Republic Day of India, is still highly frowned upon by many politicians of the State.

The Congress MP Adhir Ranjan Chowdhury has alleged the Indian BJP government behind the mishap. According to him when the day offers maximum security to the capital, the barbarity was staged by the said government. The ones who took part in the violence were believed

to be the people of the party disguised as farmers.

The Budget Session has witnessed uproar in the Lok Sabha on the new farm laws almost every day which led to the adjournment of the House several times. The Congress has already issued a whip in the Rajya Sabha for the presence of all its members in the Upper House.

After a series of meetings between the Opposition and top BJP leaders held on Monday, they finally reached a resolution. They decided to end the deadlock in the Lok Sabha

which had started on Tuesday and continued till Friday. Then the Prime Minister Narendra Modi's reply to the motion of thanks on the President's Address in the Rajya Sabha came under the limelight. The whole world waited for it.

Modi said that the newly-passed farm laws should be given a chance and that the MSP system is here to stay. Requesting the protesting farmers to go back, he reiterated that the government is open to talks. The Prime Minister has also said that there is no need to protect the nation from



'Foreign Destructive Ideology' (FDI). The newly born FDI needs to be taken care of while the "Foreign Direct Investment" should be given

the importance. The pressure was huge on him as the opposition demanded the government to withdraw the latest agricultural laws.

Amit Shah sets on 'yatra' to West Bengal prior state elections

By Susmita Ghosh

With 2021 state assembly election season arrival, the electoral battles embark on for the year. In 2019 BJP had won 18 out of 42 seats in the Lok Sabha polls in West Bengal. This year, 294 seats are scheduled for the West Bengal Assembly Elections and the main parties are looking to battle it out.

The Union Home Minister and BJP leader Amit Shah reached Guwahati on Feb 11, 2021. He looks forward to meet Ananta Rai in his house in Chirang. Ananta Rai is the 'Maharaj' of Koch-Rajbongshi, who heads a faction

of the Greater Cooch Behar Peoples' Association (GCPA) in Chirang district in lower Assam. Followed by the meet, BJP's fourth 'Poribortan Yatra' from West Bengal's Cooch Behar will be flagged by the Home Minister.

Shah tweeted on Feb 11, "Looking forward to being in Bengal tomorrow. Will flag off West Bengal BJP's fourth Poribortan Yatra from Cooch Behar followed by a public rally in Thakurnagar. I will also interact with our Social Media volunteers in Kolkata." The senior dominant party leader has also decided to pay a visit to Sri

Sri Harichand Thakur temple in West Bengal's Thakurnagar. Earlier in Nov 2020, Shah had lunch with the community family at the North 24 Parganas area. This community is considered to be a huge vote bank in the state since it holds an impact of more than two dozen assembly seats. According to West Bengal's tourism website, it is the most important temple located at the heart of North Bengal's Cooch-Behar town. With the streets ornamented with BJP flags and banners, the Koch-Rajbongshi is ready to welcome the Home Minister. As per Shah's itinerary, he is supposed to start his Cooch-Behar rally from Madan Mohan Bari, known as the abode of the local deity, at 11.10 IST followed by the flagging of yatra at 11.30 IST. The political activity in poll-bound Assam and West Bengal has been subsequently increased by the ruling party. A visit by the senior leaders is regularly maintained in the states. This marks an indication



of the importance of elections in the worlds' biggest democracy. Prime Minister Narendra Modi also visited both the states and launched various developmental projects like the foundation stone of two hospitals in Assam's Dhekiajuli in Sonitpur districts. The 'Asom Mala', a programme to upgrade state highways and major district roads was also launched by him. These visits kept a review of the work accomplished by the state

government, said BJP chief, West Bengal, Dilip Ghosh. The latter has mentioned that the home minister should visit the state and accommodate for a minimum of 7 days. Preceding the upcoming state assembly elections in West Bengal, the BJP is ready to set out five 'Parivartan Yatras' throughout the state from Feb 6. These five Yatras will be flagged by party president JP Nadda.

America resumes relation with India under the profess of Biden



By Susmita Ghosh

The political ties between USA and India have renewed as the term of the new president of the USA begins. When Joe Biden takes oath as the 46th President, he is, hopefully starting a new chapter of cordiality between the two countries.

The White House spokesperson affirms the Indo-US relationship as Biden confirms on resuming it. Indian Prime Minister, Narendra Modi is looking forward in having a word with the new US president as soon as the meeting with allied countries would be held. Jen Psaki, the white house press secretary elaborates the news and says that Biden who has already visited India quite a many times would be visiting again, soon. He looks forward in holding on the strong bond of these two countries and values the bipartisan successful relationship that they always had. He recalls the time from 2008 when Biden had visited India and had played a major role in the approval of US Congress

in the civil nuclear deal between the two countries as a chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

In reference to this topic, Biden had also visited India in 2013 only as a Vice President this time. In 2016 he also led a joint session of the US Congress which was held by Prime Minister Narendra Modi. They shared quite a rapport since then till Biden came to the power and was elected the US President in November 2020. Likewise news floats - it might prove that Biden is fond of India and Indians. Hence, he has nominated at least twenty Indian Americans, of which thirteen are women, in a number of key positions in his administration. As per the indication, seventeen of them are going to be a part of the White House power circle.

The high number of Indian American representation is the indication of changing times. Another major point in the new administration is, of course, the new vice-president Kamala Harris.

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Texas, Land of Wind and Lies

Politicians are neither gods nor saints. Because they aren't gods, they often make bad policy decisions. Because they aren't saints, they often try to evade responsibility for their failures, asserting either that they did as well as anyone could have or that someone else deserves the blame.

For a while, then, the politics surrounding the power outages that have spread across Texas looked fairly normal. True, the state's leaders pursued reckless policies that set the stage for catastrophe, then tried to evade responsibility. But while their behavior was reprehensible, it was reprehensible in ways we've seen many times over the years.

However, that changed around a day after the severity of the disaster became apparent. Republican politicians and right-wing media, not content with run-of-the-mill blame-shifting, have coalesced around a malicious falsehood instead - the claim that wind and solar power caused the collapse of the Texas power grid, and that radical environmentalists are somehow responsible for the fact that millions of people are freezing in the dark, even though conservative Republicans have run the state for a generation.

This isn't normal political malfeasance. It's the energy-policy equivalent of claiming that the Jan. 6 insurrection was a false-flag Antifa operation - raw denial of reality, not just to escape accountability, but to demonize one's opponents. And it's another indicator of the moral and intellectual collapse of American conservatism. The underlying story of what happened in Texas appears to be fairly clear. Like many states, Texas has a partly deregulated electricity market, but deregulation has gone further there than elsewhere. In particular, unlike other states, Texas chose not to provide power companies with incentives to install reserve capacity to deal with possible emergencies. This made power cheaper in normal times, but left the system vulnerable when things went wrong.

Texas authorities also ignored warnings about the risks associated with extreme cold. After a 2011 cold snap left millions of Texans in the dark, the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission urged the state to winterize its power plants with insulation, heat pipes and other measures. But Texas, which has deliberately cut its power grid off from the rest of the country precisely to exempt itself from federal regulation, only partially implemented the recommendations.

And the deep freeze came.

A power grid poorly prepared to deal with extreme cold suffered multiple points of

failure. The biggest problems appear to have come in the delivery of natural gas, which normally supplies most of the state's winter electricity, as wellheads and pipelines froze. Nor was this merely a matter of the lights going out; people are freezing too, because many Texas homes have electric heat. Many of the homes without electrical heat rely on, yes, natural gas. We're looking at enormous suffering and, probably, a significant death toll.

So Texas is experiencing a natural disaster made significantly worse by major policy errors - and the officials who made those errors should be held accountable.

Instead of accepting responsibility, however, officials from Gov. Greg Abbott on down, backed by virtually the entire right-wing media complex, have chosen to lay the blame on green energy, especially wind power.

Now, it's true that the state generates a lot of electricity from wind, although it's a small fraction of the total. But that's not because Texas - Texas! - is run by environmental crazies. It's because these days wind turbines are a cost-effective energy source wherever there's a lot of wind, and one thing Texas has is a lot of wind.

It's also true that extreme cold forced some of the state's insufficiently winterized wind turbines to shut down, but as I said, this was happening to Texas energy sources across the board, with the worst problems involving natural gas. Why, then, the all-out effort to falsely place the blame on wind power?

The incentives are obvious. Attacking wind power is a way for both elected officials and free-market ideologues to dodge responsibility for botched deregulation; it's a way to please fossil fuel interests, which give the vast bulk of their political contributions to Republicans; and since progressives tend to favor renewable energy, it's a way to own the libs. And it all dovetails with climate change denial. But why do they think they can get away with such an obvious lie? The answer, surely, is that those peddling the lie know that they're operating in a post-truth political landscape. When two-thirds of Republicans believe that Antifa was involved in the assault on the Capitol, selling the base a bogus narrative about the Texas electricity disaster is practically child's play. And if you're expecting any change in the policies that helped cause this disaster, don't count on it - at least as long as Texas remains Republican. Given everything else we've seen, the best bet is that demonization of wind power, not a realistic understanding of what actually happened, will rule policy going forward.

(By Paul Krugman, Courtesy NY Times)

Is Greta Thunberg Conspiring Against India's Tea?

Do Western ideas threaten India's rise? Prime Minister Narendra Modi seems to think so. In a speech in Parliament last week he warned that the nation "needs to be protected" from "foreign destructive ideology"—a play on the abbreviation for foreign direct investment. He attacked activists who "can't live without agitation," calling them "parasites" who must be identified. A day earlier, in a campaign speech in Assam, he attacked "conspiracies against the country" by "powers outside." He alleged that these powers were working to tarnish "the image of India's tea" in "a planned manner."

The idea of a vast global plot against Assamese Orange Pekoe and Darjeeling Black would normally belong in a comedy routine. But when a country's leader starts peddling crackpot theories, it isn't funny.

The immediate provocation for Mr. Modi's remarks was a "toolkit" tweeted by the teenage Swedish activist Greta Thunberg this month that suggested ways to support protesting farmers who have been camped on Delhi's outskirts since late-November. An initial version of the tweet, which Ms. Thunberg later deleted, listed among its objectives the disruption of India's "yoga & chai" image.

Mr. Modi pledged in the Assam speech that India wouldn't allow the tea conspiracy to triumph, and the government has already taken action. Last week police arrested Disha Ravi, 22, a Bangalore climate activist associated with Ms. Thunberg's movement. They have charged her with sedition, which carries a maximum sentence of life in prison, as "a key

conspirator" in the toolkit's formulation and dissemination. Authorities also allege the involvement of a diaspora group with links to activists who support a separate homeland for followers of Sikhism.

Why do outlandish theories appear reasonable to many Indians? In part because prominent Hindu nationalists have long peddled the idea of omnipresent "breaking India forces" out to prevent India from taking its rightful place as a superpower. Once you believe this, it's not hard to connect dots into a conspiracy. Why do mainstream U.S. newspapers like the Washington Post and the New York Times routinely give space to writers viscerally hostile to Mr. Modi, and almost never to those who back him? Why would a wide cast of celebrities, including the pop star Rihanna, the former porn star known as Mia Khalifa and Vice President Kamala Harris's niece, Meena, suddenly get all worked up about farmers half a world away? Isn't it true that some members of the Sikh diaspora flaunt their support for a homeland called Khalistan? Why do late-night comedians Trevor Noah and John Oliver make fun of the BJP and Mr. Modi? Why did Ms. Thunberg delete her tweet?

Some of these questions are legitimate. And it's certainly true that the debate about India's farm laws in the West has given too little credence to the economic logic behind the reforms. They're designed to help farmers, not hurt them. But there's a much more straightforward explanation for India's current bad rep.

By Sadanand Dhume, Courtesy Wall Street Journal



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The Farmers' Protests Prove Why Mahatma Gandhi's Ideas Cannot Be Buried

Despite facing consistent opposition, Gandhian political thought has gained relevance time and again in the Indian political landscape, with numerous mass movements relying on the principle of Satyagraha

Mahatma Gandhi's political ideas are proving to be difficult to bury. The farmers' mahapanchayats being held across north India in defiance of Section 144 are 21st century examples of civil disobedience. The principle of Satyagraha has been advocated not just during the farmers' agitation but also during the anti-Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) movement before it. What's particularly interesting is that they (Gandhian ideas) have re-emerged despite consistent rejection of Gandhi's ideas from all streams of post-Independence Indian political thought.

The rejection gained momentum with Jawaharlal Nehru treating Gandhi more as a Mahatma rather than a political thinker. Even before Independence, Nehru was quite clear that the Congress should distance itself from the vision of Gandhi's Hind Swaraj. In a rather impatient

letter to Gandhi in October 1945, Nehru insisted that, "The Congress has never considered that picture, much less adopted it." The socialists at the time, who spread across several political parties, associated themselves with the ideas of Lohia rather than Gandhi. And the followers of Hindutva have always had a hidden admiration for Gandhi's assassin; an admiration that is now being expressed more openly.

The antipathy to Gandhian thought across the political spectrum is built around a common feature. At the core of this thinking is an ideology that is closer to a grand theory than a worldview. The ideological positions vary from the economic and cultural Right and Left, and various points between the extremes. Politicians may compromise on these ideological positions in their pursuit of power, but they all believe that their ideological grand theories should be the ideal that they should

follow.

However, in contrast, Gandhi made it clear that he did not believe in grand theories. He insisted that society was in a process of continuous change, and the best one could do was to analyse specific situations in that process. These situations could be altered, and the direction of the process changed, by individual and group actions. As the desired actions would vary across individuals and groups, there would inevitably be negotiations of different kinds between those with a stake in a particular situation. Gandhi's politics was steeped in influencing these negotiations, in a way that avoided violent conflict.

His route to non-violent politics was based on countering the more powerful instruments in these negotiations. Social and political power was to be countered through mass



mobilisation, leading, if necessary, to civil disobedience. The economic power of the owner within a workplace was to be offset by giving workers the economic safety-net of an alternative job, including the making of Khadi. And the power of righteousness was to be developed not just by pointing to unfairness, but also by using the force of truth, or Satyagraha. Even as dominant post-Independence political thought has consistently ignored this approach, trends in Indian

political economy have strengthened each of the three instruments of Gandhi's political negotiations: mass mobilisation, the availability of work options, and the felt need for fairness. Decades of elections have strengthened grassroots awareness, contributing to mass mobilisation on specific issues. As the farmers' movement and the anti-CAA agitation have shown, mass mobilisations have emerged as the last line of defence against an all-powerful state.

Iran Just Handed Biden His First Credibility Test



Rocket attacks on an American base in Iraq by an Iran-backed militia will require a clear response. Nuclear negotiations, not to mention the safety of U.S. troops, depend on it.

Joe Biden is squarely in the middle of a major foreign policy test as president, and while it has gone largely unremarked inside the U.S., the Middle East is watching closely to see how he responds to an attack on U.S. forces.

Monday night, as many as 24 rockets were fired at a U.S. military base at Erbil International Airport, in the capital of the semi-autonomous Kurdistan Region of Iraq. The attacked, almost certainly launched by an Iran-backed militia, wounded an American soldier, killed one non-U.S. contractor and wounded five others. Three local civilians were also wounded.

Earlier this year, I argued that a new President Biden might face

just such a challenge early in his administration. Iran wanted to avenge the assassination of Qassem Soleimani in early January 2020 but I suggested that rather than provoking an outgoing Donald Trump, that it might choose instead to put his replacement to the test by waiting until after Inauguration Day. That is exactly what happened and now the question is how Biden will respond.

The early answer is: cautiously. On Tuesday, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki stated that the U.S. reserves "the right to respond at a time and manner of our choosing but we'll wait for the attribution to be concluded first." Establishing culpability is important, to be sure, but that

won't take long. In fact, intelligence experts already have a very good idea where blame lies. The most pressing concern is to communicate clearly to Iran what the consequences will be for encouraging further attacks.

It is a miracle that a lot more people were not killed. Two of the two dozen rockets struck the camp of the U.S.-led coalition. If more had struck the U.S. base, the result might have been multiple U.S. fatalities, as was the case on March 11, 2020, when another rocket attack killed two U.S. personnel and also one British servicewoman in Iraq.

Most of the rockets fired on February 15 missed the airport and struck the densely populated city, crowded with Kurds, Arab displaced persons, Western diplomats and foreign workers. Civilian homes and apartment complexes were struck. If even one rocket had struck a high-rise, in a city with

limited firefighting capacity, the death toll could have been catastrophic.

In late 2019, the same winding-up of militia attacks led to the end-of-year tit-for-tat strikes in Iraq in which a U.S. contractor was killed, the U.S. embassy was besieged, thousands of U.S. troops were flown to Iraq. America killed over thirty Iran-backed militiamen and Iran's senior general and spymaster, Qassem Soleimani. Iran fired ballistic missiles at a U.S. base, injuring over a hundred U.S. troops. That episode warns that, unless countered, the Erbil attack will not mark the end of militia provocations against the Biden administration but rather the beginning. This dynamic has to be quickly reversed before Americans are killed and maimed, before the U.S. is drawn into retaliatory actions, or before U.S. credibility takes a new hit in the eyes of our allies and partners in the region. As Psaki noted Tuesday, ensuring

a correct attribution of blame must be the starting point, and it offers a welcome excuse for the Biden team to slow down the process, take a breath, and review options. As someone who has been at the heart of dozens of similar intelligence exercises, I know it is not difficult to tell who did the attack: Many factors suggest with high confidence that it was Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq (AAH), a U.S.-designated terrorist group with gallons of U.S. blood on its hands from the years before the U.S. withdrawal from Iraq in 2011.

Let's review the circumstantial evidence available even to a trained observer who only has access to media, social media and some insiders. An AAH-run media front called Ashab al-Kahf (Companions of the Cave) spent much of February 15 criticizing the Kurdistan Region, and then (13 minutes before the rocket attack) issued a cryptic Telegram message threatening Kurdistan and Erbil.

Why Modi And Shah Fear Young Activists



Why would the Indian state arrest a 21-year-old woman activist who seeks a cleaner and safer planet? Should not the country want young people to look beyond their narrow personal interests to the interests of society at large? Why did our government lock up a young citizen seeking to build a better future for herself and her compatriots? And why in such a draconian manner, with a police party flown down from Delhi to whisk her away from her home in Bengaluru to the capital? How could a non-violent campaign to spread awareness about global warming, and tweets in support for farmers' protests, constitute a seditious threat to the mighty, professedly self-reliant, Indian

state?

These questions were asked of me by a friend when the news of Disha Ravi's arrest came in. They were surely asked in many other homes across India as well. At first glance, the arbitrary arrest and sentencing to police custody of this young lady from Bengaluru flew in the face of logic, reason, and common sense. No state governed by the rule of law and a democratic constitution should act like this. But the Indian state did. Why? Based on what we know of the Modi-Shah regime, of how it functioned in Gujarat between 2001 and 2014, and how it has functioned at the Centre thereafter, I'd like to outline six possible reasons why this

young, idealistic, female resident of Bengaluru was picked up without notice by the police from the house where she lived with her mother, put on a plane, and taken away for five days of intense interrogation in Delhi.

The first reason is that the Modi-Shah regime fears independent thinking in general. Indians must be obedient, conformist, loyal to the state and the ruling regime, and worshipful towards the Great and Visionary Leader. Ideally, the Indian state would like no critical, objective, detailed, scrutiny of its policies and actions to be permitted at all. However, while democratic freedoms have been greatly attenuated since May 2014, they have not been fully extinguished. There still exists (bare) elements of a free press, some (rapidly shrinking spaces) in civil society, and a few major states which are not ruled by the BJP. The Modi-Shah regime is dominant across India, in politics as well as in civil society. But it is not content with dominance - it wants total hegemony. In pursuit of this ambition, it curtails discussions in parliament, erodes the rights of states, and suppresses media freedoms. By

not having a single press conference in six-and-a-half years, and by assiduously cultivating and promoting a 'Godi Media', the Prime Minister has succeeded in reducing journalistic scrutiny of his government's work. But he has not completely eliminated it - as yet. Hence the attacks on independent sites like Newsclick, and on independent-minded journalists as well (for more details, see this.) The second reason that Disha Ravi was arrested is that while the Modi-Shah regime fears independent thinking in general, they particularly fear it when expressed by young people. Indians in their 20s and 30s, who are animated by ideals of religious pluralism, caste and gender justice, democratic transparency, and environmental sustainability - that is, by ideals different from and often opposed to those of the Sangh Parivar - have more energy and more time on this earth to fulfil their own hopes for our land. Therefore, they must be sent off to prison, through the abuse of state power and of the legal process if necessary. The

arrest of Disha Ravi is in keeping with the arrest of an ever-growing list of young, idealistic, selfless young Indians seeking a better future for our country. These young idealists constitute a far greater threat to the Sangh Parivar's agenda than older Indians who may also think of themselves as independent-minded. Indeed, they constitute a greater threat to the Sangh Parivar than the Opposition parties themselves. As the experienced journalist Nikhil Wagle wrote when Disha Ravi was jailed: "Indira Gandhi arrested opposition leaders in her emergency. Modi won't arrest them as he knows most of them have little credibility or influence. He arrests genuine, young activists who fight to protect democracy. This is Modi's emergency with a difference!"

Unlike MPs and MLAs of other parties, these young activists cannot be made to join the BJP through bribery or coercion.

Modi's Slogans - Catchy But Pointless

India has four mints spread over the country in Mumbai, Kolkata, Hyderabad and Noida. These facilities mint coins for the use of the public at large. Prime Minister Modi has set up a fifth mint. This mint does not produce coins, it mints new words and slogans. The latest word he has minted is "Andolan Jeevi", obviously referring to those who have made his life difficult in recent times by launching protests against the policies of his government. The pride of place here is occupied by the farmers of the country who, when they realised the pernicious impact the three farm laws would have on their livelihoods, launched a massive movement against the government. "Vinash kale vipreet buddhi" (bad times see bad decisions), goes an ancient Sanskrit saying. This is what has happened to this government, especially to the Prime Minister. Has Prime Minister Modi ever participated in any movement or gone to jail? My Google search led me nowhere,

except to point out that he acquired a degree in 'entire political science' from the Delhi University. I acquired a first class Master's degree in Political Science way back in 1958, and also taught the subject in Patna University for two years before the Indian Administrative Service changed the course of my life. To the best of my knowledge, neither then nor now there is a course in any university on 'entire political science', but then Prime Minister Modi can produce any rabbit from his hat. But let us return to the theme of his slogans.

Before the general elections of 2014, the slogan which reverberated throughout the country was of "Acche Din" (Good Times if Modi is elected). People believed it and voted the BJP to power by giving it a clear majority of its own, something which happened after three decades. Modi became the Prime Minister of India, the supreme leader of the BJP and



started rubbing shoulders with top world leaders. Better days did not follow, but the people were mesmerised by a barrage of new slogans. The latest in line is 'Atmanirbhar Bharat' a slogan which is as old as our freedom movement and which was given flesh and blood as long ago as the Second Five Year plan (1957 to 1962). The slogan is not original but who cares? If Prime Minister Modi uses it, he becomes the originator of it. Who are we, lesser mortals, to question him, or the hordes of his blind followers? 'Achhe Din' was followed by 'Make in India', 'Beti Bachao Beti Padhao', 'Minimum Government,

Maximum Governance', 'Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas' and many more. The latest in this long list is of 'Atmanirbhar Bharat', and 'Vocal for Local'. It is a government of slogans, for slogans, by slogans.

Why does the Prime Minister constantly churn out these new slogans? He is obviously playing a deeper game here. The most important task for any party or individual in politics is to be able to set the agenda. You set the agenda and expect the others to react. This is what the Prime Minister is doing through these slogans, leaving no option for his opponents except to react to his agenda. The opposition must get out of this trap. It must first set the agenda and then corner the government. In its nearly seven years in office, the government has failed on multiple fronts, economic, national defence, social and political. But most importantly of all, it has, by its actions, put democracy in this country under threat. The many

bulwarks of our democracy, so assiduously created and nurtured by our leaders in the past, stand devalued. Democracy does not merely mean the people exercising their right to vote once in five years. It means the accountability of the government to its people on a 24x7 basis. This can be enforced only if the institutions enjoined with this responsibility discharge their task truly and faithfully. Is this being done? Let us take the media first. The state of the media was perhaps not as miserable even during the Emergency of Indira Gandhi as it is today with a few honourable exceptions. Proximity to power and pelf, a scoop, standing in society, and finally, a Rajya Sabha seat is the ultimate aim of many of the worthies in that tribe. Even national security, as recent events would show, can be sacrificed at this altar. Additionally, most of the media today is controlled by corporates who know no better than to toe the government's line.

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How India is weakening its case on terrorism

Trivialising India's posture on terrorism in the international community can undo years of steady gains, for the short-term and myopic benefits of political support, ideological upmanship and electoral victories in the country's never-ending election cycles.

If there is one country that has been short-changed by the international order on issues relating to terrorism, more specifically cross-border terrorism, it is India. The Indian narrative on terrorism has been loud since the 1980s, but falling mostly on deaf ears, especially at forums such as the United Nations (UN). New Delhi's echoes on the perils of terrorism got a voice back predominantly in the post-9/11 era, and that too with mostly residual support for historical Indian concerns. Debates in and around the fundamentals of what terrorism entails, and how to deal with it, have been unresolved at the UN for decades. Member-states have failed to conclude a universal benchmark, choosing instead to use open-ended terminologies and vacillating between academic takes and real-world policy applications predominantly led by individual States and their geopolitical aims.

The lack of clarity on countering terrorism, specifically within the UN Security Council (UNSC),

has cost India tremendously both in economic and human capital. Till today, almost on a weekly basis, Indian troops die in theatres such as Kashmir while battling terrorism. This is a continuous reminder of the international community, UN and UNSC's abject and fundamental failures in achieving their most primal aims towards a peaceful world order. However, increasingly, India's firm and correct stance on terrorism not only from its own perspective, but a global one, is arguably getting diluted with the terms "terrorist" and "terrorism" applied to the most frivolous domestic challenges. This ranges from countering political narratives to attempts to label political ideations, dissent or the simple act of disagreement, as "terrorism". Of course, the lack of a clear definition only adds to the potential of obfuscating narratives.

To put this in perspective, the eighth report of India's Second Administrative Reforms Commission on combating terrorism, published in June 2008, highlights

the conundrums of defining terrorism while listing the various sub-categories, from ideology (Left and Right-wing terror) and religion to ethno-nationalism and narco-terror. In the end, the report highlights the short legal definition proposed by Dutch scholar Alex P Schmid to the UN Crime Branch in 1992, which reads: "An act of terrorism=peacetime equivalent of a war crime". But even this is wrapped around caveats, showcasing that a State or a commission's most nuanced attempt on defining terror is, in no manner, the final word..

So, the question then remains, why use "terrorism" as an absolutist term for messaging with regard to domestic political cracks? The broad stroke use of laws such as the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, and extending the anti-terrorism narrative to issues such as an organisation "sending too many emails" over environmental rules or localised political debates, may cause grave harm to the slow, steady and arguably positive progress New Delhi has made



over decades to elbow-in its concerns about the organised terrorism it faces from its immediate neighbourhood. A hyper-connected, social media-led world has added further to the complexities that we witness regarding narrative construction and destruction. The government and its functionaries may not use such terms directly themselves. But their ecosystems, which provide them with both digital and electoral oxygen, using terms such as "terrorist", without realising its larger implication, is equally problematic, if not more, considering no course correction is offered from the political class. We now often witness ministers and senior government functionaries using a cocktail of social media

and diaspora politics to shore up support, where once again the labelling of "terrorism" is at times used in a worryingly superficial manner. So, the question then remains, why use "terrorism" as an absolutist term for messaging with regard to domestic political cracks? The broad stroke use of laws such as the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, and extending the anti-terrorism narrative to issues such as an organisation "sending too many emails" over environmental rules or localised political debates, may cause grave harm to the slow, steady and arguably positive progress New Delhi has made over decades to elbow-in its concerns about the organised terrorism it faces from its immediate neighbourhood.

What Pangong means for Asian geopolitics

If disengagement leads to a border pact, the deal is prudent. If Beijing uses it as a tactical pause, then New Delhi may regret concessions

Defence minister Rajnath Singh announced the consensual disengagement of troops by both China and India at the contested Pangong lake in Parliament on February 11. This development, and the gradual pullback of tanks and the dismantling of infrastructure that has taken place by both militaries in a synchronised and verified manner, are cause for modest satisfaction. However, like the proverbial curate's egg, the potential for good and bad outcomes in the long-term would have to be assessed in an objective and informed manner.

In a nutshell, after nine rounds of talks between the military commanders, both sides have agreed to a process which will see Chinese troops pulling back east of Finger 8, while Indian troops will remain at Finger 3 near the Dhan Singh Thapa Post. The area between Finger 4 and Finger 8 will

be a no-man's land, with a temporary cessation of patrols and related military activities by both sides, pending further agreement between the two countries.

Spurs along the Pangong lake have been designated as Fingers 1 to 8 from west to east. India has maintained that its claim line of the Line of Actual Control (LAC) extends up to Finger 8. In early 2020, China exploited a tactical gap and moved the People's Liberation Army (PLA) troops up to Finger 4 and attempted to alter LAC by a show of force. India's calibrated response of August 29 at the Kailash range enabled Delhi to acquire a certain tactical advantage. This proved to be a valuable negotiating asset in the protracted talks that culminated in the current disengagement process. Once this round of disengagement is complete, more negotiations will take place to reach the final Indian

objective of a return to the status quo on LAC that prevailed in early 2020 prior to the "surprise" Chinese intrusion. It is significant that China has agreed to pull back from a position of relative tactical advantage and one may conjecture that the Indian occupation of the Kailash heights enabled this compromise.

Many questions have been raised in India about the nature of this disengagement process and whether it is a fair deal. The Congress has termed the "creation of a buffer zone" as a "surrender of Indian interests". In a written response, the ministry of defence has asserted that "India has not conceded any territory as a result of this agreement". On the contrary, the statement says, India has "enforced observance and respect for LAC and prevented any unilateral change in the status quo".

While the disengagement pro-



cess is a work-in-progress, it merits notice that the cessation of patrolling by both sides, in what is now a no-man's land, is on the Indian side of LAC — that is west of Finger 8. Whether this will be a temporary arrangement for the Indian troops, pending further resolution of the long-fester territorial tangle between India and China, or whether it becomes the new status quo remains a key question. Of immediate concern also is the status of the Dapsang plateau and the Y junction where China has acquired a tactical advantage that can jeopardise India's access to Daulat Beg Oldi (DBO) and air assets in that region. While noting that the Dapsang issue pre-

dates the Pangong intrusion, and there are other friction points in eastern Ladakh, India must remain cognisant of the big picture — the unresolved territorial dispute from west to east that spans almost 4,000 km. Will the current disengagement and the acceptance of a temporary suspension by India of patrolling rights in one area lead to greater malleability in managing LAC — remember China has been reluctant in clarifying LAC despite repeated Indian attempts — and provide a road map for transiting to an agreed border? That would be the most desirable outcome, in which case the current compromise by India would be a prudent political determination.

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.



Changing the status quo for social media companies in India

In India, MeitY proposed amendments to the extant Intermediary Guidelines of 2011 in 2018 to include mandatory use of technology in content moderation and data disclosures to the government. These are still under review as the government seeks to align it with the pending Personal Data Protection Bill.

The ministry of electronics and information technology (MeitY) is engaged in a tussle with Twitter over its directions to block certain accounts. While the legal framework empowers the government to act, the episode throws up larger questions on policy gaps with regard to content regulation, and areas of ambiguity even where policy exists. Globally, social media firms are protected by the “safe harbour provision”. This protects the intermediary, say Twitter or Google, from being penalised for harmful or unlawful content, if it is not created or modified by it, or if the platform did not have knowledge of such content posted by a user. The United States offers similar protection to internet companies through Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act. In Europe, the e-Commerce Directive 2000, provides protection to internet intermediaries if they act only as a conduit and do not have knowledge of unlawful content. In recent years, the Indian judiciary has tried to clarify am-

biguous provisions related to the liability of intermediaries to take down unlawful content, while keeping in mind the fundamental right to freedom of expression of users.

Europe is leading the effort to effectively regulate intermediaries. In 2020, building on its e-Commerce Directive, it introduced a comprehensive Digital Services Act for handling online content, liability of intermediaries and diligence requirements, and protection of the fundamental rights of individuals. Obligations of intermediaries include timely notification to law enforcement agencies in case of illegal content, content takedown obligations, transparency disclosures such as details of account suspensions and content removals, rules on digital advertising, appointment of compliance officers and conducting annual audits. Australia incorporated stricter rules after the Christchurch terrorist attack. The Criminal Code Amendment (Sharing of Abhorrent Violent Material) Act, 2019, mandates social me-

dia platforms to remove violent content and imposes a large penalty in case of non-compliance — 10% of the annual turnover of the company.

In India, MeitY proposed amendments to the extant Intermediary Guidelines of 2011 in 2018 to include mandatory use of technology in content moderation and data disclosures to the government. These are still under review as the government seeks to align it with the pending Personal Data Protection Bill.

While existing provisions give the State enough room to act, a change in status quo for more credible and effective interventions is urgently needed. This can only happen with the participation and deliberation of tech companies, civil society, academia and governments. Together, they can create the necessary balance between controlling misinformation/ unlawful content and protection of citizen rights, including freedom of speech. MeitY should consider following the guiding principles of transpar-



ency, accountability and grievance redressal. For transparency, each social media intermediary must disclose, in a timely manner, the process followed in moderating content, technology applied, categorisation of content between lawful and unlawful, and taking down of content. For accountability, make the principle of “duty of care” central, ie, intermediaries should be made responsible by imposing positive obligations on them to prevent users from harming others. And for grievance redress and dispute resolution, set up an independent quasi-judicial body with provisions for following the due process of law. Additionally,

MeitY may consider emulating the European classification of intermediaries, which segregates social media platforms into a sub-heading, “online platforms” with separate rules. Global rules on intermediary liability or content takedown regulations are largely absent, and social media companies have been self-regulating. Here, the G20 Digital Economy Taskforce can play an important role. As internet giants have porous territorial boundaries, it can provide a neutral platform for sharing best practices to create global standards and guidelines for liability of social media intermediaries.

Bridge the geopolitical distance with Russia



World powers, particularly those engaging with India in the Indo-Pacific, must know that a multi-polar Euro-Asian supercontinent is not possible without Russia. Preventing the emergence of a hegemon in Eurasia without Russia, given its size and resources, is well-nigh impossible. Today Russia, like India, desires a world with many centres of power. The opportunity must not be lost.

Foreign secretary Harsh Shringla's forthcoming visit to Moscow is a good occasion to examine the relevance of Indo-Russian ties in a world of changing geopolitical equations, greatly accelerated by the Covid-19 pandemic. The year 2020 saw several trends that impacted both India and Russia — the sharpening rivalry between United States (US) and China, the India-China border tussle, the continuing decline in ties between the West and Russia, and the change of guard in Washington. No issue affected

the Indo-Russian relationship as much as the border tensions between India and China. The Chinese aggression, in April/May 2020, in the border areas of eastern Ladakh, brought India-China relations to an inflexion point, but also demonstrated that Russia is capable of contributing to defusing tensions with China. On the other hand, Russia's seeming equivocation initially diminished its standing among the Indian public.

However, that changed after the first bilateral high-level political contacts between India and

China took place in Moscow on the sidelines of a September meeting of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. The Indian defence minister, Rajnath Singh, and external affairs minister, S Jaishankar, met their Chinese counterparts on September 5 and 10 respectively. Earlier in June, Singh had visited Moscow to attend the Victory Day Parade. During the visit, he met Russian defence minister Sergey Shoigu and other officials. The Russians promised to positively look at India's requests for expedited arms deliveries in view of the border conflict, despite some informal appeals against it by the Chinese.

The developments of 2020, preceded by the immensely successful Prime Minister Narendra Modi-President

Vladimir Putin Sochi meeting in May 2018 and the pathbreaking Vladivostok summit in September 2019, may give the impression that Indo-Russian ties can be now put into cruise mode, having overcome the earlier hiatus. However, some ongoing geopolitical trends suggest that such a conclusion is premature. The inflexion point reached by India in its relations with China has driven New Delhi to shed “past hesitations” and actively pursue more hard-nosed policies to protect its perceived national interests. This has included the pursuit of a closer relationship with the US; a determined restart to the Quad process — a coming together of India, Japan, Australia and the US; a clearer enunciation of “a free and inclusive” Indo-Pacific; an energetic neighbourhood policy; as well as

intensified outreach to east and west Asia.

Russia, for its part, has, since 2014, faced deteriorating ties with the US-led West following the Ukraine crisis, exacerbated now by the Western reaction to the poisoning and post-recovery jailing of anti-government political activist Alexey Navalny. Russia responded to these efforts to isolate it, by revving up its own “Pivot to the East”, the most distinct results of which are markedly improved relations with China, and better ties with Turkey (despite a brief hiccup), Iran and Pakistan. Russia, also, has officially been cold towards the concept of the Indo-Pacific, seeing it as a design to contain China. It is important to note, however, that Russia repeatedly reiterates that it does not see itself as anybody's junior partner.



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Immorality Of Policymakers Behind Rising Petrol Prices

Petrol and diesel prices were deregulated in 2010 and 2014 respectively but it is a case of deregulation over papers only.



The price of premium petrol has crossed Rs 100 per litre mark in a few cities and a litre of normal petrol is also costing over Rs 90. In Pakistan, people are on roads over the spike in fuel prices and our country too is facing a protest but for a different reason. Though the Consumer Price Index (CPI)-based inflation rate is within the mandated rate advised to RBI Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) the rise in fuel price has started pinching the common man. The rise in fuel prices has a cascading effect all over the economy but if there is a downward revision in prices, we hardly witness a

corresponding price adjustment by the suppliers or service providers. Petrol and diesel prices were deregulated in 2010 and 2014 respectively but it is a case of deregulation over papers only. Deregulation means the retail price of commodities should be moving in tandem (though not in exact proportion) to the changes in global price. However, both centre and state governments have considered a southward movement in crude price as an opportunity to hike taxes.

In other words, consumers are asked to bear the burden when there is a hike in crude price but taxes are levied when there is a

fall in prices. In NCT Delhi, overall tax incidence on petrol was Rs 22 in 2014 which has been increased to Rs 53 in February 2020. The central government has replaced excise duty component with various cess (Road & Infra Cess and Agriculture Infrastructure and Development Cess, AID) resulting in lesser devolution to states from the consolidated fund of India even though the collection has increased. Out of total tax of Rs 53, central government's net share is Rs 27.9 after sharing Rs 5.1 with states and overall share of states comes to Rs 25. Both centre and states are responsible for high tax incidence but only centre faces the brickbat because people are unaware of the tax structure and revenue devolution. Tax on petroleum has become a cash cow for the government and discussion about bringing this under the ambit of Goods and Services Tax (GST) is just an eyewash for

common people because no government would like to do so. Above facts are reinforced from the budget data released by government which shows that central excise collection for the year 2020-21 has increased from Rs 267,000 crores of the budget estimate to Rs 361,000 crores in revised estimates (source- Receipt Budget 2021). An increase of Rs 94,000 crores in tax collection as compared to budget estimate shows the immorality of our policymakers given the fact that tax incidence is to be borne by ultimate consumers whose livelihoods are impacted due to Covid. Public Enterprises Survey published by the Department of Public Enterprises shows that oil Public Sector Undertaking (PSUs) have consistently made an annual profit of about 10 billion USD since 2016-17. Governments also know that fuel demand is inelastic to its price change and people will continue

to purchase it. Time and again social media posts are circulated citing repayment of a loan by NDA government as a reason behind high fuel prices. As a matter of fact, oil bonds worth Rs 3,500 crores only have been redeemed so far and that too in 2015 (source- Annexure to Receipt Budgets). There can be another argument (though yet to come across over social media) that INR has depreciated and therefore importers have to pay a higher amount in rupee terms. All these arguments look good when they come from government or functionaries of the ruling party but appear puerile when given by analysts. There is no denying that government needs resources to run welfare schemes and create infrastructure facilities. However, it is the job of the government to maintain a balance between the different class of taxpayers.

The global problems Biden can't avoid

In his first days in office, President Joe Biden has prioritized immediate actions in America and for Americans. This is what he promised. But he has also committed to reestablishing international US leadership, with "humility and confidence" as Secretary of State Antony Blinken put it, and started with executive orders on issues like refugees and the pandemic. These measures lay the foundation for urgent action needed now more than ever in the world's proliferating humanitarian crises, mired in the triple threat of untended conflict, unmitigated climate change and the scourge of Covid-19.

As IRC's 2021 Watchlist reveals, this toxic mix is driving unprecedented humanitarian need and reversing decades of hard-won progress worldwide. As our report notes, the 20 countries in crisis on the list represent just 10% of the global population, but account for 85% of those in humanitarian need. They are also

the countries driving the global displacement crisis, accounting for 84% of all refugees in 2019. The Covid-19 pandemic has increased global humanitarian needs by 40% over the last year alone -- increasing the pressure on already fragile societies. Against this backdrop, the world has been in retreat. Humanitarian aid levels declined in 2019 for the first time in a decade. According to the UN refugee agency UNHCR, developing nations are struggling to host 85% of the world's refugees, while wealthy nations like the US and European Union member states almost halved the number of refugee resettlement slots available to the most vulnerable.

And while wealthy nations have allocated over \$11 trillion for domestic Covid-19 responses, the UN's Global Covid Humanitarian Response Plan -- meant to coordinate and rally support for crisis -- and conflict-affected countries -- is currently less than 40% funded.

Covid-19 has shown that we live in a connected world. Analysis by the International Chamber of Commerce found that the global economy could lose as much as \$9.2 trillion if vaccines are not equitably distributed to low-income countries, with wealthy nations bearing half that loss. Unmanaged instability, insecurity, migration and climate change have similar consequences for US interests. Urgent and expansive humanitarian action from the new administration is therefore a necessity and not a luxury. America's absence during the previous administration created a spiral of disengagement that has left the world leaderless at this crucial time. And while the US cannot resolve these challenges alone, US leadership can encourage others to share the burden.

Covid-19 takes priority because it has brought the world to its knees. Of the nearly \$4 trillion has allocated to combat the



pandemic, just less than 0.2% has been allocated to support the international Covid-19 response, including \$4 billion for the global vaccine effort. The ICC study indicates that the \$27.2 billion needed to close the gap on global vaccine distribution could deliver a return "as high as 166 times the investment." So, too, will there be returns on addressing deepening malnutrition, poverty, health and education losses due to the pandemic. President Biden's proposal of an extra \$11 billion is a start, but it will take more. The US can galvanize global partners by allocating \$20 billion to the global response, in

its new Covid-19 action package, and calling on wealthy nations to do their fair share. The second order of business is restoring stability to the world's worst crisis zones before they get worse. Humanitarian appeals for IRC's Watchlist countries have been organized for an average of 11 consecutive years. Sustained improvement in these destabilizing displacement crises will deliver humanitarian and strategic benefit -- but it will take aid, diplomacy, sustained engagement and coordination with donors, UN agencies and international financial institutions.

The Argument for (and Against) Only Forgiving \$10,000 of Student Debt

President Joe Biden's plan would actually do a lot of good-but it could do even more.

For the past several months, leading Democrats have been pressing Joe Biden to embrace an ambitious plan for student debt forgiveness by canceling up to \$50,000 of debt per borrower. But on Tuesday, the president unambiguously shot the idea down. "I will not make that happen," he told an audience member during a CNN town hall in Milwaukee. Biden said he did not want to write off "billions of dollars in debt for people who have gone to Harvard and Yale," and added that he did not believe he had the authority to erase the debt unilaterally via administrative authority, as some major figures in his party have suggested. Biden did say he was open to some student loan cancellation, however, telling his questioner that he was "prepared to write off a \$10,000 debt, but not 50." This was a position the president took during his White House campaign, when he backed the idea of including the proposal in a COVID relief bill. On Wednesday, the White House reiterated to me that Biden wanted Congress to enact loan forgiveness through

legislation, and that he was not promising to do it himself via executive action.

Biden's comments on this issue were deeply frustrating for progressives who've rallied around the idea of student loan forgiveness. One reason why is that it's unclear as of yet whether there are even 50 votes in the Senate for the more modest \$10,000 plan Biden has backed. If the president isn't willing to test out the power of his executive pen, and risk having the move blocked by our conservative Supreme Court, then there's a chance we won't see any broad-based debt forgiveness at all. But the other, more straightforward issue is that a lot of forgiveness advocates think that canceling \$10,000 a head simply wouldn't give borrowers enough relief. (This was basically the message of the audience member who asked Biden about it Tuesday night.) Whether or not you think that's true is a subjective judgment call, but I think it's important to keep two somewhat contrasting points about it in mind when considering the issue. First, forgiving even

\$10,000 would actually do an enormous amount of good for many borrowers. It's easy to lose sight of that fact in the middle of a Twitter fight on this topic, but it shouldn't be discounted.

Second, unless you're worried about the deficit, there isn't really a strong, logical reason to stop at \$10,000.

To someone who borrowed to attend private college or go to law school, \$10,000 in loan forgiveness may not sound like very much aid. For people who are already relying on income-based repayment plans, it might not even change what they owe each month. But while it might sound like a measly figure to some, for many others \$10,000 would be a massive helping hand. According to the Department of Education's most recent data, there are about 42 million Americans who currently hold some federal student debt. About one-third of them have balances below \$10,000. Another 1 in 5 have balances under \$20,000. We're ultimately talking about a policy that, for more than 50 percent of borrowers, would cut what they owe by half or



more. But why limit forgiveness to \$10,000? The most compelling answer is probably that it's a decent way to target the most troubled borrowers while spending a somewhat limited amount of cash. One unintuitive wrinkle of the student debt crisis is that the ex-students who have the most difficulty paying back their loans are not, generally speaking, the ones who took out the most money. In fact, the opposite is generally true—borrowers who default tend to have some of the lowest balances, in part because a large share of them never finished their degrees. (A long-term study of students who began repaying their loans in the 2003-04 school year found that, of those who eventually defaulted on their loans over the next 12

years, 49 percent had dropped out of school.) The students who rack up the largest loan balances, meanwhile, have often earned advanced diplomas in fields like law and medicine that usually pay off fairly well, at least in the long term (obviously, being a hospital resident is not a financial picnic). Forgiving just \$10,000 wouldn't be cheap, per se—my quick Excel math says you'd probably be wiping away around \$375 billion of the \$1.5 trillion in outstanding federal student loans²—but it would keep costs down, while relieving a lot of financial pressure. Plus it would make the whole scheme a bit more progressive, since Washington wouldn't be forgiving as much debt belonging to doctors and lawyers.

It's time for the US to make good with Afghanistan



One month into his administration, President Joe Biden faces a daunting set of domestic and international crises. As Covid-19 continues to spread around the world, America's allies are also counting on the Biden administration to restore leadership, credibility and international partnerships as part of US foreign policy. Among the many challenges Biden must tackle is the rapidly deteriorating situation in

Afghanistan. Following the Trump administration's agreement with the Taliban last February, a wave of orchestrated assassinations targeting civilians has besieged Afghanistan in recent months. Journalists, human rights activists, doctors, civil servants, judges, religious leaders and teachers have been injured and killed in a string of attacks. Many of the victims were women who reclaimed their rightful place in Afghan society after the Taliban's brutal rule. In

September, the US embassy in Kabul warned that Afghan women were at increased risk of being targeted by extremist groups. Since then, the number of women threatened and harmed has risen consistently. Without a concerted, coordinated effort by the US and other key actors, Afghanistan risks falling into chaos, further destabilizing a volatile region, advantaging terrorist groups, and, once again, precipitating a large-scale refugee crisis. What happens in Afghanistan has global consequences and what is happening on the ground today is a warning we can no longer ignore. When the Taliban deny responsibility for the violence, experts and US forces in Afghanistan have concluded that this is part of the Taliban's new strategy to silence civil society and destroy those who uphold peace and democracy.

Recent victims of this deliberate killing campaign include two female supreme court judges, whose murders are a clear attack against a pluralistic and democratic society reaching for peace. We welcome all steps to end conflict and bring peace in Afghanistan, but what we see today is the continuation of war by the Taliban. The repeated failure to hold the Taliban accountable for their continued violation of the terms of their agreement with the United States, including their unkept promise to break ties with al Qaeda and other terrorist networks, has set Afghanistan on a path that could lead to state collapse. Let us be clear: We believe the Taliban is terrorizing and tormenting the country's citizens into submission as part of a deliberate strategy to eliminate opposition and force surrender either on the battlefield or at the negotiating table.

President Biden is rightly reviewing the US-Taliban agreement, which it must consider as part of broader strategic calculation to not only push for a real peace process, but to prevent a reckless withdrawal that leads to state collapse, a civil war, and the revival of a global terrorist haven. There is still time to change course and make good on almost two decades of shared investment and sacrifice in Afghanistan. Several immediate steps should be taken to accomplish this. First, the Biden administration should reestablish close coordination on Afghanistan with its European, NATO, and Afghan government partners, following a unilateral US process with the Taliban that committed its allies to concessions without their agreement.

MEA's response to celebrity activism shows that India is new to Twitter diplomacy

The MEA's observation about the Indian "democratic ethos and polity" is indeed high-minded but its global pedagogic role and reach has to extend beyond majoritarian representation to the "miniscule" which dissents from the "multitude"



and climate activist Greta Thunberg. It decried "celebrities and others", and denigrated them as being "neither accurate nor responsible". The Minister for External Affairs has tweeted about "motivated campaigns" targeting India which "will never succeed" and said that: "We have the self-confidence today to hold our own". There is no doubt whatsoever that India can hold its own but the MEA action has also come under the scanner, inside and outside Parliament. While hashtag activism was welcomed by the protesting farmers' associations and many activists, some Indian film and sports stars have urged conscientious restraint on policy matters internal to the nation. Drowned in the chorus of support and dissent, is the sober voice of former Secretary, MEA, Vivek Katju: "This marks a new page for our external publicity efforts to counter criticism. The question is if it will be effective to reach the followers of those who have tweeted."

Here I engage with only the association of celebrities with public protest, fully recognising the underlying febrile public debates on substantive issues of farm policy and law, the logics of protesting publics, the conduct of the police and all the associated issues. But it must be recognised that celebrity activism is now a long tradition the world over of human rights activism. It is for the MEA to decide how foreign policy is best conducted but Twitter diplomacy is new to India.

The world of celebrities - actors, sports heroes, prominent authors, media personalities, global public citizens, recipients of Nobel Prize and the alternate Nobel prize, such as the Magsaysay Award - is firmly entrenched in international relations. It has helped the growth of global civil society opinion and action. A Bertrand Russell-inspired Permanent People's Tribunal in Rome is among the institutions which

hold participative international tribunals on institutions, actors and networks with a view to truth-finding and shaping global public opinion.

Many Indian film celebrities have engaged in activism. Priyanjana Roy Das had drawn our attention (in 2016) to 10 famous but reticent film stars who did not wear their status on their sleeves but powerfully contributed to grassroots' human rights activism. One may add many more names to this pantheon. And although he has now decided not to form a political party, Rajinikanth's attempt at "spiritual politics" and Kamal Haasan's crusades for better governance await a fuller impact analysis.

Governments and political parties also seek to convey their messages to the masses through their chosen celebrities: Many are nominated to Rajya Sabha, and some receive national honours.

We are now witnessing the second phase of the farmers' sit-in; the consistently peaceful protest was unfortunately and deeply wounded by the violent events on Republic Day at the Red Fort and Delhi Police has already made some headway in the investigation. The prime minister's reiteration that "I am just a call away" for the next round of negotiations and his government's offer to put in abeyance the laws' operation for one-and-a-half years have not affected the protesting publics; they reverberate with the slogan, "kanoon wapsi, ghar wapsi (we will return home only when the laws are repealed)". Right or wrong, a spectre haunts every

protester - that small, marginal, and middle farmers will become landless corporate serfs if a statutory guarantee of minimum support price is not assured. One hopes for a just solution of this democratic impasse, possible only through fair dialogical action on all sides. However, the desperate fortification of the protest sites in Delhi and the frequent shutdowns of essential services and the internet have led to new concerns, both nationally and globally.

A new twist in hashtag activism was evident in the statement by the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) on the tweets by international pop singer Rihanna

Burning of Thunberg's images are symbolic warnings of possible fate that awaits woman seen as 'too independent'

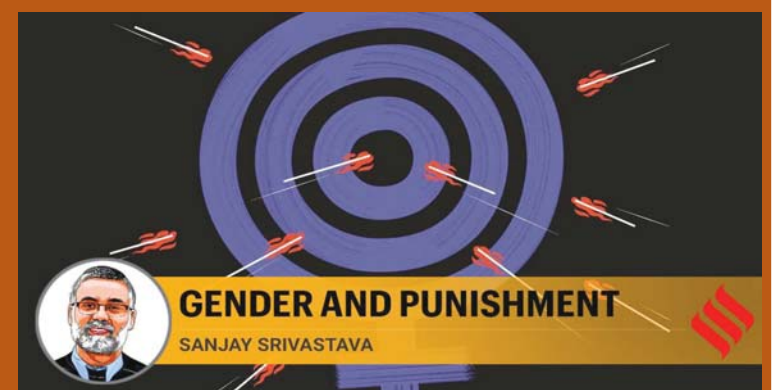
The arrest of climate activist Disha Ravi on the charge of sharing a protest "toolkit" and the burning of posters and effigies of Greta Thunberg carries ominous messages beyond the obvious ones relating to dissent and freedom of speech. One does not have to agree with the nature of Greta Thunberg's environmental activism to conclude that reactions to her tweeted support for the farmers' agitation reveal some deeply troubling aspects about gender in Indian society. You do not even have to be supportive of the cause of the farmers to think that our public culture has mutated to a particular level of toxic masculinity. If the sight of a group of men torching images and effigies of a young woman does not make our stomachs churn, then, perhaps, we have become completely habituated

to the idea of violence against women and past efforts to address the issues have been in vain.

In the not-too-distant past, the so-called sati of 18-year-old Roop Kanwar led to the passing of the Rajasthan Sati (Prevention) Act of 1987. The Act was the end result of a great deal of debate, discussion and agitation that focussed on the forms of gender discrimination that normalised violence against women in the name of tradition. Eight months after her marriage, Roop Kanwar's husband Maal Singh passed away and the young woman faced a horrific fate at her husband's pyre. One of the key aspects of the Act was to make punishable activities that "glorified" the fundamental aspect of sati - setting a woman on fire. The Act recognised that beyond the actual horrific nature of the deed itself, its afterlife - in

popular culture and religious observances, for example - served as justification of violence against women. It recognised that, in addition to actual violence, symbolic violence is a significant factor in reproducing unacceptable ideas about women and their "place" in society.

If unwilling women were sent to a public death on their husbands' funeral pyres, they did not fare much better in private life. The fires of the family kitchen - otherwise symbols of comfort and sustenance - have been made accomplices in peculiarly Indian dramas of domestic horror, homicide and human greed. Bride-burning constitutes the most frequent method of the killing of women whose families have not been able to fulfil dowry demands. It continues to be a fact of life that many women who are first imagined as cash cows are, when their families are unable to pay up,



turned to embers and ash. With new consumer cultures and grander aspirations for material advancement, this tendency has, if anything, deepened. Of course, women are set alight not just for money but also in the aftermath of rape. In December 2019, a young woman who was on way to the police station in Unnao to testify against her rapists was set alight by those she had accused. In the same month, a veterinary doctor was raped, strangled and her body set alight in Hyderabad and a

teenager in a village in Bihar died of her burn injuries after being torched when she resisted rape. Violence against women extends beyond dousing them in kerosene and setting them alight. There are many ways - hanging, drowning, being pushed from a balcony - through which death takes on a very public face. The recognition of dowry-related death as a legal offence is also a recognition of the deep-rooted nature of violence against women and the unequivocal need to both punish it and provide deterrence.

Mamata Banerjee attacks Rail ministry for attack on minister Jakir Hossain, CID takes over probe

Bengal CM Mamata Banerjee visited Jakir Husaain who was seriously injured after bombs were hurled at him in Nimtita railway station in Murshidabad district on Wednesday night. Bengal CID has, meanwhile, taken over the probe into the Murshidabad attack.



Mamata Banerjee alleges conspiracy West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee on Thursday visited the injured minister in hospital. Alleging conspiracy, Mamata Banerjee slammed the Railways and said the ministry can't avoid responsibility.

"It is the Railways which is responsible for security within the station, not the state government," Mamata Banerjee said. What happened in Murshidabad? West Bengal minister Jakir Hossain was seriously injured on Wednesday after crude bombs were hurled at him in Nimtita railway station in Murshidabad. Senior minister and TMC leader Malay Ghatak held "political rivals of the party" responsible for

the attack, while Sabhadhipati of Murshidabad Zilla Parishad Mosharaf Hossain, who was expelled from the TMC earlier in the day, claimed that it is the result of the party's internal feud. Jakir Hossain, the minister of state for labour, was waiting at platform no 2 of the station to catch a train to Kolkata at around 10 pm when he was attacked, a senior police officer of West Bengal Police said.

The TMC's Murshidabad district president Abu Taher Khan suspected the involvement of the BJP or the Congress, which was very strong in the district even a few years back, behind the attack. BJP national general secretary in charge of Bengal Kailash Vijayvargiya and state the party's

state president Dilip Ghosh condemned the attack on the Bengal minister.

"I strongly condemn the crude bomb attack on TMC minister Jakir Hossain at Nimtita railway station, Murshidabad. I pray for a speedy recovery of the injured," Vijayvargiya tweeted.

"This shows that West Bengal is not safe even for ministers. The law and order has totally failed," Ghosh said.

West Bengal Congress president Adhir Ranjan Chowdhury, who hails from the district, said, "Jakir is an honest leader unlike several others in the TMC in Murshidabad. I know him personally. I request the state government to arrest the culprits as soon as possible."

(News Agencies)- Aday after West Bengal minister Jakir Hossain was seriously injured after unidentified attackers hurled bombs at him in Nimtita railway station, the CID has taken over the probe into the case. A team of West Bengal CID arrived at the spot on Thursday morning where the Bengal minister and his nephew were injured after crude bombs were hurled at them. At least 20 others were also injured in the incident which occurred ahead of the assembly election in West Bengal due in April-May this year. Of 20 injured, 12 have been referred to Kolkata hospitals. Bengal Minister Jakir Hossain has, meanwhile, been admitted to the trauma care centre in the state-run SSKM hospital in Kolkata. Doctors treating the Bengal minister have said Hossain will undergo surgery. He suffered splinter injuries on his leg in the attack on Wednesday.

Tops Grup case: ED summons Raj Kapoor's grandson Armaan Jain, MMRDA Joint Commissioner BG Pawar

Armaan Jain and BG Pawar are likely to be called again next week for questioning by the Enforcement Directorate.

(News Agencies)-The Enforcement Directorate (ED) investigating the 'Tops Grup' case had summoned actor Armaan Jain and Mumbai Metropolitan Region Development Authority (MMRDA) Joint Commissioner BG Pawar on Wednesday.

Armaan Jain arrived at the ED office by 10 am while BG Pawar reached at 12 pm. Pawar and Jain were sent back and were told that they will be informed regarding the next date to appear as the officer investigating the case was unwell.

According to sources, Jain and

Pawar are likely to be called again next week for questioning by the agency.

The agency is investigating the case in connection with irregularities in the Rs 175 crore contract that was awarded to the security agency by MMRDA for guarding their sites.

Tops Grup had bagged the contract and an official from the same group had alleged misappropriation in the number of security guards deployed at sites which was much lesser in number than the actual numbers mentioned in the contract. This led to the al-

leged loss of crores to MMRDA. The same official had alleged that Shivsena MLA Pratap Sarnaik, who had allegedly helped Tops Grup in bagging the contract received kickbacks from the firm. Shivsena leader Pratap Sarnaik, his sons Vihang and Purvesh are under the scanner of the agency in the same case. Rahul Nanda, who is the promoter of Tops Grup remains in the UK following which he couldn't be questioned by the ED.

ED had arrested a close aide of Sarnaik in the case named Amit Chandole and had questioned



his brother-in-law Yogesh Chandegala and close aide Sanket More. ED officials had also arrested M Sasidharan, who was the Managing Director of Tops Grup in the case. Pawar's name came up in a recorded conversation recovered from M

Sasidharan and Amit Chandole. In the conversation, Chandole and Sasidharan can be heard discussing paying a certain amount of bribe to Pawar. Pawar will be questioned by ED officials regarding the same.

The world of Indian finance and banking is set for a major overhaul

(News Agencies)-In the Union Budget, finance minister (FM) Nirmala Sitharaman announced several policies for the financial sector, including, most notably, the privatisation of two of the 12 public sector banks (PSBs). New reports suggest that Bank of Maharashtra, Bank of India, Indian Overseas Bank and the Central Bank of India have been shortlisted with this objective. This is welcome as PSBs have, for long, been bleeding the Indian exchequer, symbolised in yet another recapitalisation of ₹20,000 crore in the same budget. PSBs have also created problems of dual regulation as highlighted by former RBI officials, Urjit Patel and Vi-

ral Acharya, in their respective books. The markets will keenly watch which two are finally chosen and, more importantly, who gets control of these banks. The Indian banking sector is getting concentrated with limited players.

Whether the two banks go to existing players or new ones has to be seen in the context of recent controversies around whether Indian corporates should be allowed to own banks. The Deposit Insurance and Credit Guarantee Corporation Act, 1961, will also be amended, which will enable depositors to get their savings up to ₹5 lakh when the bank is under moratorium. Another important

step is to set up an Asset Reconstruction Company Limited and Asset Management Company, which will buy the stressed assets of PSBs and sell it to other investors. Apart from privatising banks and establishing what appears to be akin to a bad bank, the government has also decided to privatise a general insurance company and make legislative changes for the listing of Life Insurance Corporation (LIC). This has implications for the financial sector as the government owns LIC, and LIC not just owns Industrial Development Bank of India (IDBI) but also has stakes in several other financial organisations. There is also a proposal

to increase foreign direct investment in insurance from 49% to 74%. These decisions are monumental as they reverse a long history of nationalisation of the financial sector. LIC was nationalised in 1956, banks were nationalised in 1969 (and 1980) and general insurance companies were nationalised in 1972. As we move forward with reprivatising banks and insurance, the idea of starting a new Development Financial Institution (DFI) also takes us back to the 1960s. We already have several existing DFIs and most are either struggling or have got converted to banks as their business model was no longer viable.

Bangladesh sentences five militants to death for killing U.S. blogger



(News Agencies)-Five members of an Islamist militant group were sentenced to death on Tuesday by a court in Bangladesh for killing a U.S. blogger critical of religious extremism six years ago. Avijit Roy, an engineer of Bangladeshi

origin, was hacked to death by machete-wielding assailants in February 2015 while returning home with his wife from a Dhaka book fair. His wife, blogger Rafida Bonya Ahmed, suffered head injuries and lost a thumb in the attack.

In all, six men were convicted of belong to the al Qaeda-inspired domestic militant group Ansar Ullah Bangla Team. Police say the group was behind the murders of more than a dozen secular activists and bloggers. Syed Ziaul Haq, a sacked army major believed to be the group leader and accused of masterminding Roy's killing, was one of two men tried in absentia, with both receiving death

sentences, public prosecutor Golam Sarwar Khan said.

The Special Anti-Terrorism Tribunal jailed one for life.

Nazrul Islam, defence lawyer for the six men, said they would appeal against their sentences.

Roy's widow said the verdict would not bring peace to her family, especially as Haq remained at large.

"Simply prosecuting a few foot-soldiers -- and ignoring the rise and roots of extremism -- does not mean justice for Avi's death," she said in a statement.

Roy, author of 10 books, had founded a popular blog, "Mukto-mona", or "Freemind", that highlighted humanist and rationalist ideas and condemned

extremism. Muslim-majority Bangladesh saw a string of deadly attacks between 2013 and 2016 targeting bloggers, secular activists and religious minorities, claimed by Islamic State or al Qaeda-aligned groups.

The most serious attack came in July 2016, when gunmen stormed a cafe in the diplomatic quarter of Dhaka and killed 22 people, most of them foreigners. After the cafe siege, more than 100 suspected militants were killed and hundreds more were arrested as the government cracked down on Islamist groups as it sought to preserve its image as a moderate Muslim nation.

Sri Lanka is now open to travelers - no quarantine, but no mingling with locals too



(News Agencies)-To quarantine or not to quarantine - that is the question.

Or at least it has been for countries deliberating how to handle incoming international travelers.

But that changed last month when Sri Lanka reopened its borders with a requirement unlike any country that had opened before it - one that neither grants travelers free rein of the island nor boxes them into a hotel room for two weeks.

Sri Lanka Tourism Chairperson Kimarli Fernando referred to it as a "new concept" developed by the tourism authority - which allows tourists to travel the country in "bio bubbles," or roving semi-isolated groups that let travelers sightsee without mixing with the local population.

The rules apply for the first two weeks of their stay.

Rules of the 'bio bubble'

When Sri Lanka reopened its borders on Jan. 21, it became one of very few Asian countries - including the Maldives - to allow

international travelers to enter without being subject to strict quarantines.

But tourists aren't exactly free to go where they choose. Sri Lanka's "bio bubbles" allow holidaymakers to move around the island provided they: Stay in approved hotels Visit approved sites at specific times

Travel via independent transportation

Undergo frequent Covid-19 testing, and

Refrain from intermingling with the local population

These rules must be followed for the first two weeks upon entering Sri Lanka. Thereafter, guests are free to "interact with the local community" and move "to an accommodation of their choice," according to a safety booklet produced by the country's Ministry of Tourism.

The plan was first tested in a pilot project with Ukrainian tourists in late December of 2020.

Where travelers can stay

As of Feb. 17, there are 98 certified "Level 1" hotels where travelers can stay during the first two weeks of a trip. The list

includes hotels and villas in tourist hotspots such as Bentota, Galle, Kandy and Sri Lanka's capital city of Colombo.

The hotels cover a range of budgets, from guest houses in the surfing paradise of Hikkaduwa, to tented lodges near Yala National Park and the ultra-luxurious Ani Villas in Dickwella.

The country's two Aman hotels - Amangalla and Amanwella - are on the list, as are several of the restored British bungalows that comprise the Ceylon Tea Trails in the beautiful tea estate region. Unlike strict quarantines, travelers are not confined to their hotel rooms during the first two weeks of a trip. Guests are "permitted to use all facilities in the hotel including the beach," Fernando told CNBC Global

Traveler. Hotels are to operate at 75% of capacity, leaving the remaining rooms open to isolate any guests who test positive for Covid-19. This option is only available to those without symptoms; infected travelers who display Covid-19 symptoms must isolate in a private hospital.

All certified hotels have a medical doctor," said Fernando. These doctors are to monitor hotel staff and guests for Covid-19 symptoms and send daily reports to government authorities, according to Sri Lanka's safety booklet.

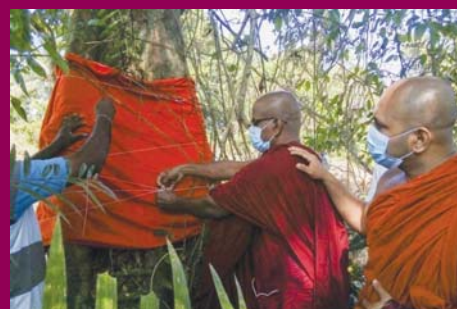
Hotel staff who are in direct contact with guests are not allowed to leave the hotel during a guests' stay and for 14 days thereafter.

Sri Lanka saves last legume from expressway axe

(News Agencies)- Sri Lankan authorities Wednesday agreed to save the world's only known wild specimen of a species of tree that was due to be chopped to clear the way for a four-lane expressway.

The Sri Lanka Legume (*Crudia zeylanica*) -- a flowering tree from the legume family whose pods are not known to be eaten by humans -- was first classified in 1868 and last found in 1911. In 2012 it was declared extinct until the surprise discovery in 2019 of a lone tree near Colombo. But the eight-metre (26-foot) plant

was set to be felled this month to allow the construction of a motorway, sparking uproar from environmentalists as well as



politicians and the country's influential Buddhist clergy. On Wednesday, Wildlife and Forest Conservation Minister C. B.

Rathnayake said construction workers were told to spare the plant. "The tree will not be cut and the work will go ahead by passing it by," Rathnayake told reporters in Colombo.

Giving a major boost to efforts to save the plant, a group of Buddhist monks last week "ordained" it, tying a saffron robe around the trunk and declaring it a "sin" to cut it down. Buddhism enjoys widespread respect in the island nation of 21 million people, where it is the majority religion,

and the clergy a major backer of the controversial government of President Gotabaya Rajapaksa. A top forestry expert welcomed the government decision and said the case underscored the need for proper environmental impact assessments before undertaking major construction. "We now have a chance to study this tree as well as its environment and step up conservation," said Hiran Amarasekera, professor in Forestry and Environment Science at the University of Sri Jayewardenepura.



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Pakistan officials say 3 climbers missing on K2 are dead



(News Agencies)- Thursday. The announcement brings closure to a dramatic tragedy on one of the most dangerous mountains to climb in the world. K2 had never been scaled in winter until only last month, when a Nepalese team

reached the peak. The three climbers - famous Pakistani mountaineer Ali Sadpara as well as Jon Snorri of Iceland and Juan Pablo Mohr of Chile - lost contact with their base camp while attempting their ascent of the 8,611-meter (28,250-foot) high K2, sometimes referred to as "killer mountain."

Search efforts for the missing climbers were called off last week amid bad weather. Clouds, strong winds and snow had made previous search-and-rescue operations too dangerous - for both mountaineers on foot as well as helicopters.

Sadpara's son, Sajid speaking at a news conference alongside officials, told reporters in the

northern town of Skardu on Thursday that he was grateful authorities had done their best to try to find the group, which went missing on Feb. 5.

"I believe they scaled it but had an accident while coming down," said the younger Sadpara, who had started the climb with his father but was forced to call it off and descend after his oxygen tanks malfunctioned. He thanked the public for the support his family had received throughout the ordeal, saying it "gave an immense strength to me, to my sister, to my brothers and my mother." A statement from the families of Snorri and Mohr was also read out at the news

conference, thanking Pakistan and its military for facilitating the search, reported Pakistan's English-language Dawn newspaper.

"Based on the last known contact by John Snorri's telephone, we are confident that all three men made it to the top of K2 and something happened on the descent," said the statement. "Ali, John and Juan Pablo will live forever in our hearts." Pakistan's President Arif Alvi tweeted his condolences to the families of the three mountaineers. Of the Pakistani climber, the president said he "battled nature with strength, fortitude and heroism."

Pakistan accuses India of stoking conflict in Indian Ocean

Pakistani foreign minister criticises Indian military expansion, as his country holds naval drills with 45 countries in the Arabian Sea.

(News Agencies)- Pakistan's foreign minister has accused eastern neighbour India of adopting "belligerent and aggressive policies" to raise the chances of conflict in the Indian Ocean, the Pakistani state news agency reported.

Shah Mehmood Qureshi also discussed concerns about India's acquisition of advanced naval weapons technology from Western partners and through domestic development in his comments to the Ninth International Maritime Conference in the Pakistani port city of Karachi on Monday.

"India's belligerent and aggressive policies - currently driven by an extremist Hindutva ideology - pose an immediate and pervasive threat to international

and regional peace and security," he said, as quoted by the state-run Associated Press of Pakistan (APP) news service.

"Pakistan will continue to take all necessary measures to ensure its security and to maintain credible minimum deterrence," he said.

Regional balance of power India and Pakistan have fought three full-scale wars and several minor conflicts since they gained independence from the British in 1947.

In 2016, India changed the balance of naval power in the region by announcing that it had formally commissioned the INS Arihant, a nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarine.

The Arihant was the first ballistic missile submarine to be built

domestically by a country other than the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council.

India also operates a second nuclear submarine, the INS Chakra II, which is a Russian Akula-class submarine acquired on a 10-year lease in 2012. A third nuclear submarine, the INS Arighat, is currently under construction.

Analysts say that while the Indian armament build-up may pose a threat to Pakistan, it should also be seen as part of the country taking an increasing role in regional security as part of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue group, which includes the United States, India, Japan and Australia and is aimed at countering China's increasing



military power in the Indo-Pacific region. "There has been a build-up, and it seems to be mostly against China, but certainly it has created some kind of apprehension in the region as well, due to this constant buildup in this area, not just by India but also by the Americans," said Zahid Hussain, an Islamabad-based security analyst. Aman '21

The Ninth International Maritime Conference is being hosted by Pakistan as part of the Aman '21 Naval Exercise. Aman '21 has seen naval personnel from more than 40 countries take part in a series of manoeuvres and exercises "aimed at practicing operational drills and manoeuvres countering non-traditional threats", according to a Pakistani military statement.

Pro-India malware used to spy on Pakistani military, nuclear agencies

(News Agencies)- A report by Lookout, a US-based cybersecurity firm, revealed how pro-India hackers deployed Android spyware to snoop on the Pakistani military.

Last week, US-based cybersecurity company Lookout said that two malware programs on an Android-based platform that emerged in India, called Hornbill and SunBird, have been spying on the Pakistani military, nuclear authorities, and Indian election officials in Kashmir. According

to Lookout, the two malwares have been linked to Confucius, an advanced persistent threat (APT) group thought to be state-sponsored and to have pro-India ties. As per the report, the malware was focused on compromising the WhatsApp messaging platform and exfiltrating the content of conversations. In its statement published on 10 February, Lookout said: "Targets of these tools include personnel linked to Pakistan's military, nuclear authorities, and Indian election

officials in Kashmir." "Hornbill and SunBird have sophisticated capabilities to exfiltrate SMS, encrypted messaging app content, and geolocation, among other types of sensitive information," it added. Confucius was first detected in 2013 and has been linked to attacks against government entities in South Asia. Although Confucius has created Windows malware in the past, the group has extended its capabilities to mobile malware since 2017 when the spying app ChatSpy

came into existence. The apps used by the group contain advanced capabilities, including taking photos from the camera, requesting elevated privileges, access to users' call logs, contacts, images, browser history and scraping WhatsApp messages, as well as being able to upload all information to the servers of the APT group.

While SunBird has a remote access function that can execute commands on a device by an attacker, Hornbill

is a surveillance tool that can extract data from users. "SunBird has been disguised as applications that include security services, such as the fictional 'Google Security Framework', Apps tied to specific locations (Kashmir News) or activities (Falconry Connect and Mania Soccer), Islam-related applications (Quran Majeed)," Lookout's report said, adding that the majority of applications appeared to target Muslims.

Saudi woman handed death sentence for killing Bangladeshi maid

Saudi court sentences Ayesha al-Jizani to death for killing Bangladeshi maid Abiron Begum in March 2019, says Bangladeshi official.

(News Agencies)-A criminal court in Saudi Arabia has handed the death sentence to a Saudi woman for killing her Bangladeshi maid in a ruling rights groups say was a rare example of an employer being found guilty of abusing a migrant worker in the Middle East country.

Ayesha al-Jizani was sentenced on Sunday to death by the court for killing Abiron Begum in March 2019, some two years after Begum went to the Gulf state in search of better paid work, a Bangladeshi government official said.

Begum's relatives urged the Bangladeshi government to take action against the brokers who "tricked" Begum, 40, into taking the job in Saudi Arabia four years ago. "(She) wanted to go abroad to earn more money so that she

could pay for her aged parents," Ayub Ali, Begum's brother-in-law, told the Thomson Reuters Foundation.

"They started torturing her two weeks after she left. She would call us and cry ... we begged the brokers here to bring her back, but no one listened to us.

Jizani's husband was jailed for three years for failing to help Begum access medical treatment and making her work outside the family home illegally, confirmed Ahmed Munir Saleheen, a senior official at Bangladesh's expatriate ministry. Jizani's son was sent to a juvenile facility for seven months, Saleheen added. Campaigners said the Saudi court's verdict against an employer was unusual.

"I have been working in the migration field for several years

and I have never heard of such a verdict," said Shakirul Islam, the head of the Ovivashi Karmi Unnayan Program, which deals with migrant rights in Bangladesh.

'Exemplary punishment' Bangladesh Foreign Minister AK Abdul Momen welcomed the verdict. "I praise Saudi government for giving out this rare yet exemplary punishment."

The minister also urged the Saudi government to investigate other cases of abuses and torture carried out on domestic workers from Bangladesh.

More than 300,000 Bangladeshi female workers have travelled to Saudi Arabia since 1991 but many of them return with stories of abuse and exploitation.

According to Human Rights Watch (HRW) employers confiscate passports, withhold



wages and force migrants to work against their will. Workers who leave their employer without their consent can be charged with "absconding" and face imprisonment and deportation, HRW said.

In the last five years, nearly 70 Bangladeshi female workers died in Saudi Arabia, more than 50 of them committing suicide.

Bangladesh is one of the world's top exporters of labour and depends heavily on the

remittances they send home to relatives. Prior to the pandemic, about 700,000 Bangladeshis used to travel abroad for jobs annually, with Saudi Arabia being the top destination despite having one of the highest recruitment fees for migrant jobseekers from the South Asian nation.

Labour rights activists say the fee, which is often paid through a network of unofficial brokers, opens the door to exploitation and trafficking.

Bangladesh Eyes Investment Gain as Japanese Firms Exit China



(News Agencies)- Supply Lines is a daily newsletter that tracks Covid-19's impact on trade. Sign up here, and subscribe to our Covid-19 podcast for the latest news and analysis on the pandemic.

Japan incentivizing its companies to shift manufacturing facilities out of China and adding Bangladesh to a list of preferred destinations for relocating the factories may give the South Asian nation's economy a boost. "As the pandemic started in China, Japanese companies needed to diversify" their supply chains further, Naoki Ito, the Japanese ambassador to Bangladesh, said in an interview.

"This will provide an opportunity for Bangladesh."

The island nation's nudge to relocate companies comes at a time when a Special Economic Zone is in the making in Bangladesh to lure Japanese firms' production facilities. The industrial zone sprawling on 1,000 acres in the Araihaazar subdistrict, 32 kilometers away (about 20 miles) from the nation's capital Dhaka, is expected to bring in \$20 billion in Japanese investments, according to the Bangladesh Economic Zones Authority.

Japanese manufacturers have already been seeking lower labor costs and supply-chain

diversification by moving some output out of China for years as wages rose and infrastructure in countries like Vietnam and Bangladesh improved. Over the last 10 years, the number of Japanese companies operating in Bangladesh has tripled to about 300, according to Ito. Japan has allocated \$350 million in special loans to develop the \$1 billion industrial zone, Ito said, making it the largest such assistance for an SEZ in

Asia. The Araihaazar industrial park, which will be operational by 2022, is seeking to draw new investments from automakers, such as Suzuki Motor Corp. and Mitsubishi Corp., according to Ito. Japan Tobacco Inc. and Honda Motor Co. are among the largest Japanese investors in the South Asian nation so far. Bangladesh occupies a geographically strategic location linking South Asia and Southeast Asia and a 177.77 billion-taka (\$2 billion) deep-sea port on the

Matarbari Island is part of Japan's geopolitical strategy. One of the world's most populous countries, Bangladesh has 160 million people residing in a land area that's just about 40% of Japan. The South Asian economy, which grew an estimated 5.2% in the year ended June, sees 7.4% expansion in the current financial year. While that's slower than the 8.2% pace it previously forecast, it still puts the nation ahead of regional peers on the growth metric.

Pakistan police seek arrest of 2 Christians over blasphemy

(News Agencies)- Pakistan's police said Wednesday they were seeking arrest of two Christian men in the eastern city of Lahore on charges they allegedly used insulting remarks against Islam's holy book and its Prophet Muhammad.

The case against the two men was registered last Saturday on the complaint of a Muslim local resident Haroon Ahmed, said Muratab Ali, a police investigator, who said the accused persons had yet to be arrested. He provided no further details and

only said they were still investigating to determine whether the two minority Christians made derogatory remarks about the Quran and Islam's Prophet during a discussion on religion.

Under Pakistan's blasphemy laws, anyone accused of insulting Islam or other religious figures can be sentenced to death if found guilty. While authorities have yet to carry out a death sentence for blasphemy, just the accusation of blasphemy can cause riots in Pakistan.

According to domestic and international human rights groups, blasphemy allegations in Pakistan have often been used to intimidate religious minorities and to settle personal scores. A Punjab governor was killed by his own guard in 2011 after he defended a Christian woman, Aasia Bibi, who was accused of blasphemy. She was acquitted after spending eight years on death row and left Pakistan for Canada to join her family after receiving threats.

City Launches Additional Online Training to Help New York City Job Seekers

New York - NYC Department of Small Business Services (SBS) Commissioner Jonnel Doris today announced that additional career paths in the industrial, media, and tech sectors will be featured on Career Discovery NYC, a centralized resource to assist New Yorkers with career exploration and training.

"Building a strong workforce is imperative to our economic recovery. Career Discovery NYC is a prime example of the City's commitment to developing key strategic partnerships that will help connect New Yorkers to better jobs and long-term careers," said J. Phillip Thompson, Deputy Mayor for Strategic Policy Initiatives. "I look forward to the success of Career Discovery NYC as it continues to help job seekers navigate the workforce in a post-COVID-19 world."

"Career Discovery NYC is a great way for New Yorkers to explore their interest in a new career, at no cost to them. If they're excited by what they learn and experience, they can apply to more advanced training that will help them get employed," said Jonnel Doris, Commissioner of the NYC Department of Small Business Services. "We are excited to announce additional careers for New Yorkers to explore and learn as they seek ways to get back into the workforce or make a career change."

The website, which launched in August, provides online, no-cost training programs that prepare New Yorkers with the necessary skills to pursue a pathway for an

in-demand career. The website is now expanding to include additional careers for Cable Installers, Commercial Drivers, Data Analysts, and Post-Production personnel. Career Discovery NYC further allows New Yorkers to learn about these careers through information sessions, introductory coursework, and occupational training programs.

Cable Installer

Introductory courses on electricity and electrical work will be provided by Brooklyn Workforce Innovations and its Brooklyn Networks program to qualified participants interested in a Cable Installer career. Qualified New Yorkers will also be able to access the Construction Site Safety Training virtual course. Upon completion participants will obtain their Site Safety Training card, which is required for certain construction industry jobs in the cable installation field.

Commercial Driver

An information session, introductory permit preparation course, and curated practice tests will be provided by Brooklyn Workforce Innovations and its Red Hook on the Road program for individuals pursuing a Commercial Driver career. Upon acquiring the commercial learner permit, participants may apply for a 4-week intensive training program that will provide virtual and behind-the-wheel training to help them pass the DMV's road test for the Commercial Driver's License.

Data Analyst

Individuals interested in pursuing a Data Analyst career can access

introductory workshops on Excel, SQL, and Tableau provided by Galvanize. Individuals who qualify will have access to Coursera courses on Excel, probability, and statistical distributions and Codecademy Pro licenses.

Post-Production

An introductory presentation will be provided for individuals interested in a career in media and entertainment. Courses on fundamentals of Graphic Design, VR and 360 Video Production, and Personal Branding will be provided by Coursera for individuals interested in developing skills for Post-Production careers.

Resources for additional careers in construction and healthcare will be added in the weeks to come. Interested individuals can visit the portal at nyc.gov/careerdiscovery to learn more and view eligibility.

"Career Discovery NYC offers more New Yorkers an opportunity to explore careers in our world-class creative economy," said the Commissioner of the Mayor's Office of Media and Entertainment, Anne del Castillo. "Through the 'Made in NY' Post Production Training Program and our other talent development programs, we have helped almost a thousand New Yorkers secure jobs in the media and entertainment industry." "At Galvanize we are always looking for high impact opportunities to partner with NYC SBS in providing introductory workshops in Data Literacy through Career Discovery," said Bill Cummings, Executive Vice

President at Galvanize. "The genius of these Data Literacy workshops is showing how interested New Yorkers can take a journey to explore, discover, prepare, and train for new careers in Data creating a true New York tech-talent pipeline." "Given the urgent need for training during this inequitable unemployment crisis, BWI is proud to partner with SBS on this initiative," said Aaron Shiffman, Executive Director at Brooklyn Workforce Innovations. "Career Discovery NYC is an important effort to build more roads to skills training and career-path jobs."

About Brooklyn Workforce Innovations

Brooklyn Workforce Innovations (BWI) is a nonprofit workforce development organization that has been launching careers for low-income, unemployed New Yorkers since 2000. Jobseekers come to BWI earning average annual wages of less than \$8,000, and a short time later, graduates earn annual wages averaging \$38,000. BWI accomplishes this through a set of five- to seven-week, award-winning skills training programs that lead to careers in thriving local industries including commercial driving, cable installation, and film and television production and post-production.

About Galvanize

Galvanize is a learning community for technology with eight physical campuses across the U.S. where innovative startups, aspiring students, and large enterprises benefit from a dynamic, unique technology ecosystem. Galvanize is an industry leader

in technology education, offering the Data Science and Hack Reactor Software Engineering immersive boot camps that propel careers and help individuals thrive in the digital economy. In addition to its physical campuses, Galvanize offers full-time and part-time immersive boot camps to individuals remotely, and tailored workforce training to enterprise clients to address each of their unique needs. With 8,000+ graduates, Galvanize alumni have gone on to bring their talents to over 2,250 companies. Galvanize is a subsidiary of Stride (NYSE: LRN), a premier provider of innovative, high-quality online and blended education solutions, curriculum, and programs to students, schools, and enterprises in primary, secondary and post-secondary settings. Learn more at www.galvanize.com.

About Coursera

Coursera was founded by Daphne Koller and Andrew Ng with a vision of providing life-transforming learning experiences to anyone, anywhere. It is now a leading online learning platform for higher education, where 76 million learners from around the world come to learn skills of the future. More than 200 of the world's top universities and industry educators partner with Coursera to offer courses, Specializations, projects, certificates, and degree programs. 2,400 companies trust the company's enterprise platform Coursera for Business to transform their talent.

Car wash Employee Charged with Vehicular Homicide

Defendant's Blood Alcohol Content was Allegedly .115; The Accused Faces Up to Seven Years in Prison if Convicted

Queens District Attorney Melinda Katz announced today that Edwin Vargas, 43, has been charged with vehicular manslaughter and drunk driving for allegedly being intoxicated while working at an Ozone Park car wash business and striking a woman and killing her as he drove a vehicle off the cleaning rack Monday afternoon.

District Attorney Katz said, "If you have a job that requires you to get behind the wheel of a vehicle, coming to work intoxicated is selfish and dangerous, with potentially fatal consequences.

This is a heart-breaking, senseless tragedy and a woman who just wanted to get her car washed is dead because of the defendant's alleged actions. He is in custody and faces serious charges."

Vargas, of 102nd Street in Richmond Hill, was arraigned late last night before Queens Criminal Court Judge Jerry Iannece on a complaint charging him with vehicular manslaughter in the second degree and driving while intoxicated. Judge Iannece set the defendant's return date for February 19, 2021. If convicted, Vargas faces up to seven years in prison.

According to the charges, just before 2 p.m. on Monday, February 15, 2021, Vargas was working at the car wash and lube shop on Cross Bay Boulevard at Desarc Road at the same time the victim, Tracy McManus was there getting her car washed. The defendant was removing autos from the washing rack and driving them onto the adjacent lot to be hand-dried by his fellow employees. DA Katz said that Vargas was behind the wheel of another customer's 2011 gray Jeep Liberty when he drove the vehicle off the clean-

ing rack and slammed into the 54-year-old victim, who was walking towards her car after tipping other workers. Ms. McManus was rushed to a nearby hospital where she succumbed to her injuries. Responding police transported the defendant to the 112th Police Precinct where the defendant provided a breath sample that showed his blood alcohol content was allegedly .115. The legal limit is .08. The investigation was conducted by Police Officer Jonathan Kammerer of the New York City Police Department's 106th Precinct. The investigation

was also conducted by Detective Frank Cardamone and Lieutenant Jagdeep Singh of the NYPD's Collision Investigation Squad.

Assistant District Attorney Joshua Garland, of the District Attorney's Homicide Bureau, is prosecuting the case under the supervision of Assistant District Attorney's Brad Leventhal, Bureau Chief, Peter McCormack III Senior Deputy Chief, John Kosinski, Deputy Chief, and under the overall supervision of Executive Assistant District Attorney for Major Crimes Daniel Saunders.

American woman accused of killing a UK teenager proposes 'mediation' with his family

(News Agencies)-Anne Sacoolas -- the woman accused of killing 19-year-old Harry Dunn while she was driving on the wrong side of the road in England -- says she is willing to enter into "mediation" with his family, after a court in Virginia ruled against her attempt to have a civil case for wrongful death dismissed. In a statement Wednesday, Sacoolas and her personal attorney, Amy Jeffress, said they would like to find a path forward to "bring a measure of peace and closure" to the family of Dunn after Sacoolas was accused of killing 19-year-old Harry Dunn while she was driving on the wrong side of the road in England.

Sacoolas and Jeffress "remain willing to discuss options, including mediation, to find a path forward toward a resolution," according to the statement.

Sacoolas' law firm confirmed to CNN that this is the first time mediation had been suggested

At the time of the August 27, 2019, crash, Sacoolas, who is a US citizen, had been described as "the wife of a US diplomat," but in a surprising revelation earlier this month, her lawyer John McGavin told the Virginia court that she was employed by the US State Department.

Although she does not dispute that she was negligent and admits driving on the wrong side of the road at the time of the crash, Sacoolas and her family fled the UK after US authorities claimed she had diplomatic immunity.

The reason her employment matters is that the US and UK agreed in the mid-1990s that American intelligence officers posted to RAF Croughton would not be able to claim diplomatic immunity for any criminal incidents that occur outside the US base. If it had been known in the days after the crash that Anne Sacoolas was employed by the State Department, she may not

as easily have been able to claim the diplomatic immunity of a spouse.

Sacoolas is still charged in the UK with causing Dunn's death by dangerous driving but the State Department has refused a UK request to extradite her.

Instead in September 2020, Dunn's family "as a last resort" filed a wrongful death civil case against Sacoolas in Virginia, where she lives. Sacoolas made a motion to dismiss the civil case, arguing it should be heard in the UK, despite repeatedly refusing to agree to face trial in the UK because of fears she would not receive fair treatment.

Her legal team said Judge T.S.Ellis' ruling Tuesday in the Eastern District Court of Virginia that the civil case can go ahead in the United States, "has no impact or bearing on Anne Sacoolas' diplomatic immunity." "Anne Sacoolas' employment status has never been relevant to her diplomatic immunity,



which was based on her husband's status as an accredited diplomat," it added. Responding to her proposal for mediation, Radd Seiger, adviser and spokesman for the Dunn family told CNN in a statement: "We are very pleased to see the strong indication from Mrs Sacoolas and her personal attorney this afternoon that they are willing to discuss options with a view to finding a path forward." "I would urge Mrs Jeffress and the Crown Prosecution Service to engage with each other as urgently as possible and the parents and I are more than happy to engage in those discussions if appropriate." "We are sure that, once a satisfactory resolution is found, both families will be able to begin the path towards recovery," he added.

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Facebook Australia: PM Scott Morrison 'will not be intimidated' by tech giant

(News Agencies)- Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison has said his government will not be intimidated by Facebook blocking news feeds to users. He described the move to "unfriend Australia" as arrogant and disappointing. Facebook is responding to a proposed law which would make tech giants pay for news content on their platforms. It says the legislation "fundamentally misunderstands" the relationship between the platform and publishers. Australians on Thursday woke up to find that Facebook pages of all local and global news sites were unavailable. People outside the country are also unable to read or access any Australian news publications on the platform. Several government health and emergency pages were also blocked. Facebook later asserted this was a mistake and many of these pages are now back online. Both Google and Facebook have fought the law, saying it unfairly "penalises" their platforms. However, in contrast to Facebook, Google has in recent days signed payment deals with major Australian media outlets. Facebook's action came hours after Google agreed to pay Rupert Murdoch's News Corp for content from news sites across its media empire. What is the response to the ban? In a statement posted on Facebook, Mr Morrison said that big

tech companies might be changing the world but this did not mean they should run it. "Facebook's actions to unfriend Australia today, cutting off essential information services on health and emergency services, were as arrogant as they were disappointing," he said. "Australia vs tech firms: What's this row about?" News publishers fight tech giants for better deals "I am in regular contact with the leaders of other nations on these issues. We simply won't be intimidated," he added. Mr Morrison urged Facebook to work constructively with the government, "as Google recently demonstrated in good faith". Treasurer Josh Frydenberg said the ban on news information had a "huge community impact". About 17 million Australians visit the social media site every month. Consumption of digital news through social media and search engines is growing in Australia, according to the Reuters Digital News Report for 2020. Some 37% of consumers who took part said they had gained access to news via social media over the course of a week, compared with 31% who had directly accessed websites or apps, the report said.

Thousands of turtles have been rescued from freezing waters in Texas

(News Agencies)-As Texas' deep freeze wreaks havoc on land, sea animals also suffer in its icy waters.

This week, more than 2,600 turtles have been rescued around South Padre Island at the southern tip of the state.

Volunteers and wildlife officials scouring bays and beaches for stranded turtles suffering from "cold-stun," a condition which inhibits turtles' mobility and often results in stranding.

Sea Turtle Inc., a nonprofit in South Padre Island, rescued more than 2,500 at-risk turtles from nearby waters. It's collecting hundreds by the day. The facility, which already housed turtles in its hospital, rehabilitation and education centers, has been overwhelmed by the amount of rescues performed since temperatures dropped.

"We have been so pleased with the community acceptance," Wendy Knight, the executive director at Sea Turtle Inc. said

in a Facebook video. "But all of these efforts will be in vain if we do not soon get power restored to our facility."

On Wednesday, Texas Game Wardens rescued at least 141 turtles from the Brownsville Ship Channel, near South Padre Island. Turtles of all sizes rested on the deck of its large rescue vessel and were taken to nearby facilities, Texas Parks and Wildlife Department spokeswoman Megan Radke told CNN.

Turtles can't survive in extremely cold water

The rescue effort began immediately for the Texas Game Wardens and the team at Sea Turtle Inc., who knew that turtles -- unlike other sea animals -- are unable to survive in extreme cold temperatures.

While animals like dolphins or manatees are able to regulate their body temperatures internally, sea turtles' body temperatures vary with surrounding water.

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.

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Tennessee lawmakers are proposing a bill that would let biological fathers petition to stop abortions

(News Agencies)-In another anti-abortion push by Republican lawmakers, lawmakers in Tennessee have introduced a bill that would allow a person to stop a woman who is pregnant with their unborn child from receiving an abortion.

The legislation -- introduced in both the Tennessee House and Senate last week -- would allow a person to petition the court to keep a pregnant person from getting an abortion.

"A person may petition a court with jurisdiction over domestic relations matters to request an injunction to prohibit a woman who is pregnant with the person's unborn child from obtaining an abortion," the Senate bill reads. The bill requires that the petitioner prove they are the biological father of the unborn child, but does not require them to provide DNA evidence -- only a "voluntary acknowledgment of paternity," which is acceptable

without the signature of the pregnant parent, the bill states. The bill also does not make exceptions for rape or incest. If someone is found to have gone against the injunction, they may



be held in civil or criminal contempt, according to the bill. CNN has reached out to state Sen. Mark Pody, who introduced the Senate bill, and state Rep. Jerry Sexton, who sponsored the House bill. Neither have returned requests for comment.

Last Thursday, the state Senate bill was passed on second consideration. It has now been referred to the Senate Judiciary Committee. In the state House, it passed first consideration last

week. If passed, the act will take effect on July 1. However, the 1992 case *Planned Parenthood v. Casey*, during which the Supreme Court ruled that states cannot require anyone seeking an abortion to inform their partners, could mean the bill is unconstitutional.

In a February 12 Facebook post sharing a HuffPost article about the legislation, Tennessee Advocates for Planned Parenthood called it "unconstitutional, insulting, and dangerous. Period." The organization did not respond to CNN's request for comment. The proposed legislation comes as the US continues to see a rise in anti-abortion legislation in recent years, as a wave of restrictive bans in Republican-leaning states have attempted to take advantage of the Conservative-majority Supreme Court and the Trump administration's support for tighter abortion restrictions.

Gunmen kill one student and kidnap dozens more in Nigeria school raid

(News Agencies)-At least 42 people, including students, were kidnapped in an armed raid at a state-run school in Niger state, in Nigeria's Middle Belt region Wednesday. The group includes 27 students, three teachers and nine family members, the state government said in a statement which names them all.

A student who died during the attack was named as Benjamin Habila. This latest incident has raised questions about the safety of schools in parts of northern Nigeria as it comes two months after more than 300 students were kidnapped in a similar invasion at Government Science Secondary School Kankara, in Katsina, President Buhari's home state. They were later released soon after their abduction.

Niger state's Governor Abubakar Sani Bello has closed all boarding schools in the area and dispatched the military to rescue those kidnapped from the school, according to his chief press secretary Mary Noel Barje. President Buhari has

condemned the abduction of the school children. "The President has directed the Armed Forces and Police, to ensure immediate and safe return of all the captives," Buhari's spokesperson, Garba Shehu, said in a statement on Wednesday. "The President has also dispatched to Minna, Niger State a team of security chiefs to coordinate the rescue operation and meet with state officials, community leaders, as well as parents and staff of the college."

A former Nigerian senator, Shehu Sani, told CNN that the school has no perimeter fence and would have afforded easy access to militants. Sani, who was also a student at the school, told CNN: "The town is at the epicenter of the insurgency in Niger State. Fulani bandits operate within the axis and there are thousands of people displaced in this area. The bandits of the northwest of Nigeria are becoming more lethal and destructive than Boko Haram."

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The Cryptic Craze About Crypto

Cryptocurrencies are essentially digitally created records, based on the blockchain technology, that can capture and record who owns what amount of that currency. This record is captured in a manner that the record cannot be easily altered. Another interesting feature of cryptocurrencies is a piece of algorithm called "proof of work", which requires someone to "work" hard to be able to verify a new transaction of say a bitcoin being transferred from one owner to another.

This "work" involves running a complex algorithm involving "proof of work" on computing infrastructure, and the first one to solve that algorithm gets to record the transaction and pass it to all other electronic distributed ledgers. In the process, the entity confirming the transaction gets some bitcoin as a reward. As we all know, computation is driven by electricity and for bitcoin transactions, electricity consumption is humungous. So, how humungous is the consumption of electricity for managing bitcoin? As per

Cambridge researchers, the energy consumed for maintaining bitcoin is more than the energy consumed by the whole of Argentina.

If Bitcoin was a nation, it would be in the top 30 nations in the world that are consuming energy, and as a corollary, also polluting our earth. And this energy consumption is growing at an accelerated rate.

But the issue in focus in this article is not the energy consumption of cryptocurrencies or their environmentally damaging impact, but their role in society and economy, especially in the context of the Indian government planning to pass legislation, blocking Indians from owning, buying and selling cryptocurrencies. Is that a retrograde step? Is the Indian government being Luddite in its position on cryptocurrencies?

To understand the position of the government, there are a few questions that one needs to answer. First, why does the government not allow foreign currencies to be used as legal tender for widespread use in India? There is a term for using

the US dollar as a currency in a country. It is called "dollarization". So why do we disallow "dollarization". "Dollarization" is disallowed so that the Indian government and the central bank, which in our case is the Reserve Bank of India or RBI, have the necessary monetary tools for managing the economy. If there is high inflation in the economy, the government intervenes to take excess rupees out from the system, to cool it down. If the government needs to spend more, such as in this year where the fiscal deficit is pegged at over 9%, then the government "prints" rupees to be able to fund the extra spend, thereby stabilizing the economy. The government cannot use such monetary tools if there is any other currency, other than rupees, being used in the country.

If the government does not have control over the currency, then the government loses this critical economic tool to manage the economy. We lose monetary sovereignty.

So, can the government allow cryptocurrencies to be widely



used in India when it does not allow the US dollar, or any other currency except the Indian Rupees, to be used in India? Clearly no.

Besides, who backs the bitcoin or any other cryptocurrency? The Indian Rupee is backed by the Indian government that promises to provide the owner of the Rupee bill, the sum that is written on the bill. Who provides that promise for a cryptocurrency? The answer is no one. The very reason that the price of bitcoin soared by almost two and a half times in the last three months, makes it unsuitable as a currency, as it makes cryptos extremely volatile. The price of

Bitcoin fell by 65% between January 2018 and February 2018. Such volatility makes cryptocurrency unsuitable as a legal tender. Imagine the price of a car going from one Bitcoin to half a Bitcoin in 3 months. How can anyone maintain accounting and book a profit or a loss? The car manufacturer would have bought components of the car at a much higher price, but the sale price drops as the value of Bitcoin suddenly soars.

But then the government does allow trade in gold. And like cryptocurrency, gold also has very little intrinsic value. Its industrial usage is limited, and largely used in electronics.

'Recipe for disaster': Dem fears mount over immigration overhaul



such as admitting some migrants who have waited in Mexico for months and announcing he would halt deportations - raise the prospects of a new influx of migrants entering the country. There's already an uptick in migrants heading to the border and some have crossed and been released in some communities already grappling with the pandemic, a strained health care system and high unemployment. With the White House and Congress set to release a broad immigration reform bill Thursday, some lawmakers fear the party's

messaging and policy proposals are too much, too soon.

"The way we're doing it right now is catastrophic and is a recipe for disaster in the middle of a pandemic," said Rep. Vicente Gonzalez, one of the three Texas Democrats who represents part of the border most affected by spikes in migrant arrests and arrivals.

"Our party should be concerned. If we go off the rails, it's going to be bad for us," Gonzalez said. "Biden is going to be dealing with a minority in Congress if he continues down some of these paths."

The worries are most acute along the Texas-Mexico border, which is ground zero for the decadeslong immigration debate. It's also an increasingly contested battleground where Republicans are targeting three Democratic House incumbents who represent border districts. Lawmakers there warn that the Biden administration isn't going to stop a large number of migrants from entering the country simply by saying "now is not the time to come" - a repeated message in recent weeks - while they roll back former President Donald Trump's policies. And any perceived crisis at the border could ultimately cost those Democrats' their seats in 2022.

Texas Rep. Henry Cuellar said he's been raising concerns since before Election Day that sudden moves reversing Trump's approach would result in an increased number of migrants at the border.

"I said, 'Hey, we don't want the wall, but when it comes to the

other issues, we gotta be careful that we don't give the impression that we have open borders because otherwise the numbers are going to start going up. And surely enough, we're starting to see numbers go up," Cuellar said.

Cuellar, Gonzalez and fellow Texas Rep. Filemón Vela all agree with the goals of Biden's vision to create a "fair and humane" immigration system. But each of them represents a district where Trump saw an unexpected surge in support in the November election, giving Republicans hope they could build support among Latino and rural voters in the region while also supporting restrictive immigration measures.

The political anxiety surrounding the topic resonates well beyond Texas, even if immigration no longer rates as a front-burner issue in many of those places. In a recent Morning Consult poll of the popularity of Biden's executive actions, the immigration-oriented actions tended to be the least popular.

The first sign surfaced in the Senate earlier this month when eight Democrats - including both senators from Arizona and Michigan - voted to deny stimulus checks to undocumented immigrants.

"Michigan is a purple state and people are going to be concerned about moving too fast when it relates to immigration," said Brandon Dillon, former chair of the Michigan Democratic Party, who stressed he was not commenting specifically on the votes of the state's two Democratic senators, Gary Peters and Debbie Stabenow. "If you get into more blue-collar counties - Genesee, Saginaw, Monroe - immigration is more of an issue, but it's not that hot of a topic right now," he said. "Once Covid goes away, if the economy is still struggling, then the ability for folks to exploit the immigration issue is going to be stronger, allowing people to draw a straight line between immigration and jobs. Right now, it's not there."

Texas governor says he is responsible for the status of ERCOT, vows reforms



"ERCOT failed on each of these measures that they said they had undertaken," Abbott said. "Texans deserve answers on why these shortfalls occurred and why they're going to be corrected."

The governor didn't shy away from saying he has work to do. "I'm taking responsibility for the current status of ERCOT. Again, I find what has happened unacceptable," he said, adding that he's going to task the Legislature with restructuring the way the board works and its membership.

Weeks prior to the storm, a new chair and vice chair of ERCOT's board were elected, he said.

Abbott says the board's membership needs "to be more

responsive to the people of Texas."

CNN reached out to ERCOT for comment on the governor's latest statements.

The governor said he signed a major disaster declaration that is awaiting approval from President Joe Biden.

Power was still down for almost 290,000 Texas customers as of Thursday night -- well below the over 3 million outages a day earlier, according to Poweroutage.us.

ERCOT said in a statement it had made "significant progress" restoring power overnight. Still, the winter storm and ongoing cold were affecting the system's power generation, and rotating outages may be needed over the

next couple of days, the company said.

ERCOT officials also said that the power grid was "seconds or minutes" away from catastrophic failure and a complete blackout if not for controlled outages implemented early Monday.

The comments come as freezing temperatures were forecast again for Thursday, extending an already excruciating period.

More than 22 million people across hard-hit Southern states were under a hard freeze warning, indicating that temperatures will be so cold it could lead to further water line breaks. Temperatures are expected to rise Friday, although icing on bridges and overpasses will remain a threat until late Sunday into Monday.

In the meantime, the electricity shortage has broadened to encompass food, water and health crises. Since last Thursday, 16 Texans have died from weather-related circumstances.

Some 13.5 million people are facing water disruptions with 797 water systems throughout the state reporting issues such as frozen or broken pipes, according

to Toby Baker, executive director for the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality. About 725 systems are under a boil water advisory, Baker said during a press conference Thursday.

Abbott said he's issued an executive order to investigate ERCOT and is asking the Legislature to mandate a winterization and modernization of the power system along with funding for it. "Everyone knows how challenging the past few days have been for our fellow Texans," Abbott said. "I want everyone to know that all of us in the state of Texas believe it's completely unacceptable that you had to endure one minute of what's happened. We will not stop until normalcy is restored to your lives." Spillover effects of no power for days

Several frigid days with no power or heating have led to serious water issues: frozen and burst pipes, disabled water treatment plants and a lack of water pressure. The Bexar-Bulverde Volunteer Fire Department in the San Antonio area had issues battling a large apartment fire on Thursday evening because of a shortage of water, according to

department Chief Jerry Bialick. Many of the hydrants on the scene were frozen and there was no water, Bialick said. Crews had to go down the street to fill their tenders with water. "Right now, the fire break is working pretty good. Our main concern is water supply," Bialick said at a news conference. "Once we make a little bit of advance on the fire, we run out of water." Residents of the building were evacuated, as well as buildings on both sides. No injuries were reported, according to Bialick. Houston Methodist West and Houston Methodist Baytown hospitals are still operating without water Thursday afternoon, according to Houston Methodist public relations manager Gale Smith. "They've been creative, from trucking water in for consumption to collecting rainwater to use for flushing toilets," Smith told CNN.

How you can help the Texas storm victims Fort Hood city leaders asked residents to conserve 40% of their water during the storm due to water line breaks and subsequent flooding.

Petrol at Rs 100: Can India reduce its dependency on imported crude oil?

Petrol is retailing over Rs 90 in most cities in the country and above Rs 100 in some cities/towns in states like Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh after 10 consecutive hikes. Not just petrol but other essential fuels like diesel and liquified petroleum gas (LPG) have also seen a sharp rise in the country.

The culprit behind the record-high fuel prices in India is the high rate of taxes on fuel, coupled with the firming of international crude oil rates after OPEC-plus decided to continue with supply curbs.

Being one of the largest importers of crude oil in the world, India purchases well over 80 per cent of its fuel needs, putting immense pressure on government revenue.

Historical data from the Oil Ministry's Petroleum and Planning Analysis Cell indicates a rising oil import trend. Multiple studies indicate that India's oil needs will be more than any other country by 2040, citing the speed at which the country's energy needs are growing.

This makes the case for reducing India's crude oil import

dependency stronger, as outlined by the PM Modi-led government. Lower dependency on imported crude oil will not only help save crucial revenue but will shield India from currency fluctuations, higher fiscal deficit and more.

Reducing oil imports will take time

The central government under PM Modi's leadership had earlier set a target to reduce the country's crude oil import dependence by 10 per cent by 2022. And while work is underway to reduce India's crude oil import, the task at hand may need more time than expected.

According to a December 2020 report of the Petroleum and Planning Analysis Cell, indigenous crude oil and condensate production during April 2020 and December 2020 was lower by 5.7 per cent and 3.6 per cent respectively.

"On a cumulative basis, total crude oil processed was 160.4 MMT which was lower by 15.8 per cent during April-December 2020 as compared to April December 2019," said the report. Initially, during the strict

lockdown period, crude oil imports had decreased over 15 per cent, but in December 2020, imports rose by 9.5 per cent in comparison to December 2019.

This is the month when India's crude oil imports soared to the highest in nearly three years.

The data indicate that even as the government aims to reduce dependence on imported crude oil, the process has been slow due to the rising trend of fuel consumption in India.

Another way to reduce high imports is by building better capacities for storing fuel. PM Modi had outlined India's capacity building plan during his Thursday speech.

"In 2019-20, we were fourth in the world in [oil] refining capacity. About 65.2 million tonnes of petroleum product have been exported. This number is expected to rise even further," PM Modi said.

But this process, too, will need time as India lacks tankage capacity for blending ethanol in fuel. A Financial Express report from February 2021 indicates that the miscalculations by oil

marketing companies are threatening to jeopardise a range of policy initiatives to boost the ethanol blending programme (EBP) target.

While sugar mills have supplied a record amount of ethanol to OMCs, there isn't adequate tankage at the moment, leading to the relocation of quantities from several depots.

This is causing huge financial losses to distilleries. This is also an indication that the OMCs have failed on their ethanol lifting commitments and blending program targets are likely to fall short.

Experts have indicated that India first needs enough tankage capacity to achieve a 10 per cent blending target at the pan-India level.

There are some alternate ways in which India can reduce its dependence on imported crude oil.

Easing access to alternate energy

Using alternate energy sources like natural gas and solar power is one way to reduce dependence on imported crude oil. It will not

only help the government save billions on imported fuel but prevent the country from energy price shocks at the global level. Some experts have earlier highlighted that the higher use of natural gas may be the only way out for India as far as reducing oil import dependence is concerned. And while India's natural gas consumption is rising, the country imports more than half of its requirements.

PM Modi also spoke about the steps the government is taking steps to diversify energy sources yesterday. He said that work has started in India to ensure that 40 per cent of all energy generated is renewable by 2030.

"We have planned to spend Rs 7.5 lakh crore in creating oil and gas infrastructure over five years," PM Modi said. "A strong emphasis has been laid on the expansion of city gas distribution network by covering 470 districts," PM Modi said.

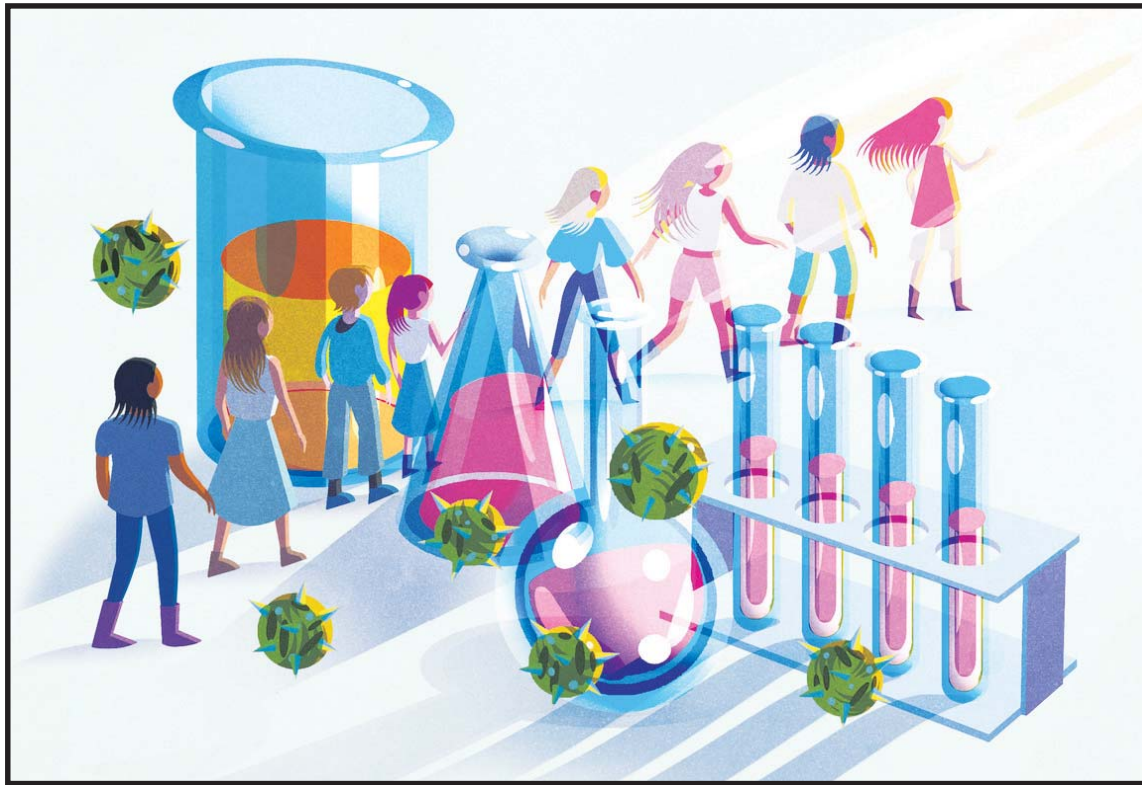
He added that the government is working towards raising the share of natural gas in the energy basket to 15 per cent from 6.3 per cent.

How Covid-19 could make Americans healthier

physician who represents a heavily Latino district in southeastern California and who leads the Congressional Hispanic Caucus. "Our health care system is geared to take care of really sick people with really, really good and expensive technology," he added. "What we are not good at is old-fashioned community health. Public health."

Pandemic as opportunity

The good news is that health officials and policy experts know a lot about how to fix America's health system. A cottage industry of consultants, advisers and advocates for a health care reboot has churned out volumes upon volumes of white papers, reports and conference proceedings for years. There's even a fair amount of consensus on the big picture, if not the nitty-gritty. But change is hard, and for every would-be change promoter, there is a change resister, often benefiting from an army of lobbyists or inertia bestowed by the status quo. So despite the devastation caused by Covid-19, despite the nearly half-million lives lost and



health is hard - and highly politicized. Some changes can be swift; others will take money and time. But there may not be a better moment to get started. President Joe Biden has already made his health and pandemic priorities clear in the stimulus bill he submitted to Congress. He plans to shore up the Affordable Care Act and move ahead on

programs like childhood vaccinations, maternal mortality and substance abuse. "Health care" was about patients and doctors and hospitals - really, about sickness more than wellness.

Now there's a chance for states to better integrate the two, to make both communities and individuals healthier. And to finally make progress against racial and ethnic disparities - not as an add-on, or a box to check, but across the board. If a global contagion teaches anything, it's that my ability to stay healthy depends on my neighbors not getting sick, either.

"Public health needs to be a strategy," said Trish Riley, executive director of the National

Academy for State Health Policy, "not a department." Prevention and containment The essential concept driving public health is that the health begins in the community - on diseases being prevented when possible, and identified and contained when they do appear. So when public health works and bad things don't happen, you can't see it. If you can't see it, you think you don't need it. And if you don't need it, lawmakers ask, why pay for it? Nothing could be more wrong. Yet that misconception has bedeviled public health for years. After the Sept. 11 terror and the anthrax attacks, Congress and states invested in bioterror defense and built up state and local public health capacity. Then complacency set in, and the 2008 economic crash wrecked state budgets. Public health was starved again - of staff, of data, of lab and surveillance capacity, of basic equipment - whether it was

of our public health plans - they were from post-9/11. They were outdated," said West Virginia Public Health Officer Ayne Amjad, one of many state and local officials who found themselves doing combat with a pandemic with a depleted and obsolete arsenal.

Invisible invader

In the early weeks of the pandemic, local health officials didn't fully appreciate that an invisible invader was at their door - a situation that was aggravated by the Trump administration's and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's bad calls about testing and surveillance. From then on, the virus would always be two steps ahead of them - and as the vaccination missteps and emergence of alarming new virus variants illustrates, it still is.

"One of the things this pandemic makes clear is the perils of underinvesting in public health," said Richard Besser, a former acting director of the CDC who now leads the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. "This is what happens when you lose public health professionals, when you don't invest in data systems, when you can't respond quickly to new public health crises that arrive."

The goal isn't just acquiring data. It's using it strategically, including to home in on inequity and discrimination which have been so pronounced in the pandemic, added Julie Morita, a former Chicago health commissioner who advised the Biden transition team and is executive vice president at the foundation.

Fixing public health also means repairing the CDC, the federal government's lead public health agency, which does its own science and research and which also gives states grants and guidance on challenges ranging from teen vaping to reopening schools. Biden-appointed CDC director Rochelle Walensky has vowed to rebuild public confidence, after some agency policies were undermined or politicized by the Trump White House. But it's at the state level where public health war plans become boots on the ground. States don't need to wait for Washington or the CDC to tell them what to do.



the economic and social costs, the pandemic is also an opportunity. The work needed to contain and recover from the coronavirus might - just might - create momentum to fix things before the next catastrophe, which will inevitably come in one form or another, perhaps before we've healed from this one.

Any such opening may be fleeting. Americans have short attention spans, so policy makers need to act fast. Governors face many competing demands on their state budgets, some of which were hammered more than others by the pandemic economy. Fixing

sustainable public health, including creating a dedicated public health job corps. But with Washington polarized and often slow to act, states have an opportunity to lead and go big. Recovery doesn't mean just getting back to where we were before the coronavirus. Recovery means finally fixing a lot of those things that everyone knew needed to be done, but never got done. It means using today's crisis to prepare for tomorrow's. Traditionally, "public health" focused on the community - emergencies arising from events like floods or wildfires, contagious infections like tuberculosis, and



Academy for State Health Policy, "not a department."

Prevention and containment

The essential concept driving public health is that the health begins in the community - on diseases being prevented when possible, and identified and

facing disasters like fires or floods, a surging opioid crisis, or a strange new disease like Zika. When the coronavirus pandemic hit, some public health departments were trying to trace its spread with faxes and pencils. "Looking back at some

11 million undocumented immigrants on pathway to citizenship

President Joe Biden unveiled his immigration plan on Thursday, a proposal that offers one of the fastest pathways to citizenship of any measure in recent years. However, the plan doesn't contain any details on enhanced border security, which past measures have included as a way to win Republican votes. Congressional Democrats released the legislation Thursday on Capitol Hill. And, although their party controls Congress, with a 50-50 tie in the Senate it will be a tough slog for Biden's plan, which will provide a pathway to citizenship for 11 million undocumented immigrants living in the United States.



Biden tapped the children of immigrants take the lead in Congress. The legislation's main sponsors are Democratic Rep. Linda Sánchez of California, the sixth of seven children raised by Mexican immigrants, and Democratic Sen. Robert Menendez of New Jersey, the son of Cuban immigrants.

'We have an economic and moral imperative to pass big, bold and inclusive immigration reform,' said Menendez said in unveiling the 353-page legislation.

Menendez said Democrats have failed in the past because they have too quickly given in 'to fringe voices who have refused to accept the humanity and contributions of immigrants to our country and dismiss everything, no matter how significant it is in terms of the national security, as amnesty.'

He noted he's been speaking to Republican colleagues in an effort toward 'putting the pieces of a puzzle together' on a bill that would receive enough votes to pass. He acknowledged the final product is likely to change significantly. But he also suggested that elements of the proposal could be included through a parliamentary

maneuver in a budget bill that would only require 51 votes.

Sanchez pointed out the bill also addresses the 'root causes' of immigration.

'Our border policy is broken, period,' Sanchez said. 'But this bill employs a multipronged approach that will manage the border, address the root causes of migration crack down on bad actors and create safe and legal channels for those who are seeking protection.'

Biden said in a statement Thursday that immigration reform is 'long overdue.'

'The legislation I sent to Congress will bring about much needed change to an immigration system where reform is long overdue,' he said. 'These are not Democratic or Republican priorities - but American ones.'

At his town hall meeting with CNN on Tuesday, Biden made a gaffe when he said most of those on his fast-track to citizenship are not Hispanic.

'The vast majority of the people, those 11 million undocumented, they're not Hispanics; they're people who came on a visa -- who was able to buy a ticket to get in a plane, and didn't go home,' the president said. 'They didn't come across the Rio

Grande swimming,' he added to laughter from the audience.

'Sorry, that's the Irish in me.'

The largest percentage of undocumented immigrants come from Mexico, according to the Pew Research Center.

In 2018, roughly 11.2 million immigrants living in the U.S. were from there, accounting for 25% of all U.S. immigrants. The next largest origin groups were those from China (6%), India (6%), the Philippines (4%) and El Salvador (3%).

The 'U.S. Citizenship Act of 2021' will reflect Biden's immigration priorities, including expanding the refugee resettlement program and deploying more technology to the Southern border.

The bill Democrats introduced Thursday would immediately provide green cards to farm workers, immigrants with temporary protected status and young people who arrived in the U.S. illegally as children. For others living in the U.S. as of Jan. 1, 2021, the plan establishes a five-year path to temporary legal status. If they pass background checks, pay taxes and fulfill other basic requirements, then, after three years, they can pursue citizenship.

The plan also would raise the current per-country caps for family and employment-based immigrant visas. It would eliminate the penalty barring those immigrants who live in the U.S. without authorization and who then leave the country from returning for three to 10 years. It also would provide resources for more judges, support staff and technology to address the backlog in processing asylum seekers.

The bill would expand transnational anti-drug task forces in Central America and enhance technology at the border. And it would set up refugee processing in Central America, to try to prevent some of the immigrant caravans that have overwhelmed border security in recent years. The plan includes \$4 billion spread over four years to try to boost economic development and tackle corruption in Latin American countries, to lessen pressure for migration to the U.S.

'He's just looking forward to having a bill to sign at his desk,' White House press secretary Jen Psaki said of Biden at her press briefing on Thursday.

Comprehensive immigration reform has struggled to gain

traction in Congress for decades.

Menendez was part of the bipartisan Gang of Eight senators who negotiated a 2013 immigration reform bill that ultimately collapsed. Prior to that, a bill backed by President George W. Bush failed in Congress as well, after multiple attempts at compromise.

While Biden is pushing a comprehensive bill, he suggested earlier this week he may be open to a more piecemeal approach.

During the CNN town hall Tuesday night, Biden said that while a pathway to citizenship would be essential in any immigration bill, 'there's things I would deal by myself.'

That could leave the door open to standalone bills focused on providing a pathway to citizenship for various populations.

Still, publicly the White House is emphasizing that its goal is a comprehensive plan. 'The president feels that all of these requirements that are in the bill - these components of the bill - are what makes it comprehensive,' Psaki said this week. 'They all need to be addressed. That's why he proposed them together.'

Democrats unveil Biden's immigration bill, including an eight-year path to citizenship

Lawmakers and White House officials unveiled sweeping immigration legislation Thursday, including a proposal for a path to citizenship for roughly 11 million migrants living without legal status in the USA.

"We're here today because last November, 80 million Americans voted against Donald Trump and against everything he stood for. They voted to restore common sense, compassion and competence in our government, and part of that mandate is fixing our immigration system," Sen. Bob Menendez, D-N.J., said in a virtual news conference.

The plan is based on the comprehensive immigration legislation proposal President Joe Biden introduced on his first day in office.

The U.S. Citizenship Act of 2021 includes: an eight-year pathway to citizenship for nearly 11 million undocumented immigrants; a shorter process to legal status for agriculture workers and recipients of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program; and an enforcement plan that includes deploying technology to patrol the border.

The bill calls for \$4 billion over four years "to confront corruption, enhance security and foster prosperity" in migrant



communities." It lays out a plan to create refugee processing in Central America to discourage migrants from trying to travel to the U.S.-Mexican border.

The bill is sponsored by Rep. Linda Sanchez, D-Calif., in the House of Representatives and by Menendez in the Senate.

Legislation faces challenges, lawmakers acknowledge

Passing one large immigration package will be a challenge. Several lawmakers have noted they will try to push through legislation that has already passed in the House, along with the legislation for Biden's proposal.

More: Biden rescinds national emergency at US southern border that allowed Trump to fund border wall House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., didn't offer specifics Thursday about the legislative strategy. Democrats are weighing whether to keep the policy proposals in one large legislative package or try to enact individual elements of it in a piecemeal approach. "How it happens through the legislative process remains to be seen," Pelosi said. "But it is a priority, and we will be working on it." Some Republicans criticized the legislation for not including more to address border security.

"The left wants to fund this border security around the Capitol, but they don't want to fund a border wall at our southern border," Rep. Nancy Mace, R-S.C., said in an interview on Fox News Thursday. "I don't understand it at all." Other Republican lawmakers said it's not the right time to introduce immigration legislation as the nation grapples with the COVID-19 pandemic. "No! This is not the right time and certainly not the right set of policies," Rep. Bill Johnson, R-Ohio, wrote in a tweet Thursday. "Let's focus on those Americans who are struggling right now."

Despite some pushback, Menendez said he has had conversations with Republican colleagues on the legislation and some have expressed interest in portions of the bill.

For example, Menendez said, Republicans from states with a large agriculture community expressed interest in parts of the legislation that would affect farmworkers. Republicans from states with a large technology industry are interested in the portions of the bill that address visas.

"The question for them is, yes, you want that part, but what are you willing to join in order to get that, with other elements that are needed for some broader reform?" Menendez said. "So those are the conversations that are going on."

What is in the legislation?

Although lawmakers are working to push through the comprehensive immigration package, they have discussed trying to pass other immigration legislation in tandem with Biden's bill. Congressional Hispanic Caucus chairman Raul Ruiz said last week that "there's three routes that we're working very hard to secure a vote on these bills before April 1."

Biden immigration bill reveals hardened battle lines in post-Trump era

President Biden's comprehensive immigration bill quickly exposed firm battle lines on Capitol Hill, raising questions about whether the White House might break the legislation into smaller bipartisan pieces if it hopes to pass any immigration reform. Congressional Democrats rolled out Biden's legislation with force, emphasizing there would be little room for compromise on a measure that would create a pathway for citizenship for some 11 million undocumented immigrants living in the U.S.

"The reason we have not gotten immigration reform over the finish line is not because of a lack of will. It is because time and time again, we have compromised too much and capitulated too quickly to fringe voices who have refused to accept the humanity and contributions of immigrants to our country," said Sen. Bob Menendez (D-N.J.), who is sponsoring the Senate side

version of the legislation. "There are some in Congress, I'll say from both parties, who argue against going big on immigration reform," he added. "Pursuing narrow reforms that nibble at the edges and leave millions of people behind." But Democrats face razor thin margins in both the House and Senate, meaning they will need to secure some GOP support if they want to get the full measure through Congress and onto Biden's desk. The bill's introduction also comes amid continued support among GOP voters for former President Trump, who made hardline immigration policies a centerpiece of his administration and campaign. The White House on Thursday signaled a willingness to work across the aisle. "There are negotiations that will need to happen," said White House press secretary Jen Psaki, who called the bill "a reset that was really needed to get an

immigration bill discussed and negotiated, and that is what our effort is to do here."

The comprehensive legislation provides a pathway to citizenship not just for Dreamers, who were brought to the U.S. illegally by their parents as children, but also for others already in the country, offering a maximum eight year track to gain citizenship.

It also increases numerous caps that limit legal immigration to the U.S. and sets aside \$4 billion to address root causes of migration from Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador.

And while it invests in training and new technology at the border, it eschews past practices of pairing immigration reform with an increase in enforcement measures. The U.S. already spends more on border control than all other federal law enforcement combined. Republicans immediately blasted the bill, zeroing in on border

security. "Senate Democrats have embraced the Biden-Harris immigration plan of amnesty and open borders. Granting amnesty to 11 million illegal immigrants, on a timeline quicker than any major legislation offered in recent history, without including any funding whatsoever to enhance border security is reckless and would fuel a never-ending cycle of illegal immigration," Sen. Rick Scott (R-Fla.) said in his capacity as chair of the National Republican Senatorial Committee, the Senate GOP's campaign arm.

"This is an unserious proposal that reflects how far left Senate Democrats have gone on the issue of immigration. Senate Republicans will not hesitate to share with the American people exactly how the Democrats' open borders, amnesty proposal will put their families at-risk," he added. Rep. John Katko (R-N.Y.), ranking member on the House

Homeland Security Committee, called the bill "a compilation of immigration activists' wish lists," arguing that "immigration reform must go hand-in-hand with border security."

The bill landed the same day that Biden rolled out new deportation guidelines for Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) officers, imposing temporary restrictions on causes for removing someone from the country. The agency is planning to release long-term guidelines later this year. Jorge Loweree, policy director with the American Immigration Council, argued in favor of the Democrats' approach, arguing they're rejecting what didn't work in the past. "The thinking was, in order to get through Congress, the tradeoff is a significant investment in immigration enforcement. Those efforts have been unsuccessful," he said. "This bill is sort of an acknowledgement of that."

White House announces sweeping immigration bill

The White House announced a sweeping immigration bill Thursday that would create an eight-year path to citizenship for millions of immigrants already in the country and provide a faster track for undocumented immigrants brought to the US as children.

The legislation faces an uphill climb in a narrowly divided Congress, where House Speaker Nancy Pelosi has just a five-vote margin and Senate Democrats do not have the 60 Democratic votes needed to pass the measure with just their party's support.

Administration officials argued Wednesday evening that the legislation was an attempt by President Joe Biden to restart a conversation on overhauling the US immigration system and said he remained open to negotiating. "He was in the Senate for 36 years, and he is the first to tell you the legislative process can look different on the other end than where it starts," one administration official said in a call with reporters, adding that Biden would be "willing to work with Congress."



The effort comes as there are multiple standalone bills in Congress aimed at revising smaller pieces of the country's immigration system. Sens. Lindsey Graham, a Republican from South Carolina, and Majority Whip Dick Durbin, a Democrat from Illinois, for example, have reintroduced their DREAM Act, which would provide a path to citizenship for immigrants who came to the country illegally as children. Administration officials said the best path forward and

plans either to pass one bill or break it into multiple pieces would be up to Congress.

"There's things that I would deal by itself, but not at the expense of saying, 'I'm never going to do the other.' There is a reasonable path to citizenship," Biden said at a CNN town hall in Milwaukee on Tuesday. "The President is committed to working with Congress to engage in conversations about the best way forward," one administration official said. Officials did not say

if they believed that the reconciliation process, a special budget tool that applies only to a specific subset of legislation and allows the Senate to pass bills with a simple majority, would be applicable for an immigration bill. "Too early to speculate about it right now," one official said.

The Senate is working on passing the President's coronavirus relief legislation through reconciliation. The expectation is that the administration could also use the process to pass an infrastructure

bill. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi told reporters Thursday she didn't necessarily think immigration reform will need to be passed via reconciliation. She also noted that some people want to take a piecemeal approach to the issue and "that may be a good approach too." Biden's immigration bill will be introduced by Democrats Bob Menendez of New Jersey in the Senate and Linda Sanchez of California in the House. Menendez conceded Thursday Democrats will have to negotiate, but noted, "We're not going to make concessions out of the gate." "We'll never win an argument that we never have the courage to make," Menendez said. We have a President and an administration that is willing to put political muscle behind making sure that we can get this across the finish line," Sanchez added. Here's what the bill, titled the US Citizenship Act of 2021, includes: Plan for a pathway to citizenship The legislation goes further than the last effort in 2013 by cutting the time to acquire citizenship to eight years instead of 13, according to an administration official.

New arrivals seeking asylum will test Biden's immigration plan

After a weeklong bus ride from Honduras, Isabel Osorio Medina arrived in northern Mexico with the hope President Joe Biden would make it easier for people like him to get into the United States.

"It seems the new president wants to help migrants," Mr. Osorio said as he got ready to check in to a cheap hotel in downtown Tijuana before heading to the U.S. "They're saying he is going to help, but I don't know for sure how much is true or not."

He is among thousands of people who have come to the U.S.-Mexico border with the hope they will be able to ask for asylum and make their way into the U.S. now that former President Donald Trump is no longer in office.

While Mr. Biden has taken some major steps in his first weeks in office to reverse Mr. Trump's hardline immigration policies, his administration hasn't lifted some of the most significant barriers to asylum-seekers.

In fact, it's discouraging people from coming to the country, hoping to avoid what happened

under both Mr. Trump and former President Barack Obama - border agents getting overwhelmed by migrants, including many Central Americans with children.

"Now is not the time to come," White House press secretary Jen Psaki said at a recent briefing, "and the vast majority of people will be turned away." Secretary of State Antony Blinken struck a similar tone on Feb. 6 as he announced official steps to end Trump-era agreements with Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala that required many asylum-seekers to seek refuge in one of those countries instead of the U.S.

"To be clear, these actions do not mean that the U.S. border is open," Mr. Blinken said. "While we are committed to expanding legal pathways for protection and opportunity here and in the region, the United States is a country with borders and laws that must be enforced." That message hasn't reached everyone.

More people have been arriving at an encampment in Matamoros, Mexico, a

dangerous city just south of the Texas border where hundreds of asylum-seekers have been waiting under Mr. Trump's "Remain in Mexico" program.

It's possible even more may come after the Biden administration announced Friday that it would slowly allow an estimated 25,000 people to enter the U.S. as their cases are reviewed. The first wave is expected Feb. 19.

Walter Valenzuela, from Honduras, said he had been waiting in Tijuana, across the border from San Diego, for months for a chance to either seek asylum or risk an illegal crossing.

For years, asylum-seekers who met the initial threshold of demonstrating a "credible fear" of persecution in their homeland could generally stay in the U.S. until an immigration judge decided whether they qualified for permanent residency, which can take years.

Trump administration officials believed many asylum claims were fraudulent or lacked merit, submitted by people simply looking to remain in the U.S. But



the issue is murky as tens of thousands flee violent gangs, natural disasters, and political upheaval.

The Biden administration has signed several executive orders on immigration, including allowing in more refugees and establishing a task force to find the parents of about 600 children who were separated under Mr. Trump and still haven't been reunited.

But it hasn't ended a public health order Mr. Trump issued at the start of the coronavirus pandemic that allows U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) to immediately expel

nearly everyone, including asylum-seekers.

Ms. Psaki said the government is still working to develop a "humane, comprehensive process" to evaluate people coming to the U.S.

"Asylum processes at the border will not occur immediately," she said. "It will take time to implement."

Alan Bersin, who held top positions dealing with border security during the Clinton and Obama administrations, warned that Mr. Biden is headed for a crisis if he releases all asylum-seekers into the United States in the short term.

The disaster that unfolded on February 7 in the higher reaches of Uttarakhand after a portion of a 'hanging glacier' on the slopes of Nanda Devi broke off and triggered flash floods strikes yet another environmental alarm bell for India's Himalayan regions. The glacial collapse, near Raini village above Joshimath in the state's Chamoli district, sent a wall of water and debris down the Dhauliganga and Rishiganga tributaries of the Alaknanda river, causing significant destruction along the route, including damage to major hydropower projects. At least 32 people are dead and over 170 are reported missing.

The devastation evoked memories of the June 2013 flash floods in the state, caused by a cloudburst near the Kedarnath shrine, which left nearly 700 dead. By afternoon, though, such fears receded as the gates of a downstream dam in Srinagar, in Pauri Garhwal, were opened while the gates of the Tehri Dam were shut to allow passage of the surging waters of the Alaknanda into the Ganga at the confluence in Devprayag. The floods wrecked NTPC's Tapovan Vishnugad 520 MW hydel project and wiped out the under-construction Rishiganga mini-hydel project, roads, bridges as well as homes. A majority of those missing are feared stuck in tunnels at these two power projects. Reports also suggest major damage to THDC India's 444 MW Pipalkoti and the Jaypee Group's 400 MW Vishnuprayag hydropower projects. Teams of the National Disaster Response Force (NDRF), army, air force and state agencies are engaged in rescue and evacuation.

WHAT CAUSED IT?

There is no clarity yet on what caused the disaster. Both the Centre and the Uttarakhand government have put experts on the job. They include scientists from the Geological Survey of India. H.C. Nainwal, a noted glaciologist at the Hemvati Nandan Bahuguna Garhwal University in Srinagar, says there is no identified glacial lake in the affected region. "We need to study where the water came from," he says. According to Mohd Farooq Azam, assistant professor with the glaciology and hydrology department of IIT-Indore, "Glacial bursts are very rare. Satellite and Google Earth images do not show any glacial lake, but there



A devastating flash flood in the Himalayan state highlights the urgent need to protect the region's fragile environment and review unbridled development activity

is possibility of water pockets, lakes inside glaciers, in the region. A water pocket may have erupted, leading to this event. But we need further analysis of weather and other data to arrive at a conclusion."

The meteorological department had reported sunny weather for February 6-7 around the disaster site. Though avalanches are common in the Himalayas, such

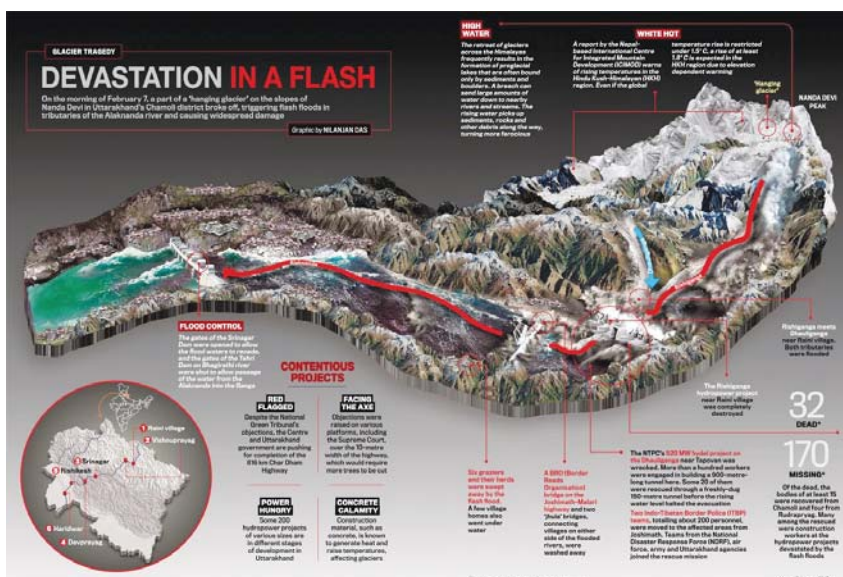
strained development work in the upper regions of the state, including the environs of Nanda Devi, Badrinath and Kedarnath. The topography of these areas makes rivers all the more prone to flash floods, whether triggered by construction activity or climate change. Studies, including one by the UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), have

its area under forests. The past decade has seen successive governments in the state struggle to balance ecological realities with development requirements, the result being the rampant damming of rivers to generate hydropower, mushrooming of settlements on river banks, and the drilling and tunneling of mountains to expand the road network. Both the Union and Uttarakhand

hill states have been making major efforts to exploit their water resources for power generation. Some 200 large, medium and small hydro projects are in various phases of development in Uttarakhand. Such projects consume vast quantities of concrete, a material known to generate heat, raising temperatures and destabilising snowfields and glaciers in the vicinity. Manju Menon, senior fellow at the Centre for Policy Research, New Delhi, says engineering projects executed in the upper regions of Uttarakhand have made the mountains more fragile. "A better understanding of the ecology will not only help save the mountains but also guide investors on the best technology to be used for their projects," she says.

In a 2016 affidavit in the Supreme Court, the then Union ministry of water resources, river development and Ganga rejuvenation said that several mountainous areas, including the higher reaches of Uttarakhand, should be left untouched by hydropower projects. But the environment and power ministries took a contrarian view. Uttarakhand cites its own compulsions. The state generates about 3.8 GW of electricity and needs to buy additional power from the national grid. The state government aims to more than double its power generation capacity over the next few years.

In June 2018, the Uttarakhand High Court had stalled all hydropower projects in the state over improper disposal of debris along the rivers. The Supreme Court, in August 2020, permitted the projects to proceed, provided the debris was disposed of without ruining the rivers. While the precise mechanism that triggered the latest calamity remains unknown for the moment, we do know that the Hindu Kush-Himalayan region has over 8,000 glacial lakes, of which 200 are classified dangerous. Uttarakhand alone has some 1,000 glacial lakes. The glacial collapse in Chamoli will not be the last such tragedy unless India's hill states take credible action to sync their development models with the environment, begin round-the-clock assessment of the Himalayas and their delicate ecology, and deploy more scientific methods to map the effects of climate change.



an occurrence alone is unlikely to have caused the sudden and alarming rise in water levels in Alaknanda's tributaries. Tweets by Dan Shugar, associate professor with the department of geosciences at Canada's University of Calgary, featuring satellite images captured before and after the catastrophe, suggest a portion of the glacier may have fallen after it was struck by a massive rockslide.

THE COST OF DEVELOPMENT
While it's too early to draw conclusions, some experts are blaming the tragedy on global warming and the continuing ecological degradation of Uttarakhand. The incident has put the spotlight back on unre-

warned that the temperature profile of ice in these regions is rising. It is -2 C now, as against a temperature range of -20 C to -6 C at one time, making the ice highly susceptible to melting.

Clearly, no lessons seem to have been learnt from the 2013 floods in Uttarakhand, which claimed hundreds of lives and destroyed an estimated 2,000 homes, 1,300 roads and 150 bridges.

The following year, the Uttarakhand government had developed an action plan on climate change with inputs from UNDP, but today there appears to be little evidence of action on the ground. Uttarakhand is an ecologically fragile state, with 71 per cent of

But with 537 km of road length already completed, there is only a dim chance of any change in the original plan. Mallika Bhanot, who works with the Uttarkashi-based citizens' forum Ganga Ahvaan and monitors the Bhagirathi eco-sensitive zone, says the Char Dham Highway construction is focusing on maximising slope-cutting in the shortest possible time. "Tall slopes, often inclined more than 45 degrees and as high as 60-70 metres, have been cut without considering the vulnerability of the local geological features. It's a high-risk approach that has triggered several major landslides." In recent years, the

The February 1 military takeover in Myanmar over what was essentially an election dispute marks yet another fateful intervention against the popular will in the country. Peaceful protests and civil disobedience movements have erupted across Myanmar against the military action that came on the day the new parliament was to convene following a third landslide victory (after 1990 and 2015) for the incumbent National League for Democracy (NLD), headed by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi (now in detention), in the November 2020 national election.

Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, on February 8, promised a return to multi-party democracy, once the poll results could be rectified by a new Election Commission during the one-year emergency period. So far, the military has refrained from use of force and relied on telecom/ internet/ social media bans and partial curfews, but it may just be a matter of time before tensions spill over into violence.

The coup has widespread implications for the region and the world. In 2016, as the US was transiting from President Barack Obama to Donald Trump, Suu Kyi's resounding victory in the November 2015 election stood out as a vindication of democracy.

India's Myanmar Tightrope

China, which had been managing relations with Suu Kyi quite well, seems to have been caught off-guard, although it will take advantage of any international censure or sanctions against Myanmar



Now, after the US's own brush with a near-right-wing 'coup', it is logical that President Joe Biden makes the struggle for democracy a major plank of his foreign policy, Myanmar being its first test. Yet, first indications are that Biden is likely to continue a firm line with China on security issues, and given his appointment of veteran diplomat Kurt Campbell as point man for the Indo-Pacific, the US is unlikely to determine its 'Burma' policy on a single event or rely on blunt sanctions. China, which had been managing relations with Suu Kyi quite well, seems to have been caught off-guard, although it will take advantage of any interna-

tional censure or sanctions against Myanmar. The Tatmadaw's relationship with Russia, a major defence partner, has grown under Gen. Min Aung Hlaing, who last July chose a Russian media channel for a veiled criticism of China's support to Myanmar's ethnic armed groups. Europe and Australia have openly criticised the coup. Japan has been more circumspect, but Kirin Beer terminated its partnership with the military enterprise, Myanmar Economic Holdings, on its flagship 'Myanmar' beer. Thailand, which faces its own public movement against the military, will be watching carefully. Both ASEAN and

the UN Security Council have expressed "deep concern" at the declaration of emergency and called for the release of all those detained, and respect for the popular will, stopping short of outright condemnation to reconcile differences among their members. Bangladesh will be monitoring the regime's promise on repatriation of the Rohingyas. India, too, will be conflicted. Since its pragmatic engagement with the Tatmadaw (Myanmar's military administration) around the turn of the millennium, India has developed trust with both the military and the NLD, by keeping its defence training, supply and security ties with the military separate from its political

support for the popular will in Myanmar. This will be put to test. The view in some quarters that India will be forced to do business with the Tatmadaw to keep China in check is flawed. While China enjoys greater leverage over Myanmar through its strategic investments, influence over ethnic armed groups and veto power in the UNSC, it lacks the trust India has acquired. India's current term in the UNSC will give it added weight. India's response should keep in mind not just China but its own long-term interest in nurturing ties with the people and economy of Myanmar. The unusual joint visit by India's foreign secretary and army chief last October may have been crafted with this in mind.

In the tussle between military and people's power, India should stand clearly with the people. But it should preserve its trust and rely on quiet diplomacy. It could curb economic ties, if any, with the Tatmadaw while building on investments in connectivity infrastructure and capacity-building, with a focus on the neglected agro-economy on which most people in Myanmar depend. It could also take a lead in working with ASEAN and Japan in bringing civilian rule back in Myanmar.

Mine games

Panna is also home to a critical tiger reserve and, according to U.K. Sharma, field director of the Panna Tiger Reserve.

On January 1, diamond mining operations in Madhya Pradesh's Panna district, the biggest centre for diamond mining in India, came to a halt after its wildlife clearance ended on December 31, 2020.

Panna is also home to a critical tiger reserve and, according to U.K. Sharma, field director of the Panna Tiger Reserve, the park management wrote to the National Mineral Development Corporation (NMDC) of the government of India about shutting down operations as soon as the wildlife clearance expired. Predictably, the closure of mining operations has led to conservationists and government authorities butting heads.

On January 3, Chief Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan announced that the diamond mine in Majhgawan in Panna will not be closed down considering the important role it plays in the lives of the people who live in the areas located nearby. "The Majhgawan mines contribute over Rs 5 crore to the local economy," says Shyamendra Singh, a former member of the state wildlife board. That estimate includes what mine employees spend as also the CSR initiatives of the

NMDC. "The locals support the mine and want it to continue functioning," Singh asserts.

The NMDC operates the mine in Majhgawan village, India's only mechanised diamond mine. The local government also leases around 700 plots, each measuring 8x8 metres, to prospective private miners in the rest of the district. These small mining units employ around 6,000 to 7,000 people. For now, the state government has put on hold any fresh leases for the smaller mines.

According to the Indian Bureau of Mines, Madhya Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh and Chhattisgarh are the only states with diamond deposits in the country, with Madhya Pradesh accounting for more than 90 per cent of these deposits. The mining capacity of the Majhgawan mine, according to the NMDC website, is 84,000 carats a year. It claims that a total of 10,05,064 carat diamonds have

been recovered so far from the area and that the mine has an incidence of 10 carats per 100 tonnes of tuff material. "The diamond mines have given the people of Panna recognition across the world, [an honour] which they would like to retain," adds Singh.

However, a senior forest department official, who requested anonymity, tells a different story. "The production of the mine is low and besides starting a bus service running from Hinauta to



Panna town, the NMDC does not do much by way of CSR," he reveals. "Some areas should be left inviolate for wildlife, especially considering the fragile ecology of the region and history of threat to the tiger." The Panna Tiger Reserve is the only viable tiger habitat in the Bundelkhand region, spanning both Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh. The mining activities, conservationists have argued, harm the forest areas and hinder free movement of

wildlife. The Panna reserve saw a revival after being declared bereft of tigers in December 2008. A tiger reintroduction programme was launched in March 2009 and currently the tiger count at Panna is around 50.

A senior NMDC official admitted, on condition of anonymity, that the viability of the mine had been impacted by the rules and regulations of the national park. "There are 8.47 lakh carat diamonds worth Rs 1,000 crore in the reserves. There is also a security issue. What happens to the diamonds if we have to close down the mine indefinitely? The diamonds will have to be secured," he says. "We are suffering financially because of the park. We operate two shifts a day, but can't operate a third as we can't switch on lights at night."

On average, the production from the Majhgawan mine is around 40,000 carats a year. "Our target is around 70,000 carats, but since we operate only two shifts, our production remains lower," says Samar Bahadur Singh, general secretary of the INTUC (Indian National Trade Union Congress) unit of the Majhgawan mine.

The Jat Engine



If the events of this year's Republic Day, when lumpen youth hijacked what had hitherto been a determined yet peaceful farmers' protest and led a siege of the iconic Red Fort, threatened to derail the movement, Rakesh Tikait's tears on Beating Retreat Day (January 28), when police tried to force-clear protesters from Ghazipur, put it right back on track. His emotional outburst not only re-energised the movement, but it also led to something more momentous, bringing the Jats of Uttar Pradesh and Haryana together in solidarity with the Punjab farmer, undermining the central government's insinuations that the movement was confined to Punjab, that it was being used by Khalis-tani forces to further their own radical agenda and was the work of 'andolanjeevis', professional protesters who live off agitations.

Before long, Rashtriya Lok Dal (RLD) president Chaudhary Ajit Singh, son of the legendary Chaudhary Charan Singh, buried his long-standing differences with the sons of Mahendra Singh Tikait, the renowned farmer leader of UP. The Tikait brothers, the elder Naresh, president of the Bharatiya Kisan Union (BKU), and Rakesh, its national spokesperson, were widely believed to have been behind Singh's defeat from Muzaffarnagar in the 2019 Lok Sabha election. The rivalry ran deep till very recently, for instance, instead of attending the BKU dharna on the Ghazipur border, Ajit Singh's son and RLD general secretary Jayant Chaudhary attended the farmers' dharna in Baraut in Baghpat district. Tikait's passionate appeal on January 28 changed all that, with Chaudhary tweeting in sup-

port the same night. In neighbouring Haryana, too, after dissociating themselves from the movement in the wake of the Republic Day hooliganism, the khaps in the state once again backed the agitation. The mahapanchayat convened by the Sarva Jatiya Kandela Khap on February 4 had thousands turning up in solidarity. Attending it were the newly-anointed Jat leader Rakesh Tikait, BKU (Rajewal) chief Balbir Singh Rajewal and Aam Aadmi Party leader Gurnam Singh Chanduni, all three of whom have worked closely as part of the Sanyukt Kisan Morcha, the umbrella organisation of all farmers' unions protesting the contentious farm laws. For the BJP, the silence of Jannayak Janata Party (JJP) leader and Haryana deputy chief minister Dushyant Singh Chautala can only have sounded ominous.

LOSING THE PLOT IN UP

It is in UP that the consolidation of the Jat vote spells the maximum trouble for the BJP, given that the state goes to polls a year from now. According to the 1931 caste census, 99 per cent of the Jat population in the state is concentrated in the 26 districts of the Agra, Aligarh, Saharanpur, Moradabad, Meerut and Bareilly divisions. Together, these six divisions account for 136 of UP's 403 assembly seats and 27 of its 80 Lok Sabha seats. RLD's Ajit Singh had been a prominent Jat leader in western UP till the Muzaffarnagar riots of 2013 left the region deeply polarised and saw Jat loyalties shift to the BJP. "Before the Muzaffarnagar riots," says R.K. Singh, a former professor in the political science department of Meerut University,

"Jats and Muslims used to vote together in western UP. After 2013, the Jat and Muslim voters found themselves on opposite sides. The Jats left the RLD and went with the BJP. As a result, the BJP became stronger with the support of the Jat vote in western UP while RLD became weaker." The BJP now controls 70 per cent of the seats in western UP. It has 11 Jat MLAs in the UP assembly, of which four, Lakshmi Narayan Choudhary, Bhupendra Chaudhary, Baldev Singh Aulakh and Uday Bhan Singh, are ministers in the Yogi Adityanath government. The party also has three Jat MPs, Satyapal Singh in Baghpat, Sanjiv Baliyan in Muzaffarnagar and Rajkumar Chahar in Fatehpur Sikri. Mohit Beniwal, the regional president of western UP in the BJP party organisation, is also a Jat.

Over the past few years, the state's sugar economy has also played a role in social and political realignments. The Muslims here usually work as farm labour on cane plantations. The schisms of 2013 not only upset this easily available source of farm labour, but unremunerative prices for his produce have also left the cane farmer increasingly restive. So when the farmers' movement regained momentum under the leadership of Rakesh Tikait, the Muslims found themselves making common cause with their Jat brethren in the state. They were present in large numbers at the Muzaffarnagar and Shamli mahapanchayats held in the first week of February. This cannot be good news for the BJP. In 55 of the 136 assembly seats where the Jat vote matters, Muslims constitute more than 30 per cent of the population. If the Jat-Mus-

lim vote were to combine, it would form 40 per cent of the total vote. For perspective, soon after the Muzaffarnagar riots in 2013, not a single Muslim MP was elected in the 2014 parliamentary election. However, Jat-Muslim unity was in evidence in the 2019 Lok Sabha poll, when UP sent six Muslim MPs to Parliament, five from western UP. In fact, BSP candidates Danish Ali and Haji Fazlurrahman, who fought from the Amroha and Saharanpur constituencies, respectively, won with 51 per cent of the vote. This could not have been possible without a combined Jat-Muslim vote. Faheem Usmani, who runs a school in Deoband in western UP, says, "With the Jat and Muslim voters coming together on one platform, as was evident in the large crowds that gathered in the panchayat of the Indian Farmers' Union, its impact will be seen in 2022." Meanwhile, the rise of Rakesh Tikait has filled the leadership vacuum that Ajit Singh's waning influence left in Jat politics. If Singh's RLD won 14 seats in the 2002 assembly poll in alliance with the BJP, 10 on its own in 2007, nine in 2012 in alliance with the Congress, it won just one seat in 2017. It could not even open its account in the 2019 Lok Sabha poll, with both father and son losing their respective seats.

The Jats themselves have now rallied around Tikait. All khaps of western UP came together under the aegis of a Sarvkhap and held a mahapanchayat in Baraut in Baghpat district on January 31. Three other mahapanchayats in Mathura, Muzaffarnagar and Shamli districts saw an equal groundswell of support.

HULLABALLOO IN HARYANA

Things look equally shaky for the BJP in Haryana. The survival of the BJP government in the state depends on the support of 10 JJP MLAs and six Independents. And there is increasing pressure on JJP leader and deputy CM Dushyant and his grand-uncle Ranjit Chautala, an Independent MLA and cabinet minister, from the Chautala village panchayat to either find a

solution or exit the government. Dushyant did meet Prime Minister Narendra Modi and home minister Amit Shah on January 13. They assured him that the MSP would stay. However, the grand renewal of Jat support for the farmers' agitation has mounted fresh trouble for Dushyant. His own MLAs have, for the moment, decided to hold on, despite the outreach by Bhupinder Singh Hooda and the Congress and pressure from local khaps. Among them is Amarjeet Dhanda, the JJP MLA from Julana, according to whom some khaps were planning to boycott their party on Hooda and Congress's insistence. But, he adds, "It doesn't reflect the collective will of the Jats. I haven't faced any hostility in my constituency." However, with one cabinet slot vacant in the JJP quota, his MLAs are exerting pressure on Dushyant to announce his pick. Jats in Haryana rally around two poles: the Deswali Jats led by former CM Bhupinder Hooda, and the Bagri Jats, who owe their allegiance to the Chautalas. To build pressure on Dushyant and regain the support base that had shifted from the INLD (Indian National Lok Dal), Abhay Chautala resigned as Fatehabad MLA. What does this mean for the BJP? Jats constitute 27 per cent of the state's electorate. They voted overwhelmingly in the party's favour in the 2019 general election, helping it win all 10 seats. However, in the assembly election soon after, its tally was reduced to 40 seats in the 90-member assembly. This was perhaps because voting in the general election was on the plank of nationalism, while the state election verdict was based on Khattar's performance. And the Jats have had an uneasy relationship with Khattar since 2016, when they staged protests to drive their demand for backward caste reservation. It doesn't help that Khattar is a non-Jat chief minister and has made no effort to appease the community. Of the 25 Jat MLAs in the current assembly, only five are from the BJP, which banks more on the JJP's acceptance among young Jat voters and the limited appeal of its state unit chief, Om Prakash Dhankar.

Rakesh Tikait's impassioned appeal has resuscitated the farmers' movement and given the Jats a leader to rally around, making the government's task that much more difficult.

The firearms trap

India's armed forces suffer due to crippling dependence on whimsical global weapons manufacturers. Behind the crisis is the country's flawed firearms production-acquisition policy and low R&D.



in 2018'. The suspension, the report stated, was prompted by a complaint from a human rights group over the Saudi military firm Heckler & Koch, whose MP5 submachine guns were used by the NSG (National Security Guard) and MARCOS (Marine

send an indigenous spacecraft to Mars is one of the world's largest importers of small arms, importing hundreds of thousands of assault rifles, pistols and submachine guns each year. The Indian Army alone is slated to import rifles, carbines and light machine guns (LMGs) worth over Rs 3,500 crore to modernise its infantry and special forces.

The army knows how foreign dependency can affect the operational readiness of its frontline units. Around the time of tensions with Pakistan following the 2019 Balakot airstrikes, the army urgently needed spares and replacements for its anti-materiel rifles. These weapons, meant to

changes in weapons and calibres could be another reason for its own troubles. The world's largest ground forces have not standardised on a single rifle calibre and are now equipped with a hodgepodge of three major calibres and multiple weapons firing them. Global militaries are acutely conscious of the problems of fielding multiple weapon types with different spares and ammunition. For instance, the US military, which has seen the most conflict since the end of World War II, has changed its rifle calibre and standard-issue rifle just twice in the past 75 years. The in-service M16 is a modified variant of a rifle first introduced in 1965.

The solution to whimsical foreign suppliers could be what an exasperated defence secretary once suggested in a closed-door meeting with military officials at South Block, import weapons only from four of New Delhi's strategic partners because they would always 'find a way'.

This perhaps explains the rush of small arms imports over the past four years, two of them being contracted under emergency fast-track provisions. Last year, the army purchased 72,000 rifles worth Rs 700 crore from US gun-maker SIG Sauer under a fast-track process. The army also wants to import 93,895 carbines from the UAE, a country with no history of arms manufacturing. Waiting in the wings is a contract to produce 750,000 AK-203 rifles in partnership with Russia. Army chief General M.M. Naravane said on January 12 that the contract would be signed soon.

Questionable imports lead to more imports. The army has already placed a repeat order of 72,000 rifles with the US manufacturer. Several other acquisitions make no sense because cheaper, indigenous options exist. The AK-203, for instance, is a modernised version of the iconic Russian rifle developed by General Mikhail Kalashnikov in 1947. Other than the wooden 'furniture' replaced by polymers and the addition of a Piccatinny rail (for clamping weapon sights) on the dust cover, little has changed. The MoD already has two weapon factories producing cheaper AK-47 clones (the original unpatented AK-47 rifle has been freely copied across the world), the 'Trichy Assault Rifle' at Ordnance Factory Tiruchirappalli and 'Ghatak' at Rifle Factory Ishapore, West Bengal.

IN June 2020, as India's special forces were planning a countermove against China's heavy military mobilisation in Ladakh, one of their units was facing a critical weapons shortage. Belgian small arms manufacturer FN Herstal (FNH) walked out of a contract to supply some 1,500 small arms to the Special Frontier Force (SFF), a covert paramilitary unit under the cabinet secretariat. The estimated Rs 70 crore contract for P90 carbines and SCAR assault rifles had been under negotiations for three years before being signed in 2019 for delivery within a year.

In late August, the SFF were deployed against the PLA (People's Liberation Army) in a massive 'area denial operation' on the southern banks of the Pangong Lake, without the imported weapons they were supposed to get. An FNH spokesperson declined comment on the failed contract, citing confidentiality.

The incident illustrates the pitfalls of India's crippling dependence on imported small arms in the face of tensions with both its adversaries, China and Pakistan. What complicates matters is that foreign arms firms are likely to pull the plug on contracts, even in the midst of a national security crisis in the importing country, due to various factors, ranging from their own countries refusing export clearances to human rights issues in the country of sale.

The reasons for FNH's withdrawal are not known but need to be seen in the light of a similar instance last August, when it suspended small arms deliveries to Saudi Arabia, its biggest client. Saudi Arabia, according to an Al Jazeera report, 'accounted for 225 million euros (about Rs 1,988 crore) in a 950 million euro (about Rs 8,396 crore) industry



intervention in Yemen. The reputation of an arms firm can override the foreign policy of its country of origin. FNH, for instance, is no Belgian waffle-maker. One of the world's top five small arms-makers, its weapons are used by the US Special Operations Command. Three of its well-regarded products, a pistol, a medium machine gun and a self-loading rifle, have been serially produced in India's state-owned ordnance factories for over four decades. FNH, though, has not participated in any of the Indian armed forces' recent small arms buys. (The firm took part in a 2016 bid to supply a new assault rifle to the Pakistan Army.) Despite these likely hurdles, the Indian Army's Para Special Forces have taken a circuitous route to acquire FNH weapons, a 'foreign military sale' from the US government. Another leading arms-maker, the German

Commandos) during the 26/11 attacks in Mumbai, steers clear of the Indian market. The manufacturer says German export laws do not allow supply of weapons to India because of the 'situation in Jammu and Kashmir'. "In Germany, the federal government must approve the export of small arms. Against the background of the situation in the Kashmir region, the German government has repeatedly indicated to our company that arms deliveries to the Indian MoD (ministry of defence) would not be approved," an H&K spokesperson said. The indigenous road

India has the world's second-largest army, over 1.2 million-strong, and nearly one million paramilitary forces. The government's inability to create a modern indigenous small arms industry has created an ironical situation, a country that can

destroy light armoured vehicles and bunkers, had been purchased from the South African arms firm Denel following the 1999 Kargil War. The supply of spares dried up after Denel was blacklisted by the MoD in 2005. The army discovered to its shock that the firm had gone bankrupt and was unable to supply weapons. The leverage that producing weapons indigenously offers is well known. During the 1971 Bangladesh War, the Indian government had supplied the 'Mukti Bahini' freedom-fighters with rifles and carbines produced by the ordnance factories. The present-day inability of the ordnance factories to replace the army's frontline infantry weapons, introduced between the 1960s and 1990s, with modern firearms has led to the current deluge of imports by the armed forces, police and paramilitary. The army's frequent

Former Trump casino where Madonna, Oprah used to hang out goes out with a bang

Former Trump casino in Atlantic City was reduced to a dusty pile of rubble on Wednesday. After falling into disrepair, the one-time jewel of former President Donald Trump's casino empire was demolished.

Aspot on the Atlantic City Boardwalk where movie stars, athletes and rock stars used to party - and a future president honed his instincts for bravado and hype - was reduced to a dusty pile of rubble on Wednesday.

The former Trump Plaza casino was imploded after falling into such disrepair that chunks of the building began peeling off and crashing to the ground.

A series of loud explosions around 9 am rocked the building, which started to collapse in a wave from back to front until it plunged straight down in a giant cloud of dust that enveloped the beach and Boardwalk. Overall, it took the structure less than 20 seconds to implode.

"I got chills," Atlantic City Mayor Marty Small said. "This is a historic moment. It was exciting." He estimated the remaining pile of rubble is about eight stories tall, and would be removed by June 10. Some of it could be used by environmentalists interested in building an artificial fishing reef off the coast of Atlantic City.

Additional parts of the casino-hotel complex fronting on the Boardwalk and on Pacific Avenue, the

main road along the row of casinos, were not included in the implosion. They will be demolished in the near future using heavy equipment, not explosives.

The removal of the one-time jewel of former President Donald Trump's casino empire clears the way for a prime development opportunity on the middle of the Boardwalk, where the Plaza used to market itself as "Atlantic City's centerpiece." "The way we put Trump Plaza and the city of Atlantic City on the map for the whole world was really incredible," said Bernie Dillon, the events manager for the casino from 1984 to 1991. "Everyone from Hulk Hogan to Mick Jagger and Keith Richards, it was the whole gamut of personalities. One night before a Tyson fight I stopped dead in my tracks and looked about four rows in as the place was filling up, and there were two guys leaning in close and having a private conversation: Jack Nicholson and Warren Beatty."

"It was like that a lot: You had Madonna and Sean Penn walking in, Barbra Streisand and Don Johnson, Muhammad Ali would

be there, Oprah sitting with Donald ringside," he recalled. "It was a special time. I'm sorry to see it go."

Although the former president built it, a different billionaire, Carl Icahn, acquired the two remaining Trump casinos in 2016 from the last of their many bankruptcies and owned the building.

The mayor proposed using the demolition as a fundraiser for the Boys And Girls Club of Atlantic City, and began an auction for the right to press the button that would bring the structure down. But Icahn - a donor and former special economic adviser to Trump - objected on safety and liability issues, and got the auction house to halt the bids. Icahn said he would replace the USD 175,000 that had already been bid with his own money. A fundraiser for a VIP view of the implosion netted the club more than USD 16,000.

Opened in 1984, when Trump was a real estate developer in his pre-politics days, Trump Plaza was for a time the most successful casino in Atlantic City. It was the place to be when mega-events such as a Mike Tyson



boxing match or a Rolling Stones concert was held next door in Boardwalk Hall.

Ron Gatewood, a food and beverage worker at Trump Plaza from 1986 until its closing in 2014, brought food and drinks to stars including Aretha Franklin, Luther Vandross and Barry White in their hotel rooms. "They were very down-to-earth people," Gatewood recalled. "They never made you feel less-than. They tipped very well. Well, some did, anyway."

The casino even had a cameo in the film "Ocean's Eleven." When George Clooney and Brad Pitt recruited actor Bernie Mac's character to help with a Las Vegas casino heist, they plucked him from Trump Plaza, where he was a dealer.

Bob McDevitt, president of the

main casino workers' union, said the place oozed glamour and buzz when it first opened.

But things began to sour for Trump Plaza when Donald Trump opened the nearby Trump Taj Mahal in 1990, with crushing debt loads that led the company to pour most of its resources - and cash - into the shiny new hotel and casino. "The moment that the Taj Mahal opened up, it began a decline for the Plaza," McDevitt said. "In order to make sure the Taj Mahal was successful, they shipped all the high rollers from Trump Plaza and Trump's Castle to the Taj, and they really didn't invest in the Plaza much."

The Trump Taj Mahal, one of the casinos acquired by Icahn, has since reopened under new ownership as the Hard Rock.

The great poll opera: Tamil Nadu gears up for electoral battle without its iconic leaders

SHORTLY AFTER DAYBREAK ON FEBRUARY 9, Vivekananda Krishnaveni Sasikala, released after four years in a Bengaluru jail on charges of corruption, returned to Chennai to a grand welcome by supporters as well as some of the ruling AIADMK (All-India Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam) leaders. At several places en route, well-wishers greeted the 66-year-old leader with firecrackers and flowers (one reason why the usual six-hour journey took almost a day). She also stopped at a few temples on the way. At one point, she was offered a garland so heavy that it took a crane to bring it to her side.

The breakaway AIADMK faction, the Amma Makkal Munnetra Kazhagam (AMMK), and her loyalists within the main party, put on the show. "The party (AIADMK) faced several struggles in the past, too, but has still risen like a phoenix. Amma (the late J. Jayalalithaa) told us how to run the AIADMK for another 100 years after her, and continuing her legacy, I'll live the rest of my life for the development of the party. The party is family and the family is party all the children of Jayalalithaa are my children too," Sasikala told supporters, projecting her-

self as the heir to Jayalalithaa in the run-up to the assembly election in Tamil Nadu in April-May.

The ruling AIADMK has reason to be worried. Its vote share has been on the decline in every election since 2011, hitting rock bottom at 18.7 per cent in the 2019 Lok Sabha election (see The Poll Trend). Then, there's the anti-incumbency from being 10 years in power. In a swift reprisal, therefore, the AIADMK expelled party members who had facilitated Sasikala's return-from-jail welcome convoy, sending a clear signal that 'Chinnamma' (mother's sister), as allies still call her reverentially, remains an outcast. The Sasikala sideshow in the past few days had taken the attention away from the upcoming battle between the AIADMK and the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), the first without its iconic leaders J. Jayalalithaa and M. Karunanidhi. The two big parties of



Dravidian politics had long depended on these larger-than-life figures, worshipped by the rank and file. This time, the DMK is projecting M.K. Stalin, Karunanidhi's son, as its chief ministerial candidate while the AIADMK too is pitching the incumbent E.K. Palaniswami (EPS) as its chief min-

isterial candidate.

THE ANTI-INCUMBENCY CHALLENGE Chief Minister Palaniswami faces a particularly stiff challenge, for the AIADMK is trying to win a third successive term. He, too, is invoking the Jayalalithaa legacy, which has the greatest resonance, while also putting out his record in attracting investments and in governance, including a slew of welfare measures, notably the "Amma of all loan waivers" for farmers. Announced on February 5, it seeks to write off Rs 12,110 crore worth of farm loans and benefit 1.64 million farmers. It's a continuation of the dole

politics Dravidian parties have followed since their early days in the 1960s, beginning with the rice for 'One Rupee per Madras Measure (slightly less than a kg)' scheme announced by the first DMK chief minister C.N. Annadurai. "I am a farmer. I waived the outstanding crop loans only because I intended to remove all challenges facing farmers," says CM Palaniswami.

The collective impact of the sops, though, has been that Tamil Nadu has moved from being a revenue-surplus state to a revenue-deficit one between 2012 and 2019. On the positive side, as the 15th Finance Commission report noted in 2020, the state has been a frontrunner in many metrics in sustainable development goals like poverty reduction, good health and well-being and quality education.

Latching on to the development pitch, EPS has been travelling extensively since the early Covid-19 days, proclaiming that the state was ahead of others in implementing containment measures during the lockdown (except in the large Koyambedu market in Chennai, which turned out to be a super-spreader).

If Planet Nine exists, why has no one seen it?

Percival Lowell was a man of many errors.

The 19th-Century travel writer and businessman - fabulously wealthy, perennially moustachioed, and often found in crisp three-piece suits - had read a book on Mars, and on this basis, decided to become an astronomer. Over the coming decades, he made a number of wild claims.

First up, he was convinced of the existence of Martians, and thought he had found them (he hadn't). Others had documented strange lines traversing the planet, and Lowell suggested that these were canals, built as the last attempt of a dying civilisation to tap water from the polar ice caps. He used his fortune to build an entire observatory, just to get a better look. It turned out they

were an optical illusion, created by the mountains and craters on Mars when viewed through low quality telescopes.

Lowell also believed that the planet Venus had spokes - seen in his notes as spidery lines emanating from its centre (it doesn't). Though his assistants tried to find them, it seemed that only he could see this unexpected detail. It's now assumed that they were shadows cast from the irises in his own eyes, as he looked through his telescope.

But most of all, Lowell was determined to find the ninth planet in our solar system - a hypothetical "planet X", which at the time was thought to be responsible for the rogue orbits of the furthest-known planets from the Sun, the cool-blue ice giants

Uranus and Neptune. Though he never set eyes on this phantom behemoth, the quest consumed the last decade of his life - and after several nervous breakdowns, he died at the age of 61.

Little did he know, the search would still be going - with a few tweaks - in 2021.

A false trail

Undeterred by his own mortality, Lowell left a million dollars to the cause of finding planet X in his will. So, after a brief interlude involving a legal battle with his widow, Constance Lowell, his observatory kept looking.

Just 14 years later, on 18 February 1930, a young astronomer was looking at two photos of star-studded skies, when he noticed a speck amongst them. It was a tiny world. He had found Pluto - for a

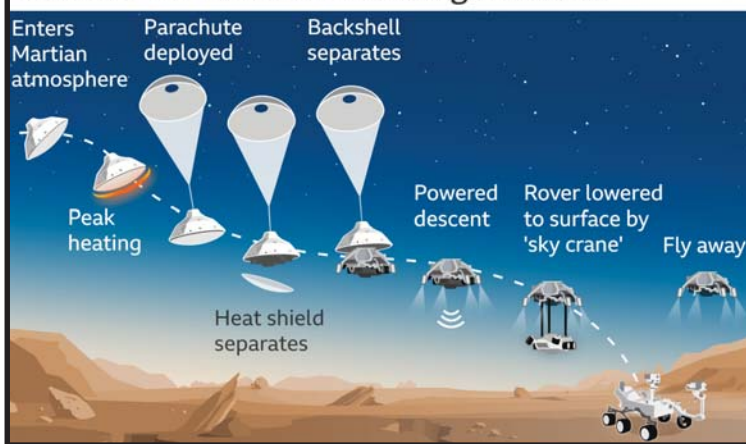


while considered the elusive planet X. Alas, it was not to be. Soon scientists realised that this could not be what Lowell was looking for - it was not nearly large enough to pull Neptune and Uranus away from their rightful positions. Pluto was just an accidental interloper, which happened to be in the area. The final blow to planet X came in

1989, when the Voyager 2 spacecraft swept by Neptune and revealed that it's fractionally lighter than anyone had originally thought. With this in mind, eventually a Nasa scientist calculated that the orbits of the outer planets had made sense all along. Lowell had instigated a search that had had never been needed.

Nasa Mars rover: Perseverance robot all set for big test

Nasa's Perseverance landing on Mars



The stakes could not be higher for the US space agency's Perseverance rover.

The six-wheeled robot is fast approaching the end of its seven-month journey from Earth and will very shortly plunge into the atmosphere of Mars.

It's got to put itself down safely on the Red Planet - a task that has befuddled so many spacecraft before it.

But if Perseverance is successful, it has an amazing opportunity to find signs of past life on Mars. Never has a science mission gone to the planet with so sophisticated a suite of instruments; never has a robot been targeted at so promising a location.

Jezero Crater, the intended touchdown zone, bears all the hallmarks in satellite imagery of once having held a giant lake. And where there's been abundant water, perhaps there's been biology as well. Perseverance will sift and drill into the sediments to

look for traces of ancient microbial activity. The most propitious examples will be packaged for return to Earth by later missions. "But before we can get that surface mission going, we have to land on Mars and that is always a challenging feat," said Matt Wallace, Nasa's deputy project manager for Perseverance.

"This is one of the most difficult manoeuvres we do in the space

business. Almost 50% of the spacecraft sent to the surface of Mars have failed, so we know we have our work cut out to get down safely at Jezero."

Perseverance is on a path to engage the Martian atmosphere late on Thursday (GMT).

It will plunge into the rarefied air at more than 20,000km/h and it will have to reduce this to near-walking pace by the time it reaches the surface - a daunting prospect that Nasa engineers half-jokingly call the "seven minutes of terror". The robot's protective capsule will do most of the work of scrubbing off the entry speed but a supersonic parachute and a rocket jetpack, or "Sky crane", will be needed for the last three minutes of braking and surface placement.

Much is made of the difficulty of mounting Mars missions, and it's true many have failed. But the statistics actually favour

Perseverance. Of the 14 landing attempts at the planet, eight have been successful - all of them American. Indeed, Nasa has only got it wrong once, way back in 1999. Engineers will be following proceedings at mission control at the Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena, California. Telemetry from the rover during its descent will be relayed by an overflying satellite - the Mars Reconnaissance Orbiter. The team will also be listening to a series of low-data tones coming back direct from the robot itself. A signal confirming touchdown should arrive at Earth at 20:55 GMT. With luck, we could even be looking at the first pictures of Jezero just a few minutes afterwards. Why is Jezero Crater so interesting? Jezero is named after a town in Bosnia-Herzegovina. In some Slavic languages the word "jezero" also means "lake" - which should

explain the fascination. This 500m-deep bowl once saw huge volumes of water flow in through the western wall to pool on the crater floor. Where the water entered, it even deposited sediments to form a delta. Perseverance will try to land next to this feature. Jezero displays multiple rock types, including clays and carbonates, that have the potential to preserve the type of organic molecules that would hint at life's bygone existence. Particularly enticing is the "bathtub ring" of sediments laid down at the ancient lake's shoreline. It's here that Perseverance could find what on Earth are called stromatolites. "In some lakes you can get microbial mats and carbonates interacting to form these big structures, these large layered mounds," explained science team-member Dr Briony Horgan from Purdue University in West Lafayette, Indiana.

What would a truly wild Ireland look like?

On a remote patch of land in the south-west of Ireland lies a precious fragment of a lost world - owned and managed by one man. Eleven years ago, Eoghan Dalton sold his house in Dublin and moved to his new home, an old farm on County Cork's rugged coast. The farm, on the Beara Peninsula, included a strip of native woodland, something that is now incredibly rare in Ireland, as well as Europe. Dalton

saw that 32-acre (13-hectare) patch of ancient trees as his very own temperate rainforest - a type of mossy forest once far more common in Britain and Ireland, made possible in part thanks to moist island air. By pulling out heaps of non-native plants, including rhododendron, and erecting a fence to keep sheep and deer from grazing the area, Dalton gave his forest a chance to flourish and expand. Life has, in fact,

exploded. In late spring, the forest becomes a sea of flowers. "It's just, it's really beautiful," Dalton says. He calls it an "ecological resurgence", explaining that there's been a noticeable increase in the presence of birds and insects, too. The picture elsewhere is less than leafy. The Republic of Ireland has the lowest forest cover of any country in Europe. It wasn't always that way. Once, 80% of the land here was covered by native

trees - the figure now just 1%. Farmland dominates, covering 72% of land in the Republic and 75% of land in Northern Ireland. For an island so often referred to as "green", there's a striking lack of wilderness. Ireland's dearth of biodiversity has long been noted, and it is getting worse. A 2019 report found that 85% of Ireland's habitats had "unfavourable" conservation status, and nearly half of habitats were in decline.

How the Maldives became the biggest 2020 international tourism success story

COURTESY: ONE&ONLY



In most destinations, being a million tourists short over the previous year would be a huge cause for concern, the result of a horrible natural disaster. But that was before 2020, and before the coronavirus pandemic changed the way we travel forever.

The Maldives, an Indian Ocean island archipelago practically synonymous with romance, normally sees north of 1.7 million visitors per year. In 2020, it had around 500,000. And despite the significant decrease, it marks one of the most successful tourism stories amid the pandemic.

While many other destinations slammed their borders closed, the Maldives chose to fully reopen to travelers from any country, regardless of the status of the virus there, in July 2020. Part of the decision was financial. According to data from Michigan State University, tourism contributes 28% of the Maldives's GDP, one of the highest totals in the world.

The country's geography also lends itself well to coronavirus protocols. Many hotels and resorts are on their own private islands -- there are more than a thousand to choose from, even before man-made islands come into the equation -- which makes isolating and social distancing exceptionally easy. Countries around Asia and the Pacific have

been more cautious about reopening than those in Europe and North America, meaning that tourists in the region had few options for places to go.

As other popular Asia-Pacific island getaways like Tahiti, Bali

only to walk it back in September by requiring all travelers to show proof of a negative Covid-19 test upon arrival.

The Maldives' heavy reliance on ultra-luxury resorts also worked in its favor when it came to

surpassing their adjusted arrival forecast of 500,000 arrivals by the end of 2020.

"Our biggest advantage is the unique geographical features of Maldives," he says, adding that the implementation of strict

destinations without encountering many -- if any -- other tourists.

Jan Tibaldi, general manager of One&Only Reethi Rah, tells CNN Travel that while they didn't have significantly more visitors in 2020 than they did in 2019, there was a massive increase in the amount of time these visitors were spending there.

"Our guests are traveling less frequently, but for longer and with more purpose," he said.

As a direct response to the increased amount of time visitors were spending in the Maldives and the fact that most people were going digital-only for work and school, the resort devised a special package for guests staying a full month. The 28-day offering includes meals, high-speed internet, wellness activities and use of a kids' club and is priced from \$42,600 for a family of four.

They weren't the only ones. The Anantara Veli dug in even further, selling "all you can stay" packages for unlimited bookings for up to a year at a cost of \$30,000. Another luxurious property, The Nautilus Maldives, promoted a "workation" package priced from \$23,250 for seven days. Still, there's no such thing as a completely positive travel story when it comes to navigating the new world under Covid.



and Phuket remained off-limits, the Maldives took advantage of the fact that they were in relatively good shape with the virus. The places that have since reopened have done so with significant caveats. For example, Thailand and Sri Lanka both require a mandatory two-week hotel quarantine before being able to travel elsewhere in-country.

Understandably, there were some hiccups. The Maldives reopened unconditionally in July,

testing and social distancing. For example, some high-end properties conduct additional in-resort Covid testing as an added layer of protection against the spread of the virus.

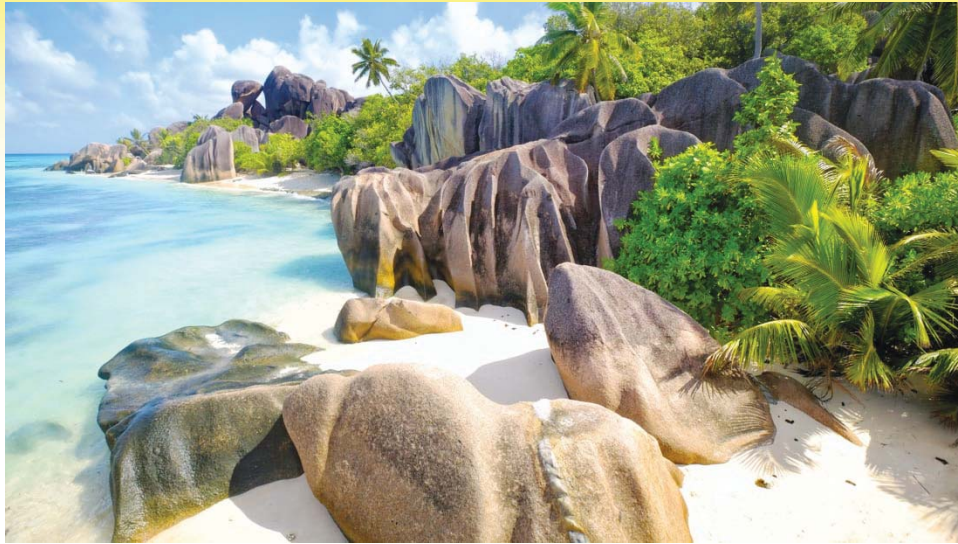
Thoyyib Mohamed is the managing director of the Maldives Marketing & PR Corporation, the country's national tourism authority.

He says that the country received a total number of 555,494 visitors in 2020,

hygiene protocols combined with the ease of spreading people on different islands made a compelling combination for travelers who wanted to get away from it all.

"We promoted the destination as a safe haven to the tourists." Infrastructure played a role as well. Many resorts have private boat or plane transfers built into their packages, meaning that visitors who arrived in the country could get to their final

The destinations open to travelers vaccinated against Covid-19



As the Covid-19 pandemic continues to wreak havoc on the travel industry, countless destinations around the world are rolling out vaccines to their most vulnerable citizens.

The UK has already vaccinated over 15 million people, while the US is currently administering 1.6 million shots a day. Meanwhile, Denmark has announced plans to launch a coronavirus digital passport by the end of February that will act as documentation the holder has been fully vaccinated against Covid-19.

Although it's worth pointing out that the main Covid vaccines are around 95% effective, which means vaccinated individuals may still become infected and spread the virus to others, there's no doubt that these

successful rollouts are a step in the right direction.

As a result, a number of destinations are choosing to either drop border restrictions for travelers who've been fully vaccinated, or ease them significantly.

From Cyprus to the Seychelles, here are seven destinations reopening to tourists who've received the Covid-19 vaccine. Back in December, Cyprus became the first destination to announce plans to allow travelers who've been fully vaccinated to enter without having to go into quarantine.

In addition, visitors who provide proof that they've received both doses of a Covid-19 vaccine will be allowed to visit without providing a negative PCR test result on arrival.

This will likely only apply to

those arriving from destinations on the country's safe travel list, which is regularly updated. However Cyprus recently agreed a deal with Israel that allows vaccinated travelers to travel between the countries without restriction.

"The amended action plan is expected to further boost the interest of airline companies to carry out additional flights to Cyprus, improve connectivity and increase passenger traffic," transport minister Yiannis Karousos told the Cyprus Mail newspaper when the plan was announced last year.

While it was previously claimed that the new rules would come into effect on March 1, this not been confirmed by government officials as yet.

Currently travelers who are permitted to visit Cyprus have

the option to either provide a negative PCR test taken within 72 hours before travel, or undergo a test on arrival.

They must then go into quarantine for two weeks in government-assigned accommodation. The isolation period can be shortened slightly if travelers undergo a molecular test on their tenth day of quarantine at their own expense and receive a negative result.

Estonia - Estonia hasn't just dropped mandatory quarantine requirements for EU travelers, it's also relinquished them for those with evidence proving they've recovered from Covid-19 in the past six months. The European country is also accepting those with vaccinations from nine suppliers across the world rather than just Moderna,

Pfizer-BioNTech or Oxford-AstraZeneca, the three that have been approved by the European Union. Only vaccination certificates produced in Estonian, Russian or English will be recognized and visitors who've previously had Covid will need to submit a doctor's certificate, as well as a recent PCR test indicating they are no longer infected with the virus. "This is to show mutual solidarity. If we take into account vaccines in use in other countries, we could hope that vaccines in use in our country will also be taken into account in other countries," Hanna Sepp, head of the country's Infectious Diseases Surveillance and Epidemic Control Department, told Estonia television organization ERR News.

Zannone: Italy's forbidden 'orgy island'

With emerald-green waters, blue skies and a rugged empty landscape, Zannone has everything you'd expect from a near-deserted Italian island destination. It also has a reputation for something rather more unexpected: Orgies.

"See that white colonial villa up high there?" says former fisherman Giorgio Aniello as he points a rough finger at a clifftop villa overlooking the Tyrrhenian Sea. "That's where the Marquis Casati Stampa held lavish sex parties."

Aniello is a regular visitor to Zannone, taking tourists on boat trips to the wildest atoll among the Pontine archipelago off the west coast of Italy. The big attraction, aside from the island's natural beauty, is its dark, sexy past, most of which centers around the Marquis and

his wife, Anna Fallarino, a former actress.

"He was a lewd man, a voyeur who liked to watch and photograph his starlet wife get kinky having sex with other younger guys," Aniello adds, enjoying spinning R-rated tales as he navigates a maze of reddish-yellow cliffs, old stone fisheries and sea stacks.

"Then one day he got fed up of the threesome, shot the two lovers and killed himself."

Skinny-dipping

During the 1960s, Zannone -- translated as "big bang" in Italian -- was a secret vacation retreat that the chic and sexually adventurous aristocratic couple had rented from the state.

"The nobleman went hunting while his beautiful wife killed time doing different activities," says Aniello.

These, he adds, included skinny

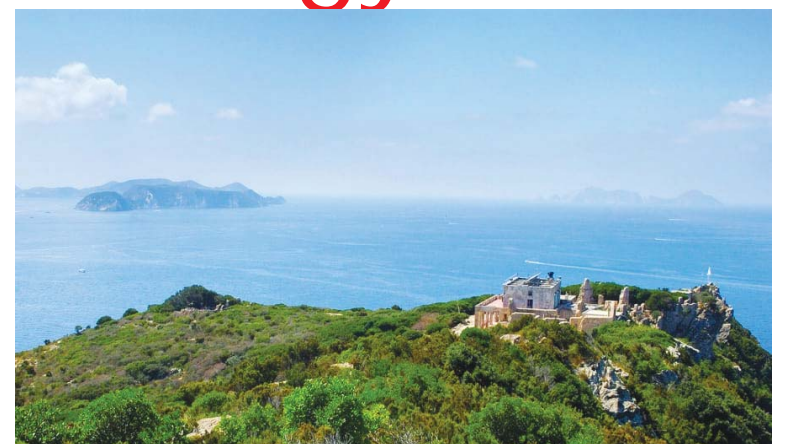
dipping in ancient Roman pools and entertaining herself on the beach with other men.

The isle's isolation made it a perfect place to host masked parties that would culminate in debauched scenes reminiscent of Stanley Kubrick's "Eyes Wide Shut." And its exotic setting matched the provocative nude photographs of Anna taken by her husband.

Graveyard of bottles

Dozens of yachts and motorboats would land during weekends as dukes, barons, countesses, VIPs and billionaires dropped by.

Guests and hosts drank heavily. During recent maintenance work, heaps of broken bottles and glass shards were found buried in the ground by local authorities. According to rumors, the villa also featured a "hidden mirror room" to spy on



heavy sex sessions.

"The villa was a hot jet-society get-together," recalls former caretaker Salvatore Pagano, an old Zannone sea dog who once lived next door to the marquises. "It was crazy here."

Residents living on nearby Ponza island, from where today's guided tours depart, still recall the scandalous couple. "We all knew what was happening there," says tourist

guide Riccardo Peci. "It was dubbed the 'sex parties isle,' but nobody ever uttered a word about it back then."

Open secret

"It's what we call a Pulcinella's secret," he adds, meaning everyone knew. Then things ran out of control.

The erotic games ended in bloodshed in 1970 when Anna fell in love with one of her many handsome lovers.

Britain's Cairn Files Case at US Court To Get India To Pay Dues



British energy major Cairn Energy had won an international arbitration case against India's govt over a tax dispute.

British firm Cairn Energy has filed a case at a district court in the United States (US) for the enforcement of a \$1.2 billion arbitration award that it won against India, reported Reuters, citing a court document. This, according to Reuters, comes in an intensification of

pressure on the Indian government to pay its dues. The arbitration award has been won in a tax dispute, reported Reuters. The court filing, accessed by Reuters, reportedly shows that Cairn plans to enforce the arbitral award under the international arbitration rules, commonly known as the 'New York Convention', and recover losses that have occurred due to India's "unfair and inequitable treatment of their

investments". WHAT HAD HAPPENED? As per Reuters, an arbitration body had awarded Cairn damages of \$1.2 billion plus interest and costs, ruling that India had breached an investment treaty with Britain and therefore was liable to pay. Cairn, according to Reuters, has now asked the United States to recognise and confirm the award including payments that have been due since 2014 and interest compounded semi-

annually. A source with knowledge of the case reportedly said to Reuters: Previously, in January, Reuters had reported that Cairn was identifying India's overseas assets. Declining to give a comment to Reuters, Cairn did point to a 9 February Twitter post, which said that Chief Executive Officer Simon Thomson was looking forward to meeting India's Finance Minister in Delhi "next week".

Kishore Biyani's stress test

From having to sell his business to facing legal challenges on his deal with Reliance and a one-year ban from the capital markets, retail icon Kishore Biyani finds himself indistinctly inglorious circumstances.



JOURNEY OF A RETAILER

1987: Biyani enters the apparel business by launching the **Manz Wear brand**, later renamed Pantaloon

1992: He lists **Pantaloon Retail** on the stock market

2001: Plans diversification, **sets up Big Bazaar** grocery stores

2012: Sells his majority stake in Pantaloon Retail to Aditya Birla Nuvo, with the latter investing **Rs 1,600 crore** in the firm

2015: Launches white-label FMCG products under **Future Consumer Enterprises**, allowing shoppers to shop from anywhere and take deliveries anywhere

2016: Forays into consumer goods by launching **27 private labels** in 64 categories

Dec 2019: Amazon acquires 49 per cent in Future Coupons, a promoter group entity of Future Retail, for around **Rs 2,000 crore**

Aug 2020: Future Retail sells its retail, wholesale, logistics and warehousing units to Reliance Retail for **Rs 24,713 crore**

Oct 2020: Following an appeal by Amazon, a single bench of the Singapore International Arbitration Centre bars Future Retail from taking any step to sell its assets to another party

2021

Feb 2: A single bench of the **Delhi High Court orders a freeze** on the Future-Retail deal

Feb 3: Sebi bars Biyani, his brother Anil, and a few others from the stock market for a year in an insider trading case dating back to 2017

Feb 8: A two-judge bench of the Delhi High Court stays the order of the single bench. **The next hearing of the case is slated for February 26**

Kishore Biyani, 59, CEO of the Future Group, whose name became a byword for corporate innovation, is also a close observer of human psychology, a street-smart entrepreneur who often ignored PowerPoint presentations and instead backed his business instincts. Often called the pioneer of organised retail in India, Biyani consistently bet on the Indian consumer's penchant for physical shopping before the onslaught of online retail shook up his business empire. The Republic Day sales of Big Bazaar, his grocery retail chain, regularly attracted tens of thousands, to the point that in some cases, as he wrote in his 2007 memoir *It Happened in India*, the fear was not running low on stocks but the safety of shoppers. In time, Big Bazaar became a hugely popular one-stop shop for the Indian middle

class. As the popularity of Big Bazaar soared, Biyani's ambitions took wing, too. However, the e-tail boom disrupted his business, compelling him to overhaul the group in 2015. More recently, the Covid pandemic played havoc with his offline business model. Forced to strike a deal with Reliance Retail to sell the family silver, Biyani now finds himself in a legal quagmire, with e-tail giant Amazon challenging the deal in a Singapore court. In a far cry from the accolades he won at the height of his career, he now faces a one-year ban from the bourses-market regulator Sebi (Securities and Exchange Board of India) has pressed insider trading charges in a 2017 case, an order he has challenged.

Big Bazaar made Biyani an icon in the retail business, but that was not his starting point. After dabbling in his family's fabric trading business in Mumbai (his

grandfather had moved there from Rajasthan's Nimbi Jodha to open a textile shop), he ventured into making fashion-ready fabric in 1983. The Manz Wear brand he launched in 1987 would later become Pantaloon. In 1992, he listed Pantaloon Retail on the stock market to fund his expansion plans. In 2012, as the debt pile kept mounting, he sold his majority stake in Pantaloon Retail to Aditya Birla Nuvo for Rs 1,600 crore. What remained were Big Bazaar, Central, Ezone, Brand Factory and HomeTown brands. "What worked for him (in the early years) was that his group was willing to try out different [business] concepts and did not shy away from failure," says Devangshu Dutta, CEO of Third Eyesight, a consultancy. This innovative spirit gave the Future Group a bigger footprint than many others. Balancing the

raising of capital, deploying it into ventures and figuring out which ones worked and which didn't was a tough juggling act, which Biyani managed well. But fresh trouble was in the offing. The e-commerce challenge After a decade of high growth, the Future Group's business began to slow post 2010. The success of e-tailers such as Flipkart, Snapdeal and Amazon, on the back of discounts and doorstep-delivery convenience, was a big threat. So was the growth of rival Reliance Retail. Biyani had no option but to shake his firm out of slumber in 2015, with new initiatives he said would mark the group's 'rebirth', white-label FMCG products under Future Consumer Enterprises, allowing shoppers to shop from anywhere and take deliveries anywhere, and so on. (Under the white label strategy, products made by one company would be packaged and sold by other companies under various brand names.) Over the next few years, Biyani, who prefers to be spartan in his personal life and has a connect with his staff due to his accessibility, continued to increase his store count, taking the number to 1,800 across formats, from apparel and lifestyle to groceries. Flush with funds from banks, he acquired as many as six companies in the past seven years to expand his reach. By 2019-20, revenues from the business he ultimately sold to Reliance Retail stood at Rs 28,272 crore. But his debt was mounting too. Future Retail's debt, which Reliance took over

as part of the deal, stood at Rs 19,000 crore. The final blow came in the form of the pandemic, halting his business and pushing him closer to defaulting on his loans. The absence of an e-commerce arm closed all doors on his business. The deal that Biyani stuck with Reliance Retail during the pandemic was just what the doctor ordered. Mukesh Ambani, 63, chairman of India's largest private sector firm Reliance Industries, harboured big ambitions in e-tail but had little to boast of in offline retail except for electronics (comprising three-fourths of Reliance Retail's stores and giving it Rs 45,000 crore in annual sales). He found in Future Group the perfect platform for his retail play. Many feel that at Rs 24,713 crore, the deal came cheap for Ambani, but Biyani could not have asked for better. While valuations have been soaring for e-commerce players and have attracted global giants such as Amazon and Walmart to the Indian market, there are not many takers for brick-and-mortar businesses, especially during a pandemic that caused almost total economic paralysis. In short, Ambani was nothing less than a saviour for Biyani. The deal was a steal for Ambani. When complete, it would create a Rs 1.2 lakh crore business for him, four times bigger than Reliance Retail's nearest rival, Avenue Supermart, which runs the popular DMart stores.

Eeb Allay Ooo! movie review:

An absurdist gem; one of the best Hindi debuts in years is now on Netflix

Eeb Allay Ooo! movie review: Shardul Bhardwaj embodies the desperate dignity of a migrant worker in Prateek Vats' stunning social satire, now available on Netflix.

Eeb Allay Ooo!

Director - Prateek Vats

Cast - Shardul Bhardwaj, Shashi Bhushan, Nutan Sinha, Naina Sareen, Nitin Goel

The absurdity of Eeb Allay Ooo! is established in its opening frames. A man looks directly into the camera and makes strange noises - he sounds like a yodeller that just burned his hand. It's the sort of scene that could induce giggles, but also an odd desire to stifle them. The man's job, we are told, is to shoo away monkeys from perhaps the most fortified area in India - Lutyens' Delhi. These monkeys aren't democratically elected, but they've certainly been put on a pedestal. And it is the job of a group of young men, including our protagonist Anjani, to shriek at them until they go away. We never see this, but you could al-

most imagine the 'sarkari babus' sitting in their offices, annoyed at the sounds of monkeys and migrants on the streets below. To them, it's all just noise; it doesn't matter who's making it. Played by Shardul Bhardwaj, Anjani is new to the Capital. He lives across the river - or, 'jamna paar', as it is colloquially known - with his sister and her husband, in a slum way beyond NDMC lines. Like the millions of men and women who keep the Centre of Power running, he is an outsider from another state. Eeb Allay Ooo! is about his Kafkaesque metamorphosis into a primate, willed along by those who refuse to perceive him as anything else. Anjani probably didn't imagine he'd be chasing monkeys when he came to Delhi dreaming of a better life. He recognises the inherent ridiculousness of the job that he's

stumbled into, and that is key. Anjani never fully accepts that this is what he is supposed to be doing, and Bhardwaj, through his performance, never stops rattling the cage that society has confined him in.

Religion, and not basic decency, is the primary reason why Indians revere so many animals. There are temples here in which rats are respected; there are communities that worship dogs. And the reason why Delhi has such a rampant monkey problem, as an orientation video that Anjani is shown reasons, is because people, in fits of blind faith, have been feeding them leftovers. Having been given this vote of confidence, the monkeys of Lutyens' Delhi terrorise the citizenry. They have, Anjani learns, developed a sense of entitlement. In one scene, he timidly ap-



proaches a man who is leaving some food out for the pests. "If you feed them, they'll come back," he says, a hint of exasperation in his voice. The man, like so many men in Delhi, counters by flaunting his made-up credentials, and threatening to complain to Anjani's boss. This is a tremendous directorial debut by Prateek Vats, among the finest our country has seen since Kanu Behl's Titli half-a-decade ago. Incidentally, both films are among the most keenly observed depictions of New Delhi - perhaps one of the most cinematic cities in the world, but

rarely ever depicted as such. Thanks to recent shows such as Paatal Lok and Delhi Crime, the city's reputation as a smog-covered cesspool of blowhards has, unfortunately for the time being, been cemented. While most of Eeb Allay Ooo! plays out along the broad, tree-lined avenues of Central Delhi, there is a visible change in tone and colour palette when Anjani trudges back home, on the outskirts - sometimes on foot, and on one unforgettable occasion, on the Barapullah flyover at night-time. He belongs neither here nor there.

Kutty Story movie review:

Anthology with quirky ideas but problematic execution



Kutty Story is a cocktail of love stories with some quirky twists. Except for Nalan's refreshing short on male insecurity in a marriage, other shorts come across as promising but never work wholesomely.

Kutty Story Director: Gautham Menon, Vijay, Venkat Prabhu and Nalan Kumaraswamy

Cast: Amala Paul, Gautham Menon, Vinoth Kishan, Megha Akash, Amitash Pradhan, Sakshi Aggarwal, Sangeetha, Aditi Balan and Vijay Sethupathi

It suddenly feels like the season of anthologies. After Putham Pudhu Kaalai and Paava Kadhaigal, Kutty Story is the latest anthology to come out of Tamil cinema. It's also the first Tamil anthology film featuring four directors to release in cinemas. Headlined by some really popular Tamil

filmmakers such as Gautham Menon, Vijay, Venkat Prabhu and Nalan Kumaraswamy, Kutty Story is a cocktail of love stories with some quirky twists. Except for Nalan's refreshing short on male insecurity in a marriage, other shorts come across as promising but never work wholesomely.

Gautham Menon's short talks about platonic relationships. Throughout the course of the short, we hear dialogues like a man and a woman can never be friends. The story is centered on Adhi (Vinoth) and Mrinalini (Amala Paul) who've been friends for the longest time but

they've shared one intimate moment many years ago. Adhi continues to believe that he and Mrinalini have always maintained a platonic relationship and have been well aware of the invisible line that differentiates friendship and love. However, many years later, both of them realize they had feelings for each other but it's too late to do anything about it. If there's one Tamil filmmaker who has championed the urban romance space, it is undoubtedly Gautham Menon. His mature take on platonic relationship - which is rarely discussed at length in Tamil cinema - deserves praise and he extracts beautiful performances from his lead cast, especially from Amala Paul. But Gautham's effort to commercialize the story with the help of Robo Shankar's comedy is probably why the short is problematic. Gautham

preempts audiences' reaction and conveys it through the scenes featuring Robo Shankar, who jokes about how a boy can kiss a girl on her cheek when they're having an intimate moment and not take it all the way. These scenes take away all the sensibility out of Gautham's intent to talk maturely about platonic relationships and it gets flat-out annoying after a point.

Vijay's short about unplanned pregnancy could've been handled in a better way. To some extent the story takes a mature stand on the topic but the ending is a major disappointment. It leaves one confused about the filmmaker's stand on pregnancy and abortion. The short features Amitash and Megha Akash in the lead and it's the latter who impresses here. Venkat Prabhu's short is about two avid gamers who fall in love without

seeing each other. It's easily the most creative idea of the lot, and it makes for an interesting watch. It features extensive footage of gaming animation, and we see two characters bonding over a game. The exciting premise doesn't translate into an engaging story with characters worth rooting. The twist in the climax is slightly underwhelming, too. Nalan Kumaraswamy's short about a couple during the pandemic is easily the best segment of the anthology. It talks about male insecurity when a husband, who is confronted by his wife for cheating on her, learns that she has cheated on him many years ago. The short talks about the element of sanctity in a marriage and how it applies to both husband and the wife. Nalan takes a very bold approach but his treatment is light-hearted, as it leaves one chuckling away right till the end.

Parineeti Chopra felt like she 'was playing five girls in one' in The Girl on the Train

Bollywood star Parineeti Chopra says actors tend to get cast based on their previous work when all they want is to do roles where they can "change things up" and surprise viewers. The 32-year-old actor said she was not the obvious choice for her upcoming thriller *The Girl on the Train*, which is why it felt liberating to play Mira Kapoor, a complex woman struggling with grief and alcoholism, in the thriller. "It is rare to get roles that you might have not played before because people tend to cast you for the things that they have seen on-screen. So when you're writing a script, you go 'Oh I want this character, so let's go to that actor because that person has done it in a film'," Chopra told PTI in a Zoom interview.

"The habit is to go that person who you've seen do that part before. But actors are in search for something they haven't done before, what other actors are known for," Chopra said. *The Girl on the Train*, written by Paula Hawkins, has already been adapted in Hollywood in 2016

Parineeti Chopra said that her role in *The Girl on the Train* is different from anything she has done before. She expressed her gratitude to be offered the film.

with actor Emily Blunt playing the lead role. Chopra, who has featured in romantic dramas such as *Ishaqzaade*, *Shuddh Desi Romance*, *Hasee Toh Phasee* and *Meri Pyaari Bindu*, said she saw the role as a big opportunity in her career. "I was grateful that the makers had that confidence in me that I would be able to do this part. I was not the obvious casting for the role, that for me was a big achievement."

In an industry which relies on convenient casting, the actor said roles such as *The Girl on the Train* must be acknowledged. "Not everybody gets a mixed bag of offers. Everybody tends to get something in the same world. We must be grateful for opportunities like these, where you can change things up and surprise people," she said.



Deepika Padukone joins Pawri Hori Hai trend, shares fan-made collage with her childhood pic: 'Who made this?'

Deepika Padukone has joined the 'pawri' trend. She posted a fan-made collage with a childhood picture of her.



Deepika Padukone is the latest celebrity to take part in the 'Pawri Hori Hai' trend that has swept the internet. She shared a collage of one of childhood pictures. Sharing it, she wrote: "Who made this?" The picture showed a collage of three pictures - the first one is a closeup of her, with text that read, "yeh hum hain", the second one shows the same picture, zoomed out, with her on a wooden horse. It read "yeh

hamara ghoda hain" and third picture's text says "aur hamari pawri ho rahi hain". Quite clearly it was big hit with her fans; one said "super" while another said "u r so cute". A third person wrote: "Excellent mam.. Aap bhi pawri kar rahi ho." On the work front, Deepika will be seen next in Kabir Khan's 83, where she will appear in a supporting role, playing cricketing legend Kapil Dev's wife, Romi Dev. Her husband

actor Ranveer Singh will play Kapil in the film, which is based on India's surprise win at the 1983 Cricket World Cup. Since September last year, she has been shooting for Shakun Batra's untitled next with Siddhant Chaturvedi and Ananya Panday. Talking about the film, Deepika had

described it as domestic noir. He had told Hindustan Times, "To be honest, you can't call Shakun's film 'light' either... Although the overall tonality of the film is slightly lighter than my last film, in terms of inner, emotional turmoil my character goes through, it's quite challenging."

The overall genre of the film is something we haven't seen much in Indian cinema, it's called domestic noir."

Kylie Jenner's BFF Stassie Karanikolaou poses on a bed in lacy pink lingerie as she suggestively beckons 'come back to bed'



Kylie Jenner's 'ride or die' BFF Anastasia 'Stassiebaby' Karanikolaou seemed to be feeling a little frisky on Thursday.

The 23-year-old Instagram model shared two snaps as she laid on a bed while posing in lacy pink lingerie, penning a suggestive caption 'come back to bed.'

A myriad of suitors in her comments section, Stassie had many eager takers despite being linked in recent months to actor Noah Centineo.

In the busty snaps Stassie arched her back in the fuschia lingerie set as she flaunted her curves.

She wore her seductively tousled brown tresses down, resting her hand on her hip to draw more attention to her backside.

Just another day in the office, she tagged an influencer-centric brand in the post - the sexy snaps being her version of work. Earlier in the day she modeled a Fashion Nova set and drank a green juice.

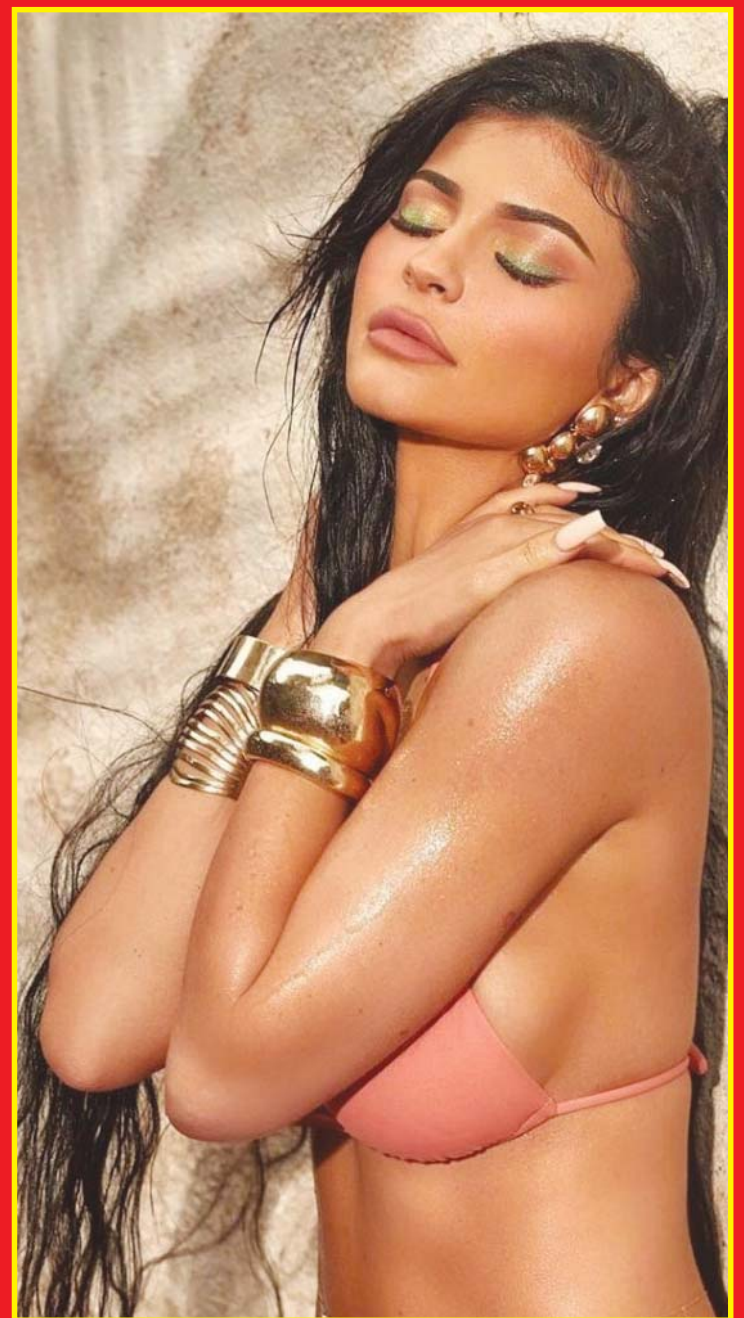
Absent from the social media engagement was her purported beau Centineo (To All The Boys I've Loved Before) who she has been linked to since October when they packed on the PDA on Halloween.

Kendall Jenner was quick to like the photo as she supported her good pal's 'thirst trap' - one way to repay Stassie for supporting her 818 Tequila venture.

Recently accompanying Kylie and Kendall on a vacation to Jalisco, Mexico - the location of 818's distillery - Stassie was one of the first to try the elusive product.

The family and their friends had been coyly teasing the product on social media for months, as the influencer posed with one of the bottles in the background at their luxury villa. Eagle-eye fans were quick to notice a pattern upon seeing the bottle floating around their close inner circle, with many even suspecting that the tequila was Kylie and Stassie's joint venture.

Finally debuting the product and her ownership over 818 on Tuesday, Stassie and other pals were seen cheering Kendall on as she brought them a bottle before they all took shots. Stassie congratulated her best friend's sister as she wrote 'Congrats Kenny!!! so excited for people to try!' Despite overwhelming praise from those closest to her, the model was met with



backlash from many members of the LatinX and Mexican communities, as social media users called her a 'colonizer' with no knowledge of Mexican heritage or the product's history. People were quick to slam Jenner for the incorrect bottle label that should have read 'tequila blanco' per the Spanish language, with others saying that

it was 'white-washed' for her to name a Jalisco-based product after her Calabasas area code. She announced the product on Tuesday calling it a four-year 'journey to create the best tasting tequila,' as she was seen comparing two products before deciding on her winner - the new go-to KarJenner drink of choice.

Roohi's rocking trailer makes B-town want to rush to cinemas!

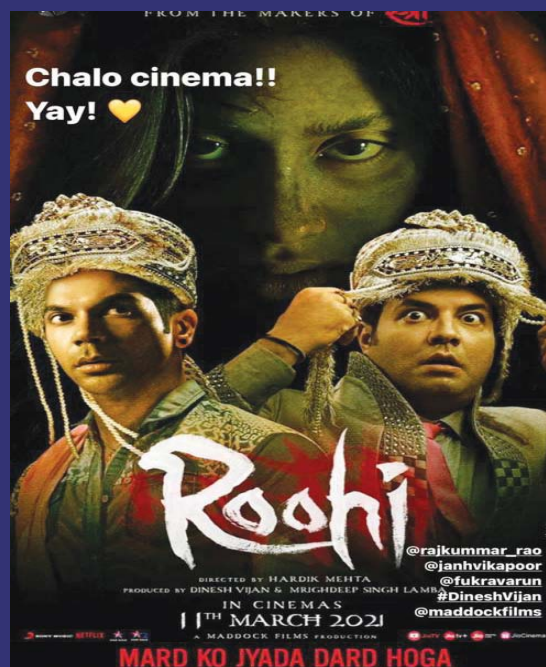
It's been a while since a film has sent social media into a tizzy, but the Roohi trailer has managed to do just that, and more!

The moment the horror comedy's promo dropped online, B-town joined hands to cheer for the Rajkummar Rao - Janhvi Kapoor - Varun Sharma starrer.

As the film marks Bollywood's triumphant return to the bada parda, a visibly excited Varun Dhawan took to Instagram to declare he "Can't wait to visit a cinema and watch Roohi", Sonakshi Sinha exclaimed that "This is gonna be one spooky and fun ride!"

It's not just them! Sonu Ke Titu Ki Sweety star Nushratt Bharuccha showered praises on funny man Varun Sharma and Rajkummar's epic "bromance", and Housefull 4 fame Kriti Kharbanda was bowled over by the trailer too.

B-towners such as Ayushmann Khurrana, Kriti Sanon, Vicky Kaushal, Aparshakti Khurana, Jacqueline Fernandez, Radhika Madan, Mouni Roy



and director Amar Kaushik also have shared their love for the trailer online.

The film follows the eerie yet hilarious misadventures of Bhaura (Rao) and Kattanni (Sharma), as they cross paths with a mysterious girl named Roohi (Kapoor) in a creepy jungle. They are not alone though, as a scary bhoot also tags along for the ride!

With the trailer already nearing 12 million views and counting, producer Dinesh Vijan says, "The biggest wins of this trailer is that everyone, right from the film industry to true blue cinephiles are looking forward to catch Roohi on the big screen"

Looks like the makers of Roohi are all set to welcome audiences back to the cinemas with a "paisa vasool" bang. Jio Studios & Dinesh Vijan present, Roohi. A Maddock Films production, Produced by Dinesh Vijan and Mrighdeep Singh Lamba, directed by Hardik Mehta starring Rajkummar Rao, Varun Sharma and Janhvi Kapoor, releasing 11th March 2021.



How Covid-19 could make Americans healthier

(SAI Bureau)- If you tried to design a weapon customized to exploit every weakness in the U.S. health care system, you might have come up with SARS-CoV-2: the novel coronavirus.

The pandemic caused by that spiky virus, now in its second year, has rampaged across the country in part because our disease defense system - the critical but neglected discipline known as "public health" - has been so starved of resources for so long that it had been effectively dismantled before the coronavirus arrived. Without robust disease surveillance, stockpiles of emergency equipment and a skilled public health work force, we were all but defenseless. As a result, for the past year, Americans have watched as their vaunted health care system, with its massive hospitals, top-flight surgeons and expensive technology, struggled



against an enemy best fought with low-tech measures like wearing face masks and staying home. We knew our health care system had deep flaws: Too little emphasis on prevention and primary care. Clunky data systems. A porous mental health system. Deep health disparities, arising from poverty, racism and decades of neglect. High costs. Uneven quality. And despite the gains of Obamacare, a lot of people who still can't get affordable care at all. And under it all, there was a deep, dangerous erosion in the social foundation of public health: trust. Trust in science, in medicine, in expertise, in government and in one another. Our national lack of trust will make recovery and rebuilding from Covid-19 that much harder. "This pandemic has really exposed the failures of our health care system," said Rep. Raul Ruiz (D-Calif.), a

(Contd on page 36)

The Cryptic Craze About Crypto



(SAI Bureau)- Bitcoin prices have shot up from less than USD 20,000 to over USD 48,000 in the last three months. This is a humungous growth for any asset class. Bitcoin falls under the asset-class that is called crypto, which is short for cryptocurrency. But then why is the Indian government planning to pass a regulation that bans Indians from owning and trading in Bitcoins and all other cryptocurrencies? To understand the government's position, one has to understand the nature of "cryptocurrencies".

(Contd on page 36)

'Recipe for disaster': Dem fears mount over immigration overhaul



(SAI Bureau)- Democrats in Texas and other states where immigration has been a lightning rod issue are growing increasingly uneasy that the White House is walking into a political buzz saw in its zeal to unwind hard-line Trump administration policies. Biden has not yet implemented expansive policy changes. The vast majority of migrants arriving at the U.S.-Mexico border are still being turned away. Deportations are still taking place and there's still no pathway to citizenship for undocumented immigrants. But the softer rhetoric and modest changes announced so far by the Biden administration -

(Contd on page 35)

Texas governor says he is responsible for the status of ERCOT, vows reforms

(SAI Bureau)- Texas Gov. Greg Abbott continued to slam the Electric Reliability Council of Texas (ERCOT) on Thursday for what he says are failures to prepare the state for the winter storm that has left thousands freezing in the dark without running water. But the governor also said he had the responsibility to ensure the nonprofit company functions properly and he vowed reforms. ERCOT, which operates the state's power grid, said five days before the storm it was ready for the incoming storm, Abbott said at a press conference. The company's winter assessment assured the public there would be enough power to get through winter and it issued a notice to power plants to ensure they were winterized properly, Abbott said.



(Contd on page 35)

(Contd on page 35)

Petrol at Rs 100: Can India reduce its dependency on imported crude oil?

(SAI Bureau)- After petrol price crossed Rs 100 per litre in some parts of the country, Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Wednesday said India's middle class would not have been burdened by this if previous governments had focussed on reducing India's energy import dependence.

"Can we be so import-dependent? I don't want to criticise anyone but I want to say (that) had we focussed on this subject earlier, our middle-class would not have been burdened," he said at an inauguration function in Tamil Nadu. His statement comes at a time when fuel prices are hitting fresh highs on a daily basis.

(Contd on page 35)

