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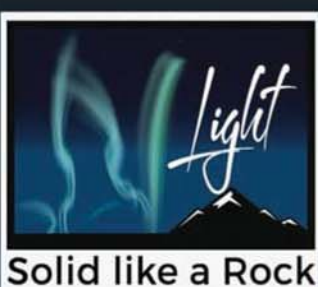
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Two Business Owners charged with \$2.6 Million Fraud against New York State insurance Fund

Both Businesses and Its Owners Charged with Grand Larceny; The NYSIF Disburses Money to Employees Receiving Workers Compensation; Defendants Face Between Prison if Convicted

Queens District insurance for their much- needed Attorney Melinda Katz, joined by Superintendent of the New York State Department of Financial Services Linda A. Lacewell and New York State Inspector General Letizia Tagliafierro, today announced that Manuel Sanchez and his business Lagos Construction have been charged with grand larceny and other crimes for allegedly failing to pay insurance premiums of more than \$2 million for workers' compensation insurance covering employees. A second business owner, Rosa Rodriguez, and her company, Encinos Construction, have also been charged with grand larceny for allegedly concealing \$3 million in revenue during their audits with New York State Insurance Fund and allegedly defrauding the Fund of more than \$460,000 in insurance premiums. District Attorney Katz said, "Employees depend on the worker's compensation insurance for their much- needed wages and medical care when they are injured on the job. This is a promise that must be kept to our hard- working labor force. These two employers allegedly pocketed money that should have helped fund the insurance program. This is unacceptable. I want to thank my law enforcement partners for their diligence investigating these two cases. Both defendants will be held accountable." NYSDFS Superintendent Lacewell said, "Instead of doing the right thing to provide hard-earned benefits to employees during this difficult time, these two employers allegedly pursued insurance fraud for their own benefit. Insurance fraud not only hits the bottom line of insurance companies, it also hits the pocketbooks of consumers through higher premiums. I commend the joint investigative efforts of DFS and our law enforcement counterparts."

Inspector General Tagliafierro said, "The workers' compensation system exists to protect employees - and their employers - should they get injured while on-the-job. It is unacceptable that companies would fail to protect their employees and flout the law. That is why we continue to vigorously pursue and investigate fraud and abuse in the workers' compensation system across New York State. These individuals and their companies will now be held responsible for their deception thanks to the great work of District Attorney Katz's office and our partners in law enforcement." Sanchez, 50, of 100th Street in East Elmhurst, and his business, Lagos Construction Corporation, also on 100th Street, were arraigned late yesterday before Queens Criminal Court Judge Scott Dunn on a complaint charging them with grand larceny in the first degree, insurance

fraud in the first degree, falsifying business records in the first degree, offering a false instrument for filing in the first degree and fraudulent practice. Judge Dunn ordered defendant Sanchez to return to Court on March 3, 2021. If convicted, Sanchez faces up to 8 1/3 to 25 years in prison.

According to the charges, Lagos Construction was a policyholder with NYSIF, which provided workers compensation benefits for the business's employees. Between April 2014 and April 2018, NYSIF conducted four audits conducted on Lagos Construction's business records to verify the appropriate amount Lagos should pay in premiums to the Fund. The audits included a review of the company's checkbooks, banks statements, contracts, tax returns, unemployment insurance reports and other documents. It is alleged that Sanchez and the business falsified records and underreported the amount of business it conducted in order to avoid paying \$2.2 million in insurance premiums.

Defendant Rodriguez, 37, of 112th Street in Corona and her company Encinos Construction Corporation, also on 112th Street, were arraigned last Tuesday night before Queens Criminal Court Judge Eugene Guarino on a complaint charging them with grand larceny in the second degree, insurance fraud in the second degree, falsifying business records in the first degree, offering a false instrument for filing in the first degree and fraudulent practices. Judge Guarino order Rodriguez to return to Court on March 3, 2021. If convicted, Rodriguez faces up to between 5 to 15 years in prison.

According to the charges, an audit of Encinos Construction's books and records from October 2015 through August 2017 allegedly showed Rodriguez and her company concealed revenue totaling \$3 million and therefore defrauded NYSIF of more than \$460,000 plus interest in insurance premiums.

Telangana Man, 38, Run Over By Train In New Jersey



A 38-year-old man from Praveen Desini's family in Telangana was run over by a train in New Jersey's Edison on Wednesday. The incident took place when Praveen Desini, a pharma sector employee, was on his way to work in New York. It was not immediately clear as to how he got on the railway track. An MBA graduate, Praveen Desini was working in the US for the last five years. His wife and 3-year-old son were living in the US with him. His body has been kept at the Middlesex Regional Medical Examiner in New Jersey. Praveen Desini's family in Telangana's Warangal was informed about his death on Wednesday. According to Gofundme.com page, created to provide financial assistance to Praveen Desini's family, he was the youngest among three brothers and his father is a retired Panchayati Raj department employee. The note said that Praveen Desini's remains will be transported to his hometown for his family to bid their final proceedings. The note further describes Praveen Desini as an "easy going, jovial personality".



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An Interfaith & Cross-Cultural Wedding of The Sidanas



By Amarjit Singh



The *Anand Kaaraj*, the BLISSFUL ceremony (as per Sikh-wedding rites) of Puneet Singh Sidana & Erica Kaur Sidana (nee Diaz) was solemnized and celebrated, by their families and friends, at Gurdwara Mata Sahib Kaur, in Glen Cove, New York, on Wednesday, November 11, 2020.

The groom is an adherent of Sikhism, a religion originating in the Punjab region of India, in the year 1469, with the *Blessed Advent of Guru Nanak Sahib Jee*. The bride is an adherent of Catholicism and was born in the United States. Her parents were born in the Dominican Republic.

I asked them how and where did they meet, the first time and in what year. Erica says "Puneet and I met in October of 2014. We connected on an online-dating app., and met near

Puneet's college campus at St. John's University". The young couple are extremely passionate and resolute about contributing their share of selfless-service, as part of giving back to the community.

Queried about their commonalities of interests, Erica said "since the onset of our relationship, both of us knew we had a passion to help build a better world, through love and compassion towards others. We have a strong desire to promote a healthy and humble lifestyle amongst all human beings. One of our very first conversations included our perspectives on helping shelter and feed the people of this world".

I have known the grandfather and father of Mr. Sidana, since November of 1996, the month of my arrival here from New Delhi. So, I am absolutely certain that the entire family is very steadfast

and very deeply-rooted in Sikh traditions and heritage, although I can, also, say with an equal degree of confidence, that they are, simultaneously, not fanatically rigid.

So, I asked the couple about whether, during their early dating days or months, as the case may be, either or both ever fear that family-elders of either or both would discourage or would not easily accept this matrimonial alliance.

Erica told me "I had met Puneet's parents early on in our relationship. Within the first month of dating, he had introduced me, to his parents, as a close friend. They were quite open to the idea of Puneet dating a woman outside of the Sikh culture. Yet, on the other hand, I was a bit skeptical about introducing Puneet to my family. I was not sure how they would react to me dating, especially someone who was

culturally different from our family. Due to this, I had introduced Puneet, several months later, once I knew we were fond of one another and could see a future together".

I asked them about ways in which one was influenced or impacted by the other, pertaining to overcoming differences in religion and culture. Of course, language barriers did not exist, as both could easily communicate in English, through which the entire world is connected.

Puneet Singh said "Erica Kaur and I always took everything, day by day. We grew with each other, from young college students to young adults. The differences in religion and culture gave us new perspectives in looking at life and the world. It influenced us to love everyone and treat everyone equally. Erica was not culturally aware of Sikhism, at first. She had grown up with other kids who were

of Sikh faith and held the Singh last name, but she had no knowledge of the religion. Once I had spoken about my family and our faith, was when she was formally introduced to Sikhism. And as it turned out, the more she learned, the more she realized that her inner morals aligned well, with the Sikh values and way of life".

Puneet Singh Sidana had, in the year 2008 cut his hair, which is considered to be an essential 'Article of Faith' in Sikhism.

Puneet Singh told me that Erica Kaur became instrumental in leading him, towards regaining his Sikh identity. Puneet says "Erica Kaur has played a major part in the return of my faith to 'Sikhi' (the lifestyle a Sikh adopts, especially regarding the *Articles of Faith*, including retention of hair). The abundance of her love showed me that I, too, can love myself and be appreciative of my upbringing. She saw past the physical attributes of the 'kesh' (hair) and embraced me for who I am. Her open-mindedness in discovering the teachings of Sikhism encouraged me to further my devotion towards the faith. As we grew together, I also kept my hair intact. Her acceptance has influenced me into becoming the 'Sardar ji', that I am today". Mrs. Sidana, I'm told by your

US: Indian-origin man booked for cyberstalking woman in New York

US federal authorities have booked an Indian-origin man for cyberstalking a woman. The 19-year-old allegedly told her that he will hire someone to rape, kill and decapitate her.

(Insider Bureau)-An Indian-origin man has been charged in New York for cyberstalking a woman for months. Nineteen-year-old Desmond Babloo Singh is accused of making threats, including soliciting people online to rape, kill and decapitate her in exchange for Bitcoin, authorities were quoted as saying in local media. According to media reports, Desmond Babloo Singh also 'swatted' the woman, which means that he summoned the police to her home by emailing a

bogus bomb threat, a US Department of Homeland Security special agent said in a court filing.

The woman, not identified in reports or official documents was reportedly a friend of Singh's older sister in middle school for one year before his family moved to Texas and has never met Singh in person, the agent said. Since April, Desmond Babloo Singh allegedly has used more than 100 different social media, electronic communication and phone accounts to send harassing and unsolicited

messages to the woman. "These messages include express and implied threats of death and bodily injury, sexualised violence, and racial slurs," the agent wrote.

Singh was expected to make his initial court appearance Tuesday in New York to face federal charges of cyberstalking, causing intentional damage to a protected computer, aggravated identity theft, e-mailing a hoax bomb threat and murder for hire, US media outlet Fox News reported. After police responded to the fake bomb threat at the



woman's home on July 20, investigators in Temple, Texas, spoke to Singh's parents, who said their son had been attending a college in New York. But they believed he was homeless and wasn't enrolled in school during the Covid-19 pandemic.

In October, the woman contacted Baltimore County

police to report that a user named "desmond" on the Telegram instant messaging platform was soliciting someone to kill her, according to the agent's affidavit.

"You will cut her head," the user named "desmond" wrote to another user who asked for payment and replied, "and ill make sure she gonna die."

UAE-Based 12-Year-Old Indian Sets World Record For Identifying Most Airplane Tails



Siddhant Gumber, an Abu Dhabi-based homeschooled boy who identified 39 aeroplane tails in 60 seconds, is also the youngest Indian to identify top 100 tallest buildings, Gulf News reported.

(Insider Bureau)-A 12-year-old Indian boy in the UAE has entered into the Guinness Book of World Records by identifying the most aeroplane tails in a minute, media reports

said on Thursday. Siddhant Gumber, an Abu Dhabi-based homeschooled boy who identified 39 aeroplane tails in 60 seconds, is also the youngest Indian to identify top 100 tallest

buildings, Gulf News reported. Gumber, who hails from Haryana, was earlier recognised by the "India Book of World Records". He achieved the Guinness world record last month, the report said. His name also features in the "India Book" for being the youngest to identify the top 100 tallest buildings of the world with their respective heights and locations, it said. "I have been a Lego buff

since I was a toddler, and my father and I spent a lot of time creating a variety of models - rockets, air planes, buildings and vehicles. I was able to recognise a lot of the air plane tails, and my mother helped me compile them in PowerPoint slides so I could identify them (very quickly)," Siddhant Gumber told Gulf News. His mother Monisha said that her son has always been interested in signs,

symbols and logos. He has an exceptional picture memory and usually never forgets an image once he has seen it. He does have a variety of interests and likes to know about things into detail, just like air planes. Although he loves country flags, we focused on aeroplane tails for the Guinness record because they too are unique," she said. He took about 1.5 seconds per airline tail, she added.

Hyderabad Man Shot At In US, Claims Family



Mohammed Mujeebuddin suffered bullet injuries in the early hours of Monday and has been admitted to a hospital in a very critical condition, his wife said in a letter to Telangana IT Minister K T Rama Rao.

(Insider Bureau)-A 43-year-old man from Hyderabad was fired upon and injured in Chicago in the United States, his family members said on

Monday. Mohammed Mujeebuddin suffered bullet injuries in the early hours of Monday and has been admitted to a hospital in a very critical

condition, his wife said in a letter to Telangana IT Minister K T Rama Rao. Mr Mujeebuddin's wife, children and his mother reside in Hyderabad. She said Mr Mujeebuddin's roommate in the US informed her about the incident. "My entire family is in a state of shock and there is no one to look after my husband. It is requested to ask the Indian Embassy and the

Indian Consulate in the US to reach out to him and provide medical aid," Mr Mujeebuddin's wife said in the letter. She also requested the minister to ask the US Consulate in Hyderabad to grant the family members emergency visa to travel to the US. City-based Majlis Bachao Tehreek (MBT) leader Amjed Ullah Khan, in a tweet, requested External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar to ask the

Indian Embassy in the US to reach out to Mr Mujeebuddin. Based on information he received from Mujeebuddin's roommates from the US, the MBT leader said, two people waylaid Mr Mujeebuddin when he was driving and forced him to get out of the vehicle at gunpoint. Later the duo robbed Mr Mujeebuddin of his money and fired upon him and fled in the car, Khan said.

Two Men in Separate Cases indicted by queens county Grand Jury fro singh internet to lure 14- year olds for sex

Defendants Allegedly Propositioned Undercover Detective Posing as Teenager Online; Accused Face Up to 7 Years in Prison if Convicted

(Insider Bureau)-Queens District Attorney Melinda Katz today announced that two men, Eduardo Hernandez and Joseph Creegan, have been indicted by a Queens County Grand Jury on charges of attempted use of a child in a sexual performance and other crimes for allegedly trying to lure a girl each had separately met online to meet in person for sex.

District Attorney Katz said, "These cases are very disturbing and reveal the extreme importance of law enforcement internet surveillance initiatives to apprehend sexual predators who actively engage with children. This should serve as a warning for parents and guardians - be mindful of who your child

interacts with online and monitor their access and activities." Creegan, 49, of Manhattan was arraigned last Tuesday before Queens Supreme Court Justice Stephanie Zaro on a three-count indictment charging him with attempted use of a child in a sexual performance, attempted disseminating indecent material to minors in the first degree and attempted endangering the welfare of a child. Justice Zaro ordered the defendant to return to court on March 16, 2021.

Hernandez, 38, of Corona, Queens, was arraigned today before Queens Supreme Court Justice Zaro on a 4-count indictment charging him with attempted use of a child in a

sexual performance as a sexually motivated felony, attempted criminal sexual act in the second degree, attempted disseminating indecent material to minors in the first degree as a sexually motivated felony and attempted endangering the welfare of a child. Justice Zaro ordered Hernandez to return to court on January 11, 2021. Both defendants face up to seven years in prison if convicted.

District Attorney Katz said, that according to the charges, between June 13, 2019 and December 4, 2019, the defendant using the screen name JOSEPH CREEGAN engaged in numerous online conversations on the MEET24 app with an undercover officer posing as a 14-year-old

girl from Queens. During the conversation, the defendant, who was informed repeatedly that he was talking to a 14-year-old, offered his phone number and indicated that it was ok to exchange text messages. On June 18, 2019, the defendant requested a meeting and later asked if she would send the defendant nude pictures of herself.

In the Hernandez case, DA Katz said that, according to the charges, between November 11, 2020 and November 19, 2020, the defendant engaged in sexually-explicit conversations on the Grindr app with an undercover officer who was posing as a 14-year-old boy. The defendant requested naked pictures and asked to meet the teenager at a location in Queens County to have sex. The defendant arrived at the location and met with the

undercover officer - still pretending to be the 14-year-old - and at that time the defendant allegedly indicated he wanted to have sex with the teenager.

Detective Philip Adaszewski of the New York Police Department's Vice Major Case Squad conducted both investigations under the supervision of Lieutenant Joseph Agresta, Captain Thomas Milano and Inspector Neteis Gilbert.

Assistant District Attorney Kateri Gasper, Unit Chief of the District Attorney's Computer Crime Unit in the Frauds Bureau is prosecuting the case under the supervision of Assistant District Attorneys Joseph Conley, Bureau Chief, Herman Wun, Deputy Bureau Chief, and under the overall supervision of Executive Assistant District Attorney of Investigations Gerard A. Brave.

Outstanding At What She Does : India-Born Rakes In Billions For JPMorgan'

"M&A was traditionally a male bastion-often cigar-smoking men in suspenders-and now she is at the top of the field, because she is simply outstanding at what she does," says her boss, JPMorgan Chief Executive Officer Jamie Dimon.

(Insider Bureau)-As JPMorgan Chase & Co. searches for its first major acquisition in more than a decade, Anu Aiyengar will have a hand in shaping the giant bank's future. She's the co-head of its global mergers and acquisitions business, and the only person of color and only woman to hold that position on Wall Street. It's been a remarkable trajectory for an Indian immigrant who moved to the U.S. as a teenager to study at Smith College, shivering through the bitter Massachusetts winter in a \$5 coat.

"M&A was traditionally a male bastion-often cigar-smoking men in suspenders-and now she is at the top of the field, because she is simply outstanding at what she does," says her boss, JPMorgan Chief Executive Officer Jamie Dimon.

Advising companies on M&A is one of the prestige roles in investment banking, generating both huge fees and headlines when a deal comes together. Aiyengar was promoted to her

current position in February, almost 20 years after ignoring one Wall Street interviewer who told her she couldn't be hired for M&A because she was of the wrong color, gender, and country. Her year began with a bang when JPMorgan advised ETrade on its \$13 billion sale to Morgan Stanley, a deal that earned the bank \$81 million in fees.

That same deal has put JPMorgan and other big banks under some pressure. In the years since the 2008 financial crisis subsided, there have been hardly any major acquisitions by top Wall Street firms. Morgan Stanley's buying spree-it also snapped up a fund company JPMorgan had approached-may have signaled the start of a wave of takeovers. At a conference in December, Dimon joked that bankers at other firms with good ideas for acquisitions should give him a call. If JPMorgan does find a tempting target, Aiyengar will be among the key executives helping to negotiate a deal. At the same time, Aiyengar is guiding

JPMorgan's M&A shop through an unprecedented disruption. Soon after she took over, the global pandemic and lockdowns dragged deal activity in April and May to their lowest for any two-month period in 22 years, while companies were forced to focus on survival. After traveling every week for two decades to meet clients across the U.S. and sometimes overseas, Aiyengar found herself grounded. She didn't leave her Midtown Manhattan apartment for 66 days, running her team over Zoom and devising new ways of thinking about dealmaking amid what she calls a "seismic shift." "The future of work and the future of how things happen in all industries is forever changed," she says. The pandemic has shown how technology-driven almost every successful business is, blurring the lines between traditional sectors. "So M&A bankers need to have the ability to cross-pollinate among different industries," she says. It's something she's done



before. Jeffrey Sprecher, CEO of Intercontinental Exchange Inc., owner of the New York Stock Exchange, says Aiyengar has been helpful as they considered unique ideas, including the company's foiled attempt at a tieup with a different kind of electronic market: online auction site EBay Inc. "We had dozens and dozens of conversations over a period of years thinking about EBay and what parts might fit with ICE and whether other partners could be involved and who those partners should be," Sprecher says. "My shareholders didn't like the idea, but part of

my job is thinking about growing the company, and internally we were very proud of it. She was very blunt and thoughtful about thinking through things."

Sprecher's deal wasn't to be, but Aiyengar and her co-head, Dirk Albersmeier, have notched up more than \$575 billion of transactions this year, according to data compiled by Bloomberg. The list includes LVMH's \$16 billion purchase of Tiffany-the biggest-ever deal in the luxury industry-and last month's \$8.7 billion merger of Home Depot Inc. and HD Supply Holdings Inc.

Farm stir: Muslims from Punjab's Malerkotla serve zarda pulav to farmers at Singhu border

A group of Muslim men have travelled from Punjab's Malerkotla to Singhu border to serve agitating farmers with delicious zarda pulav - a vegetarian dish made with sweet and salty rice.

(News Agencies)-Muslims from Punjab's Malerkotla have set an example of religious harmony and communal peace by serving daily langar to majority Sikh protesters at Delhi's Singhu border.

Malerkotla is a Muslim-majority town in Punjab's Sangrur district and is famous for the shrine of Baba Haidar Sheikh. India Today TV caught with a group of men who have travelled from Malerkotla to Singhu border to not just participate and support the protest against three recent farm laws but also to serve farmers their special zarda pulav.

Speaking to Aajtak, one of the langar organizers from Malerkotla, Haji Mohammad Jamil said that he hails from a place known for communal peace and religious cooperation. Narrating a story from the early 18th century, Haji Mohammad Jamil said, "When the governor of Sirhind ordered to torture Guru Gobind Singh's sons, the Nawab of Malerkotla had helped them. We are also the sons of the same land. We are walking shoulder-to-shoulder with our Sikh brothers." Jamil said that have been preparing their special dish zarda

pulav for the farmers since November 26, when the protest started. He said that that dish is prepared with only vegetarian ingredients and includes sweet and salty rice.

On the issue of farm laws, Jamil said that he and the rest of the protesters will continue their agitation until the laws are not withdrawn. "Farmers are our 'annadatta', they feed us all. This is why we are here to help them," he said.

A Sikh protester, who was standing near the langar being prepared next to the main stage of Sanyukt Kisan Morcha, said that "even though farmers are



protesting in these difficult conditions, these Muslim brothers have been feeding us continuously for the last 25-6 days". The langar has also attracted some Muslim youth like Aneesh from Delhi. Aneesh is a resident of Delhi's Ferozshah Kotla area. He told

Aajtak that his family belongs to Malerkotla so he decided to join the langar team at the Singhu border and serve the farmers. Another Sikh farmer Jaswinder, who was sitting next to the Muslim men, said that this langar was a symbol of their unity.

MNS pulls out Sharad Pawar party photo asking if Covid rules only for poor, NCP hits back



Raj Thackeray-led Maharashtra Navnirman Sena (MNS) has charged the Uddhav Thackeray-led Maharashtra government of not working for the common man and losing touch with the ground realities.

(News Agencies)--Raj Thackeray-led Maharashtra Navnirman Sena (MNS) has charged the Uddhav Thackeray-led Maharashtra government of not working for the common man

and losing touch with the ground realities.

While coming out in support of the workers engaged in hotels and restaurant businesses, MNS leader Sandeep Deshpande said

that the government's doublespeak has been exposed yet again. Talking to India Today TV, Deshpande said, "The political heavyweights can organise lavish parties and it seems there is no fear of the virus for them whatsoever but when a common man does anything, rules come into play."

"So, is the virus so smart that it attacks only the poor? All sorts of rules and regulations have been placed for hotels and

restaurants in the name of virus. They can't operate during Christmas and New Year beyond a certain time. But there's no stopping big parties where political heavyweights go. How is this happening," asked the MNS leader. He further shared a recent picture of NCP supremo Sharad Pawar with Chief Minister Uddhav Thackeray and Deputy Chief Minister Ajit Pawar and alleged that their parties have no fear of the virus. "Tell me what was the

need to impose night curfew. This year as it has been so hard. Salaries have been cut and for these workers there has been no work at all and now just when they could earn a bit in the last week, night curfew has been imposed," Deshpande asked. NCP has taken strong exception to the MNS leader's comments. NCP spokesperson Mahesh Tapase said there was nothing wrong if Ambani and Adani were present at the party.

Gujarat: Three cops suspended after hundreds flout Covid-19 norms at music event

(News Agencies)- Three police officers have been suspended after Covid-19 norms were allegedly flouted at a musical event in a village in Gujarat. The folk music event was organised on Wednesday night at Vadgamda village in Tharad taluka of Gujarat's Banaskantha district.

Videos of the event which went viral on social media showed around 200 people, many without masks, sitting close to each other at the event without following social distancing

norms.

The main organiser of the event has been arrested, Banaskantha Superintendent of Police Tarun Kumar Duggal said. Some videos of the programme went viral after the event was held on Wednesday night, he said.

"Such programmes are not at all permitted in the wake of the Covid-19 situation. For failing to act in time, we have placed a sub-inspector of that area and two head constables under suspension after the matter came to light today," news

agency PTI quoted the official as saying.

The police have lodged an FIR against 12 people under the Disaster Management Act and the Epidemic Diseases Act and arrested the main organiser of the event, he said.

The event organiser had mentioned the names of a member of Parliament and an assistant superintendent of police as chief guests on the event's poster.

But, they did not attend the programme, Duggal said.



Animal Welfare Board cancels registration of 5 circuses in India

The Animal Welfare Board has cancelled the registration of five circuses in India over alleged violation of animal rights. The decision has come in the wake of a Delhi High Court order in this connection.

(Insider Bureau)-The Animal Welfare Board of India (AWBI) has cancelled the registration of five circuses, namely Great Golden Circus of Ahmedabad, Asiad Circus of Kanpur, Apollo Circus of Maujpur (Delhi), Rayman Circus of Kanpur and Nataraj Circus of Kolkata over complaints of violation of animal rights. The decision follows a direction from the Delhi High Court in this connection. The AWBI has also issued show cause notices to

two circuses for gross violation and discrepancies under the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act, 1960, the Performing Animals (Registration) Rules, 2001 and the Wildlife Protection Act, 1972.

Further, the AWBI requested the Ministry of Fisheries, Animal Husbandry and Dairying to enact appropriate legislation considering the current status of circuses under the Performing Animals (Registration) Rules, 2001. The AWBI took this action

in compliance with certain directions issued by the Delhi High Court while hearing a petition filed by the Federation for Indian Animal Protection Organisations (FIAPO) seeking rescue of animals in circuses in the wake of Covid-19 pandemic, and challenging the law that permits use of animals in circuses. "In the modern society, there is no place for human entertainment at the cost of the sufferings of animals," said FIAPO executive director Varda



Mehrotra. The Central Zoo Authority in November had also recommended cancellation of recognition of the Great Golden Circus under Section 38-H (6) of the Wild Life (Protection) Act, 1972. The FIAPO said it has

rescued more than 150 animals from 13 circuses across India and has mobilised 114 activists, from 45 organisations across 18 states as part of its campaign End Circus Suffering that was launched in 2015.

Delhiites brace for 'chilly' New Year as cold wave grips North India



Delhi is likely to experience a chilly New Year as the temperature in the national capital is set to drop sharply and remain in the range of sub 5 degrees Celsius. The temperature during Christmas is also expected to remain lower.

degrees Celsius and might even dip further.

The weather forecast has predicted that till December 27 the cold wave situation will prevail in New Delhi followed by slight relief. From December 27, the temperature may increase due to the cloudy weather conditions.

A feeble western disturbance is approaching Jammu and Kashmir on December 24, but may not contribute much as far as the weather of Delhi is concerned. However, a stronger western disturbance is likely to affect North India and may result

in snowfall over peaks and rain in Punjab and Haryana on December 26 and 27. Even Delhi may experience light rains on December 27 and due to cloudy weather conditions, the temperature will rise a bit for the next couple of days.

Chilly new year

But after December 28, the temperature is set to see a considerable drop once again. Days and nights will be considerably colder when the year-end approaches. The minimum temperature in Delhi may drop to 2 degrees Celsius

on New Year's eve. Kuldeep Srivastav, director of the Regional Meteorological Centre, Delhi, told India Today TV: "The cold wave situation will prevail till December 26 and then there might be a slight increase in temperature for next two days.

After that the temperature will see a fall once again and the temperature might dip up to 2 degree Celsius on December 31 and January 1."It means there will be hardly any relief from the cold weather, especially during the nights and early mornings.

Cold wave will be the flavour of the New Year for Delhiites. The cold wave situation has set in the national capital and surrounding areas already and in the days to come, it is likely to intensify further. The weather

forecast for the next week indicates that the mercury will remain in the range of sub 5 degrees Celsius till the arrival of the New Year. Even on the Christmas night, the temperature is expected to remain below 4

Attempt to murder case against 13 farmers for blocking Haryana CM Khattar's convoy

(News Agencies)- Thirteen farmers have been booked on charges of attempt to murder and rioting on Wednesday, a day after a group of people protesting against the Centre's farm laws allegedly blocked chief minister Manohar Lal Khattar's convoy and hurled sticks at it.

The opposition Congress has criticised the move with its state chief Kumari Selja saying it showed the government's desperation. On Tuesday, a group of protesting farmers had shown black flags to Khattar when his convoy was passing through Ambala City. CM Khattar was in the city to address public meetings in support of the party's candidates for the upcoming civic body polls.

Farmers had waved black flags at the chief minister's convoy while it was crossing Agrasen Chowk. They also raised slogans against the government. Police said on Wednesday that some farmers tried to charge towards the convoy and blocked its movement for some time. They said some of them hurled sticks at some vehicles. 'Haryana govt crossed all the limits'

Reacting to it, Haryana Congress chief Kumari Selja said the Haryana government has crossed all the limits by registering the case against the farmers.

Filing a case of attempt to murder and under other sections against the farmers shows the government's desperation. In a

democracy, everyone has the right to free speech but when the voice of people is suppressed, they are forced to come to the streets for their rights. "The voice of farmers is being continuously suppressed by the BJP government. People have lost trust in this government. This is the reason why black flags were shown by the farmers to chief minister Manohar Lal," she said. Earlier, Kumari Selja said that the state government had taken oppressive action against farmers and asked how showing black flags is a matter of attempt to murder. "The government should immediately withdraw the cases lodged against the farmers," she added. The Ambala City Police has booked the



farmers under IPC sections 147 (rioting), 148 (rioting, armed with deadly weapon), 149 (offence committed by any member of any unlawful assembly), 186 (obstructing public servant in

discharge of public functions), 307 (attempt to murder), 353 (assault or criminal force to deter public servant from discharge of his duty) and 506 (punishment for criminal intimidation).

Amid shivering cold in Delhi, Sikh body donates 700 geysers to protesting farmers

Some 700 water geysers were given to the thousands of farmers from Punjab, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh and other states, who have been camping at several entry points of Delhi for nearly a month, now in the biting cold, demanding the Centre repeal the three farm laws.

ADVERTISING

The Delhi Sikh Gurudwara Management Committee (DSGMC) provided the water geysers to the farmers protesting against the Centre's farm laws at the national capital's borders on Wednesday. "We are doing everything to help the farmers in

their struggle. In view of the severe cold, DSGMC distributed 700 geysers among the protesting farmers at Singhu, Tikri and Ghazipur borders," said DSGMC president Manjinder Singh Sirsa.

Winter wear provided

The Committee has also provided woolens, body warmers and other winter wear among the protesters, Sirsa said. Besides, langars (community kitchens) and night shelters have also been set up at the protest venues. Medicines and ambulance facility are also being provided to the agitating farmers, he added.

Some 700 water geysers were given to the thousands of farmers from Punjab, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh and other states, who have been camping at several entry points of Delhi for nearly a month, now in the biting cold, demanding the Centre repeal the three farm laws.



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West Bengal election: Congress to form alliance with Left Front in 2021



(News Agencies)-The Congress and the Left Front will contest the West Bengal Assembly election 2021 in alliance. Congress president Sonia Gandhi has her nod for the alliance. This was confirmed by West Bengal Congress president and Lok Sabha MP Adhir Ranjan Chowdhury.

In a post on Twitter, Adhir Ranjan Chowdhury said, "Today, the Congress high command has formally approved the electoral alliance with the Left parties in the impending election of West Bengal."

The leader of the Left Front in Bengal, the Communist Party of India-Marxist's central committee had approved the alliance decision in October itself. The proposal was then moved by the Bengal unit of the CPI-M for alliance with the Congress.

This is a significant development in Bengal politics which has looked centred on a ruling Trinamool Congress versus rival

Bharatiya Janata Party fight in recent months. This formally makes the Bengal Assembly election a triangular contest.

This is not the first time that the Congress and the Left will contest the Bengal election together. They had an electoral alliance in Bengal in 2016 state polls, when Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee's Trinamool Congress returned to power with a greater majority.

But back then the central committee of the CPI(M) had not approved the Bengal unit's decision to contest assembly election in alliance with the Congress. The experiment did not succeed as the alliance won just 71 seats, with the Congress becoming a senior partner with 40 seats.

West Bengal will go to the polls in April-May for its 294 assembly seats. A party or coalition needs to win more than 147 seats to form government in Bengal.

Indian farmers are right to be outraged

By Simran Jeet Singh
and Dr. Gunisha Kaur

Tens of thousands of farmers have marched to the Indian capital of New Delhi from neighboring states to protest new legislation that hurts small farmers and benefits large corporations. Police unleashed tear gas and water cannons to halt the march, and last weekend protesters blocking major roads leading into New Delhi were met with hundreds of police and paramilitary forces. One senior police official alleged that the protestors pelted police with stones and damaged property, but even if this is true, the heavy-handed response by police is disproportionate. The current situation may feel like déjà vu to those familiar with modern Indian politics. The lives and livelihoods of Indian agricultural workers -- who make up more than half of India's workforce -- have long been secondary to the national interest of feeding the masses. Nowhere has that been more evident than in the northwestern state of Punjab, India's agricultural hub and "bread basket." In May of 1984, Punjabi leaders initiated a campaign for equal rights, Punjab Bandh, which blocked the transport of crops and withheld taxes from the federal government. It was a part of a states' rights movement against the central government in New Delhi. In response, the federal government deployed 100,000 army troops to the state. Within a month, the Indian government would launch a military attack on the Darbar Sahib (Golden Temple) of Amritsar, the most significant of Sikh sites. The Indian government justified the military action as a matter of national security, though journalists and independent sources report mass civilian casualties in the thousands. Within the year, the prime minister of India was assassinated by her Sikh bodyguards. And in the decade that followed, there was turmoil in Punjab: the Indian state carried out widespread human rights abuses, "encounter killings" and the extra-judicial disappearances of thousands of innocent civilians, while a segment of Sikhs in Punjab engaged in a years-long armed uprising for self-determination. The current protests in India should warn us of another pressure-cooker situation. Today, the farmers are reacting to the new laws that divest them of minimum price guarantees for their crops. But their grievances and their impetus for protest go far beyond that. To understand what they are protesting and why, we must recognize the historical context. In 1966, less than 20 years into its nationhood, India was faced with impending famine and responded by introducing a new, experimental technology into key states, in a program known as the Green

Revolution. Having demonstrated success in some other parts of the world, engineered seeds, chemicals and irrigation were beginning to become popular, and India embraced them. Just as some medications are tested on humans of developing countries before being accepted in developed nations, the Green Revolution was an agricultural experiment tested out on the fields of Punjab. While the Green Revolution produced more crops in the short-term and helped mitigate India's risk of national famine, its long-term effects have contributed to the degradation of the economy, environment and health of Punjab. These factors have exacerbated the strife between farmers and the government. The Central Government's subsidization of Green Revolution technologies have effectively coerced farmers to adopt these resource-intensive methods. Yet India has not guaranteed a profitable market for these crops, leaving the farmers in an unviable situation. The input cost for producing crops already exceeds the purchase price in many instances: According to a recent report from Punjab Agricultural University, eight out of ten farmers are in debt, and the average amount a farmer owes is more than four times the average annual income. Further, the government has not protected farmers from multinational corporations. International agricultural giants have been deregulated since 1988, through World Bank-encouraged seed policies, and they have been building their empires for decades now. This is an issue for farmers, who are not allowed to keep their seeds at the end of the year and have to buy new seeds every year. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has said that the reforms are intended to benefit farmers. But removing its existing price guarantees for crop sales only empowers these corporations by requiring farmers to negotiate with them individually. That means that as these corporations increase market supply, small farmers will struggle to compete and be pushed further into debt. The bleak economic outlook has contributed to psychological degradation in the region. Punjabi farming communities have been ravaged by an epidemic of farmer suicides. Though estimates vary, a farmer's union, Bharatiya Kisan Union, estimates that 90,000 Punjabi farmers committed suicide between 1990 and 2006. In the last two years alone, the same union has documented more than 1,000 cases, an average of more than one suicide per day. Dozens more have committed suicide since the Modi government announced this legislation as ordinances in June, according to data compiled by a farmers' organization. This crisis is not limited to Punjab.

(Contd on page 34)

National security requires Biden to break campaign pledge on illegal immigration

President-elect Joe Biden is already backpedaling on a dangerous campaign promise that pleased advocates of open borders, but would create a humanitarian and national security crisis on our border with Mexico. While he pledged during the election campaign to roll back President Trump's policies that have reduced illegal immigration on his first day in office on Jan. 20, Biden said Tuesday that it would take about six months to reverse Trump's actions enforcing immigration laws. The delay is a smart move, and Biden should use the first six months of his administration to backpedal further and embrace the reality that throwing open our borders to virtually unrestricted immigration would cause a crisis that would thrust border state governors into the greatest challenge of their careers. But squaring his irresponsible immigration promises with reality won't be easy for Biden, and will lead to an ugly fight with far-left Democrats. Already radical "Squad" member Rep. Ilhan Omar, D-Minn., has attacked the president-elect for pulling back on his campaign promise. "This is a classic bait and switch," Omar tweeted. "It perpetuates Trump's dehumanization of migrants and breaks a core campaign promise. Democrats lose big when administrations won't fulfill their promise. I urge the Biden transition team to reconsider this position." "Trust me," Biden said Tuesday. He said he was already working with authorities south of the border to end President

Trump's Migrant Protection Protocols - the "return to Mexico" policy - that was successful in quelling the human trafficking crisis on the border. Biden now says he wants "guardrails" to prevent "2 million people on our border." But it's already too late. Illegal immigration has risen, buoyed by the expectation of Biden ending Trump's border enforcement efforts, coupled with some form of amnesty. "During the presidential campaign, Biden promised to reverse President Trump's strict immigration and border policies, which together with emergency travel restrictions because of the pandemic helped drive illegal immigration levels to historic lows after a surge last spring," said John Daniel Davidson, a senior fellow with the Texas Public Policy Foundation. "Numbers are once again increasing as conditions deteriorate in Central America." Davidson and 23 other experts from the Heritage Foundation, government, and academia - both in the U.S. and Mexico - as well as four former members of Congress, gathered for a border crisis simulation for three days earlier this month. I designed and led the effort. The results were sobering. The team's report can be read here. The simulation projected that a renewed wave of illegal immigrant caravans will be headed for the U.S.-Mexico border by January. The new border crisis would be worsened by a Biden administration slow to comprehend and react to the situation's magnitude.

By Chuck DeVore



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Where the Indian economic story went wrong

The ongoing economic recovery is being driven by a small section of the economy, and led by profits rather than wages. We can hope, on a wing and a prayer, that the government will finally act.

A set of economists has defended the record of reforms of the present government. This must be taken seriously. But there is a more fundamental question here: Reforms, even if yes, towards what end?

The Indian economy has continued to slow post the sudden demonetisation (one of the big ticket "reforms") and the roll-out of the ill-conceived Goods and Services Tax (GST) regime. Investment, exports, private consumption and government expenditure were already seriously impaired before Covid-19 put the proverbial last nail in the coffin. Gross Domestic Product (GDP) has fallen into a technical recession and most independent economists are unanimous that contraction this fiscal will be 8-10%. Even with the vaccine in sight, the economy will continue to be seriously impacted for the next two years before we can see a real turnaround.

The global slowdown or pandemic alone cannot explain the current situation. While the pandemic is unprecedented, it is important to understand how the economy has come to a sorry pass. Thirty years since the 1991 economic liberalisation, there is much we can be proud

of. For one, State intervention in the economy was minimised, allowing free markets to develop. As negative consequences, such as increased inequality, became evident, schemes such as the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) were brought in to reduce poverty. This has been globally acknowledged. The Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative report has noted that, "India remains the country that has the largest reduction in number of poor, with over 270 million persons leaving poverty (from) 2005-6 to 2015-16." India went from being a poor, slow-growing country to the fastest-growing major economy in the world. According to the World Economic Outlook (2016), the United States (US) and India were the two pillars of strength of the world economy. So what went wrong? It must be acknowledged that during the tenure of the United Progressive Alliance (UPA)-2, with inflation going double digit and fiscal deficit running out of control, the economy was taking a severe beating. In 2013, with the US Fed indicating withdrawal of Quantitative Easing (QE). India faced what infamously came to be known as the "taper tantrum"

with the rupee plummeting to a then record low of more than ₹68 to a dollar. With 2G, coal and other crises, the government seemed to have lost the plot. Much has been said about the new government inheriting an economy that was in a downward spiral in 2014.

However, the truth is otherwise. From 2012-14, UPA-2 took bold measures which reflected in the quick recovery over the following two years. Apart from clearing bottlenecks for large infrastructure projects, the FDI regime was liberalised considerably, financial market instruments such as Infrastructure Debt Funds, InVITs and REITS were introduced, price deregulation of diesel was put into motion, a fiscal consolidation roadmap was laid down and the rupee tantrum very effectively managed. The results were dramatic. GDP clocked a growth of 6.9% in 2013-14 as against 5.1% in the previous fiscal. Growth in 2014-15 was 7.4%, built on the back of the dramatic recovery the previous year. The government has the instruments to effectively intervene and manage economic cycles provided it has the capacity and the will to do so. The sudden



negative shocks of demonetisation and hasty introduction of GST started the downward spiral, which has led the economy into recession this year. India is no longer in the list of the top 25 nations in AT Kearney's Global FDI Confidence Index 2000 despite claims of improving the country's ranking in the Ease of Doing Business. Once an alternative model for economic growth vis-a-vis China, India has dropped to the 23rd rank for 2020 from among the top three fastest-growing economies in Economist's weekly chart of 43 major economies. Unfortunately, there doesn't appear to be a well thought-out strategy to bring the economy out of the morass except for a much touted Atmanirbhar Bharat package, which has received mostly adverse reviews. According to global research firm, AB Bernstein, "The need to announce measures that add up

to this top down number made the entire package aimless". The firm described it as a "lost opportunity". By various estimates, close to 90% of the workforce in India is employed in the unorganised sector and this has been severely impacted. There have also been huge retrenchments and salary cuts in the organised sector and an estimated loss of around 80% of the demand. The much acclaimed fact about the "economy bottoming out" is a mirage. The latest Consumer Confidence Survey, conducted in the first half of November, states that more than half of the respondents continue to report a fall in income and employment. Clearly the ongoing economic recovery is being driven by a small section of the economy, and led by profits rather than wages. We can hope, on a wing and a prayer, that the government will finally act.

Accept the SC's advice, don't underestimate the agitation



The fact that the protests against the Centre's farm reforms are led by farmers from Punjab lends them extra muscle and the movement, historicity. Official interlocutors need to take into account the staying power of the Sikh community, the agitation's main driving force, while seeking to break the protracted logjam. The optics of the stir lend it a pre-bifurcation pan-Punjab dimension as farmers with

differing political predilections have forged a joint front with their counterparts from the adjoining agrarian state, Haryana. Besides Himachal Pradesh, Haryana was part of undivided Punjab till the adoption of the 1966 Reorganisation Act. Lending shoulders to the wheel they have set into motion are groups from Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh and Maharashtra. Around 40 different farm unions under one umbrella

Pressing the pause button on the legislations will be a face-saver for the agitators, who want a repeal, and the Centre, which is loath to roll them back. Observers point to the availability of a reservoir of jurists, retired generals, academics, agriculture experts and bureaucrats who can inspire trust on either side.

have laid siege to Delhi. They are supported by a range of political parties, but not led by any one. Having them jointly and severally on one negotiating table is an unwieldy exercise, driving home the utility of the Supreme Court (SC)'s suggestion that an "impartial and independent" committee of experts be constituted to hear both sides. The ambience for a structured dialogue could be made congenial if the government puts on hold the laws the farmers want undone. Pressing the pause button on the legislations will be a face-saver for the agitators, who want a repeal, and the Centre, which

is loath to roll them back. Observers point to the availability of a reservoir of jurists, retired generals, academics, agriculture experts and bureaucrats who can inspire trust on either side. The top judiciary's advice to the government makes eminent sense also because it will be difficult to get the farmers to repose trust in the current dialogue format. As observed by the Court, the interface thus far between the two sides has failed to yield results. The renewal of talks through a credible, bipartisan mechanism might stand a better chance to persuade farmers to reciprocally defer their radical "scrap the

laws" stance towards a workable middle ground that addresses their concerns.

A point widely overlooked or ignored is that the Centre's counter-narrative, after the talks hit a dead end, has had negative implications for its parallel offers of a dialogue. Be it studied or incidental, the dichotomous messaging has queered the pitch rather than prepared ground for a fruitful engagement. If the intent is to tire out the agitators, the history of Sikh movements would be a good reference point for the official side. Their struggle to free their shrines from the control of the British-appointed mahants went on from 1920 to 1925.

Farmers prove their resilience, but need to optimise outcomes

Given the logic of 94 by 6, most states should implement these new reforms. The remaining states, particularly the original Green Revolution areas that have seen less risky and largely assured agriculture, should get time to ponder and engage in dialogue with agitated farmers to settle the way forward.

•The spontaneous farmers' agitation against the three central ordinances to facilitate trade and services in agriculture has surprised everyone. The farmers were quick to understand the implications, which perhaps the architects of these laws could not envisage. True, some misgivings need to be removed, but the full essence of the Agricultural Produce Market Committee (APMC) systems has not been captured in these laws. These systems have successfully prevailed in the states that made the country self-sufficient in food.

APMCs have not promoted monopolies or obstructed reforms in agriculture. Post-1992, regulatory reforms in the most vital sectors of our economy were largely acknowledged. There is certainly a case for such reforms in agriculture also. Agriculture markets are not so perfect that these can be totally unregulated, allowing the vagaries of mighty businesses with no government intervention to stabilise the market.

FARMERS FEAR EXPLOITATION

Punjab was chosen for the Green Revolution due to the dynamism and resilience of Punjabi farmers. They have proved it again, with their persevering agitation during a global pandemic. The farm laws were thrust on a community of peasants who are small, local, and subsistent. The premise of these laws built upon notions of transparency, demonopolisation, open market, competition, deregulation, and tax-free marketing did not cut much ice with them.

Farmers fear exploitation by big businesses, attachment of land, withdrawal of minimum support price (MSP), closure of APMC markets, the abolition of commission agents, and loss of state revenues. The framers of the laws could not allay these. They maintain that these were apprehensions of 6% of the total farmers in the country. But the logic of 94% may not be the best way to demolish 6% who led the nation in food security for over six decades. The experiential learning of the 6% should have been used in framing the laws to

prevent the situation that has arisen and, all farmers could have gained through a new but different era of the second Green Revolution (GR).

STRATEGY OF CRISIS MANAGERS

The crisis managers of the governments seem to be working on a three-pronged strategy. First, they tried to deflect it to the states, but the states that were badly affected responded quickly by suggesting amendments to the laws, much to the displeasure of the central government. Second, following the middle path, it was proposed to amend these laws to sidestep the crisis. This was possible, but some of those representing interests of the rich and mighty disrupted the dialogue. Third, convert the defeat in withdrawing or neutralising the laws into a victory by becoming a messiah of kisans. This may not be easy because the socio-economic polarisation of Punjab has failed every time it was attempted.

In prolonged parleys, the government has pondered over many possible solutions for



farmers. These include making the MSP for food grains a legal right; the introduction of price deficiency support for 21 other crops for which MSP is declared; APMCs as existing should continue; and the states should be empowered to continue with local taxes on buyers in both government and private markets. For other reforms to transform agriculture, a second national agriculture commission or a committee may be set up.

DIVERSIFICATION AND RESILIENT PRACTICES

The agitation has also raised the debate on the drift in federal governance and lack of policy synergy. Encroachment on states' powers, excessive centralisation of decision making, limiting the states' ability to raise revenues, and deflection and disruption of the systems

that were evolved over 70 years, are some of the other issues being propagated in full view of competitive politics in the country.

Despite sufficient buffers, national food security is still a serious concern. It needs to be strengthened further for nutrition security. The original GR states should be incentivised to diversify and improve their sustainability of agricultural operations. The push for a second GR in other states should encourage new agriculture instead of replicating the Punjab model. Diversification of agriculture in original GR areas and more resilient agriculture practices in new areas for the products that are required more, will lead the country to a new growth trajectory.

The battle over the next Dalai Lama



Reincarnation is officially a geopolitical consideration. The United States (US) Congress has passed a Tibet Policy and Support Act that says the choice of the next Dalai Lama is the prerogative only of Tibetans. In addition, any attempt by the Chinese to

interfere in the Dalai Lama's succession would result in sanctions against that country. The Act is expected to be signed into law by President Donald Trump who made history by allowing Lobsang Sangay of the Tibet government-in-exile to make his first visit the US State

Department. Washington has urged other governments to pass similar laws.

While the Act reflects the Trump administration's hard views on China, it also serves as a reminder of the coming global battle over the Dalai Lama's succession. If traditional

India, like the US, should make it clear that only Tibetans, not Beijing, can decide the issue

methods are followed, there will be a gap of over a decade before the 15th Dalai Lama will come of age. Beijing is fully expected to appoint its own Dalai Lama - and then use China's economic and political influence to coerce other governments into recognising only their Dalai Lama. The new US law ensures that on reincarnation, Washington will stick to the straight and correct path. But other countries will find it harder to resist. One has only to see how Mongolia was brought to its knees after allowing the Dalai Lama to visit their country. This begs the question as to whether India needs to do more. New Delhi's position has been that it does enough by playing host to the Dalai Lama, the government-in-exile and the largest Tibetan refugee

population anywhere. Tibetan leaders are discouraged from expressing political views against China while on Indian soil. However, the Ladakh border clash has shown Beijing no longer feels the need to abide by such informal understandings. The Dalai Lama succession is the type of high stakes issue China will feel no reason to hold back on. India should prepare itself for a modern-day avatar aggression. One, it should officially declare that it believes the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan sect leaders outside of China have the final say in Tibetan spiritual issues. Two, it must review its present policies regarding Tibetan refugees whose numbers in India are shrinking rapidly.

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An unlikely common strand of 2020 - land and property rights

A continued focus on land and property rights is important - these cross-cutting issues not only impact the growth of India's economy but play an important role in the lives of all Indians.

The year 2020 drew sharp focus to land and property rights issues in India. The year began with protests against the National Register of Citizens (NRC), which - if implemented - would have relied on citizens having their land records in place to prove citizenship. Many commentators lamented how landless migrant labour would meet these stringent requirements in a country where land records management is in an abysmal shape with limited digitisation.

With the onset of the pandemic, and India going into an unprecedented lockdown, the shocking sight of migrant labourers walking the highways for days exposed the lack of inclusive housing in our cities. They were forced to leave cities not only due to the lack of affordable housing, but also because informal rent agreements enabled abrupt evictions. While many developed countries enforced rent moratoriums and protections against evictions, in India, authorities could not create such a safety net. Informal tenancy in urban and semi-urban India and landlessness in rural India plunged the most vulnerable populations into further despair.

Lockdowns across the world also forced businesses to consider diversification of their supply chains. This turned the attention of policymakers to the ease of doing business to make India an attractive destination for companies looking to invest in new locations. Again, land reforms became a central part of



this conversation. While the central government explored the idea of creating land banks, some states focused on structural reforms. Karnataka amended laws to remove restrictions on buying and selling of agricultural land by non-agriculturalists. Other developments that brought focus to property rights include the

SVAMITVA (Survey of villages and mapping with improvised technology in village areas) scheme launched in April 2020. The scheme aims to survey non-agricultural inhabited land in rural India. The stated goals are connecting rural Indians with institutional credit through better property records, and

empowering Panchayati Raj institutions through property tax collection. In October 2020, in response to the migrant crisis, the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs announced the Affordable Rental Housing Complexes (ARHCs) Scheme. The scheme aims to fill the affordable housing gap in cities by utilising government-

funded vacant houses along with construction, operation and maintenance of new affordable housing projects by private players.

In an unrelated development, the Supreme Court passed a landmark judgement; it ruled that daughters have equal coparcenary rights in Hindu Undivided Family properties, even if the father died before the enactment of the 2005 Hindu Succession (Amendment) Act. Gender activists celebrated the judgment as this ambiguity had presented a big hurdle for women across India in accessing their property rights.

Though these developments seem disparate, it is worth noting that land and property rights dominated people's lives and public narrative even in an extraordinary year such as 2020. The year highlighted the fault lines in our land governance and exacerbated the effect of existing inefficiencies in our system. As we look to kickstart

recovery in 2021, one hopes that policymakers will retain focus on making land records services citizen-friendly, undertaking surveys of previously unsurveyed areas, improving land markets and continuing to invest in affordable housing in our urban centres.

Presently, there are interesting policy proposals under discussion to achieve these goals. Apart from ARHC and SVAMITVA that may be scaled up, a Model Tenancy Act aimed at bridging the trust deficit between tenants and landlords is under consideration. The Centre and states are mulling subsidies in stamp duty rates to boost the real estate market and property registration. Telangana and Andhra Pradesh are making huge investments in new surveys and technology to improve land governance.

A continued focus on land and property rights is important - these cross-cutting issues not only impact the growth of India's economy but play an important role in the lives of all Indians. Among other things, 2020 has also been a stark reminder that governments must prioritise securing land and property rights for all its citizens.

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.



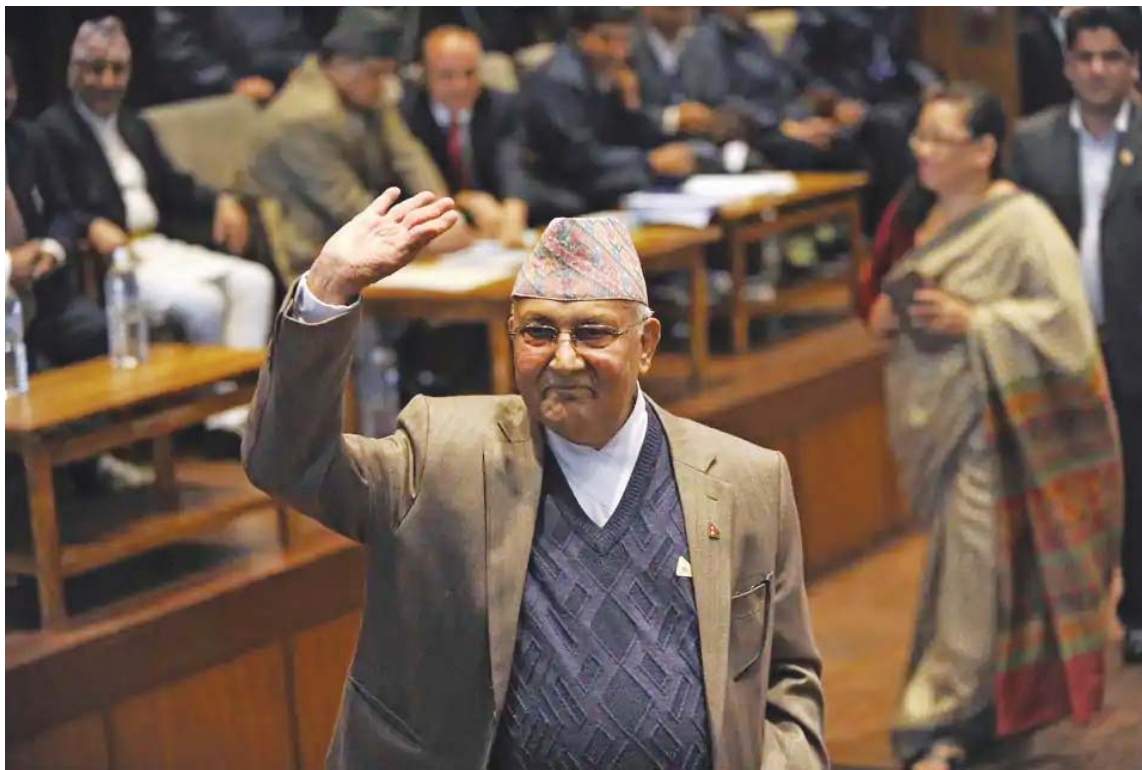
In Nepal, an attack on democracy

Nepalis want good governance, democratic stability and economic development. Supporting PM Oli's move undermines all these principles.

When Nepal's Prime Minister (PM) KP Oli dissolved Parliament and announced elections on December 20, he clearly overstepped his executive authority. Nepal's entire political class, barring Oli, and Nepali civil society, including constitutional experts, overwhelmingly believe that the move was unconstitutional and illegitimate.

Oli's decision needs to be seen in a larger global context of democratically-elected leaders undermining democracy. Democracies now face a new challenge - where elected leaders can unleash democratic backsliding and carry out executive takeovers by taking a series of what appear to be "democratic" decisions.

PM Oli has had a history of trying to use parliamentary acts and executive decisions to limit people's freedoms. He has hollowed out independent institutions and sought to use them as mechanisms of political control, in order to reduce executive accountability and undermine opponents. Oli has packed in institutions such as the Election Commission, Department of Money Laundering Investigation, and most recently, the Commission for the Investigation of Abuse of Authority, with loyalists, often bypassing bipartisan constitutional methods of appointment, to maintain control. The dissolution of Parliament needs to be understood in this backdrop. Oli has expanded his control over the State, while bypassing the institutions that have tried to keep him accountable - Parliament, political party, and civil society. Oli has also, opportunistically, used political principles only when it has suited him, driven by a psychology that puts individual needs above that of democracy and constructs political ideologies to suit that need. For example, he is driven by a need for social affirmation of his personality and the desire to be seen as a statesman. To



achieve this end, he replaced political ideology with a populist ideology that could camouflage his authoritarian streaks. He used the agenda of "nationalism" and development in theory while abandoning the democratic processes that could in fact strengthen the nation and unleash economic development. Given its history of political instability - Nepal has had over two dozen PMs in the last three decades - Nepal adopted a

revised multi-party system that was different from the Westminster model. The new Constitution deliberately cut off possibilities for dissolution of Parliament at the whims of the executive or political parties. During the elections, the unified Nepal Communist Party (NCP) - a product of the merger of the Maoists and the Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist Leninist) - promised political stability and development and

claimed that only a political party with a clear majority can deliver political stability.

Oli points to the opposition within the NCP - he has faced a severe challenge from former PMs Madhav Kumar Nepal and Pushpa Kamal Dahal "Prachanda" - as the reason for his non-performance and his decision to go for fresh people's mandate. But this is disingenuous. In a multi-party democracy, political parties are

the central means through which accountability is ensured. In any case, how the party ensures accountability is a matter internal to the party and the country cannot be held hostage to resolve petty internal differences. Oli did not want this accountability - and the more he got squeezed within his party, the more he unleashed his authoritarian impulses.

Oli's move shows that there is a clear disconnect between his personal needs and the nation's challenges, especially in the face of Covid-19. At a time when the government should be focused on implementing the new Constitution, tackling the pandemic and protecting people's livelihoods, the country will be - on paper - heading to uncertain and costly elections. Although the idea of obtaining a fresh electoral mandate sounds tempting, Nepal's political history is replete with instances where elections have been not held after being announced; the unconstitutional nature of Oli's announcement will make it even more unlikely this time around. All of this will further undermine Nepal's democracy and people's trust in the process.

The rise in extreme climate events

It is not just the Centre; states have a key role too. The State Action Plans on Climate Change (SAPCCs) need upscaling and capacity enhancement

More than 75% of India's districts are hotspots of extreme climate events and are bearing the lethal effects of a rapidly-changing microclimate with loss of property, livelihoods and lives, according to a study by the Council on Energy, Environment and Water (CEEW). The report notes that while India witnessed 250 extreme climate events between 1970 and 2005, the country recorded 310 extreme weather events after 2005.

That India has been at the receiving end of the climate crisis is known. According to the Climate Risk Index, 2018, the country jumped nine places in climate vulnerability rankings,



and was ranked the fifth-most climate-vulnerable country in the world. Storms are escalating into cyclones, droughts are affecting more than half the country, and floods of an unprecedented scale

are causing catastrophic damage. The Centre has done well in treating climate as a priority issue - but the scale of the destruction of lives, livelihoods and critical

infrastructure warrants more action.

It is not just the Centre; states have a key role too. The State Action Plans on Climate Change (SAPCCs) need upscaling and capacity enhancement. Many pilot projects on resilience are taking place; the effective ones need to be replicated quickly. There has to be a sharper focus on building institutional and human capacity and district-level localisation of SAPCCs so that the authorities can respond to changing climate challenges quickly and effectively. The report provides yet another warning that business-as-usual isn't sustainable.



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The perils of a prolonged deadlock with farmers

Prolonged blockages of the main arteries of the NCR can have a serious adverse effect on people already reeling from the pandemic and economic distress

"I belong to a farmer's family and since childhood, I have experienced the tough life of farmers...a lie is being spread these days in the name of MSP and mandis". This was part of a letter by Union agriculture minister, Narendra Singh Tomar, reaching out to the agitating farmers. The farm groups rejected the overture. Who will blink first? Past experience shows that prolonged protests can lead to great instability.

A three-judge Supreme Court (SC) bench headed by the Chief Justice observed that if the issue is not resolved quickly, the protest could spread to other parts of the country. The SC also said that it cannot take away the right to express disagreement from anyone unless it impedes the rights of others. This is why it has asked for the matter to be listed before the vacation Bench. The SC has also asked the Attorney General (AG) whether the government could put these laws on hold for a few days to which he has said he would seek the government's view. The SC

has also suggested the setting up of an independent committee to enable discussions; this gives the government some space.

The farmers, however, are asking the Centre to settle the issue - they want nothing less than a repeal of the three laws. The government had earlier suggested some amendments but this has not met with favour from the farmers. If both sides refuse to be flexible, this deadlock is likely to be prolonged.

The main problem created by this stir is that fact that the four entry points to Delhi are either completely closed or partially blocked. Millions of people have to travel daily to Delhi or to the National Capital Region (NCR) for work. Now their mobility has been curtailed. During the Shaheen Bagh agitation last year, only one road was closed. Prolonged blockages of the main arteries of the NCR can have a serious adverse effect on people already reeling from the pandemic and economic distress. Traders in

Delhi and NCR have already begun to feel the pinch. The movement of fruits and vegetables to Azadpur mandi has become irregular. Farmers who are the producers of these perishable goods are among the hardest hit.

Many of those sitting in protest are senior citizens who are likely to suffer the adverse effects of a harsh winter. So far, more than 25 protesters are reported to have died at the protest sites.

From a gurudwara near Karnal, an elderly priest, Sant Ram Singh, died by suicide. He was apparently unhappy with the plight of the protesting farmers. His final rites will be held on December 25. Farmer organisations are organising events in the villages of all those who have died during the protests so far.

Clearly, this is being used to mobilise sympathy and support. Unscrupulous elements have exploited such situations in past protests. And this is a real danger this time around as well.



However, despite the highly-charged atmosphere, the protests have been peaceful until now.

The government and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) are making their own political moves. Prime Minister (PM) Narendra Modi himself has spoken to farmers in Kutch and Madhya Pradesh. He has also sent many messages to the farmers. Home Minister Amit Shah has met farmers in Bengal, while in Uttar Pradesh, chief minister Yogi Adityanath has held big farmer rallies in Meerut and Bareilly. The government is clearly keen to contain these protests before they spread further. The Opposition has claimed that the government is trying to project the protests as the handiwork of a small group of disgruntled

farmers in a limited geographical area. Some optimists may say that the protests and the government's response have put agriculture and farming in the spotlight. But, the issue has wider ramifications. Punjab is a sensitive border state.

A unique blend of religion, socio-economic factors and politics has always played a big role in Punjab's society. This has been misused by certain elements in the past to fan separatism for which the country has paid a very heavy price. If the efforts to label this protest as being part of a move to realise Khalistan continue, there could be dire consequences. Some foreign governments have also made unnecessary comments about this issue.

For the Congress, why status quo is untenable

Unless the party gets its leadership, messaging, organisation, and social base right, it stares at a third Lok Sabha defeat in 2024



The Congress is in crisis and this crisis has four distinct elements - of leadership, of effective messaging to take on the Narendra Modi-led Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), of organisation, and of social coalition.

But to understand the scale of the crisis first, just examine what has happened in the electoral arena since 2019. The

Congress, in the second consecutive Lok Sabha election, lost dismally, winning just 52 seats. The party managed to squeeze into government in Maharashtra and Jharkhand as part of a coalition. But it failed to win Haryana; it came a poor and distant third in Delhi, decisively losing its support base to the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) yet again; it lost power in Madhya Pradesh

and just about survived in Rajasthan; it dragged down the Mahagatbandhan in Bihar; it has fared dismally in Hyderabad's local elections even as the BJP made impressive strides; it lost the local polls in Kerala to the Left Front; and its performance was below par for a ruling party in Rajasthan's local polls.

In the polls scheduled for 2021, the Congress stares at the possibility of coming fourth in West Bengal; it is facing a tough challenge in Assam where the incumbent BJP, despite the concerns over the Citizenship (Amendment) Act and a flawed National Register of Citizens (NRC), retains the edge; it has a chance at coming to power in Tamil Nadu, but only as a junior ally of the Dravida Munnetra

Kazhagam; and its best prospects of returning to power in a state - Kerala - have dimmed if the local polls are any indication. Therefore, it is entirely possible that between April 2019 and December 2021, the Congress would have failed to win any state election on its own. There are indications that the party leadership recognises that the status quo is untenable. Sonia Gandhi's meeting with a group of senior leaders, including dissenters, on Saturday, indicates a greater willingness to listen to criticism. But cosmetic changes will no longer do. What is needed is a radical surgery that looks at each element of the crisis in the party.

The first is the question of leadership. Sonia Gandhi is president - but all Congress

leaders know that real power is being exercised by Rahul Gandhi, who is, however, unwilling to take charge formally. There is a simple way out here. Either the Nehru-Gandhi family takes full control or it lets go and allows a genuinely competitive electoral process to throw up a new leader.

There are trade-offs with each scenario. If Rahul Gandhi does take over again, it will help bring back some clear authority in the party - but it is, based on two general elections, clear that he does not evoke the faith and trust of India's electorate, especially when pitted against Narendra Modi in increasingly presidential-style elections.

What agriculture needs: Risk mitigation



Its absence make farmers less receptive to pro-market reforms which add to income uncertainty

At the heart of the debate on farm laws is the issue of the level of farm incomes. Income volatility is a key dimension important for farmers' welfare, understanding their anxieties, and the success of a pro-market reform. The two main risks associated with farming are production risks and price risks. While production-related risks that come from weather, pests and disease are well understood, price risks induced by the market or policy are more subtle. Market price realisation of agricultural produce is usually uncertain. When sowing, farmers have to

guess the price their crops will get after four or five months when harvest occurs. After sowing, they have limited ability to change their decision. Price risks are exacerbated by policy. India abruptly changes export restrictions on crops like cotton and onion, often multiple times between sowing and harvest. Thus, farmers are unable to make informed decisions; when international prices are too high, export bans also keep farmers from making a profit.

Globally, governments provide farmers with various risk-mitigation instruments. In India, Pradhan Mantri Fasal Bima Yojna (PMFBY), the government's crop insurance programme, deals only with production risks. It does not

cover livestock. Enrollment remains low and operational challenges leave much scope for improvement. To deal with price risk, the only real instrument that the government provides is procurement at minimum support prices (MSPs). When available, farmers use it to the fullest. In the 1960s, before procurement of paddy and wheat started, Punjab's farmers grew many other crops like maize, bajra, pulses and oilseeds. Three decades of assured procurement has turned it largely into a paddy-wheat producing state. Farmers understand the environmental costs of growing water-intensive crops. But they choose to grow these crops, as they minimise their ex-post risk, even if they don't maximise their incomes or welfare of future generations.

When farmers don't have access to public procurement, they mitigate risk by sowing low-value low-risk crops conditional on agro-ecology. Research has shown that India's domestic market integration has increased income volatility and induced farmers to switch to lower-risk crops. Consider the flood-prone areas of Bihar, where paddy

crops get damaged due to monsoons. In unintegrated markets, this would increase local prices. Thus, farmer income, which is a product of prices and quantities, is stabilised. In integrated markets, a reduction in local production leads to inflow of paddy from neighbouring regions keeping prices stable. This is good for consumers. However, farmer incomes decline as their production loss is not offset by a price increase. A single instrument, procurement at MSP, is being used to solve multiple problems - risk, remunerative prices, and food security. However, it is not the best solution. It cannot be made universal, is operationally challenging, and environmentally detrimental. Therefore, India needs a better plan. What are the elements that we need to consider? First, to provide immediate relief there is a need to strengthen PM-Kisan (and its state-specific variants), especially in states where there is no public procurement. It should also be expanded to include landless farmers. The second is the debate over

removing various subsidies - MSP, power, fertiliser etc - and replacing it with an equivalent transfer. If the latter is done, then we must ensure that the basic PM-Kisan infrastructure works, and be cognisant about whether distribution chains of key inputs work and are competitive. The switch will, then, have greater acceptance. The production systems in Punjab and Haryana have gradually evolved as a response to the procurement systems that the government implemented for three decades. Overnight reversal is hard. Thus, farmers must be compensated for policy induced adjustment costs. These compensations will have environmental benefits when farmers switch from paddy to other crops. Third, to insure price-risk, we can consider a procedurally simple version of the Bhavantar scheme to compensate farmers for losses from market price crashes. A price monitoring and market intelligence system is necessary for it to work. However, this should be a top-up over the basic income transfer to target extreme events.

The BJP's Bengal offensive

If past record and current momentum are an indication, Trinamool should be worried



With home minister and Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)'s second most powerful leader and organiser par excellence, Amit Shah, visiting West Bengal over the weekend, the battle for the state has truly begun. Elections are scheduled for early summer next year. This is the one eastern

state where the BJP was unable to make deep inroads till 2019. This is despite the fact that the founder of the BJP's earlier avatar, Bharatiya Jana Sangh, Shyama Prasad Mookerjee was from the state; it is despite the fact that the state was witness to Partition and

remains demographically mixed with a substantial Muslim population - often a ripe enough basis for the BJP to make a splash. But the three-decade long rule of the Left and then the decade-old regime of Mamata Banerjee kept the party on the fringes.

But not anymore. The 2019 election result - the BJP won 18 of the 42 seats in the state, emerging as the clear opposition to Ms Banerjee - provided momentum to the party. It is now relying on a set of tested techniques to expand its hold. It is banking on anti-incumbency against Trinamool - and, remember, the BJP has proved to be an effective challenger to governments in various states. It is banking on Prime Minister Narendra Modi's popularity. It is relying on identity politics - stoking the resentment of Hindus against what it alleges to be Ms Banerjee's "politics of appeasement" and the Citizenship (Amendment) Act to win over those Hindu voters with links east of the border. It is banking on a set of defectors from the Trinamool who are deeply rooted in the state - from

Mukul Roy to now Suvendu Adhikari. And it is leveraging its careful micro-caste politics within a state where various sub-castes have often felt underrepresented. All of this is happening at a time when Ms Banerjee is on the defensive. Her control of the State apparatus and her organisational machine give her an advantage. But her reliance on political consultant Prashant Kishor has antagonised older leaders; her governance, especially the handling of Cyclone Amphan, has raised questions; and she is struggling to retain both her Muslim base while assuring Hindus that she is also committed to their interests. Ms Banerjee is a political fighter and cannot be underestimated, but the Trinamool has reason to be concerned about 2021.

Why farmers have rejected govt's offer on agri laws

Farmers have rejected the central government's offer on agri laws. They have listed out their conditions for resuming talks with the government to end the farm stir.

(News Agencies)-There is no breakthrough in deadlock between the central government and the protesting farmers over the three agri laws. Prime Minister Narendra Modi is set to address a mega interaction event with farmers from six states on Christmas and the Good Governance Day on Friday. He will digitally transfer Rs 18,000 crore to the bank accounts of about 9 crore farmers under the Pradhan Mantri Kisan Samman Nidhi Yojana even as thousands of farmers are bracing chilly winters in Delhi-NCR and other northern states demanding complete rollback of the three farm laws. After days of suspense, the protesting farmers' unions on Tuesday rejected the government offer for talks on its eight-point agenda that signalled a climbdown by it. The protesters are no longer interested in discussing the merits of the new agri laws. They want the legislation to be repealed.

The unions have now set a pre-condition for coming to the negotiating table saying talks could start only if the repeal of the three laws is on the agenda of discussion. They topped it up with a fresh demand that calls for revision of the mechanism to determine the cost of production. Simply put, the protesters are now rooting for an increased Minimum Support Price (MSP). The protesters have sent a letter to the agriculture ministry calling the government's amendment proposal as a "meaningless" offer and demanding a "concrete proposal" to restart the dialogue process for resolving the stalemate. Quite interestingly, the unions asked the government not to "repeat" the proposed changes in the laws that the protesting farmers have already rejected.

The farmers' unions have demanded a legal guarantee for the MSP invoking MS Swaminathan-headed National

Commission on Farmers' recommendation for determination of the cost of agricultural production and consequent MSP.

They have demanded a revised procurement price - the MSP - for agriculture produce on the basis of the C2+50% formula as explained in the Swaminathan commission report. This formula includes the cost of imputed rent plus interest paid on the owned land and capital.

Under the existing formula that the Modi government revised in its first term, the "cost plus 50%" calculation is arrived at by considering only the actual cost of inputs and imputed value of family labour.

The Electricity Bill 2020 is another inclusion by the protesting farmers' unions among the agenda for talks. The protesters say the electricity bill is anti-farmer as it leads to greater privatisation of power generation and supply, and



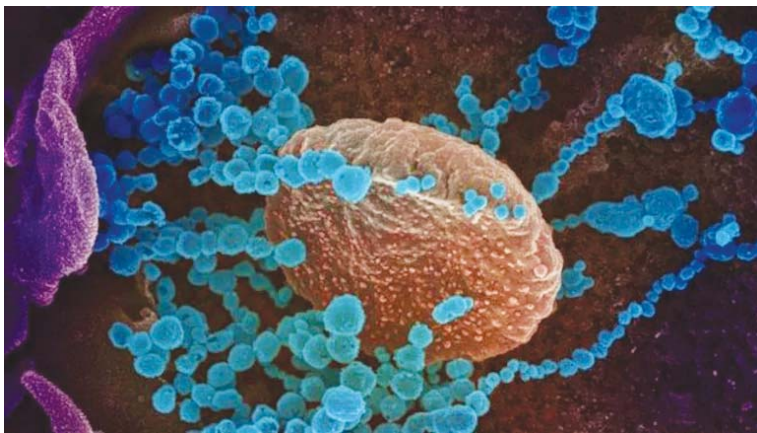
hence exposes them to the greed of the private players. The safeguard under the proposed law that the subsidies would be paid by the state governments has failed to convince them. The protesting unions say they don't trust the state governments for paying the subsidy bills on time leading to snapping of power supply during key farming weeks.

Further, the protesting farmers' unions have demanded that the government should include the Essential Commodities Act in the ambit of talks. It was not mentioned in the eight-point offer that the government had given to the protesters earlier. Though the protesting farmers' unions

have tried to keep the political banner away from their protest sites along with the Delhi border points, they have countered the government over political statements. Sample this sentence from the letter that they have written to the government: "You are dealing with protesting farmers in a manner as if they are not aggrieved citizens but political rivals."

Those present at the press conference of the Samyukt Kisan Morcha, a joint front of farmer unions, on Wednesday, however, included former parliamentarian Hannan Mallah and Swaraj India president Yogendra Yadav.

Mutant alert: Understanding the Covid UK variant and what it means for you



The new variant came to light in early December because of the UK's phenomenal genomic surveillance system for Covid-19. After looking at genomic analysis and epidemiological evidence of increased transmission, the Public Health England (PHE) concluded that "the new variant was showing signs of increased transmissibility."

briefing all clarify that current evidence only supports increased transmissibility and there is no evidence about increased or decreased disease severity, impact on reinfections, therapeutics or vaccines.

EXPLAINING THE BASIS OF MUTATION

Imagine SARS-CoV-2 as a tiny bubble with tiny clubs projecting out from its surface. The virus comprises different types of proteins and genetic code called RNA (ribonucleic acid) enveloped by a layer of fat (lipids from the bubble). The tiny clubs are called S proteins (spike protein) and they're a very important part of the virus. The S protein attaches to a specific receptor on host cells (called ACE-2), and if the fit is right, the virus can infect the cells. If the S protein is a partial fit, the virus may not be able to

infect the cells as easily. The better the fit between the S protein and the receptor, the better the virus can infect the host cell.

The RNA genetic code consists of a series of letters and this represents the genetic blueprint to make all the coronavirus's proteins, including the S protein. The RNA blueprint determines which protein building blocks are present. These building blocks are called amino acids. A change in the virus's RNA may cause a change in its amino acids which can result in a change in the S protein. When the virus infects a host cell, it tricks the host cell into making copies of viral RNA and proteins in a process called replication. During replication inside host cells, viral RNA needs to be copied thousands of times to make RNA for offspring

viruses. During this process, a few errors may occur resulting in a different RNA genetic code. These errors are called mutations and the coronavirus mutates regularly, acquiring about one new mutation in its genome every two weeks.

Many mutations do not result in any changes in the amino acids that make proteins. Some mutations do result in a change in the amino acids but often have no functional impact on the virus's proteins. Occasionally, a mutation may occur that results in a change in a protein's function. For example, a mutation may result in a new amino acid that makes a new S protein which may fit better with the host cell ACE-2 receptor. This may create a virus that can infect cells better and pass more easily from one host to another.

Last week, a new SARS-CoV-2 variant was identified in parts of London and southeast England where Covid-19 cases were surging. According to the Covid-19 Genomics UK Consortium (COG-UK Consortium) that sequenced the genome data of the virus and identified it, the new variant has been spreading "rapidly" over the last four weeks and has now been detected in other parts of the United Kingdom. UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson recently said the new variant of SARS-CoV-2 could be up to 70 per cent more transmissible than other variants.

This prompted several countries to impose limited or complete travel bans for the UK.

The new variant came to light in early December because of the UK's phenomenal genomic surveillance system for Covid-19. After looking at genomic analysis and epidemiological evidence of increased transmission, the Public Health England (PHE) concluded that "the new variant was showing signs of increased transmissibility."

The European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (CDC), World Health Organisation (WHO), the US CDC, and the Public Health England technical

How fading practice of autopsy revealed secrets of Covid-19 and found a revival



Early autopsies of deceased patients confirmed the coronavirus does not just cause respiratory disease, but can also attack other vital organs. They also led doctors to try blood thinners in some Covid-19 patients and reconsider how long others should be on ventilators.

asking, 'What are you seeing?'" said NYU Langone's Dr. Amy Rapkiewicz. 'Autopsy,' she pointed out, means to see for yourself. "That's exactly what we had to do."

Early autopsies of deceased patients confirmed the coronavirus does not just cause respiratory disease, but can also attack other vital organs. They also led doctors to try blood thinners in some Covid-19 patients and reconsider how long others should be on ventilators.

"You can't treat what you don't know about," said Dr. Alex Williamson, a pathologist at Northwell Health in New York.

"Many lives have been saved by looking closely at someone's death."

Autopsies have informed medicine for centuries - most recently helping to reveal the extent of the opioid epidemic, improve cancer care and demystify AIDS and anthrax. Hospitals were once judged by how many autopsies they performed.

But they've lost stature over the years as the medical world instead turned to lab tests and imaging scans. In 1950, the practice was conducted on about half of deceased hospital patients. Today, those rates have

shrunk to somewhere between 5% and 11%.

It's really kind of a lost tool," said Louisiana State University pathologist Dr. Richard Vander Heide.

Some hospitals found it even harder this year. Safety concerns about transmission forced many hospital administrators to stop or seriously curb autopsies in 2020.

The pandemic also led to a general dip in the total number patients at many hospitals, which drove down autopsy rates in some places. Large hospitals around the country have reported conducting fewer autopsies in 2020.

The Covid-19 pandemic has helped revive the autopsy. When the virus first arrived in US hospitals, doctors could only guess what was causing its strange constellation of symptoms: What could explain why patients were losing their sense of smell and taste, developing skin rashes, struggling to breathe and

reporting memory loss on top of flu-like coughs and aches?

At hospital morgues, which have been steadily losing prominence and funding over several decades, pathologists were busily dissecting the disease's first victims - and finding some answers.

"We were getting emails from clinicians, kind of desperate,

Here's 5-point strategy that could end impasse over farm laws

The stalemate between Centre and farmers over the newly enacted three farm laws continues. While the farmers are agitating over the Minimum Support Price (MSP), some states are concerned about the loss of revenue as the new laws do away with the mandi taxes and fees, which currently range from 8.5 per cent in Punjab to less than 1 per cent in others.

The stalemate between Centre and farmers over the newly enacted three farm laws continues. While the farmers are agitating over the Minimum Support Price (MSP), some states are concerned about the loss of revenue as the new laws do away with the mandi taxes and fees, which currently range from 8.5 per cent in Punjab to less than 1 per cent in others.

Asymmetric procurement In the current kharif procurement regime, the percentage of procurement from Punjab is a staggering 55 per cent till December 11, even though Punjab ranks third in paddy production. The procurement of cereals continues to be asymmetric, with top paddy producing states such as West Bengal (leading producer) and Uttar Pradesh (second largest producer) witnessing nil and eight per cent procurement respectively in the current procurement season. Andhra Pradesh, among top producers, has seen procurement of only 1 per cent. Punjab and Haryana have seen procurement of around 70 per cent.

MSP works only in certain pockets

Every year, the central government declares the MSP for 23 crops at the beginning of each sowing season. However, the government doesn't buy all the 23 crops. Historical procurement data indicate that only 25-35 per cent of total wheat produce has been procured over the years (with largest procurement happening through Punjab and Haryana). In the case of rice, the procurement share is in the range of 30-40 per cent with significant procurement from Telangana, Punjab, Haryana and Kerala. Going by the NSS 70th round survey on Key Indicators of Situation of Agricultural Households in India almost 93 per cent of households sold their goods in open market.

Given that there are 14.6 crore small and marginal farmers who are ready to sell below the MSP, making it mandatory for buyers could drive the price to zero.

Farmers' suicide

The issue of farmers' suicide is clearly linked with prosperity of the farmers. The data from National Crime Records Bureau

(NCRB) indicate that suicide in farm sector (farmers/cultivators + labourers) in Maharashtra and Karnataka was almost 13 times and 6.6 times, respectively compared to Punjab.

Interestingly, the average annual income of agricultural households in Punjab is almost 2.3 times compared to Maharashtra or Karnataka. In this background, a five-point strategy could help resolve the current impasse over the farm laws:



First, instead of the MSP as a price guarantee that farmers are demanding, the government could insert a quantity guarantee clause for a minimum period of five years that procurement to production percentage of crops

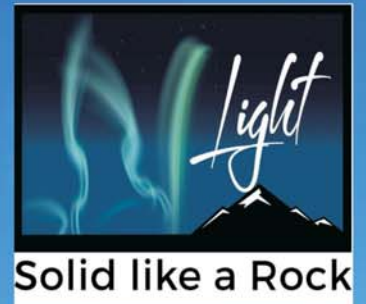
(being currently procured) should at least be equal to last year's percentage (with safeguards in exceptional events like droughts, floods etc). This could allay the concerns of the farmers to a great extent.

National Farmers' Day: Why farm stir is no longer about merits of agri laws

December 23 is commemorated as the National Farmers' Day or Kisan Divas in India in the honour of former Prime Minister Chaudhary Charan Singh, who was a premier farmers' leader of his time. He was an active politician in pre-Independence India and is credited with the introduction of the Agriculture Produce Market Bill in the Legislative Assembly of then United Province in 1938. That bill was significant as it was the first legislative move by an Indian to have a mechanism for the sale of farm produce. Its objective was to protect farmers from the pressure tactics of traders. The bill was later adopted by some provincial governments before Independence with Punjab being the first. Incidentally, thousands of farmers protesting

today against three agri laws that the Centre brought earlier this year demand a similar protection against avarice of traders. The new farm laws provide for a system that allows traders to purchase agriculture produce of farmers outside the APMC mandis. The protesting farmers have an apprehension that the new mechanism would dismantle the MSP-APMC system that offers them an assured price for agriculture produce. They are demanding a complete rollback of the three farm laws -- The Farmers' Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Act, The Farmers (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement of Price Assurance and Farm Services Act, and The Essential Commodities (Amendment) Act.

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Bengal: Not only BJP, TMC is also growing. Then why Mamata Banerjee looks rattled?

The BJP has been rising consistently in Bengal and is setting up for a direct contest with the ruling TMC in 2021 assembly election. The TMC, interestingly, has also been rising in Bengal. Still, CM Mamata Banerjee has looked rattled at the growth of the BJP in Bengal.

The Bharatiya Janata Party appears to be setting the agenda of West Bengal politics with sharpened attacks on Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee, high-profile political tours by leaders and induction of TMC turncoats into the party, and declining political firepower of the Congress and the Left. Mamata Banerjee has appeared rattled over the aggressive rise of the BJP in Bengal.

Mamata Banerjee made frantic efforts to placate Suvendu Adhikari, who rebelled over the growing importance of her nephew Abhishek Banerjee in the TMC. Suvendu and nine other sitting MLAs joined the BJP last week. At a recent public rally in North Bengal, Mamata Banerjee in an impassioned appeal to the voters asked what wrong she did to lose all seats in the 2019 Lok Sabha seats in the region. The inroads that the BJP has made

in Bengal over the past 10 years are phenomenal. Riding on the Modi wave and weakening of the Congress and the Left, the BJP has grown 10 times since 2009. But then it began with a very low base.

Read: Mamata Banerjee vs Modi govt over IPS officers
Interestingly, what is generally overlooked in political discussions is that the TMC of Mamata Banerjee too has seen a significant growth in elections since 2009. The only difference is that the BJP's growth rate has been higher. It is needless to mention that the TMC and the BJP have eaten into the votes of the Congress and the Left.

BJP IN BENGAL ELECTIONS
In 2009, the BJP got six per cent votes and one Lok Sabha seat of Darjeeling that Jaswant Singh won. In the 2011 West Bengal Assembly election, which the TMC won to end the 34-year-rule

of the Left Front, the BJP contested 289 of 294 seats. But it failed to win a single seat and got only four per cent votes. The BJP's rise in Bengal was seen in 2014, the Modi wave election. The BJP won two Lok Sabha seats but got 17 per cent votes. Both winners, Babul Supriyo and SS Ahluwalia made it to the Narendra Modi cabinet - an indication of how much political value the BJP attached to Bengal.

In the 2016 Bengal election, the BJP fought on 291 seats, won just three and almost retained its 2014 vote share (10.6 per cent). The 2019 Lok Sabha election returned the dividend of the investment that the BJP had made over the years in Bengal. The BJP won 18 of Bengal's 42 Lok Sabha seats with a vote share of about 41 per cent.

This is when Mamata Banerjee felt alarmed about the BJP's



progress in Bengal. This is despite her own TMC's continued rise in Bengal election after election.

TMC RISING IN BENGAL

In 2009, the TMC won 19 Lok Sabha seats in Bengal with 31 per cent vote share riding on the back of Singur-Nandigram movement. Two years later in the 2011 Bengal election, Mamata Banerjee's TMC won 184 of 294 assembly seats. The TMC's partner the Congress won 42 seats. The combined vote share was about 40 per cent -- in the range that the BJP is today.

In 2016, Mamata Banerjee did not need the Congress with her TMC winning 211 of Bengal's 294

Assembly seats with 45 per cent votes. That was the pinnacle of the TMC's performance in Bengal. In 2019, when the Modi government returned to power at the Centre with a bigger mandate, the TMC in Bengal lost only 1.25 per cent vote share to win 22 Lok Sabha seats -- four more than the BJP.

But the devil lies in the details for Mamata Banerjee.

BJP VERSUS TMC REGIONAL PATTERN - Bengal can be divided into five distinct zones -- the hills, North, Central, Jangalmahal, and South. The hills, Jangalmahal, and South Bengal are key regions for the TMC in its contest against the BJP.

Congress pot simmers again over talk of 'G 23' meet with Sonia



Speculation is rife over 'G 23' Congress dissenters getting an audience with party's interim chief Sonia Gandhi. News of an Ashok Gehlot visit to the national Capital on Friday has deepened the swirl in the party that something related to the Congress organisation and the Rajasthan impasse is coming up.

Speculation is rife over 'G 23' Congress dissenters getting an audience with party's interim chief Sonia Gandhi. News of an Ashok Gehlot visit to the national Capital on Friday has deepened the swirl in the party that something related to the Congress organisation and the Rajasthan impasse is coming up.

The meet, if and when it materialises, would have far-reaching consequences on the fate of the Grand Old Party. After two subsequent general election washouts and a pervading malaise, matters came to a head in August when 23 senior leaders of the Congress sent a letter to Sonia calling for sweeping

changes in the party, sparking an existential crisis.

For Sonia, who holds a distinction of being the longest-serving All India Congress Committee (AICC) chief in the 136-year history of the Congress, the meeting may see history repeat itself like in 1996 and then 1998 when two serving Congress presidents, first PV Narasimha Rao and then Sitaram Kesri, were unceremoniously shown the door.

Flashback

In both 1996 and 1998, Sonia remained aloof but that had been a façade. A galaxy of senior party leaders, ranging from Arjun Singh, Sitaram Kesri, Vijaya Bhaskar Reddy, K Karunakaran

and AK Antony to Ahmed Patel and Ghulam Nabi Azad, had played together to throw Rao out. Barely two years later, Rao could only watch bemused when Pranab Mukherjee, Jitendra Prasada, RK Dhawan, Arjun Singh, Azad, Sharad Pawar, Vijaya Bhaskara Reddy, Antony, Manmohan Singh, Meira Kumar, Oscar Fernandes, Madhavsingh Solanki, JB Patnaik and Lalthanhawla sent an ultimatum to Kesri. Almost 22 years later, Sonia and her son Rahul Gandhi are staring at a mutiny which lacks colour, punch and numbers but is striking in terms of the party's growing sense of impatience and disillusionment with the leadership's inability to win elections. Mukherjee, Prasada, Dhawan, Arjun, Reddy, Patnaik, and Patel are dead but the new lineup - Azad, Kapil Sibal, Anand Sharma, Shashi Tharoor, Mukul Wasnik, Bhupinder Singh Hooda,

Rajinder Kaur Bhattal, Veerappa Moily, Prithviraj Chavan, Manish Tiwari, Vivek Tankha, Milind Deora - is equally formidable. It includes five former chief ministers, floor leaders in the Rajya Sabha, members of the Congress Working Committee (CWC), AICC functionaries and Congress Legislature Party (CLP) leaders in various states. Sonia's options

To Sonia's advantage, the dissenters do not have a Sonia-like figure in 2020 to replace what they consider a jaded leadership. Unlike Rao of 1996 and Kesri of 1998, Sonia has many cards to play. She is far better placed than Rao or Kesri. The average Congress worker is emotionally attached to the Nehru-Gandhi family but electoral setbacks ranging from civic polls in Hyderabad to Assembly bypolls in Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh to the Bihar flop is making even loyal footsoldiers

edgy. The average Congress worker is politically savvy. She/he can clearly see some sense of disenchantment towards the Narendra Modi regime. Be it farmers or Dalits, Scheduled Castes, poorest of the poor, intermediate castes such as Jats or Marathas, the dissatisfaction with the NDA government is not getting channelised or translating into any major movement against the BJP-led government at the Centre. It must be understood that unlike religion, loyalty in politics is conditional and transactional. When Indira Gandhi was voted out of power in 1977, DK Barooah who had [in]famously coined 'Indira is India, and India is Indira' slogan, had switched sides. Vidya Charan Shukla and Ambika Soni deposed before the Shah Commission that inquired into the excesses of the 1975 Emergency.

Security concerns on Myanmar border delaying vital project linking Kolkata to Mizoram, says home ministry

The Union home ministry has listed security concerns and lack of access as the reasons for the delay in the mega-infrastructure project for enhancing connectivity to the north-east linking Kolkata to Mizoram via Sitwe port.

The Kaladan project, that is expected to be a big boost for connectivity and enhance infrastructure in both India and Myanmar, has been under threat from Myanmar-based insurgent group Arakan Army that is said to be backed by China.

India Today TV had earlier reported how a steady supply of weapons from China is reaching insurgent groups in Myanmar including the Arakan Army (AA), that has been posing a threat to the Kaladan project, setting up camps bordering the southern tip of Mizoram in India, according to recent intelligence reports.

The Parliamentary Standing Committee on Home Affairs has



Multimodal Transit Transport (KMTT) project that is being piloted and funded by the Ministry of External Affairs.

A recent report of the panel tabled in parliament on December 21 noted that the progress of road construction is not at all satisfactory.

In response to the observations, the Ministry of Home Affairs stated that the security situation in the region and lack of access from the India-Myanmar border in Mizoram are the main reasons for the delay.

deteriorated in the recent past. Access to the project site from the Indian side has been permitted by the Government of Myanmar after much effort and construction activities are currently underway from this end. The Project is being closely monitored," the home ministry said. It is also stated that "acute financial crisis" faced by the construction companies have resulted in delays. The original waterways component of the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project (KMMTTP) has been completed in May 2017.

The work for construction of road in the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project (KMMTTP) was to take three years to complete. However, the current physical progress for the construction of the road is behind schedule.

While the Union home ministry's response does not give out details of the security situation, the reference is to the threat from Myanmar based insurgent group Arakan Army. The insurgent group has also been demanding a tax from workers at the project and threatening them. An Indian worker part of the Kaladan project died in custody of the Arakan Army earlier. Last year, five Indian workers along with Member of Myanmar Parliament and four other Myanmar nationals were abducted by Arakan Army in the Rakhine State of Myanmar and one of the workers got killed. Joint action by India and Myanmar

In February last year, Indian and Myanmar forces carried out operations to push back the Arakan Army cadres that had come extremely close to the border near Mizoram targeting infrastructure project. Fresh inputs suggest that the Arakan Army is raising its head again in the area trying to target the Kaladan project. "China is supplying high-quality sophisticated weapons including surface-to-air missiles to militant groups like Arakan Army fighting the Tatmadaw (armed forces) which is also a source of annoyance to them," recent intelligence reports say.

Act East policy

The Kaladan project will be a new gateway to the landlocked north-east part of India, reducing the distance from Kolkata to Mizoram by nearly a thousand kilometres and bringing down the travel time by at least four days.

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JuD chief Hafiz Saeed sentenced to over 15 years in jail by Pak court in terror financing case



Hafiz Saeed has been sentenced to 15 and a half years of jail time by a Pak anti-terror court in one of the several terror financing cases against him.

(News Agencies)- A Pakistani court on Thursday sentenced Mumbai terror attack mastermind and banned Jamat-ud-Dawa (JuD) chief Hafiz Saeed to 15 and a half years in jail in one of the several terror financing cases against him. The Anti-Terrorism Court (ATC) of Lahore also imposed a fine of 2 lakh Pakistani rupees on Hafiz Saeed.

Hafiz Saeed, an UN-designated terrorist on whom the US has

placed a USD 10 million bounty, was arrested on July 17 last year in the terror financing cases.

He was sentenced to 11 years in jail by an anti-terrorism court in February this year in two terror financing cases.

In November, Saeed was sentenced to another 10 years in jail by an anti-terrorism court in two more terror financing cases. The punishments are to be served subsequently, that is one after the other, compounding

Saeed's jail time to 36 and a half years.

"On Thursday an Anti-Terrorism Court (ATC) of Lahore sentenced five leaders of Jamat-ud-Dawa, including its chief Hafiz Saeed, in another terror financing case...for 15 and a half years," a court official told PTL.

Hafiz Saeed will serve his time at the Kot Lakhpat Jail in Lahore. There are reports that he is given "VIP protocol" in jail.

The other four JuD leaders convicted by the court on Thursday are Hafiz Abdus Salam, Zafar Iqbal, JuD spokesperson Yahya Mujahid and Muhammad Ashraf.

Each convicted person has also been fined a PKR 200,000.

The ATC also handed down six-month imprisonment to Saeed's brother-in-law Abdul Rehman Makki in this case and imposed

a fine of PKR 200,000 on him, the official said.

A total of 41 cases have been registered by the CTD against the JuD leaders, out of which 28 have been decided while the rest are pending in the ATC courts. Five cases have been decided against Saeed so far.

Hafiz Saeed-led JuD is the front organisation for the Lashkar-e-Toiba (LeT) which is responsible for carrying out the 2008 Mumbai attack that killed 166 people, including six Americans.

The US Department of the Treasury has designated Hafiz Saeed as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist. He was listed under the UN Security Council Resolution 1267 in December 2008.

The global terror financing watchdog Financial Action Task Force (FATF) is instrumental in

pushing Pakistan to take measures against terrorists roaming freely in Pakistan and using its territory to carry out attacks in India.

The FATF had placed Pakistan on the grey list in June 2018 and asked Islamabad to implement a plan of action to curb money laundering and terror financing by the end of 2019 but the deadline was extended later on due to the Covid-19 pandemic. With Pakistan's continuation in the 'grey list', the country may find it difficult to get financial aid from the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and the European Union, thus further enhancing problems for the cash-strapped nation.

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Israel says Pakistan not among states it may have ties with



(News Agencies)-Oli's detractors have described the move as a "constitutional coup", and media reports have pointed to the role played by the Chinese ambassador to Nepal, Hou Yanqi, in efforts to engineer a patch up between Oli and Pushpa Kamal Dahal "Prachanda", the premier's main rival in the ruling Nepal Communist Party.

India on Thursday reacted in a guarded manner to Nepal Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli's decision to dissolve Parliament and call snap elections, saying it was an internal matter that should be handled in keeping with the country's democratic processes.

Oli's detractors have described the move as a "constitutional coup", and media reports have pointed to the role played by the Chinese ambassador to Nepal, Hou Yanqi, in efforts to engineer a patch up between Oli and Pushpa Kamal Dahal "Prachanda", the premier's main rival in the ruling Nepal Communist Party.

Asked about India's position on the dissolution of Parliament and political uncertainty in Nepal, external affairs ministry spokesperson Anurag Srivastava said: "We have noted the recent political developments in Nepal.

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(News Agencies)- Pakistan is not among the Muslim countries Israel is aiming to normalise relations with, an Israeli cabinet minister said. In recent months, the Trump administration has brokered rapprochements between Israel and the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Sudan and Morocco. Ofir Akunis, Israel's regional cooperation minister, told Ynet TV on Wednesday that there were two more countries lined up to normalise ties with Israel before US President Donald Trump leaves the White House next month. He did not name either but said one was in the Gulf but would not be Saudi Arabia. The other, further to the east, is a "Muslim country that is not small" but is not Pakistan, Akunis said. "I categorically presented Pakistan's stance on Israel to the UAE's foreign minister [during a visit to the UAE] that we will not and cannot establish a relationship with Israel until a concrete and permanent solution

to the Palestine issue is found," Qureshi said. Qureshi's statement came days after his visit to the UAE, which was seen by many as crucial amid rumours that Islamabad had secretly sent a messenger to Israel. Islamabad denied the reports, which appeared mainly in the Israeli media. Responding to questions regarding reports about alleged pressure from Saudi Arabia, the UAE and other Gulf states for the recognition of Israel, Qureshi said he explained to his UAE counterpart the "depth of emotions and feelings Pakistanis have about Palestine and Kashmir". Meanwhile, Indonesia, the most populous Muslim country, said last week it would not recognise Israel as long as Palestinian statehood demands remain unmet. Malaysia has signalled a similar policy. In Dhaka, a foreign ministry official said Bangladesh was not interested in establishing diplomatic ties with Israel.

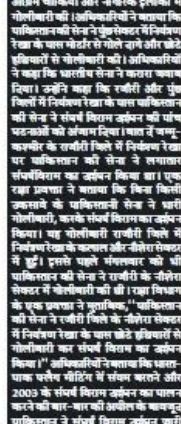
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Since April 2005 Editor : Sharnjit Singh Thind

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Karima Baloch: Pakistani rights activist found dead in Toronto



The body of Karima Baloch, a Pakistani human rights activist, has been found in Toronto, Canada, where she had been living for five years in exile. Ms Baloch, 37, a campaigner from the restive region of Balochistan in western Pakistan, was a vocal critic of the Pakistani military and state. Toronto police issued an appeal after she went missing on Sunday and later confirmed that her body had been found. Police said there were "not believed to be any suspicious circumstances". In 2016, Ms Baloch was named in the BBC's annual list of 100 inspirational and influential women for her work as a campaigner. She left Pakistan in 2015, after terrorism charges were levelled against her. She continued

to campaign in exile for the rights of people in Balochistan, both on social media and in person. And the threats followed her, according to Lateef Johar Baloch, a close friend and fellow activist who also lives in Toronto. He told the BBC that Ms Baloch had recently received anonymous threats warning someone would send her a "Christmas gift" and "teach her a lesson".

Ms Baloch's sister told the BBC Urdu service on Tuesday that her death was "not only a tragedy for the family, but also for the Baloch national movement".

"She didn't go abroad because she wanted to, but because... open activism in Pakistan had become impossible," Mahganj Baloch said.

"The students fighting for a homeland dream

"One girl overcame the men who blocked her school. Balochistan province has been host to a long-running separatist insurgency. Ms Baloch was a well-known activist in the region; she was the first female head of

the Baloch Students' Organisation (BSO) - a banned activist group. Her first public exposure as an activist was in 2005, in Balochistan's Turbat area, where she attended a protest over missing persons carrying the picture of one of her missing relatives. Activists in Balochistan say thousands of campaigners have gone missing in recent years. The Pakistani military

denies accusations that it's brutally suppressing the region's aspirations for autonomy.

Several members of Ms Baloch's extended family had been linked to the Baloch resistance movement over the years, and two of her uncles - a brother of her mother and a brother of her father - had gone missing. Their dead bodies were later found.

She joined the BSO in 2006, serving in several different positions in the following years. The group was officially banned by the government in 2013, but its existence continued and Ms Baloch became chairperson in 2015.

Only a few months later, she went into exile after terrorism charges were filed against her. In Toronto, she married a fellow activist, Hamal Baloch, and remained active both on social media and in human rights activities in Canada and Europe. Reacting to the news of Ms Baloch's death, the Balochistan National Movement (BNM) announced a 40-day mourning period.

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Pakistan court orders release of man charged over Daniel Pearl murder



supreme court will resume its hearing on 5 January.

Sheikh grew up in east London and was educated at a private school where he gained a reputation for being unruly. The son of a prosperous Pakistan-born businessman, he briefly studied at the London School of Economics before dropping out to join an organisation coordinating relief efforts for Muslims during the Bosnian war. Radicalised by his experience in the Balkans, Sheikh travelled to Pakistan where he joined an extremist group. After several months training in camps in Afghanistan, Sheikh was sent to India to kidnap tourists to secure the release of a senior militant imprisoned there.

Captured in a police raid, he was imprisoned in India but was released when extremists hijacked an Indian Airlines plane in 1999, and he travelled back to Pakistan.

Sheikh set a trap for Pearl in the first days of January 2002, though his exact motives are unclear. He eventually gave himself up to civilian authorities after Pearl's death. According to an authoritative investigation and a 100-page report researched over several years by staff and

students at Georgetown University, Pakistani authorities knowingly used perjured testimony to pin the act of murder on Sheikh and his three co-conspirators to achieve a rapid conviction. "While the four were involved in the kidnapping plan and certainly were culpable, they were not present when Pearl was murdered. Others who were present and actually assisted in the brutal beheading were not charged," the report concluded. The kidnapping and eventual execution of Pearl involved three sets of militants, the investigators found: one, led by Sheikh, to abduct the journalist; a second, which kept him prisoner in a home on the outskirts of Karachi; and a third, comprising senior figures in al-Qaida, which killed him.

The decision to murder Pearl was taken by Saif al-Adel, an Egyptian militant who was very influential within al-Qaida but virtually unknown to others at the time. Adel is now regarded as one of its most effective operators and is considered a potential successor to Ayman al-Zawahiri as leader of the organisation. The Georgetown investigation revealed that US investigators had found that the

pattern of the veins in the hand seen beheading Pearl in the video of his murder closely resembled those seen in images of Khalid Sheikh Mohammed's hands. The investigators concluded that the al-Qaida extremist had killed the journalist.

The report also found that most of those involved in the crime had escaped justice. Several were killed in clashes with Pakistani security agencies, and one was shot dead by four unidentified men on motorbikes in 2009. Several of the guards who kept Pearl imprisoned, including one who held him down during his execution, have never been fully investigated by Pakistani authorities.

Others have served short prison sentences for other crimes but have never been charged for their roles in Pearl's murder.

Authorities in Pakistan were embarrassed both by Sheikh's involvement with a series of Pakistan-based extremist groups prior to the kidnapping of Pearl, and the extensive role of such organisations in the detention and murder of the journalist. Many Islamist extremist factions in Pakistan have received extensive support from the country's security services over decades.

(News Agencies)-A court in Pakistan has ordered that a British-born Islamist militant charged with the 2002 kidnapping and murder of the Wall Street Journal reporter Daniel Pearl should be freed, his defence lawyer has said.

Ahmed Omar Saeed Sheikh was sentenced to death in 2002 for masterminding Pearl's murder but the conviction was overturned this year. He has been in jail ever since awaiting the outcome of a series of appeals and legal arguments.

Sheikh's role in the murder of Pearl has long been disputed. The 47-year-old is known to have been involved in the kidnapping of the journalist, who was investigating al-Qaida in the southern Pakistani city of Karachi when he disappeared in January 2002, but is thought not to have taken part in his killing.

In April the high court of Sindh province found that the murder charge had not been proven, but upheld a seven-year jail sentence for kidnapping. Three other people sentenced to life in prison for their role in the plot were acquitted. The decision stunned the US government, Pearl's family and journalism advocacy groups. Sheikh's conviction was showcased by Pakistan as proof of its commitment to the US-led war against terrorism, launched after the 9/11 attacks in 2001 that killed 3,000 people in New York and Washington.

Pearl's murder, which was filmed and the video posted online, may instead have been carried out by Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, the key organiser of the 9/11 attacks, who is being held at Guantánamo Bay in Cuba.

In 2007, US officials said Mohammed, who was systematically tortured after his arrest in Pakistan in 2003, had confessed to personally killing Pearl during a military hearing at

Guantánamo Bay. The Sindh high court's release order overturns a decision by Pakistan's top court that Sheikh should remain in custody while Pearl's family appeal against the acquittal.

Sheikh's lawyer, Mehmood Sheikh, called for his client to be released immediately.

Faisal Siddiqi, the Pearl family lawyer, said Sheikh would be freed until the appeal was completed but would be returned to prison if the family was successful in overturning the acquittal.

There are separate appeals against the acquittal by the government and Pearl's family, a process that under Pakistani law could take years. The government has opposed Sheikh's release, saying it would endanger the public. The

Exclusive-Bangladesh, India finalising first bilateral rice deal in 3 years - sources

(News Agencies)-Bangladesh is finalising a purchase of 150,000 tonnes of rice from India's NAFED, the New Delhi-based state agency told Reuters, in what would be the first such bilateral deal in three years after floods in Bangladesh sent local prices to a record high. India, the world's biggest rice exporter, is offering a steep discount to supplies from rivals Thailand and Vietnam to cut its surplus after a bumper harvest.

"We are negotiating with Bangladesh," said a spokesman for NAFED (the National Agricultural Cooperative Marketing Federation of India Ltd). "NAFED is in a position to supply up to 500,000 tonnes rice to Bangladesh." A senior official with Bangladesh's food ministry said they could buy 100,000 tonnes of parboiled rice and



50,000 tonnes of white rice under a government-to-government deal. India could sell parboiled rice at around \$407 and white rice at around \$417 per tonne on a cost, insurance and freight (CIF) liner out basis, an Indian government source said. The rates are about a third cheaper than those from Thailand and Vietnam. The entire shipment is

likely to be made in the first quarter of next year from the Haldia port in India's eastern state of West Bengal, which borders Bangladesh, the Indian government official added.

Both the Indian and Bangladeshi government officials declined to be named as details are still being worked out. Representatives for the trade and

food ministries of India and Bangladesh did not immediately respond to requests for comment. Bangladesh, the world's third-biggest rice producer with an output of almost 35 million tonnes a year, relies on imports from time to time to cope with shortages caused by natural disasters such as floods or drought. Its state grains agency issued its first rice purchase tender in three years in November to boost local supplies. The country of more than 160 million people could import as much as 500,000 tonnes of rice in the year to June. "Bilateral deals will accelerate India's rice exports," said B.V. Krishna Rao, president of the Indian Rice Exporters' Association. "The government should try to seal more such deals as we have ample surplus for exports."

UK, EU reach post-Brexit trade deal to avert chaotic New Year's split

The breakthrough came Thursday with just over a week to go until the UK's split is completed.

(News Agencies)-Britain and the European Union have struck a provisional free-trade agreement that should avert New Year's chaos for cross-border commerce and bring a measure of certainty to businesses after years of Brexit turmoil.

The breakthrough came Thursday with just over a week to go until the UK's split is completed. Now comes the race to approve and ratify the deal before the UK leaves the

EU's economic structures at the end of the year. The British and European parliaments both must hold votes on the agreement. Months of tense and often testy negotiations gradually whittled differences between the two sides down to three key issues: fair-competition rules, mechanisms for resolving future disputes and fishing rights. The rights of EU boats to trawl in British waters remained the last obstacle

before it was resolved. However, key aspects of the future relationship between the 27-nation bloc and its former member remain unresolved.

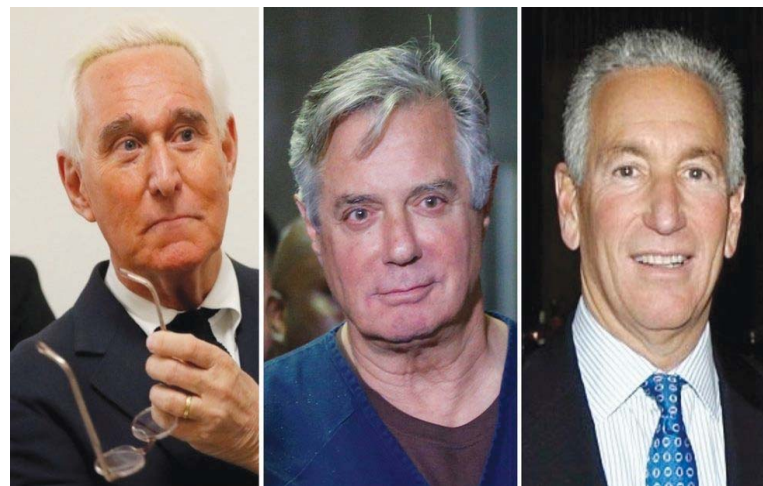
British Prime Minister Boris Johnson had insisted the UK would "prosper mightily" even if no deal were reached and the UK had to trade with the EU on World Trade Organization terms. But his government has acknowledged that a chaotic exit was likely to bring gridlock



at Britain's ports, temporary shortages of some goods and price increases for staple foods. Britain withdrew from the

EU's political institutions on January 31, and an economic transition period expires on December 31.

Trump pardons Paul Manafort, Roger Stone and Charles Kushner



Biggest nor'easter in a decade dumps up to 2ft of snow on 70 million people, causes huge pile-ups and threatens to hold up vaccine delivery - but doesn't stop New Yorkers dining outdoors

while another three received commutations.

A commutation usually takes the form of a reduced prison term, but does not erase the conviction or imply innocence.

A pardon is an expression of the president's forgiveness that confers extra privileges, such as restoring the convict's right to vote.

Presidents often grant pardons in their final days of office.

US 'bribes-for-pardon' inquiry unveiled

How did Paul Manafort react? Mr Trump's pardon for Manafort spared his former campaign chairman from serving most of his seven-and-a-half year prison term

for financial fraud and conspiring to obstruct the investigation into himself.

He had been serving his term under home confinement since being released from federal prison in May over fears of coronavirus, but is now a free man.

The grateful political operative responded by tweeting: "Mr President, my family & I humbly thank you for the Presidential Pardon you bestowed on me. Words cannot fully convey how grateful we are."

What about Roger Stone? Stone was found guilty of lying to Congress about his attempts to contact Wikileaks, the

website that released damaging emails about Mr Trump's 2016 Democratic election rival Hillary Clinton.

On Wednesday night, the long-time Trump friend and adviser welcomed his upgrade from a commutation to full pardon.

He said he had been the victim of a "Soviet-style show trial on politically motivated charges", reports Politico.

Stone has been urging Mr Trump on his way out of the White House to also pardon Wikileaks co-founder Julian Assange and National Security Agency leaker Edward Snowden.

(News Agencies)- US President Donald Trump has pardoned his former campaign manager Paul Manafort, ex-adviser Roger Stone and the father of Mr Trump's son-in-law. Mr Manafort was convicted in 2018 in an investigation into alleged Russian meddling in the 2016 US election.

Mr Trump had previously commuted the prison sentence of Mr Stone, who was convicted of lying to Congress.

They are among 29 people to benefit from Mr Trump's latest pardons before he leaves office next month.

Twenty-six of them won full pardons on Wednesday night,

Ethiopia military 'kills 40' after Benishangul-Gumuz massacre

(News Agencies)-Ethiopia's military has killed more than 40 men suspected to be linked to the massacre of at least 100 people, including children, in the Benishangul-Gumuz region, state media report.

Five current and former government officials were also detained over the security crisis, the reports added.

The assailants torched the homes of sleeping villagers, and shot and stabbed people in Wednesday's attack.

The attack came a day after Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed visited the region.

"Bold reforms expose Ethiopia's ethnic divides

Why Abiy Ahmed formed a new ruling party It is unclear who the attackers were, but they appeared to have targeted ethnic minority communities viewed as "settlers" in the region, rights group Amnesty International said.

Ethiopia has seen a surge in political, ethnic and religious violence in recent years.

It had the highest number of internally displaced people in Africa in 2018 - about 1.8 million. Conflicts have been largely fuelled by groups demanding more land and power, with attempts to drive out people they regard as outsiders. Mr Abiy described the massacre as

tragic, and said the government had deployed a force to the area to help find a solution to the conflict.

State media did not give the identity of the 42 people killed in the military operation to hunt down the attackers.

It said weapons, including bows and arrows, had been seized, the reports said.

A deputy minister in the government was among the five people arrested, state media reported.

Some of the five were "supposedly involved in [the] security crisis" while others had been detained because they had allegedly "not fulfilled their



responsibility appropriately", the reports said.

What happened during the latest attack? A spokesman for the state-linked Ethiopian Human Rights Commission told the BBC that gunmen carried out the attack in the western

Benishangul-Gumuz region at around 04:00 local time (01:00) on Wednesday. "They descended on a village and while their victims were asleep they set their homes on fire but also they shot and killed the civilians," Aaron Maasho said.

Covid: Mexico, Chile and Costa Rica begin mass vaccination



A Mexican nurse became the first person in Latin America to receive a coronavirus jab when her country began its vaccination programme on Thursday.

Mexico has received an initial shipment of 3,000 doses of the US-German Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine.

The country has one of the highest pandemic death tolls in

the world, behind only the US, Brazil and India. A short time later on Thursday, Chile and Costa Rica also began administering Pfizer-BioNTech.

"Covid vaccine approved for use in EU's 27 states

"New coronavirus variant: What do we know?

"Argentina also plans to start inoculations in the next few days

but has chosen the Russian-produced vaccine Sputnik V for its initial phase, with a delivery of 300,000 doses arriving in the capital Buenos Aires on Thursday morning.

"Brazil, which has recorded the highest number of deaths in the region, is not due to start until mid-February despite a recent surge in the number of cases. " President Jair Bolsonaro says he is not planning to be inoculated. He believes he has developed immunity against coronavirus as he tested positive earlier this year.

"We have to move on"

"In Mexico, María Irene Ramirez, 59, the head of the intensive care unit at Ruben Leñero Hospital in Mexico City, was the first to volunteer to be vaccinated.

"We are afraid, but we have to move on... and I want to stay in the line of fire," she said afterwards, according to El Universal newspaper.

"The first 3,000 doses - of 34 million purchased - arrived in Mexico on Wednesday from Belgium, where they are being manufactured. " Footage of the launch was broadcast during President Andrés Manuel López Obrador's televised morning news conference.

"The Mexican government says it wants to vaccinate all health workers fighting the pandemic by the end of the first quarter of 2021. " The country has recorded more than 1.3 million infections so far, with at least 121,000 Covid-related deaths, according to Johns Hopkins university.

"Chile has had nearly 600,000 confirmed cases and more than 16,300 deaths; Costa Rica - nearly 163,000 cases and over 2,000 deaths; and Argentina - nearly 1.6 million cases and more than 42,300 deaths." Chile's President, Sebastian Piñera, described the start of his country's national coronavirus immunisation programme as a moment of hope and excitement. " Why is Argentina getting a Russian vaccine?

"Argentina's health authorities earlier this week had given Russia's Sputnik V vaccine "emergency" authorisation - the first Latin American nation to do so.

"On Thursday, the first 300,000 doses were flown in from Moscow to Buenos Aires.

Covid: US parties wrangle in Congress after Trump shuns stimulus bill



Democrats and Republicans have blocked each other's attempts to amend a vital \$900bn (£665bn) stimulus package after President Donald Trump sent it back to Congress demanding changes.

The coronavirus economic relief, which comes with a \$1.4tn federal budget attached, was agreed by both sides.

But Mr Trump said one-off payments to Americans should increase from \$600 to \$2,000, and foreign aid should be cut.

Without the bill in force, many Americans face an uncertain Christmas.

Unemployment benefits are due to expire on Saturday if the bill is not enacted, and a moratorium on evictions may not be extended.

Legislators could pass a stopgap bill by Monday to prevent a partial government shutdown looming a day later, but this would not include

coronavirus aid and Mr Trump would still have to sign it.

"Hunger spikes, demand rises for US food banks

"Unemployed in the US: 'I don't know what to do'

"Counting down the days to losing a home

Meeting on Thursday in response to Mr Trump's intervention, Democrats in the House of Representatives blocked

Republican attempts to cut foreign aid from the federal spending bill, while Republicans refused to allow the increase in coronavirus payments to \$2,000. House Republican leader Kevin McCarthy said in a letter to colleagues: "House Democrats appear to be suffering from selective hearing."

While the haggling continues on Capitol Hill, the president is spending Christmas at his resort in Palm Beach, Florida. A White House memo said he was working "tirelessly" with "many meetings and calls", though he

was spotted at his golf course on Thursday morning. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, a Democrat, said the lower chamber would meet again next Monday to vote on the stimulus payments for Americans.

On the same day, the House is also expected to vote on an unrelated, \$740bn defence spending bill, which Mr Trump vetoed on Wednesday instead of signing into law. Lawmakers plan to override the president's veto and enact the legislation anyway, but to do so they need two-thirds of votes in both the House and Senate.

Mr Trump is objecting to provisions in the defence bill that limit troop withdrawals from

Afghanistan and Europe and remove Confederate leaders' names from military bases.

The \$900bn coronavirus aid relief bill - with the larger budget bill rolled in - overwhelmingly passed the House of Representatives and Senate on Monday but a day later Mr Trump issued an implied veto threat, describing the package in a video statement as a "disgrace" full of "wasteful" items.

He baulked at the annual aid money for other countries in the federal budget, arguing that those funds should instead go to struggling Americans.

Mr Trump's decision to bat the measure back to Capitol Hill stunned lawmakers since he has

largely stayed out of negotiations for a coronavirus aid bill that had stalled since last July.

His top economic adviser, Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin, had proposed the \$600 payments early this month, and many have questioned why the president waited until now to object.

The one-off payments of \$600 and the federal jobless benefits are half the sum provided by the last major coronavirus aid bill in March, which contained \$2.4tn in economic relief. Mr Trump's call for more generous one-off payments to Americans has found him in rare agreement with some liberal Democrats who are usually his sworn political foes.

Portugal outrage after Spanish hunters massacre 500 wild animals

Portuguese officials have expressed outrage at the massacre of more than 500 deer and wild boar in a hunting zone in the centre of the country. Environment

Minister João Fernandes said the killing by 16 Spanish hunters was "vile" and an "environmental crime" that should be prosecuted. Pictures of the slaughter were shared

on social media. Hunting individual animals is allowed but in this incident most of the zone's deer population are said to have died. The killing is thought to have taken place on a farm in the

Torrebelá tourist hunting zone, near Azambuja, about 40km (24 miles) from the Portuguese capital Lisbon on 17 and 18 December. The



1,100ha (2,700-acre) farm is described as being walled in, meaning that the 540 animals had no means of escape from their killers.

The Environment Ministry said in a statement on Tuesday that "the reports and news about the

indiscriminate slaughter of animals... have nothing to do with hunting, understood as a practice that can contribute to the maintenance of biodiversity and ecosystems".

'Complete clusterf---': Trump leaves Washington in limbo

Hill aides and even White House officials scrambled to figure out what Trump actually wanted, just as lawmakers - and Trump - prepare to leave town for the holidays.

There's no clear answer, though. No one on either side of Pennsylvania Avenue appears to know what Trump's plan is - or even if there is one. House Republicans held a brief conference call Wednesday afternoon, where they received little clarity on the situation. House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy told Republicans he spoke to Trump, but that the president hasn't committed to anything yet, according to two people on the call. The White House, meanwhile, did not respond to questions about the legislation. "Complete clusterf---," summarized one top Republican Hill aide.

The whole episode has frustrated some rank-and-file Republicans, who aired their grievances during the private party call, sources said. Rep. Don Bacon of Nebraska complained Trump threw Republicans under the "bus," while Rep. Virginia Foxx of North Carolina said they need to have members going on TV to set the record straight about the legislation.

The repercussions of inaction could be dramatic. If lawmakers and White House aides can't persuade the president to sign a funding and Covid relief package by Monday, the government will enter the fourth shutdown of Trump's presidency. And millions of Americans had been told to expect another round of direct payments from the government shortly, while businesses across the country were expecting more financial assistance.

Yet Trump left town Wednesday afternoon without saying a word about the bill, departing for Mar-a-Lago, his South Florida resort, where he plans to stay through the new year. And no one seems to know what will happen next. House Democrats on Wednesday night held a conference call, where they laid out a plan for the next few days that includes an attempt to approve \$2,000 direct stimulus checks for Americans via unanimous consent on Thursday. Democrats expect at least one Republican to reject it, which would block the effort. They are also considering a

stopgap spending bill that would fund the government until the next Congress, averting a shutdown. The sudden limbo reflects how Trump has combatively approached his final days in office. Trump's main goal, said those close to the president and



White House, is to grab attention and send a message to his base that he's more supportive of Americans than Congress as he plots a run for reelection in 2024. And, in some ways, the strong GOP support for the bill has given Trump little reason to publicly support it. The measure is expected to eventually become law, whether by Trump relenting, Congress overriding a veto or President-elect Joe Biden entering office.

"It sends a signal he wants to help people more," said former House Speaker Newt Gingrich, a Trump ally, even as he added that Trump's threat on the Covid relief and government funding bill "is not helpful," saying he hopes the president will sign the bill after making his point.

Trump might choose that path. Two people close to the president said the president is unlikely to actually veto the bill and cause a government shutdown because he doesn't want to delay funding for distribution of the Covid-19 vaccine, which he considers one of his biggest achievements. It wouldn't be the first time Trump has threatened to veto legislation before signing it: In 2018, Trump approved a \$1.3 trillion spending bill, despite saying he was "unhappy" with it.

Yet a former Trump aide who remains close to the White House said no one should be surprised by the president's demands, noting Trump has been calling for larger stimulus checks

for Americans for months in statements and on Twitter.

"Why is everyone surprised? They didn't meet his expectations," the former aide said. "At the end of the day, he's fighting for people. He's on the side of history and the side of the

American people. None of this is bad for him."

In recent weeks, Trump has shown no qualms about trying to best position himself politically for his post-presidency, even if it means holding up legislation his own party supports and attacking one-time congressional allies, like Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell.

Trump made a similar veto threat earlier this month for the annual defense policy bill, which also passed with wide Republican support. On Wednesday, he followed through and vetoed the bill, setting up a showdown with lawmakers.

The last-minute Covid stimulus demands from Trump - who has been preoccupied with fighting the election results, leaving Treasury Secretary Steve Mnuchin to negotiate the long-delayed rescue bill - have put Republicans in a particularly tough spot. In addition to the confusion it has caused on Capitol Hill, the move has also complicated a Republican push to win two Georgia runoff races next month that will decide the Senate majority. At the crux of Trump's objections appears to be the \$600 direct payments the bill was set to send to many Americans. Trump had publicly and privately said he wanted the direct payments to be higher, but he did not say he was unwilling to accept the \$600 checks. In fact, he had said he would sign the bill, which White House

deputy press secretary Brian Morgenstern reiterated Tuesday to reporters.

Hours later, Trump released a five-minute video he recorded in the Diplomatic Reception Room of the White House, surprising many of his aides. He did not

threaten to veto the bill, but he did express displeasure. Trump also complained about spending levels in the measure that he had previously approved and even requested.

"I'm asking Congress to amend this bill and increase the ridiculously low \$600 to \$2,000," he said. "I'm also asking Congress to immediately get rid of the wasteful and unnecessary items in this legislation or to send me a suitable bill."

But there isn't a huge appetite in the GOP for the \$2,000 stimulus checks that Trump is now calling for.

"It's a really foolish egg-headed, left-wing, socialist idea to pass out free money to people, so I part ways with the president on giving people free money," Sen. Rand Paul (R-Ky.), who wants Trump to veto the bill for fiscal reasons, said Wednesday on Fox News.

Meanwhile, Democrats - who have been pushing for higher checks all along - could make life even more painful for the GOP in the coming days.

"Just when you think you have seen it all, last night, the President said that he would possibly veto the bicameral agreement negotiated between Republicans and Democrats," Speaker Nancy Pelosi said in a "Dear Colleague" letter circulated to Democrats. "If the President truly wants to join us in \$2,000 payments, he should call upon [House Minority Leader Kevin]

McCarthy to agree to our Unanimous Consent request."

During Wednesday's conference call, McCarthy made clear the effort would be rejected by the House GOP as a stunt. And last week, Sen. Ron Johnson (R-Wis.) twice stopped an effort from Sens. Josh Hawley (R-Mo.) and Bernie Sanders (I-Vt.) to provide \$1,200 in stimulus checks.

A last-minute veto could also have implications in the Georgia runoffs Jan. 5. McConnell had promised Kelly Loeffler and David Perdue that the chamber would not leave for Christmas without a deal, and both senators started touting the stimulus package in their campaigns this week.

Both Jon Ossoff and Rev. Raphael Warnock, who is challenging Loeffler, say they agree with Trump's push for higher payments and are seizing on the moment to hammer their opponents. Pressed on Trump's demand Wednesday, Loeffler said at a campaign event that she'd "certainly look at supporting it if it repurposes wasteful spending."

"Trump has put Loeffler and Perdue in an impossible situation repeatedly throughout the entirety of the runoff. And this is just the latest chapter of the book of humiliation he has made them characters in," said one Georgia Republican strategist. "What do they do? Do they defy the president and stand by what they had been saying or do they once again look like weak puppets with no backbone?" While Democrats from across the political spectrum rallied around Trump's calls for more stimulus money, they also made clear they don't want him to veto the package, which also includes enhanced unemployment benefits, small-business aid and funding for distribution of the Covid-19 vaccine. Adding to the sense of urgency, a slew of critical pandemic-related aid programs is set to expire on Dec. 26. Hill sources warned it's too early to game out what Congress might do if Trump refuses to sign the sprawling bill. If Trump does blow up the bill, Congress' options include trying to renegotiate the aid package, passing another short-term funding patch, or letting Trump take credit for a government shutdown and clearing the aid package under the Biden administration.

Bluff and brinksmanship: How Britain got a Brexit trade deal done

Britain formally left the EU last January, 47 years after joining and 3-1/2 years after its 'Brexit' referendum, but then entered a transition period during which rules on commerce and travel were frozen until the end of 2020. EU officials and diplomats described the talks to put a post-transition trade deal in place by Jan. 1, 2021, as an exhausting exercise of bluff and brinksmanship.

On the EU side, the 27 member states remained united under their chief negotiator, Frenchman Michel Barnier, an unflinching defender of their single market of 450 million consumers.

The British side was harder to gauge because it sometimes sought to exploit differences between member states and often appeared to be guided by the vagaries of domestic politics, the EU officials said. Yet to mass-circulation newspapers at home and Brexit ideologues in his government, Johnson's tough line with Brussels on competition rules and access to UK waters for EU fishing boats was applauded as a much-needed assertion of sovereignty.

A BAD FIT?

Britain has always been ambivalent about the project to unite and rebuild Europe from the ashes of World War Two. It joined, belatedly, in 1973, but its economic liberalism jarred with much of continental Europe, and it never joined the single currency, the euro, or the Schengen zone of passport-free travel.

British euroscepticism was fanned for decades by much of its press, whose members - including Johnson, a Daily Telegraph correspondent in Brussels in 1989-94 - panned the federalist ambitions of 'eurocrats' and lampooned the EU's regulatory zeal.

Johnson once poked fun in an opinion column at rules that, according to him, forbade the recycling of a teabag or children under eight blowing up balloons. For many Britons, Brexit has an intellectual rationale: that the United Kingdom should cut loose from the stagnating economies of the EU and compete with a project they are convinced is destined to fail. Yet Britain's uneasy relationship



with the EU has been controversial at home, too. Margaret Thatcher's aggression towards Brussels led to a Conservative party coup that ended her premiership in 1990. The 2016 Brexit referendum gamble made by one of her successors, David Cameron, led to his departure and, with voters split 52-48%, polarised British society.

On the other side of the Channel, many have long thought that Britain is simply a poor fit. French wartime hero Charles de Gaulle twice vetoed its attempts to join what was then the European Economic Community in the 1960s. Five decades later, President Emmanuel Macron pressed for a swift British exit after the referendum, worried that eurosceptic sentiment could seep across the continent. Britain's boldest step during the trade talks came last summer, when an inner circle around Johnson met to figure a way out of the deadlock. Their solution: trigger a crisis.

In the words of one source close to the group, they decided to "put a gun on the table" by drafting legislation that would explicitly override parts of the Withdrawal Agreement, the divorce treaty that the UK had already signed with the EU. Several British officials told Reuters the Internal Market Bill had been a shock tactic to counter what they saw as EU efforts to prevent Britain winning back its "sovereignty" before its final exit from the bloc's orbit on Jan. 31.

But the move made Brussels all the more determined to make sure it could enforce a trade deal.

Von der Leyen spelled it out: "Trust is good, but law is better ... And crucially, in light of recent experience, a strong governance system is essential to ensure

that what has been agreed is actually done."

The strategists behind the gambit included some, sources said, who felt that Britain had been humiliated in earlier talks and were determined not to let that happen again.

Britain's tabloid press was indignant in 2019 when Johnson's predecessor, Theresa May - another Conservative prime minister to fall victim to the struggle over Europe - had to sit outside a summit meeting room for hours while, as the Sun newspaper put it, "EU leaders gorged on langoustine and duckling".

A PIECE OF CAKE

At a summit in Salzburg a year earlier, the chairman, Donald Tusk, posted a picture on Instagram of himself at a cake stand alongside May with the caption: "A piece of cake, perhaps? Sorry, no cherries." The jibe referred to a plan proposed by May for the Withdrawal Agreement that the EU had publicly trashed as cherry-picking the benefits of

membership - and to Johnson's belief that Britain could do just that, "have its cake and eat it". "The cake business certainly had an impact," a British source said. Some saw it as tasteless, because May is diabetic.

A source involved in the divorce talks last year said that, when the delegations broke for refreshments, they would often sit on opposite sides of the room, glaring at each other in silence. Rancour over Britain's Internal Market Bill set the tone for negotiation as the end-year deadline loomed.

A spat broke out on Twitter between British negotiator David Frost and the usually smooth Barnier. Both sides dug in on fishing rights, ways to settle future disputes, and "level playing-field" rules to guarantee fair competition, including state aid to companies.

Britain declared in October that it was breaking off negotiations entirely. But a week later, they resumed, after Brussels acknowledged both sides needed to compromise - a signal that London hailed as evidence that its strategy had worked.

Johnson's dinner on Dec. 9 with von der Leyen and the two chief negotiators - ironically including turbot, a flatfish found in British waters - threw up a sharp contrast between the two sides as photographs taken beforehand went viral. On one side stood the Commission's elegantly dressed German

president and French negotiator; on the other, Johnson in an ill-fitting suit with his trademark tousled hair, and his negotiator wearing a tie that had been tied too short.

A UK source said Johnson had gone in with proposals and "genuinely trying to find a route to a solution", but had been stonewalled and left with a sense that "things were very gloomy".

Another source close to the talks said Johnson's affability had failed to charm the more formal von der Leyen.

"I don't believe either would normally invite the other to a dinner party," the source said. "Chalk and cheese."

The EU memo sent after the dinner said London appeared to be trying to squeeze out concessions by declaring that it was prepared to leave on Jan. 1 without a deal.

It took another two weeks of negotiations, stretching into evenings and over weekends, to find an agreement.

One EU diplomat close to the negotiations said the past 4-1/2 years had been a "tiresome melodrama" that had dented goodwill and sapped enthusiasm for any further talks.

"The divorce was meant to be amicable. But our estranged spouse went mad and that didn't go smoothly," he said. "One way or another, we are still going to be stuck together. Loveless."

ED attaches assets worth Rs 4,109 crore across 5 states in mega Agri Gold Ponzi fraud case

During the probe by ED, it was allegedly found that thousands of commission agents were engaged to lure people with various schemes for hefty commission and managed to collect Rs 6380 crore from 32,02,628 investor accounts. "In the end, the gullible investors neither got plots nor could recover their deposits. Investigation



family," the ED added. Their names also figured in the Paradise Leaks and they had incorporated companies with the help of the infamous Mossack Fonseca in the Cayman Islands.

under PMLA further revealed that Agri Gold Group Companies used to lure the gullible public to join as depositors in their schemes either directly or through their agents under the pretext of real estate deals. Investigation under PMLA further revealed that Avva Venkata Rama Rao and his family went on a siphoning spree and illegally diverted the public deposits and invested in myriad verticals and in private companies which were directly owned by their

CAA dilemma for BJP as it eyes both Bengal and Assam



Amit Shah said, "The rules of the CAA are yet to be framed as such a massive process could not be carried out because of the corona. As soon as (Covid-19) vaccination starts and corona cycle breaks, we will consider it." Mamata Banerjee has been a staunch opponent of the CAA ever since it was enacted in 2019, triggering protests in various parts of the country. Bengal and Assam saw continuous agitation against the CAA but the nature of protests varied in the two states.

In Bengal, the opposition to the CAA was over discrimination against Muslim illegal immigrants from Bangladesh, Pakistan and Afghanistan. The government denied the charges

saying keeping Muslims from these countries out of the ambit of the CAA was not due to their religious beliefs but owing to these countries being Islamic nations as per their constitutions, and alleged persecution of non-Muslim minorities in there.

In Assam, the opposition was over the provision of the CAA that gives a window for easy citizenship to illegal immigrants from these three countries by pushing the cut-off date from 1970s to end of 2014. The protesters in Assam want none to be given citizenship beyond the cut-off date of 1971 as agreed in the Assam Accord of 1986. In Assam, the protest was against influx of non-Indian Bengali

Hindus and for implementation of the National Register of Citizens (NRC) in accordance with the Assam Accord.

This is why soon after Amit Shah's statement in Bengal about the implementation of the CAA, the All-Assam Students' Union (AASU) condemned the Union home minister's remark. "The BJP was targeting to use the CAA to garner votes in West Bengal election. Amit Shah's statement on the CAA proves this. He has linked the CAA with corona and wants to implement it at the earliest for the BJP's gain in West Bengal politics. Assam won't accept this," AASU general secretary Sankar Jyoti Barua was quoted by the Times of India as saying while responding to Amit Shah's CAA remark in Bengal.

A response from Amit Shah is expected when he visits Assam on December 26. His visit is taking place at a time when apart from the AASU, another influential group called the Chhatra Mukti Sangram Samiti -- affiliated to the Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti -- has announced observing December 24-31 as anti-CAA week in

Assam. The AASU has had a formidable influence in Assam's electoral politics. Assam Chief Minister Sarbananda Sonowal rose from AASU in Assam politics. Assam Gan Parishad (AGP) chief Prafulla Kumar Mahanta emerged from AASU's agitation against illegal immigrants during 1980s. This time around, the AASU is backing a new political outfit called the Assam Jatiya Parishad pinning its anger against the CAA on the local BJP government. The development is happening at a time when electoral process is beginning in Assam. The Election Commission's teams are visiting states -- including Assam and Bengal -- that will vote next year in April-May. The BJP's state executive council met in the Karimganj district in the Barak Valley of Assam this week to give a push to its preparations for the Assam Assembly election 2021. The party set a target of winning more than 100 of 114 seats in Assam Assembly. While the BJP is pushing its CAA campaign aggressively in Bengal ahead of the assembly election, it is defensive in neighbouring Assam. In a recent interview to

the India Express, Assam's powerful minister Himanta Biswa Sarma, the BJP's chief strategist in the Northeast, dismissed the AASU's campaign against the CAA. He said, "The NRC and the CAA are no longer the discourse in Assam." He called the protests a clash between the Assamese culture and the "Miya culture" of the Bangladeshi migrant Muslims.

Both Bengal and Assam have significant Muslim populations - 27-28 per cent and 34-35 per cent respectively. An election narrative around the CAA is expected to polarise the voters. Such a polarisation works for both the BJP and its rivals in these two states. The TMC of Mamata Banerjee has apparently changed tack on the illegal migrant issue over the years. The BJP calls it vote bank politics. Mamata Banerjee prefers to use "inclusive politics" for the same. In Assam, Himanta Biswa Sarma has said the BJP is not concerned over what "Miya culture" supporters say or do, it is for the Congress and the All India United Democratic Front (AIUDF) of Lok Sabha MP Badruddin Ajmal to take note of.

Rahul Gandhi says no democracy in India, only an imagination, Priyanka Gandhi detained during protest march

Congress leaders Rahul Gandhi hit out at the Centre and said there is no democracy in India after he met President Kovind on Thursday while Priyanka Gandhi and other Congress leaders were detained on their way to meet the President.

Congress leaders Rahul Gandhi hit out at the Centre and said there is no democracy in India after he met President Kovind on Thursday while Priyanka Gandhi and other Congress leaders were detained on their way to meet the President. Rahul Gandhi alleged that only three-four people are running the system and said the Congress is fighting this. The Congress delegation met the President with 2 crore signatures against the farm laws. However, only three Congress leaders -- Rahul Gandhi, Ghulam Nabi Azad and Adhir Chowdhury -- were allowed to visit the Rashtrapati Bhawan while all others, including Priyanka Gandhi, were detained. "It is an assault on the idea of India. The government is stopping our MPs from moving out of our office... There is no democracy in

India, it is only in imagination, not in reality," said Rahul Gandhi, after coming out of the meeting. Congress' march to Rashtrapati Bhavan was stopped by police. Rahul Gandhi proceeded to the Rashtrapati Bhawan to meet President Ram Nath Kovind with the signatures against farm laws and said the farmers will not budge from Delhi borders till the farm laws are repealed.

Coming out after meeting President Kovind, Rahul Gandhi said, "The Opposition stands with farmers. The protesting farmers will not stop the protest till the laws are repealed." He also said there is no democracy in India. A delegation from the Indian National Congress comprising Shri Ghulam Nabi Azad, Shri Adhir Ranjan Chowdhury and Shri Rahul Gandhi called on President

Kovind at Rashtrapati Bhavan pic.twitter.com/gc6r8qvBGg

- President of India (@rashtrapatibhvn) December 24, 2020

As the march was stopped, Priyanka Gandhi said, "Any dissent against this government is classified as having elements of terror. We are undertaking this march to voice our support for the farmers." Priyanka Gandhi also said, "We're living in a democracy and they are elected MPs. They have the right to meet the President and they should be allowed. What is the problem with that? Government is not ready to listen to voices of lakhs of farmers camping at borders."

After the meeting with the President, Rahul Gandhi said, "I want to tell PM Modi that farmers will not go back home if there's no repeal of the farm laws. The



Centre should call a joint session of Parliament and repeal the laws. All opposition parties are with the farmers."

Earlier, Chanakyapuri ACP Pragya had said, "Only the leaders who have permission will be allowed to go to Rashtrapati Bhavan." Delhi Police take Priyanka Gandhi and other Congress leaders into custody. They were taking out a march to Rashtrapati Bhavan to submit to the President a memorandum containing 2 crore signatures seeking his intervention in farm laws issue. <https://t.co/>

YHBbXmF8nC pic.twitter.com/SBB8BwyJ1P -

ANI (@ANI) December 24, 2020
"No permission has been granted for Congress' march to Rashtrapati Bhavan today. However, three leaders, who have appointment at Rashtrapati Bhavan, will be allowed to go," Additional DCP (New Delhi) Deepak Yadav had said on Thursday morning. Priyanka Gandhi and other Congress leaders were detained and taken on a bus by police as they did not have permission for the protest march in Delhi.

Is Your Shot Real Or Plain Water?

In September this year, even as scientists in India and elsewhere were busy with clinical trials on an effective inoculation against the novel coronavirus, a drug inspector in Odisha seized a large cache of vials labelled as COVID-19 vaccines, from a village 350 km from state capital Bhubaneswar. The seized drug was found to be spurious, perhaps containing nothing more than tap water. "He is a village guy who created the fake drug on his own and named it COVID-19 vaccine. We got a tip-off from our informers, raided the place and seized everything," drug inspector Sasmita Dehury told Outlook over the phone.

It was a lucky break in a country where manufacturing of spurious medicines is a multi-billion dollar business that puts the lives of millions of people at risk every year. The risk, experts say, has risen manifold with the imminent arrival of a vaccine against the coronavirus, with panic-stricken people eager to get the shot at any cost.

Though government-sponsored studies, conducted thrice in the past 15 years, indicate that only three per cent medicines are of substandard quality in India, pharma companies, industry bodies and non-government organisations estimate the figure to be between 25 per cent to 40 per cent. For instance, industry body Assocham said in 2015 that 25 per cent of medicines in India are fake or of substandard quality. Now there are growing concerns globally that counterfeiters are working parallelly with scientists to create rip-off versions of various reputed brands. Fake drugs contain no active ingredients or may contain incorrect doses or wrong ingredients. Counterfeiters use packaging to make their products look like the original, and pass cursory glance of customers in retail outlets.

Law enforcement agencies and regulators such as US's Federal Drug Agency and the World Health Organization have issued separate warnings to countries against the possibility of counterfeit Covid vaccines. Recently, Interpol too issued an alert to its 194 member countries, asking them to prepare

for potential targeting of Covid vaccines by organised crime networks, both physically and online.

The Big Fight

With Pfizer rolling out the world's first Covid vaccine, and several other agencies on the verge of shipping out their consignments, companies across the world are

provides technology to pharmaceutical companies for safeguarding their products.

Counterfeiters are expected to be working overtime because of the high demand for a Covid vaccine. Trade experts say that even if the profit margin is low, the expected high volume of sales makes it a lucrative business opportunity.



drawing up elaborate plans to prevent theft, pilferage and counterfeiting of vials as well as the finished products.

Reports say that Pfizer is using GPS software for tracking distribution. So much so that the US pharmaceutical giant is even sending out fake shipments on dummy trucks to confuse counterfeiters who could try to steal the vaccine, The Wall Street Journal reported.

American multinational technology company Corning Incorporated, which is making the glass vials for COVID-19 vaccines, is using black-light verification technology to protect its product from counterfeiters. A vial with this technology shows special characteristics under black light, which can be traced if replicated.

"These concerns are justifiable and genuine...Over the past five years, worldwide incidents such as theft and counterfeiting of pharmaceutical products rose nearly 69 per cent, according to the trade group Pharmaceutical Security Institute," says Nakul Pasricha, president of Authentication Solution Providers' Association, which

The Supply Chain

Companies engaged in protecting intellectual property rights for big pharma brands look at various possibilities of vaccine fraud. They say the sources of substandard and fake vaccines are many. "It can be locally produced with used vials which are tossed away as medical waste. This is the easiest way most of the cosmetics and drugs are counterfeited and supplied to medical stores," says Syed Mashkur Hussain, an IPR firm owner in Noida.

Hussain, who provides services to big companies like Dabur, says that manufacturing vaccines is easier than any other medicine because all the counterfeiters need is water as raw material. They just need to "manufacture a lookalike vial and fill it with water. With digital printing technology, imitating any brand is no big deal," says another IPR firm owner working with a pharma company. Requesting anonymity, he added, "There are instances in which genuine packaging materials are supplied illegally to fraudsters by company employees looking to earn extra

money." Besides local production, counterfeit drugs and cosmetics are smuggled into India from China, Bangladesh, Turkey and some other countries. IPR experts suspect the involvement of a global network which may operate parallel to an authorised supply chain of COVID-19 vaccines. "A

fake vaccine can be supplied directly to a medical store that operates in cahoots with counterfeiters or it can enter the authorised supply chain with the help of employees of authorised agents or stockists of manufacturing companies," the IPR firm head says.

Outlook wrote to the Serum Institute of India (SII) for comments on safety measures for its vaccine but the company, which is the largest producer of vaccines in the world, didn't respond by the time this report went to print. In India, neither manufacturing companies nor the government are yet to come out with safety features to keep Covid vaccines safe and secure.

Rajesh Bhushan, secretary in the health ministry, recently introduced the concept of the COVIN app, which will maintain data of people-to-be-vaccinated and stock of vaccines in the government cold chain. Authentication experts say that COVIN can track patients and vaccine stock on a real-time basis but it is not a full-proof mechanism to safeguard the supply chain from theft, pilferage or entry of counterfeit

medicine. They say there are technologies like serialisation and traceability with the help of which each packet of vaccines, containing various vials, can be tracked from the manufacturing plant to the distribution warehouse and all the way until it is dispensed to a patient anywhere in the country. They suggest that if the Aadhaar number of an individual can be integrated with the unique code on a vaccine vial on COVIN app, it can maintain data of which vaccine has been given to whom. Thus, this will make the whole process transparent and accountable for everyone—from the manufacturer to the stockist or the hospital. Pharmaceutical companies use the serialisation-and-traceability method to export their products as the Directorate General of Foreign Trade (DGFT) has made it a mandatory provision. However, the same technology is not being used for the supply-chain in the domestic sector as there is a lack of resources in implementing it. GS1 India, a global standards organisation, set up by the ministry of commerce and industries, along with apex trade organisations, has provided a white paper to the government on how to protect Covid vaccines from theft and counterfeiting. S Swaminathan, COO of GS1 India, says that vaccines are in development stages, but their ability to end this pandemic depends on an effective supply chain that can connect diverse production locations to the public. "To tackle this and to ensure that most people benefit out of the initial limited supplies, we need to work on enhancing the effectiveness of the vaccine supply chains," Swaminathan says. "One way to bring in visibility and enhance the effectiveness of supply chains is to implement IT-enabled traceability systems encompassing all supply chain stakeholders such as manufacturers, distributors, stockists, chemists, hospitals etc." He argued that this would enable all stakeholders to capture and share consignment information to enable complete end-to-end visibility—from the point of manufacturing to the patient.

Fake COVID-19 Vaccines are Already Being Sold Online

ROME—The first Western COVID-19 vaccines have only been in circulation for 10 days, and the scammers of the internet underworld are already cashing in. Both Interpol and Europol issued warnings of a coming onslaught of underworld activity as criminals seek to exploit global pandemic paranoia. There are already doses for sale on the dark web for between \$250 and \$750 that Europol says could be fatal if used. "Criminal networks will also be targeting unsuspecting members of the public via fake websites and false cures, which could pose a significant risk to their health, even their lives," Jürgen Stock, INTERPOL Secretary General, said in a statement. "It is essential that law enforcement is as prepared as possible for what will be an onslaught of all types of criminal activity linked to the COVID-19 vaccine." The likeliest scam is the sale of fake vaccines that could range from being ineffective to lethal for



anyone who takes them. Law enforcement officials are particularly worried that used vaccine vials will be stolen from waste management centers and refilled to look official. Europol has already found a number of companies selling vaccines, promising stealth delivery and double-wrapped packaging, to imply that would somehow keep the vaccines that require constant sub-zero temperatures cold enough.

Several dark web vendors are also hawking Chinese vaccines from Sinopharm and Sinovac for \$750 per double dose. The Financial Times reached out to the vendor, asking how to store the vaccines, to which they were told a refrigerator would be just fine. There were already vaccines being touted on the dark web before the U.K. and later the U.S. authorized Pfizer's for use. Vendors also sold what they advertised as

plasma from COVID-19 survivors and magic elixirs to beat the virus, including the creatively named "Say Bye Bye to Covid19." In every case of suspicious activity, payment is only accepted by Bitcoin or other cryptocurrencies. Data research firm Checkpoint Research found more than 1,000 new domains tied to the pandemic and eventual sale of vaccines or cures, of which nearly half include the

word COVID or CORONA. Interpol's Cybercrime Unit also found that of the 3,000 websites associated with online pharmacies suspected of selling illicit medicines and medical devices, more than half contained malware. In Italy, anti-Mafia authorities have warned that organized crime syndicates that started with trafficking personal protective equipment and fake tests and doctored test results to get around quarantines and other restrictions are also expected to be part of the new exploitation by these groups as well. Italy has also seen infiltration by organized crime into the social assistance and public health sectors, compromising some services, especially in the south of the country. Interpol's Stock warned: "High demand combined with a limited supply will make COVID-19 vaccines the equivalent of liquid gold to organized crime networks."

Beware of scams advertising fake COVID-19 vaccines, early access

Experts warn of scammers trying to capitalize on the rollout of coronavirus vaccines.

PORTLAND, Oregon — Law enforcement officials are warning of scammers trying to take advantage of people with the rollout of the COVID-19 vaccines. The FBI issued a press release warning of online advertisements selling fake doses or trying to charge you money with false promises to get a vaccine sooner.

There are several real-world examples of this already. Law enforcement officials in Europe shared a bogus ad for a fake Pfizer vaccine they found online. It cost .06882 Bitcoin or about \$1,300.

The FDA sent a warning letter to a Seattle man and owner of North Coast Biologics in Seattle for advertising "unapproved and misbranded" products related to COVID-19 after he claimed he had the vaccine and has given the shot to a dozen people. In fact, the FDA has sent warning letters to

BEWARE OF COVID VACCINE SCAMS

Some dark web markets feature advertisements for fake COVID-19 vaccines. The number of offers is limited at this stage but will likely increase once a legitimate vaccine becomes available. Criminals advertise their fake vaccines using the brands of genuine pharmaceutical companies that are already in the final stages of COVID-19 vaccine development.

Buy Pfizer COVID-19 vaccine

Price: 0.06882 (1000.000000 GBP)

Ships To: Worldwide

The drugs of the COVID-19 vaccine has been developed by Pfizer and BioNTec. We can deliver in any country.

152 companies about fraudulent coronavirus disease products in 2019. And experts believe it's only going to get worse with people desperate to get the vaccine.

"Law enforcement is warning that you could see tons of these ads and that people could end up getting hurt from this," said Kerry Tomlinson, a cybersecurity and tech journalist with Archer News Network.

Tomlinson said there are three things that can happen if you fall for one of these ads:

1. It's a fake ad and your money is stolen.
2. The "vaccine" you thought you were buying is fake and doesn't hurt you but it doesn't work.
3. You buy something that could make you sick or even kill you. Bottom line, if you see the COVID-19 vaccine for sale online, it's fake.

No, This is Not What Pfizer's COVID-19 Vaccine Looks Like

The Pfizer vaccine is a two-dose vaccine that is supposed to be injected in the upper arm and not inhaled

An image created in jest showing Pfizer's coronavirus vaccine as a vaporizing cartridge or 'vape' is doing the rounds of social media with several people believing it to be true. The image shows a vaporizing cartridge that is used in electronic cigarettes and is inhaled which is packaged exhibiting Pfizer-like branding. The packaging in itself has signs which clearly suggest that the product is not the Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine. Pfizer has even told Reuters that this product is fake. While, the image was first created as satire, several social media users started questioning if the vaccine was truly made in China as shown on the package. The image was first shared on December 19. Several Indian users also picked up the image and shared it on their social media. It is noteworthy to understand that Pfizer has not submitted its data to the India drug controller and regulator, yet even though it has sought emergency use.

Another Facebook user, however, believed that this is actually the COVID-19 vaccine. His caption reads: Get ready, the medicine for Corona is here (Transliterated from Hindi: Taiyar ho jao, corona ki dawai aane waali hai)

Fact Check

As mentioned earlier, the packaging has three errors to identify that this is a fake product and not the vaccine. Firstly, a quote below the Pfizer logo reads, "makers of the boner pill". Pfizer does manufacture 'Viagra' but does not use it anywhere in its branding. This quote highlights that this product is not produced by the pharmaceutical. Secondly, the packaging shows a Made in China mark. The vaccine has been manufactured by Pfizer and BioNTech in the



US. Finally, the packaging mentions a single dose vaccine. The Pfizer mRNA vaccine is a two-dose vaccine wherein the second dose is to be given 21 days after the first. Furthermore, the Pfizer vaccine is injected

intramuscularly. The product in the image is a vaporizer cartridge used in electronic cigarettes and has to be inhaled. BOOM contacted the Indian representatives of Pfizer who redirected us to a statement the company gave to

Reuters. In an emailed statement, Pfizer told Reuters that the vaporiser cartridge was fake. This is not the first time that misinformation about the Pfizer vaccine is circulating on social media. Earlier, there were claims that the vaccine

could lead to female sterilisation as well as that it contained nanocomputers to collect data of the people the vaccine is being administered to. Also Read: No Proof Of Pfizer's COVID-19 Vaccine Causing Female Sterilisation

Indian farmers are right to be outraged

Contd from page 9

Green Revolution a 2011 report from the Center for Human Rights and Global Justice at New York University found that one Indian farmer commits suicide every 30 minutes. echnology is suspected to have contributed to disastrous rates of cancer. In the past decade, we have seen reports of "cancer trains" and Punjab's reputation as India's "cancer belt;" as NBC reported in 2014, researchers had linked contaminated water to the sharp uptick in cancer cases. High-yield variety seeds require excessive amounts of pesticides and fertilizers, which seep into the soil and water and are believed to contribute to high rates of cancer. Farming communities find themselves in a double-bind: They suspect the chemicals are to blame for the high cancer rates, yet the Green Revolution crops will not grow without them. The future also looks bleak from an environmental perspective. The Indian government continues to divert Punjab's

waters to other, non-agricultural states, in violation of international riparian law, and recent data suggest that Punjab's groundwater sources are likely to run dry by 2039. Much of the region's soil has been degraded to a point of near infertility, and is no longer capable of sustaining agriculture. The Green Revolution was introduced in Punjab before anywhere else in India, and because of its initial success, it has been adopted around the world. Over the years, it has become increasingly clear that India is committed to its current approach to farming, despite the disastrous costs. The first and most obvious step is to repeal the recent laws and give farmers in India the same support they have in other countries around the world. India must meet their demands and enforce minimum price support for crops. Asking its farmers -- 86% of whom own fewer than two

hectares of land -- to negotiate with multinational corporations spells certain doom for small farmers and will inevitably precipitate a more drastic epidemic of economically driven farmer suicides. In addition to regulating large companies, India must also adhere to existing legislation that would protect the soil, water and bodies of the Indian people. It must support farmers in returning to sustainable agricultural methods that do not require the intensive use of harmful chemicals. The Indian government must stop diverting Punjab's river waters to other states so that farmers no longer pay high prices for it or dig deep, ill-fated wells. The big picture here is that India must begin to value the lives of its own citizens over the potential economic gains for its nation. By putting its perceived interests over the well-being of its people, the Indian government is not just harming those it is meant to serve. It is also undermining itself and putting the country's stability at risk.

Banks to recast Future loans on delay in RIL deal



for easier repayment terms," said the banker, who is part of the lenders' consortium. He said talks were on since October on a proposal to restructure Future group's loans as it has been facing liquidity pressures worsened by the pandemic.

"We had signed inter-creditor agreements (ICA) as a precursor to a restructuring of loans although hoping it would not be necessary if the deal with Reliance fructified. However, as things stand today, this is the only way out," the banker said.

RBI has also allowed lenders to invoke debt recast even without any specific resolution plan. While RBI's August 6 debt recast plan does not come with a standstill clause on asset quality if loans turn bad between invocation and

implementation of resolution plan, the loans can be upgraded to standard once the resolution is completed.

While the Delhi high court on Monday permitted Future Retail Ltd to proceed with the sale of its assets to a unit of Reliance Industries, it also allowed Amazon.com Inc. to approach appropriate forums to oppose the transaction.

Future group owes around \$3 billion in loans which, in the event of a protracted legal battle with Amazon, may turn sour, bankers fear. The group also owes mutual funds that had invested in securities sold by group entities, including Rivaaz Trade Ventures, NuFuture Digital India and Future Ideas Co. A tussle over ownership of Future group be-

tween two of the world's richest men—Mukesh Ambani of Reliance and Jeff Bezos of Amazon—has left lenders in the lurch, scrambling to soften the blow to their asset quality.

Given that multi-brand retailing is not permitted, Amazon can't acquire Future Retail's businesses directly.

It had, however, in partnership with domestic private equity firm Samara Capital, acquired grocery retail chain More from the Aditya Birla group for roughly ₹4,200 crore in 2018. Amazon took a 49% stake in Future Coupons Pvt. Ltd for ₹1,430 crore in 2019, on the condition that without its consent, Future and its promoters cannot sell any stake or forge an alliance with 30 retail entities, including Reliance.

Lenders to Future group have agreed to recast its loans under the Reserve Bank of India's (RBI) one-time restructuring scheme as the deal with Reliance Industries Ltd (RIL) remains mired in a legal spat, two bankers aware of the development said.

The lenders led by State Bank of India (SBI) have already invoked

the debt recast scheme well within December 31, the deadline set by RBI, and will have six more months to finalise and implement a resolution plan, said one of the bankers, requesting anonymity.

"The resolution plan has not been finalised, but we have decided to invoke the one-time restructuring clause so that Future is eligible

Delhi HC declines Future Retail's injunction plea against Amazon

The development is a blow to Future Retail which has been engaged in a tussle with Amazon over the sale of its retail business to Reliance Industries Limited (RIL).

The Delhi High Court (HC) has declined to grant Kishore Biyani-led Future Retail Limited's (FRL) plea for an interim injunction restraining Amazon from writing to market regulator Sebi, CCI and other authorities about the arbitral order against its asset sale.

The development is a blow to Future Retail which has been engaged in a tussle with Amazon over the sale of its retail business to Reliance Industries Limited (RIL).

Justice Mukta Gupta passed the order on FRL's plea, which

claimed that Amazon writing to the authorities about the emergency arbitrator's award amounts to interfering with the Rs 24,713 crore Reliance-Future deal.

Biyani's cash-strapped Future Group is desperate to secure the deal with Reliance for its retail businesses. Amazon, however, secured an interim order from the Singapore International Arbitration Centre (SIAC) on October 25, barring FRL from taking steps to dispose of or encumber its assets or issuing any securities to secure any funding from a restricted party.

In this case, Reliance was categorised as a "restricted party" as per a previous agreement signed between Future and Amazon.

Amazon then followed up by writing to the market regulator Sebi, stock exchanges and the Competition Commission of India, urging them to take into consideration the Singapore arbitrator's interim decision as it is a binding order. In August, Reliance had issued a statement to announce that it has entered a deal to acquire the retail, wholesale business, logistics and warehousing business of the



Future Group.

The deal is crucial for Reliance, which is looking to strengthen its retail footprint in the country. But Amazon, too, is looking to expand its retail business in the country and the Reliance-Future

deal will take away the edge from its retail domination plans for India. With the Delhi HC now rejecting Future Group's injunction plea, its deal to sell retail assets Reliance seems to have hit another roadblock.

India challenges Vodafone arbitration ruling in Singapore court



The Indian government on Thursday challenged an international arbitration court's earlier verdict in favour of Vodafone Plc in a retrospective

tax dispute case in a Singapore court. The fresh appeal has been filed by India on December 21. A senior government official has confirmed the devel-

opment to news agency Reuters.

The development comes after a Vodafone won a long-pending arbitration case against India's income tax department, which had demanded over Rs 22,000 crore from the telecom giant as retrospective tax.

An international arbitration tribunal (Permanent Court of Arbitration) in The Hague, Netherlands earlier ruled in September that India's imposition of tax liability on Vodafone was a breach of an investment treaty agreement between India and the Netherlands.

India was given 90 days or three months to appeal against

the ruling.

The dispute first emerged when the Indian government amended the Finance Act in 2012, under which authorities were given the power to retrospectively tax any gain on transfer of the share.

Due to the amendment, Vodafone was asked to pay a total of Rs 22,100 crore in two tranches towards retrospective taxes on capital gains, including interest and penalty. It may be noted that the amendment also overruled a Supreme Court judgement of 2012 that went in favour of Vodafone. However, Vodafone challenged the law that al-

lowed the income tax department to retrospectively tax deals such as Vodafone Group's acquisition of a 67 per cent stake in Hutchison Essar in 2007. The development comes a day after India lost another international arbitration case this week against Cairn Energy Plc over a retrospective tax dispute case. India has been asked to pay Rs 8,000 crore in damages to the UK-listed company. However, it now seems that India will challenge the Cairn ruling as well, given the massive amount it has been asked to pay in damages.

What if the Universe has no end?



To mark the end of a turbulent year, we are bringing back some of our favourite stories for BBC Future's "Best of 2020" collection. Discover more of our picks here.

The usual story of the Universe has a beginning, middle, and an end.

It began with the Big Bang 13.8 billion years ago when the Universe was tiny, hot, and dense. In less than a billionth of a billionth of a second, that pinpoint of a universe expanded to more than a billion, billion times its original size through a process called "cosmological inflation".

Next came "the graceful exit", when inflation stopped. The universe carried on expanding and cooling, but at a fraction of the initial rate. For the next 380,000 years, the Universe was so dense

that not even light could move through it – the cosmos was an opaque, superhot plasma of scattered particles. When things finally cooled enough for the first hydrogen atoms to form, the Universe swiftly became transparent. Radiation burst out in every direction, and the Universe was on its way to becoming the lumpy entity we see today, with vast swaths of empty space punctuated by clumps of particles, dust, stars, black holes, galaxies, radiation, and other forms of matter and energy.

Eventually these lumps of matter will drift so far apart that they will slowly disappear, according to some models. The Universe will become a cold, uniform soup of isolated photons.

It's not a particularly dramatic ending, although it does have a

satisfying finality.

But what if the Big Bang wasn't actually the start of it all?

Perhaps the Big Bang was more of a "Big Bounce", a turning point in an ongoing cycle of contraction and expansion. Or, it could be more like a point of reflection, with a mirror image of our universe expanding out the "other side", where antimatter replaces matter, and time itself flows backwards. (There might even be a "mirror you" pondering what life looks like on this side.)

Or, the Big Bang might be a transition point in a universe that has always been – and always will be – expanding. All of these theories sit outside mainstream cosmology, but all are supported by influential scientists.

The growing number of these competing theories suggests that it might now be time to let go of the idea that the Big Bang marked the beginning of space and time. And, indeed, that it may even have an end.

Many competing Big Bang alternatives stem from deep dissatisfaction with the idea of cosmological inflation.

"I have to confess, I never liked inflation from the beginning," says Neil Turok, the former director of

the Perimeter Institute for Theoretical Physics in Waterloo, Canada.

"The inflationary paradigm has failed," adds Paul Steinhardt, Albert Einstein professor in science at Princeton University, and proponent of a "Big Bounce" model.

"I always regarded inflation as a very artificial theory," says Roger Penrose, emeritus Rouse Ball professor of mathematics at Oxford University. "The main reason that it didn't die at birth is that it was the only thing people could think of to explain what they call the 'scale invariance of the Cosmic Microwave Background temperature fluctuations'." The Cosmic Microwave Background (or "CMB") has been a fundamental factor in every model of the Universe since it was first observed in 1965. It's a faint, ambient radiation found everywhere in the observable Universe that dates back to that moment when the Universe first became transparent to radiation. The CMB is a major source of information about what the early Universe looked like. It is also a tantalising mystery for physicists. In every direction scientists point a radio telescope, the CMB looks the same,

even in regions that seemingly could never have interacted with one another at any point in the history of a 13.8 billion-year-old universe.

"The CMB temperature is the same on opposite sides of the sky and those parts of the sky would never have been in causal contact," says Katie Mack, a cosmologist at North Carolina State University. "Something had to connect those two regions of the Universe in the past. Something had to tell that part of the sky to be the same temperature as that part of the sky." Without some mechanism to even out the temperature across the observable Universe, scientists would expect to see much larger variations in different regions. Inflation offers a way to solve this so-called "homogeneity problem". With a period of insane expansion stretching out the Universe so rapidly that almost the entire thing ended up far beyond the region we can observe and interact with. Our observable universe expanded from one tiny homogeneous region within that primordial hot mess, producing the uniform CMB. Other regions beyond what we can observe might look very different.

Bangladesh's Dangerous Islamist Appeasement – And What It Portends

Left unchecked and periodically molly-coddled, Bangladesh's Islamist parties could spell havoc for its democracy.

In early 2017, a tussle around a statue of a woman personifying justice became a proxy for the longstanding tensions between Islamist and secular groups in Bangladesh. The sculpture, erected in front of the Supreme Court Complex in capital Dhaka, triggered a series of protests spearheaded by Hefazat-e-Islam, a hardline Islamist group based in Chittagong. Islamist groups deem such statues to be anti-Islamic, often associating them with idol worship – a strictly forbidden practice in Islam.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina subsequently signaled support for the statue's removal from the Supreme Court premises. Despite the outcry from secular groups, the authorities quietly relocated the statue to the annex building of the Supreme Court, away from the public eye. The ruling Awami League – an in-principle secular political party – is not new to the religious groups'

threats of escalating protests. In hindsight, this may look like a minor political compromise for a government in a Muslim-majority state. However, three years on, agitations over another sculpture has turned out to be Awami League's déjà vu moment. For Hasina, the ball this time has rather hit too close to home.

The government had sanctioned several projects to erect sculptures of the country's founder Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in 2018. For Hasina, the daughter of Rahman, the emotional value of such projects far surpassed the necessity of having a statue in the Supreme Court premises. Despite the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the regime was busy celebrating "Mujib Year" – the centenary of the founder's birth. Disregarding the risks related to the spread of the virus, fireworks and other celebratory gatherings continued in Dhaka. However, agitations over the

sculpture issue were renewed in November, when popular leaders from the hardline Hefazat-e-Islam Bangladesh (HIB) and Islami Andolan Bangladesh (IAB) demanded the removal of a statue of Rahman under construction in Dhaka's Dholaipar area. The demands intensified in the succeeding religious gatherings by HIB and other Islamist groups. In a November 13 rally, IAB leader Syed Fazlul Karim reportedly threatened to "dismantle the statue and throw it in the Buriganga river" if the installation works were not stopped. On December 4, another under construction sculpture of Rahman was vandalized in Rajshahi division. While the agitations in Dhaka were quickly thwarted by the police, the ensuing chain of events were a major embarrassment for the government, given that groups like Hefazat have long been courted by the Awami League regime. Sedition charges



were eventually brought against several HIB and IAB leaders over public comments they had made on the issue, which has subdued the agitation. The developments nevertheless raise tough questions about the Awami League's approach to dealing with hardline Islamists. Years of appeasement and concessions toward Hefazat and similar groups have only emboldened hardliners, who see such policy shifts as empowering and mobilizing changes in the social sphere while not being in the power. Enjoying this article? Click here to subscribe for full access. Just \$5 a month. Hefazat-e-Islam rose to public

consciousness in May 2013, staging mass protests and sit-ins in Dhaka with a 13-point charter that included implementing the death penalty for blaspheming Islam or the prophet. The hardline group, which claims to be apolitical, also advocates for the separation of boys and girls in public schools, declaring Qadianis as non-Muslims, and other stringent Islamic laws. Following the police raid at a HIB rally in 2013 in which several students from a madrasa (Islamic school) were killed, the Awami League was forced to negotiate with the group in order to deter further unrest.

The Trump White House has entered its final stage: Complete Meltdown



The last days of the Trump presidency increasingly resemble the fictional presidency in the movie *Monsters vs Aliens*.

In case you missed this 2009 animated masterpiece, President Hathaway (voiced by Stephen Colbert) responds to an alien invasion with a team of unlikely heroes, among them a giant-sized TV reporter from Modesto, a cockroach-turned-mad-scientist, and an enormous blob of Jell-O.

One of the running gags is that the president has installed two red buttons in his situation room. One is to make his morning latte, the other to launch all his nuclear weapons. He can never remem-

ber which is which.

In the final month of Donald Trump's time in the Oval Office, he has at last assembled his own team of outsized odds and ends, self-aggrandizing wingnuts, and brainless lumps of gelatin. You can decide for yourself if this latest incarnation of his "elite strike force" of advisers is more likely to launch all the nuclear weapons or make a fresh cup of coffee.

At the center of the team to save Planet Trump are the unhinged characters of Sidney Powell and Michael Flynn, who reportedly met with the soon-to-be-ex-president in the White House over several hours on Friday.

Trump issues order to demand new US federal buildings be 'beautiful'

Both Powell and Flynn have previously been fired by the reality TV star turned president – who, after all, built a public persona around firing people on *The Apprentice*. But on Planet Trump, firings are not as final as they appear to be, which surely means it's not too late for the Mooch to extend his 10-day record of service to the nation.

Powell was ejected from the elite strike force of lawyers just one month ago for her outlandish claims that Joe Biden won the presidential election with mysterious "communist money" and the support of the long-deceased Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez.

But that was so November. Now, as the New York Times first reported, Powell's outlandish claims are the basis for Trump's desire to name her as special counsel to investigate the Venezuelan plot.

Trump's attorney general, Bill Barr, told reporters on Monday that he saw no need to name a special counsel to investigate ei-

ther the election or Biden's son Hunter.

But it is only a matter of time before Powell disinters the Chavismo corpse once more. Specifically, a couple of days: Barr leaves his office on Wednesday, mysteriously a few weeks before everyone else in the Trump administration.

Friday's surreal bull session included Michael Flynn, Trump's first national security adviser, who has the distinct honor of having been fired by both Obama and Trump – a rare point of agreement between the yin and yang of the American presidency. Flynn lied to Mike Pence and the FBI about his conversations with the Russian ambassador, pleading guilty to the felony as part of the Mueller investigation.

Newly pardoned by the man who fired him, Flynn is now reportedly advocating for Trump to invoke martial law to rerun the election. This would normally be key to executing a Chavista coup, but is obviously now the victim of a Chavista coup.

One of the ringleaders of this madcap gang is Patrick Byrne, the former CEO of Overstock,

who left the online retailer last year claiming that he had romanced a Russian agent on behalf of "the Men in Black". Good luck making sense of that, or Byrne's latest venture: what he calls "a team of hackers and cybersleuths and other people with odd skills". For Trump's favorite news channel, OAN, this constitutes an "elite cybersecurity team".

It's quite possible that "elite" means something else on Planet Trump. It's also possible there are giant-sized TV reporters in Modesto.

Byrne, who tweeted that he was part of the long White House session with Flynn and Powell, says that Trump is being lied to by his own advisers and that his buddy can still win the election he so clearly lost.

"It is 100% winnable. No martial law required," he tweeted. "Sydney [sic] and Flynn presented a course that I estimate has 50%-75% chance of victory. His staff just try to convince him to do nothing but accept it. As a CEO, my heart broke to see what he is going through. He is betrayed from within."

The US has suffered a massive cyberbreach. It's hard to overstate how bad it is

Recent news articles have all been talking about the massive Russian cyber-attack against the United States, but that's wrong on two accounts. It wasn't a cyber-attack in international relations terms, it was espionage. And the victim wasn't just the US, it was the entire world. But it was massive, and it is dangerous.

Espionage is internationally allowed in peacetime. The problem is that both espionage and cyber-attacks require the same computer and network intrusions, and the difference is only a few keystrokes. And since this Russian operation isn't at all targeted, the entire world is at risk – and not just from Russia. Many countries carry out these sorts of operations, none more extensively than the US. The solution is to prioritize security and defense over espionage and attack.

Suspected Russian cyber-attack growing in scale, Microsoft warns
Here's what we know: Orion is a network management product from a company named SolarWinds, with over 300,000 customers worldwide. Sometime

before March, hackers working for the Russian SVR – previously known as the KGB – hacked into SolarWinds and slipped a backdoor into an Orion software update. (We don't know how, but last year the company's update server was protected by the password "solarwinds123" – something that speaks to a lack of security culture.) Users who downloaded and installed that corrupted update between March and June unwittingly gave SVR hackers access to their networks.

This is called a supply-chain attack, because it targets a supplier to an organization rather than an organization itself – and can affect all of a supplier's customers. It's an increasingly common way to attack networks. Other examples of this sort of attack include fake apps in the Google Play store, and hacked replacement screens for your smartphone.

SolarWinds has removed its customers list from its website, but the Internet Archive saved it: all five branches of the US military, the state department, the White

House, the NSA, 425 of the Fortune 500 companies, all five of the top five accounting firms, and hundreds of universities and colleges. In an SEC filing, SolarWinds said that it believes "fewer than 18,000" of those customers installed this malicious update, another way of saying that more than 17,000 did.

That's a lot of vulnerable networks, and it's inconceivable that the SVR penetrated them all. Instead, it chose carefully from its cornucopia of targets. Microsoft's analysis identified 40 customers who were infiltrated using this vulnerability. The great majority of those were in the US, but networks in Canada, Mexico, Belgium, Spain, the UK, Israel and the UAE were also targeted. This list includes governments, government contractors, IT companies, thinktanks, and NGOs ... and it will certainly grow.

Once inside a network, SVR hackers followed a standard playbook: establish persistent access that will remain even if the initial vulnerability is fixed; move laterally around the network by compromising additional sys-



tems and accounts; and then exfiltrate data. Not being a SolarWinds customer is no guarantee of security; this SVR operation used other initial infection vectors and techniques as well. These are sophisticated and patient hackers, and we're only just learning some of the techniques involved here.

Recovering from this attack isn't easy. Because any SVR hackers would establish persistent access, the only way to ensure that your network isn't compromised is to burn it to the ground and rebuild it, similar to reinstalling your computer's operating system to recover from a

bad hack. This is how a lot of sysadmins are going to spend their Christmas holiday, and even then they can't be sure. There are many ways to establish persistent access that survive rebuilding individual computers and networks. We know, for example, of an NSA exploit that remains on a hard drive even after it is reformatted. Code for that exploit was part of the Equation Group tools that the Shadow Brokers – again believed to be Russia – stole from the NSA and published in 2016. The SVR probably has the same kinds of tools.

The Republican party has ushered in a dark Christmas, indeed. We deserve better



Santa will not be pleased. Not to mention Jesus. That guy is gonna be pissed. When they find out what's happened here, America is going to be in for a very dark Christmas indeed.

I am not one of the unfortunates so poisoned by capitalism's warped inhalation of the holiday season that they have grown cynical about the entire enterprise. My family takes Christmas very seriously. From a very young age I learned that this time of year was not about orgies of shopping or stewing in your contempt for your far-flung relatives, but rather about putting our dormant innate

generosity into practice. The Christmas spirit is love. Our bitter cynicism should properly be oriented not at the Christmas spirit itself, but rather at those who corrupt it.

Three hundred thousand Americans have died from Covid this year. Well over 200,000 of them died unnecessarily. Had our government managed this public health crisis in a mature and rational way, the deaths would be a fraction of what they are. Our government chose not to do so. Our leering and stupid leader chose to make the wearing of masks into a defining political issue – not out of necessity, or for any financial gain,

or out of adherence to any philosophy, but out of aggressive stupidity, laziness and self-rationalization. Usually, the Republican party screws regular people because someone stands to get rich on it. In this case, it was only because they formed a coward's puppet line behind an awful leader with a loud voice. In every community in America, there are people lying dead because their elected officials were scared of being tweeted at by a former reality show host.

Merry Christmas, America.

Tens of millions of Americans lost their jobs this year through

no fault of their own. Tens of thousands of small businesses, each one representing the dreams and ambitions of a human being and the employment of many others, have failed this year through no fault of their own. The money that our government appropriated to carry all of these people and businesses through this natural disaster ran out months ago, and nothing more has been forthcoming, even as we watch our friends and neighbors sink into bankruptcy and food insecurity and desperation.

Many other nations have paid workers to stay home, relieving financial pressures on employers and employees alike. Republicans in Congress have refused to do this, because the stock market has stayed high, and also because they don't care. Our incompetent and callous Republican leaders have ordered shutdowns without providing an adequate safety net, thus causing predictable public backlash against the shutdowns, which Republicans have been happy to encourage, because it directs public ire away from them and onto public health professionals. Idiocy in the White House has combined with the wealth-worshipping Republican Senate to produce the worst of both worlds: a raging preventable public health

disaster and an economic catastrophe from which the very rich have been insulated.

Your loved ones can die, your business can collapse, your job can evaporate, your unemployment benefits can dry up, your stimulus checks can disappear, and in return your elected leaders will offer you sneering jokes about masks and lies about who won the election. The rest, they will mostly ignore.

Donald Trump is a vapid and pathetic man controlled in every case by his own worst impulses, but he is not the biggest villain of 2020. Without the entire superstructure of the Republican party behind him – voting for him, campaigning for him, debasing themselves before him, praising his stupid ideas and supporting him politically – he would not be in a position to cause hundreds of thousands of deaths. There is a long, straight line that runs from the wink-and-nod racist Southern Strategy of Richard Nixon through the deregulation and union-busting of Reagan and up to the deadly narcissism of Trump. When a political party is willing to tell any lie and demonize anyone in order to protect the right of the rich to have everything, it will eventually find that it has become the home of cranks and fascists.

Before India Breaks Its Promises, The Cautionary Tale Of The American Kisan

What is the farmer protesting about? A very real existential threat. The devastation in the US farm sector gives us a scary parable for Kisan Diwas.

Some 5,000 years later and 131 km south of Dharmakshetra Kurushetra, two forces of nature are again eyeball to eyeball. At stake is, again, is the earth—who owns it. The three farm laws at the centre of the debate have thus become symbolic of a much deeper fight. The government has given feelers that it is willing to amend the contentious clauses. But the farmers want nothing short of a full repeal. They wish to drive home the point that these laws are fundamentally anti-farmer and even deny them the principles of natural justice as enshrined in our Constitution. From their perspective, it looks clear-cut that the Centre rode roughshod over India's have-nots—without even engaging them in a consultative process—to benefit India's haves. On Kisan Diwas today, let's examine the core questions with both a close lens and in a tangential perspective that will throw

light on what they really entail.

The protests are, in a sense, an expression of dissent by Bharat against India. Against a consistent step-brotherly treatment post liberalisation. The gap in agricultural and non-agricultural per capita income has increased five times in these three-decade—from approximately Rs 40,000 per annum to Rs 2,00,000 p.a. Consumption in rural India hit a 7-year low in 2019.

There was an agrarian distress even before Covid-19. In fact, the signs of crisis have been clear for at least two decades. Census 2011 told us 2,000 farmers gave up farming every day as farming income is 1/5th of a non-farmer. And 28 farmers commit suicide. Every day!

In the summer of 2017, Tamil farmers protested at Jantar Mantar while we were swooning over Despacito and Bahubali 2. The Kisan Long March in 2018 saw 35,000 Maharashtrian farmers

swarm into Mumbai but we were busy debating Padmavat. They were marching again in 2019.

But what ails farming?

It's simple. Liberalisation benefited the English-speaking elite of this country. The '1 per cent' figuratively and the '3 per cent' literally. The 'progress' we take to be ubiquitous is simply not a living reality for Bharat. Check the figures again, in case you are in doubt. India—a country of 138 crore people—has only 3 crore cars, 5 crore credit cards, 1.5 crore income-tax payers, a total of 4 crore demat accounts of which only 1 crore are active, and 2 crore wired broadband users. Even the total English newspaper readership is only around 3 crore. As Thomas Picketty said, we have come from the British Raj to Billionaire Raj. One could think of their millionaire minions as add-on beneficiaries.

So when the government pro-



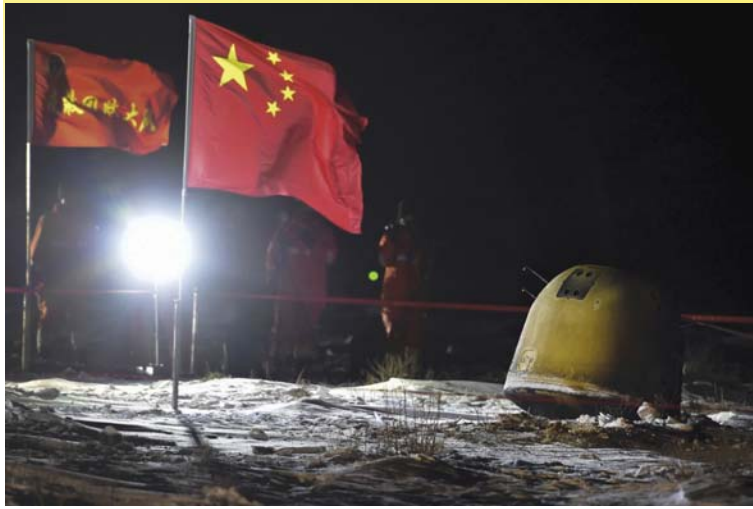
fesses that the three laws herald a transformational 1991 moment for agriculture, that does not exactly unleash a tidal wave of joy among farmers. To them, it only confirms the gloom, appearing to increase the stranglehold of the Billionaire Raj over Bharat.

Let's take the first law, The Farmers Produce Trade and Commerce Act, 2020, or as it is popularly known, The 'APMC Bypass Act'. The APMCs or mandis are essentially marketplaces. The price discovery process occurs when buyers and sellers come together in a mar-

ketplace. You remove the marketplace and you remove the stable price discovery mechanism.

The government denies this law will lead to the end of APMCs, but just in November 2019, the Finance Minister said on record that states have earlier been "cajoled to reject" APMCs. Arrivals in Madhya Pradesh's mandis have already fallen 60% after the amendments in the MP Krishi Upaj Mandi Adhiniyam, 1972, and passing of the Model Mandi Act, 2020.

Lunar soil on Earth after 40 years as Chinese capsule returns with Moon rocks, samples



A Chinese lunar capsule returned to Earth Thursday with the first fresh samples of rock and debris from the moon in more than 40 years. The capsule of the Chang'e 5 probe landed in the Siziwang district of the Inner Mongolia region, state media reported shortly after 2:00 am (1800 GMT). The capsule earlier sepa-

rated from its orbiter module and performed a bounce off the Earth's atmosphere to reduce its speed before passing through and floating to the ground on parachutes.

Two of the Chang'e 5's four modules set down on the moon on December 1 and collected about 2 kilograms (4.4 pounds) of

samples by scooping them from the surface and by drilling 2 meters (about 6 feet) into the moon's crust. The samples were deposited in a sealed container that was carried back to the return module by an ascent vehicle. The successful mission was the latest breakthrough for China's increasingly ambitious space program that includes a robotic mission to Mars and plans for a permanent orbiting space station. Recovery crews had prepared helicopters and off-road vehicles to home-in on signals emitted by the lunar spacecraft to locate it in the darkness shrouding the vast snow-covered region in China's far north, long been used as a landing site for China's Shenzhou crewed spaceships. The spacecraft's return marked the first time scientists have obtained fresh samples

of lunar rocks since the former Soviet Union's Luna 24 robot probe in 1976.

Those rocks and debris are thought to be billions of years younger than those obtained by the US and former Soviet Union, offering new insights into the history of the moon and other bodies in the solar system. They come from a part of the moon known as the Oceanus Procellarum, or Ocean of Storms, near a site called the Mons Rumker that was believed to have been volcanic in ancient times. As with the 382 kilograms (842 pounds) of lunar samples brought back by US astronauts from 1969 to 1972, they will be analyzed for age and composition and likely shared with other countries. Chang'e 5 blasted off from a launch base in China's southern island province of

Hainan on November 23.

Flying a Chinese flag, the moon lander stopped functioning soon after it was used as a launching pad for the ascender, which was ejected from the orbiter after transferring the samples and came to rest on the moon's surface.

It marked China's third successful lunar landing but the only one to lift off again from the moon.

The spacecraft's predecessor, Chang'e 4, was the first probe to land on the moon's little-explored far side and continues to send back data on conditions that could affect a future extended stay by humans on the moon.

The moon has been a particular focus of the Chinese space program, which has said it plans to land humans there and possibly construct a permanent base. No timeline or other details have been announced.

Aliens exist? First potential radio signal from exoplanet detected

In another extensive search for possible alien life, a team of scientists for the first time has collected a potential radio signal from a planet beyond our solar system. The first possible radio signal is believed to be emanating from an exoplanet system about 51 light-years away.

The international team of researchers uncovered emission bursts from the Tau Bootes star-system hosting a so-called hot Jupiter. The team led by researchers from the Cornell University in the US used the Low Frequency Array (LOFAR), a radio telescope in the Netherlands, to uncover the emission bursts. The researchers also observed

other potential exoplanetary radio-emission candidates in the constellation Cancer and Upsilon Andromedae systems.

However, the study published in the journal *Astronomy & Astrophysics* found that only the Tau Bootes exoplanet system exhibited a significant radio signature, a unique potential window on the planet's magnetic field.

"We present one of the first hints of detecting an exoplanet in the radio realm," Cornell postdoctoral researcher Jake D Turner said. "The signal is from the Tau Bootes system, which contains a binary star system and an exoplanet. We make the case for an emission by the planet itself," Jake D Turner said.

If confirmed through follow-up observations, this radio detection opens up a new window on exoplanets and provides a novel way to examine alien worlds that are tens of light-years away. Observing an exoplanet's magnetic field helps astronomers decipher a planet's interior and atmospheric properties, as well as the physics of star-planet interactions, said Turner. Earth's magnetic field protects it from solar wind dangers, keeping the planet habitable.

"The magnetic field of Earth-like exoplanets may contribute to their possible habitability by shielding their own atmospheres from solar wind and cosmic rays,



and protecting the planet from atmospheric loss," Turner said. Two years ago, Turner and his colleagues examined the radio emission signature of Jupiter and scaled those emissions to

mimic the possible signatures from a distant Jupiter-like exoplanet. Those results became the template for searching radio emission from exoplanets 40 to 100 light-years away.

ISRO to launch satellites built by start-ups onboard PSLV-C51



After India launched its latest communication satellite CMS-01 on board the launch vehicle PSLV-C50, ISRO chairper-

son K Sivan on Friday announced that the next mission would launch an earth observation satellite 'ANAND' that is fully

built by a start-up as part of enabling private players in space exploration.

This comes after the government had earlier announced of opening up space exploration for private sector. On May the government had announced giving the private sector a role in India's space programme, includ-

ing in satellites, launches and space-based services. "The next mission PSLV-C51 (polar satellite launch vehicle) is spe-

cial for us. It is special for the entire country," K Sivan said while hailing the Centre for launching reforms unlocking India's potential in the space sector, news agency AP reported.

K Sivan, who was addressing scientists from the Mission Control Centre after the successful launch of communication satellite "CMS-01" on-board PSLV-C50 from the spaceport in Sriharikota, said: "The first satellite 'ANAND' from a start-up called Pixel India, is going to be launched."

"Definitely, PSLV-C51 (mis-

sion) is going to be a first of its kind in the country. It is going to initiate a new era of space reforms in India and I am sure that these private people will take this activity further and provide services for the entire country," K Sivan said.

Wonder Woman 1984 movie review:**Gal Gadot's goddess-like charm barely saves a wonderless sequel**

Wonder Woman 1984 movie review: Patty Jenkins' follow-up to her inspired, wondrous 2017 film is a bit too dull, even with the charming star cast of Gal Gadot, Chris Pine, Kirsten Wiig and Pedro Pascal.

Wonder Woman 1984

Director: Patty Jenkins

Cast: Gal Gadot, Chris Pine, Pedro Pascal, Kirsten Wiig and others

Judging from the title, there are two things that should have been the focus of Wonder Woman 1984: the Amazonian goddess and the '80s nostalgia that the film most likely wanted to cash on. But somehow, neither is explored to their full potential. Wonder Woman, among the few actually interesting DC icons, had the good luck to find someone as perfect as Gal Gadot to wear the cuffs, yet even she could just barely save a largely soulless, wonderless film.

WW84, a follow up to 2017's Wonder Woman, which I still dub the best DCEU film to exist, leaves World War I and German trenches to land in Washington DC of 1984. Diana Prince has assumed her position at the Smithsonian and has been spending her weekends saving joggers in pink tights from getting

run over and local malls from getting robbed. Other than on the fashion, there is very little influence that the 1980s have had on WW84. Try as hard as I might, I cannot recall hearing a single beat of synth in Hans Zimmer's gargantuan music, as we were so vehemently promised in the trailer, a year ago. The music, specially the opening Themyscira theme, is more likely to transport you to the Shire and leave you there. With a needlessly long, flashback opening sequence set in Diana's homeland Themyscira, director Patty Jenkins establishes the moral lesson she will give us this time. A young Diana, in a shorter, more Amazonian version of the Ironman Triathlon, learns that there is no honour in taking the short path to what you desire. Lying will get you nothing and the truth shall always emerge as victorious. The lessons and the ideals crop up again in her life, more than 60 years after she enters the human world.

At work (the cover-up kind), Diana

makes friends with the clumsy and awkward Dr Barbara Minerva, played by Kirsten Wiig. Together, they chance upon an ancient rock that promises to make anyone's wishes come true. But even in a premise that has already established Diana as a goddess among men, the magical rock still manages to look too stupid not to roll your eyes at. Diana, who has still not moved on from the death of Steve Trevor (Chris Pine), wishes him to come back and Barbara wishes to be 'strong, sexy and cool' like her new friend. Both of them get what they wish for but much like the Monkey's Paw, it comes at a heavy price. But the one most desirous of the rock is Pedro Pascal's slimy, loser businessman, Max Lord. With a failing business and his funds running dry, he wants to find the genie in a bottle, in a plotline straight out of Disney's Aladdin. He becomes the film's main villain who takes the plot to faraway lands, on a journey no one wants to be on. While Pedro does have



fun as the pathetic Lord, the same cannot be said about the rest of us. He is given a large chunk of the screentime, which could have perhaps been better divided among Cheetah or Wonder Woman.

Kirsten, as expected, is perfect with the comedic portions and electric in the more sinister moments post her transformation. Her beating up a creep in the streets was among the more human, if not all that righteous moments of the film. However, even she gets an unfair, rushed treatment with how quickly she turns against Diana. It's a turnaround that almost matches Kangana Ranaut's feelings for Priyanka Chopra, when at one moment, she is helping her friend find out the

truth about the rock and soon after that, beating her to a pulp and calling her a snob for thinking that she isn't worthy of the same powers as her.

But what broke my heart the most was what they did to Steve Trevor. Once a guiding light and a hero in his own right in a story about a goddess, Steve is now reduced to an excited puppy, who tags along with Diana to her adventures. He is the sacrificial lamb brought to life only as an aide to her. The tragic love story of Diana and Steve, paralleled only by Steve Rogers and Peggy Carter's in the MCU, gave the first film its beating, although sad heart. But here, even the dead are not left in peace for an easy cash grab.

The Midnight Sky movie review:**There's no dawn at the end of George Clooney's disastrously dull Netflix film**

The Midnight Sky movie review: George Clooney's direction sucks all the tension out of the movie, described as Gravity meets The Revenant.

The Midnight Sky

Director - George Clooney

Cast - George Clooney, Felicity Jones, David Oyelowo, Kyle Chandler, Demian Bichir, Caoilinn Springall

Fancy spending two hours wondering if George Clooney's beard has grown longer before your eyes? Well, it's your lucky day. The Midnight Sky is the movie for you.

Directed by Clooney himself, the big-budget science-fiction film does such a shoddy job of hold-

ing the audience's attention that it's a miracle it is even able to communicate its basic premise. I can almost imagine the Netflix pitch meeting for this. I wonder if it was the fastest green light in the history of Hollywood.

On paper, few ideas could have such delicious marketability. You have one of the most recognisable faces on the planet top-lining the picture, which sounds like a mash-up of two Oscar-winning films — Gravity and The Revenant — both of which also happen to

be major box office hits. Netflix is said to have a data-driven approach to making 'content', but you don't need number-crunching computers to tell you that this is a no-brainer. But let this be a lesson, kids. Just because something sounds appealing doesn't mean it actually is. In their haste to be in the George Clooney business, everyone seems to have overlooked the condition of the script. It's in severe need of polishing. Written by The Revenant co-writer Mark L Smith and based on the book by Lily Brooks-Dalton, The Midnight Sky stars Clooney as a terminally ill scientist who stays behind on a ravaged Earth, while the remnants of humanity head off into space, looking for a planet to colonise or something. Meanwhile

on the scorched Earth, Clooney's character, Dr Augustine Lofthouse (what?), runs into a young girl named Iris. She appears to have been separated from her group, which by now is probably way past Ganymede. But there's more trouble incoming: a crew of astronauts on a scouting mission is on its way back to Earth, oblivious of the apocalypse. To warn them, Dr Lofthouse and Iris must travel across the tundra to a station with a strong radio signal. It's a simple premise, royally complicated by Clooney, who seems hell-bent on giving his audiences more bang for their buck. So what should have been a straightforward survival thriller — half set in space and half on land, to add an interesting duality to the pro-

ceedings — turns into, at a conservative estimate, four-and-a-half movies all rolled into one. In addition to the more obvious references to Gravity and The Revenant, Clooney also appears to be borrowing liberally from Interstellar, Oblivion, and War for the Planet of the Apes. There's a tonal dissonance to the two distinct storylines in the film; a lack of urgency to the proceedings, despite time playing such a key role. And that's because Clooney's direction sucks all the tension out of the movie. A more seasoned hand might have worked wonders with the two race against time missions, unfolding in parallel to each other — Dr Lofthouse on Earth, literally dying, and the astronauts in space, also hurtling towards certain death.

Interview with lead actress **Tanya Maniktala** of **A Suitable Boy**



With the highly anticipated conclusion of the epic miniseries **A SUITABLE BOY** approaching, actress Tanya Maniktala sat down to discuss the making of her acclaimed project. In North America, all episodes are available exclusively on the streaming service Acorn TV with new episodes premiering every Monday.

Tell us about the story of A Suitable Boy?

A Suitable Boy is a book written by Vikram Seth and the series that we are making is based on the novel. Based in 1950s India, the story is about Lata Mehra and her journey to find herself and

also to find **A Suitable Boy**! There are a lot of other elements, such as the turmoil after the partition and the Hindu/Muslim riots. I would say that it is a love story, but it's also Lata finding love in herself and the potential to be able to love somebody else as well.

Who is Lata Mehra and what is her journey?

Lata is a 19 year old girl. She is attending university and graduating in English Literature. Lata's beauty lies in her simplicity; I would say that she is very relatable, very grounded and humble. She is taking the world as it is and has no illusions about how it's going to be. However, we see her

bubble break when she actually enters into the real world. Lata and her mother's ideas of marriage and love are very different. Lata follows her heart but her mother follows what society says. There's always a constant conflict between the two of them.

How does the relationship between Lata and her mother develop across the first few episodes?

Lata and her mother share a love/hate relationship where they push each other towards the edge but pull each other back as well. They are always there for each other and they understand each other. I feel like Lata is almost an extension, or rather a younger version, of her mother. They both have very strong opinions. At the end of it all, her mother wants Lata to be happy, whether it's studying literature or law and I think Lata understands that. However, her youth takes over at times when she feels like rebelling - but she would never do anything to hurt her mother.

How did you become involved in A Suitable Boy?

Just a few days before I got the call for the audition my friend and I were discussing this book and how Lata and Malati's relationship was very much like ours. I was working as a copywriter and I was very happy with my life. A few days later, a friend called me and asked me to come for an audition but didn't tell me what it was for. My friend is a huge fan of the book. I get goose bumps now when I remember showing up for the audition and how it was for **A Suitable Boy** and the role of Lata.

What has it been like working with Mira Nair?

Mira is absolutely phenomenal; she's the best director that anybody could ask for. She's so clear and vocal in what she wants. It's so easy for any artist to deliver when they know what the director wants from them and that's so important since it's my first time working on such a huge scale project. I couldn't have been

luckier. I'm blessed. I'm honestly honoured to have her directing me and this entire cast. Mira gave me opportunities to grow and learn which is very important for me as an actor. I need to figure out my own process and she allowed me time to just be with the character, so I'm really grateful. Her vision about what she wants from the book is very clear and you can tell she's totally in love with the book and its characters.

What has it been like to be part of this huge production?

Every day on set feels like a dream - from the cars, to the sets and the costumes. I can't believe that this has actually happened. I feel so humbled and grateful for this wonderful opportunity. I can't believe this is my life. There are so many people around me who encourage me and give me that boost of confidence whenever I feel low. I'm honestly so grateful for it all!

Ranbir Kapoor on father Rishi Kapoor's death: 'I am still, in some ways, dealing with that'



Actor Ranbir Kapoor, who lost his father, veteran actor Rishi Kapoor, in April, said that he is still coming to terms with the loss. Ranbir also talked

about the huge impact Rishi had on his life, both professionally and personally. Rishi died on the morning of April 30 after a two-year battle with can-

I am still, in some ways, dealing with that," Ranbir told journalist Rajeev Masand.

Ranbir said that Rishi impacted his life "in every which

cer. He is survived by his wife Neetu Kapoor, son Ranbir and daughter Riddhima Kapoor Sahni. "It has been quite a big year in my life, starting with losing a parent, which I don't think has seeped in yet.

He is survived by his wife Neetu Kapoor, son Ranbir and daughter Riddhima Kapoor Sahni.

Ranbir said that Rishi impacted his life "in every which

way'. "I think the person I am is because of the strong value system that he imbibed in my sister and me. He was an extremely passionate man, a family man," he said.

"Just the time I spent with him in these last two years, before he passed, walking with him from the hotel to the hospital while he was getting his chemotherapy, just walking in silence and being around him... Everything has gone so fast. I don't know if I have really formed words yet about what impact he has had on me, professionally and personally, but I do know that it's the largest impact a human being has had on my life so far," he added.

Ranbir will be seen next on the big screen in Ayan Mukerji's supernatural drama **Brahmastra**, which marks his first collaboration with girlfriend, actor Alia Bhatt. The film, first part of a proposed fantasy trilogy, also stars actors Amitabh Bachchan, Mouni Roy, Nagarjuna Akkineni and Dimple Kapadia. Apart from this, Ranbir has Karan Malhotra's dacoit drama **Shamsher**. He will begin shooting for Luv Ranjan's next with Shraddha Kapoor on January 5. Post that, he will work on Sandeep Reddy Vanga's next, which is scheduled to go on floors in mid-2021.

Priyanka Chopra stranded with Text For You team in UK amid the lockdown: report

After a new, potentially more infectious strain of Covid-19 was detected in the UK, the government has imposed restrictions on travel. Reportedly, Priyanka Chopra, who was shooting for her Hollywood film Text For You in London, is stranded in the country.

Many parts of the UK have already been put under Tier 4 lockdown - the highest level - as the new variant of the virus has high transmissibility. While Priyanka and the team were originally supposed to shoot till January, it is being said that the production team is trying to arrange for everyone to return to the US at the earliest.

"The producers have halted production at the moment. Their top priority is to ensure the safe return of the cast and crew. Special permissions are being sought to travel back to the US, but the procedure may take longer than usual with the lockdown rules becoming stricter than ever before. It is possible that Priyanka and the rest of the unit will have to stay put in the UK for a while," a source told Mid-Day.

According to a report, Priyanka Chopra and the team of Text For You might be stuck in the UK for a few days, amid travel restrictions imposed to curb the spread of the new strain of Covid-19.

Earlier this month, Nick Jonas shot for a cameo in Text For You, which features Priyanka and Sam Heughan in the lead roles. Celine Dion, Russell Tovey and Omid Djalili will also star in the film, a remake of the German

film SMS Fur Dich, which itself is a cinematic adaptation of Sofie Cramer's novel of the same name.

Directed by Jim Strouse, Text For You is about a young woman, reeling from the death of her fiancé in a car

accident, who continues to send romantic messages to his old phone number even after two years. She develops a bond with the current owner of the number, a man suffering a similar heartbreak. Celine is said to play the catalyst who brings them together.

Gal Gadot thanks Hrithik Roshan for watching Wonder Woman 1984 in a theatre: 'So glad you enjoyed'

Gal Gadot has thanked Hrithik Roshan for sharing an appreciation tweet for her. Hrithik watched her film Wonder Woman 1984 with his whole family on Wednesday.



@iHrithik ab bol v do kab announcement hoga (Sir has been on a holiday for a long time. Don't know when he will be back at work. Hrithik, please tell us when you will announce your next movie." Earlier on Wednesday, Hrithik had shared a picture of himself, his sons and ex-wife Sussanne watching the movie together at a cinema hall.

"Home is where the heart is, My wonderland#CinemasAreBack & so am I! Now watching #WonderWoman84 in my other super hero mask. Good job @INOXmovies @rsjyala for empowering us with a safe movie watching experience," he wrote in a tweet. Hrithik also watched Tenet recently and praised Dimple Kapadia for her work.

Sharing a picture of Dimple and lead actor John David Washington from the movie, he wrote, "Hers is unmistakably one of the best performances by an Indian actor in an international film. Just brilliant!!!! The charm, the power, the poise, the seductive eyes, Dimple aunty you are something else! Go see Tenet for HER."

Sunny Leone to star in Vikram Bhatt's web series titled Anamika

Sunny Leone is all set to team up with director Vikram Bhatt for his next web series titled Anamika. Sunny will be playing lead in this action series. It will have 10 episodes and the actress will be seen in an avatar never seen before. The series will be shot in Mumbai. The first schedule will mostly be wrapped by the end of 2020.

Says Vikram Bhatt, "Due to the lockdown, the process of shooting was on hold for some time. But the industry never stops working. So here we are back where we love to work. We have just started shooting with Sunny and it has been a great as well as an exciting start. The audience will be delighted to watch Sunny doing martial arts and wielding firearms. This action series is going to be a thrilling project." The series will be released on MX player.

Actor Gal Gadot has tweeted her thanks to Bollywood star Hrithik Roshan for watching her movie, Wonder Woman 1984. Hrithik has shared a bunch of pictures from the theatre, lauding the film and Gal's performance. Sharing pictures from the movie hall, Hrithik had written, "Just watched WONDER WOMAN. Exhilarating experience. My childhood crush(WW) and my first love(movies) together with the BIG cinema IMAX experience! Doesn't get any better than this. Thank you @GalGadot for being the perfect WONDER WOMAN. And congratulations to the entire

team." One picture showed Gal as Diana Prince in her first scene from the movie and another showed the title card of the film— WW84.

Replying to his tweet, Gal wrote, "So glad you enjoyed the movie @iHrithik! Wishing you and yours a happy holiday." Hrithik's fans also appreciated Gal's tweet, hoping to see them together someday. "Please do a film together it will be hotness and class redefined. #KrrishXWonderWoman," wrote a fan. One follower even joked, "Sir ka toh hardin holiday jaa raha hai Pata nhi kab kam pe jeyenge





Bluff and brinksmanship: How Britain got a Brexit trade deal done

(SAI Bureau)- As trade talks with the United Kingdom ground to deadlock on Dec. 9, one European Union official summed up the mood in Brussels, writing in a memo: "The Brits ... are taking us for a ride, we must remain firm." British Prime Minister Boris Johnson and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen had just met for dinner



in the Berlaymont building, the headquarters of the 27-nation EU's executive in Brussels, and failed to resolve blockages on fisheries and competition policy.

Even though those differences and many others were resolved on Thursday with a deal to avert a 'cliff-edge' rupture to a \$900 billion trade relationship, the pattern of mutual

mistrust highlighted by the memo, seen by Reuters, remains. That mistrust is likely to bedevil future relations as the UK and the EU address a huge slate of unfinished business ranging from trade in services to cooperation on criminal matters and security.

"Unfortunately, trust is not something that will come overnight," said a

senior EU diplomat based in Brussels. The economic consequences of Britain's acrimonious break from its historic European allies will be painfully evident - but the g e o s t r a t e g i c implications will arguably be even greater.

For one of Europe's main military and economic powers to shun the EU as the bloc tries to become a coherent counterweight to Russian and Chinese assertiveness will diminish Europe's transatlantic community with the United States and Canada.

(Contd on page 29)

Trump leaves Washington in limbo



(SAI Bureau)- No one in the White House or on Capitol Hill appears to know what Trump's plan is - or even if there is one. President Donald Trump has once again thrown Washington into chaos, making uneven demands that have left lawmakers baffled and Americans coping with a global pandemic uncertain when they'll be getting long-promised financial help. On Tuesday night, Trump blindsided all of Washington - including his own staff - with a series of eleventh-hour demands to amend coronavirus relief and government funding legislation that his own administration had helped carefully craft and supported. Overnight and into Wednesday, senior Republicans,

(Contd on page 30)

CAA dilemma for BJP as it eyes both Bengal and Assam



(SAI Bureau) - West Bengal and Assam will go to assembly polls next year around the same time in April-May next year. In both the states, the BJP has high stakes. In Assam, the BJP is seeking a return to power for the second consecutive time. In Bengal, the BJP is expecting to defeat Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee's Trinamool Congress in 2021 polls. And, in both the states the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) is an emotive issue. The issue of CAA came back in electoral debate this week after Union Home Minister Amit Shah held a roadshow in Bengal and said the amended citizenship law will be implemented as soon as Covid-19 vaccination starts.

(Contd on page 30)

ED attaches assets worth Rs 4,109 crore across 5 states in mega Agri Gold Ponzi fraud case

(SAI Bureau) -The Enforcement Directorate (ED) on Thursday attached assets worth Rs 4,109 crore in connection with the Agri Gold Ponzi fraud case, officials said. The attached assets include 2,809 properties in form of land, Haailand Amusement Park of Arka Leisure and Entertainments Private Limited in Andhra Pradesh spread over 48 acres, shares of various companies, plants and machinery.

The attached properties are located in the Anantapur, Kurnool, Krishna, Chittoor, Guntur, Kadapa, Vizianagaram, East & West Godavari, Visakhapatnam, Nellore, Prakasam, Srikakulam and Kadapa districts of Andhra Pradesh; Bengaluru, Kolar, Yadgir, Mandya Districts of



Karnataka; Khurda District of Orissa; Krishnagiri District of Tamil Nadu and Mahaboob Nagar, Narayanpet, Khammam, Mahboob Nagar, Hyderabad, Ranga Reddy, Vikarabad, Medchal, Malkajgiri, Nalgonda,

Mahabubnagar Districts of Telangana. According to the probe agency, the scam was perpetrated by accused Avva Venkata Rama Rao through Agri Gold Group of companies. "Avva Venkata Rama Rao hatched a well-planned conspiracy and along with his seven brothers and other associates setting up more than 150 companies and started collecting deposits from the general public with a promise of providing developed plots, farmlands or withdrawal at a high rate of return on maturity," the ED said.

(Contd on page 30)

