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What's in the \$1.9 trillion American Rescue Plan ?

In this \$1.9 trillion stimulus package, unveiled by President Biden last month, hundreds of billions of dollars are going to vaccination programs, expanded unemployment insurance, \$1,400 stimulus checks, state and local governments, school re-openings and more.

Biden's sprawling proposal set off an immediate debate among Republicans and Democrats over how best to heal the economy - or if another stimulus package is needed at all. Some issues, like raising the minimum wage to \$15, have been especially fraught.



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Joe Biden Revokes Trump Ban On Many Green Card Applicants

(News Agencies)-US President Joe Biden on Wednesday revoked a proclamation from his predecessor that blocked many green card applicants from entering the United States.

Former President Donald Trump issued the ban last year, saying it was needed to protect U.S. workers amid high unemployment due to the coronavirus pandemic.

Biden rejected that reasoning in a proclamation on Wednesday rescinding the visa ban. The Democratic president said it had prevented families from reuniting

in the United States and harmed U.S. businesses.

Biden, a Democrat, has pledged to reverse many of Trump's hardline immigration policies. Immigrant advocates had pressed in recent weeks for him to lift the visa ban, which was set to expire on March 31. Biden left in place another ban on most foreign temporary workers.

In October, a federal judge in California blocked Trump's ban on those foreign guest workers as it affected hundreds of thousands of U.S. businesses that fought the policy in court.

Curtis Morrison, a California-based immigration attorney, who represents people subject to the ban said Biden will now have to tackle a growing backlog of applications that have been held up for months as the pandemic shut down most visa processing by the State Department. The process could potentially take years, he said. "It's a backlog that Trump created," Morrison said. "He broke the immigration system." The State Department did not immediately respond to a request for comment.



"Fighting" For Neera Tanden's Nomination To Lead US Budget Department: White House

(Insider Bureau)-The White House has said it is "fighting" for the nomination of Indian-American Neera Tanden to lead the Office of Management and Budget as two crucial Senate committees abruptly postponed meetings on her confirmation. Speculation was rife on Wednesday that the White House is struggling to get the required votes for the confirmation of Ms Tanden, amidst strong opposition from the Republicans and a few Democratic senators over her past Twitter outbursts

critical during this time of an unprecedented crisis," White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki told reporters at her daily news conference.

If confirmed by the Senate, 50-year-old Ms Tanden would become the first person of colour to head the federal agency that prepares the annual budget of the US government.

Ms Tanden, Ms Psaki said, has rolled up her sleeves.

"She's very engaged and doing outreach to senators, to members on the Hill --

President Joe Biden did not respond to questions on Ms Tanden during a media interaction on Wednesday.

"That's not the stage we're in," Ms Psaki said when asked if Ms Tanden has offered to withdraw her nomination. "The stage we're in is working to continue to fight for her nomination. And as you

know, it's a numbers game. It's a matter of getting one Republican to support her nomination. We're continuing to do that outreach, answer questions they have, and continue to reiterate her qualifications," she said. "There's one nominee to lead the budget department; her name is Neera

Tanden, and that's who we're continuing to fight for," Ms Psaki said when asked if the White House is seeking for options. Ms Tanden reportedly deleted more than 1,000 tweets before her confirmation process started. She had apologised to senators during her confirmation hearings earlier this month.



against several lawmakers, including those from her own party.

The Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee and the Senate Budget Committee abruptly postponed votes on Ms Tanden's confirmation, scheduled for Wednesday.

"We're fighting for the nomination, and she (Tanden) and our team remain in close contact with senators and key constituency groups. She is an expert whose qualifications are

answering any questions they have and offering to do that. And we're doing the same," she said.

"There's one nominee to lead the budget department; her name is Neera Tanden, and that's who we're continuing to fight for," Ms Psaki said when asked if the White House is seeking for options. Ms Tanden reportedly deleted more than 1,000 tweets before her confirmation process started. She had apologised to senators during her confirmation hearings earlier this month.



1 in 7 children faces hunger.

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

Brother & Sister in Middle & High School set a shining example of Generosity, Problem-Solving, and use of Intellect for helping during the COVID-19 pandemic

(By Max Thind) New York: Sana Merchant, a student at Great Neck South High School was excited about her 16th Birthday, she has been the heartbeat of her school friends and they were planning on surprise gifts for her. It was March 1st, 2020 and Sana's birthday was just a week away, things seemed normal in school and life was good, no one realized what was about to come. On March 2nd, 2020 Governor Cuomo held the first COVID-19 briefing to share details about the first COVID-19 case in New York, additional cleaning measures at schools, and more.

Sana grew concerned and curious over the coming days, she started to ask 'who are the most vulnerable in this situation?', 'How can the virus spread be avoided?', 'what can we do to help?'. She then decided to forgo all the 16th birthday presents by asking her friends & family to not give any gifts to her but rather contribute

to a fund she was planning to donate. Schools shut down on March 16th, 2020 and total cases in NY were already at 2,952 by March 20th. Sana wrote a letter to Governor Cuomo on March 21st, 2020 and included the four hundred dollars she had collected for her 16th birthday. In the letter, she wrote "I am aware that this is a small amount of money but hopefully it will make a difference to someone who has been impacted by COVID-19...my values teach me to serve our common humanity and that to save a life is, as if, to save humankind altogether"

In subsequent months, as the COVID-19 cases continued to grow so did the shortage of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE). Our healthcare heroes and first responders were using

makeshift PPE in some states. Sana and her younger brother Shaan Merchant who is a student at Great Neck South Middle School started to research how they could help



with solving this problem. Sana & Shaan used Computer Aided Design (CAD) to improvise and 3D print the face shields at home. Each 3D print took 4 hours to be printed and another half an hour to assemble and

disinfect. Sana and Shaan ran 16-20 hour shifts to speed up their initiative and were able to donate all of the 3D printed face shields to the local police station in Long Island. Sana recently launched a new website <http://simplyhuman.life> to engage other high school students from all over the country to create 3D print face shields for first responders.

In summer, Sana teamed up with another Great Neck South High School student to organize 'Introduction to Java Programming' virtual course for 7 high school girls from the remote villages in Central Asia. The classes were held over 15 sessions where students learned basic concepts and created programs using Java computer language. With <http://simplyhuman.life> she aims to

introduce robotics & computer programming to more middle & high school students in central Asia.

During the 3rd quarter of 2020, Sana and Shaan decided to join the older adult outreach initiative that was introduced by the office of New York State Senator Anna Kaplan. The objective was to call & speak with older adults in the district, find out how they are doing and share information about the resources available to assist during this pandemic. Sana & Shaan made numerous calls over several weeks and experienced joy in the voice of these older adults.

Sana said "Shaan & I could not be bystanders during the pandemic so we decided to take the initiative and do a small part. My hope is to engage more middle and high schools students from around the country so that together we can mobilize STEM to serve the community."

Josh

India WebTV



Geeta Saxena
Show Host (Prime Time News)

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

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

Stay home except to get medical care

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



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.



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.



Cover your coughs and sneezes

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



Clean your hands often

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



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

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

Avoid sharing personal household items

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



CS 116120-A 03/20/2020

cdc.gov/COVID19

Biden Nominates Indian-American Lawyer To Head Office Of Personnel Management

(Insider Bureau)-US President Joe Biden has nominated Indian-American lawyer and rights activist Kiran Ahuja to head the Office of Personnel Management, a federal agency that manages America's more than two million civil servants.

If confirmed by the Senate, 49-year-old Ahuja would become the first Indian-American to serve this top position in the US government.

Ahuja served as the Chief of Staff to Director of the US Office of Personnel Management from 2015 to 2017. She has more than two decades of public service and nonprofit/philanthropic sector leadership experience.

Ahuja currently serves as Chief Executive Officer of Philanthropy

Northwest, a regional network of philanthropic institutions.

She began her career as a civil rights lawyer at the US Department of Justice, litigating school desegregation cases, and filing the department's first student racial harassment case. From 2003 to 2008, Ahuja served as the founding executive director of the National Asian Pacific American Women's Forum, an advocacy and membership organisation.

During the Obama-Biden administration, she spent six years as executive director of the White House Initiative on Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, leading efforts to increase access to federal services, resources and programmes for underserved Asian Americans

and Pacific Islanders (AAPIs). Ahuja grew up in Savannah, Georgia, as a young Indian immigrant in the wake of the civil rights era, and earned a bachelor's degree in political science from Spelman College and a law degree from the University of Georgia.

The Washington Post said Ahuja would have a mandate to reverse course on former president Donald Trump's policies on the civil service, which he and his top aides often derided as a "deep state" of Democratic bureaucrats.

Many agencies lost experts in a range of fields during the Trump era, and Biden has pledged to revitalise the workforce, the daily reported. Congressman Gerry Connolly, Chairman of the House

Government Operations subcommittee, welcomed the nomination of Ahuja.

"Ahuja's years of leadership experience and knowledge of OPM are much needed to rebuild an agency that was targeted for elimination in the last administration," he said.

"Ahuja is a well-known and expert leader who will instill stability and confidence in OPM as it recruits, hires, retains, and retires our 2.8 million federal employees. I look forward to her swift Senate confirmation, and then getting to the hard work of transforming OPM into the human resources and leadership training organization our nation needs it to be," Connolly said. President Biden has made an excellent choice in his

nomination of Ahuja to serve as OPM director, Congresswoman Judy Chu said.

"With over two decades of experience serving in government, non-profit and philanthropic sectors, Kiran is uniquely qualified to lead OPM at this critical juncture as we work to build a federal workforce that reflects the full diversity of our country," she said.

"As the former chief of staff to the director of OPM and the former executive director of the White House Initiative on Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders under the Obama administration, she will bring a wealth of knowledge and expertise to OPM that will enable her to hit the ground running on day one," Chu added.

Indian-Origin Woman In Singapore Tortures 24-Year-Old Maid To Death: Report

Five months into her new maid's employment, Gaiyathiri Murugayan began abusing her, punching and stamping on her and starving her until she was only 24-kgs, reported Channel News Asia.

(Insider Bureau)-A 40-year-old Indian-origin woman in Singapore has pleaded guilty to torturing her 24-year-old Myanmar-origin maid to death, even as the prosecution said that she abused, starved, tortured and ultimately killed her in a manner that would shock anyone's conscience.

Five months into her new maid's employment, Gaiyathiri Murugayan began abusing her, punching and stamping on her and starving her until she was only 24-kgs, reported Channel News Asia.

Days before Piang Ngaih Don died of a brain injury with severe blunt trauma to her neck, she

was starved and tied to a window grille at night and assaulted if she tried to rummage for food from the dustbin, the report said.

Gaiyathiri, who could be jailed for life, has pleaded guilty to 28 charges, including culpable homicide, voluntarily causing grievous hurt by starvation, voluntarily causing hurt by a heated substance and wrongful restraint that eventually led to the death of her maid from Myanmar, the report said.

Another 87 charges will be considered in sentencing.

The court heard that the victim came to Singapore to work for Gaiyathiri in May 2015 in what was her first job overseas as she

was poor and needed to support her three-year-old son.

Closed-circuit television footage from cameras installed in the house to monitor the victim and the children showed the abuse carried out in the last 35 days of the victim's life, the report said.

An autopsy found 31 recent scars and 47 external injuries on the victim's body. She had died of hypoxic ischaemic encephalopathy - a type of brain injury - with severe blunt trauma to the neck. She was emaciated and in a poor nutritional state and would have died of starvation if it had been sustained further, according to the report. The prosecution, led by Senior



Counsel Mohamed Faizal, asked for life imprisonment, saying that this is the only sentence "that would speak to the harms that have been occasioned and the outrage felt by the community by such a shocking series of events". He said Gaiyathiri abused, starved, tortured and ultimately killed the helper in a manner that would shock anyone's

conscience, according to the report. Parties will return at a later date for sentencing. The penalties for culpable homicide not amounting to murder are life imprisonment and caning, or up to 20 years' jail, a fine and caning. Women cannot be caned. Prema's case is pending, while Gaiyathiri's husband also faces pending charges for maid abuse.

Civil Servants Union Wants UK High Court Intervention In Priti Patel Bullying Case



(Insider Bureau)- The union for senior civil servants in the UK, First Division Association (FDA), wants the High Court to

overturn UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson's decision to exonerate Home Secretary Priti Patel amid allegations of bullying raised

within her department.

In a written submission, FDA general secretary Dave Penman told the High Court that "civil servants should expect to work with ministers without fear of being bullied or harassed" and that PM Johnson's actions had "fundamentally undermined" the disciplinary process.

The issue dates back to last year when Sir Philip Rutnam dramatically resigned as the senior-most civil servant in the UK Home Office pointing the

finger of blame at Ms Patel.

He is separately pursuing a claim against the department through the employment tribunal.

Meanwhile, a Cabinet Office probe into whether Ms Patel had breached the ministerial code concluded last year with the finding that she was in breach, albeit "unintentionally".

While ministers are usually expected to resign if they are found in breach of the code, it

ultimately rests with the Prime Minister on whether to take any action on an independent Ministerial Code adviser's findings.

Boris Johnson, who has consistently supported Ms Patel ever since the allegations first emerged, had declared that he had "full confidence" in the 48-year-old Indian-origin minister, who holds one of the UK's highest political offices as Home Secretary.

Oil price in India soars, 4 states offer relief

By Susmita Ghosh

In order to rein in the soaring prices of petrol and diesel, four states have cut taxes in recent days. This resulted in giving some relief to consumers who are feeling the pinch of a sharp rise in global rates and the high level of taxation. The states like West Bengal, Assam, Rajasthan and Meghalaya have cut their taxes. But even with the mitigation, the price of diesel in Delhi is cheaper than in three of these states, while the price of petrol in the capital is lower than two of them.

Rajasthan was the first state to reduce the Value Added Tax (VAT) from 38 per cent to 36 per cent. The poll-bound state of West Bengal followed by cutting VAT on petrol and diesel by Re 1. The state of Assam, which had imposed an additional tax of Rs 5 in 2020 to generate revenue amid the Covid-19 crisis, has also retracted it. The

state of Meghalaya has cut not only Rs 7.4 per litre on petrol and Rs 7.1 on diesel but also VAT on petrol and diesel by Rs 2. This provided by far the biggest relief in the country.

In spite of the unprecedented rise in fuel prices in the past two months, the Centre is reluctant to cut excise duty. When the pandemic shut down economies and India's crude purchase cost fell to US\$19.9/barrel, the Centre raised the excise duty by Rs 13 a litre on petrol and Rs 16 on diesel between March and May 2020.

Union Petroleum and Natural Gas and Steel Minister, Dharmendra Pradhan pointed out oil-producing countries for producing less fuel. According to the minister, there are two main reasons for the fuel price rise. The reduction of fuel production by the international market and manufacturing countries producing less fuel to gain more

profit. "This is making the consumer countries suffer," said Pradhan in a rally in Assam. The minister further said that the Centre has requested OPEC and OPEC Plus countries to increase output.

Finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman said that the price hike was perturbing and it presented a "Dharma Sankat (dilemma)" for the government. The crude oil prices have risen more than 60 percent since early November because vaccines against the virus provided hope for economic recovery. In spite of US President Biden's plans for a US\$1.9 trillion stimulus that is expected to raise demand, freezing weather in the U.S. caused disruption and squeezed the supply by the oil cartel OPEC. The Indian fuel price rates followed a similar trajectory.

In theory, Indian oil marketing



companies like Indian Oil Corporation are free to set their own prices for petrol and diesel based on international prices. But the state and Centre taxes make up a significant portion of the retailing price. A litre of petrol and diesel costs about Rs31-Rs33, while the rest of it is central and state taxes. Thus Indian customers don't really see the benefit of price decontrol. The increased central government taxes on petrol and diesel by the Narendra Modi

government does not pass on the benefits of lower global prices to Indian consumers. Some economists observed that high taxes on petroleum are good for the environment. While it doesn't really affect India's poorest, it is the middle-class who feels the pinch in their pockets instead. Other experts however point out that high automobile fuel charges might impact the agriculture and manufacturing sectors, resulting in inflation.

Covid-19 cases re-surge in Maharashtra, other states follow



By Susmita Ghosh

The presence of a new strain of the Covid-19 virus is reported in India, especially in Maharashtra where the coronavirus cases are once again rising in the country. The number of cases has been rising steadfast since the last

seven days, though the rate of growth is not as steep as it was during the peak of the pandemic. Maharashtra logged the biggest jump in the last three months of nearly 7,000 new Covid-19 cases. New coronavirus guidelines including lockdowns

and night curfews across various regions in the state have been announced by the Maharashtra government. The metropolitan city of Mumbai which has recorded a 36.38 percent rise in active Covid-19 cases since February 8, saw 760 new cases after reporting over 900 infections daily for two consecutive days. Maharashtra and other states with high Covid-19 caseload have been sent a letter from the Centre, asking them to augment the efforts to combat the deadly disease.

Maharashtra health minister Rajesh Tope has tested positive for Covid-19. He said another lockdown would be "unaffordable" and wrote a letter

urging people of the state to follow Covid-19 restrictions. Chief Minister of Maharashtra, Uddhav Thackeray on Sunday said that on account of the rising Covid-19 cases, religious, social and political gatherings will be prohibited in the state from Monday.

One of the worst-affected districts in Maharashtra is Amravati. The district has already been placed under a week-long lockdown from 8 pm today. Yashomati Thakur, Amravati's guardian minister said that the lockdown will be in force till 8 am on March 1. He further stated that during the lockdown, all the shops will remain shut, except those dealing with

essential commodities. The government and private educational institutions, private coaching classes, training schools as well would also remain closed. "People can buy items for daily necessities from 9 am to 5 pm," said Thakur.

Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat enforced Thermal screening to people coming from Maharashtra. The Health Minister of Karnataka, K. Sudhakar asked people to exercise prudence against negligence and towards following COVID protocols. He stated that stricter steps would be implemented if the number of cases increase. The marshals would be deployed to monitor weddings.

Biden Administration to hold virtual 'Quad' meeting with Australia, India, Japan

By Susmita Ghosh

U.S. Secretary of State, Antony Blinken virtually meets with his "Quad" ministerial counterparts, India, Australia and Japan on Thursday. It is an effort to stabilize China's growing military and economic power. On the eve of the maiden Quad ministerial meeting under the Biden administration, the Pentagon said that India is a critical partner, especially when one considers all the challenges in the Indo-

Pacific region. The State Department spokesman Ned Price faced the reporters at a daily briefing on Wednesday. He stated that it is absolutely critical for the Quad foreign ministers to participate in the discussion. It is an important tool to achieve the goal of a free and open Indo-Pacific. "For rising to the defining challenges of our time, including coordinating efforts on COVID-19 response as well as climate change," he further added.

Although it would be the first informal group under the Biden administration that took office on January 20, has discussed its future role in bilateral calls with members since then.

According to the Indian external affairs Minister, S. Jaishankar, the meeting would offer an opportunity to continue the useful exchange of views since their last meeting in Tokyo on October 6, 2020. Further, he said that the foreign ministers are

eager to deliberate on regional and global issues, especially practical areas of cooperation towards maintaining a free, open and inclusive Indo-Pacific region. In a key strategy towards out-competing China, US President Joe Biden said working closely with allies is the only solution. In a telephonic call last week, Biden and Indian Prime Minister, Narendra Modi agreed to strengthen the Indo-Pacific security through the Quad. There

will be a separate call where the U.S. Secretary of State, Anthony Blinken, will connect to his counterparts from France, Germany and the UK, to discuss the common global challenges faced by the countries. It was up to India to decide if it wants to be one of the four members of the summit of leaders of the 'Quad' or not. India is the only Quad member who shares a land border with China and is outside of US-led security alliances.

Global support pours in for protesting farmers, Twitter in frenzy

By Susmita Ghosh

The Indian Government's handling of the ongoing farmers' protest has now drawn global attention and several high-profile celebrities spoke out in favour of the farmers. Several international personalities of varied backgrounds have now put forth their opinions on the social networking site Twitter.

It all started with Rihanna's tweet on Tuesday night "Why aren't we talking about #FarmersProtest?", which garnered major international attention. She shared a CNN news article with her 100 million followers, and called out the internet shutdown at the protest site. The post had been shared around 2 lakh times in a little more than 12 hours.

The Ministry of Home Affairs had ordered the shutdown of internet services in the border areas of Singhu, Ghazipur and Tikri from Jan 30, and the Haryana government had cut off internet connectivity in at least seven districts till Feb 3.

Soon after, in solidarity with Rihanna, Swedish climate

activist, Greta Thunberg too joined in and expressed her support. She shared the same CNN news article and wrote "We stand in solidarity with the #FarmersProtest in India."

Hollywood actor John Cusack also expressed his support for the farmers as he retweeted a post by Vanessa Nakate, a Ugandan climate activist, which read, "Let us talk about what is happening in India right now #FarmersProtest." Notably, he had also shown support to anti-CAA protestors in February 2020.

This development occurred as thousands of farmers, mainly from the states of Punjab and Haryana, have been camping at several Delhi border points since November 2020. It was in protest of the new farm laws the state planned to pass on. They demanded the government to repeal the three farm laws and legal guarantee of Minimum Support Price (MSP) for their produce.

Popularly known by his stage name, Jay Sean, Kamaljit Singh

Jhooti took to Instagram and wrote that despite the farmers' agitation being one of the largest protests 'ever in history,' there was barely enough media coverage of the event. "I live in the US and I've barely seen it on the news or mainstream media. I don't know what needs to be done to raise more awareness and have more eyes on this but I've seen videos that are far too graphic and heart-breaking to post," he added.

Even as a majority of the mainstream Indian celebrities have kept their judgement reserved on the issue, actress Kangana Ranaut, who is known for her outspoken attitude on socio-political issues, replied to Rihanna's tweet. "No one is talking about it because they are not farmers, they are terrorists who are trying to divide India, so that China can take over our vulnerable broken nation and make it a Chinese colony much like the USA! Sit down, you fool, we are not selling our nation like you dummies". On the other side of the spectrum, actors Richa



Chadha and Swara Bhasker lauded Rihanna's tweet. They have been vocal with their huge support of the agitation. In India where actors and sports persons especially cricketers enjoy massive following, their tweets and opinions become instant news. Sayani Gupta, the actor, lamented the silence of the mainstream Bollywood celebrities. "Dear Indian celebrities/ actors/ sportsmen/ musicians/stars, grow some spine. Love," she wrote.

The farmers' protest is a politically highlighted matter, not only in India, but globally too. The famous author Meena Harris,

who is also the niece of US vice-president Kamala Harris, lends her voice to the movement, saying the world's oldest democracy was attacked by the government. She stated, "We ALL should be outraged by India's internet shutdowns and paramilitary violence against farmer protesters." The issue is also highlighted in the UK. There was an online petition supporting the protest, which has gathered more than 100,000 signatures. As a result, the Labour Party MP Claudia Webbe stated that they will be taking up the issue of Indian farmers' protest for a debate in the UK parliament.

India initiates vaccine diplomacy with support from neighbours

By Susmita Ghosh

On Thursday, Narendra Modi, Indian Prime Minister urged neighbouring countries in South Asia and the Indian Ocean region to explore special visas for medics. He stated that it is highly needed for their quick and unhindered movement around the region during health emergencies and consider sharing data on the effectiveness of Covid-19 vaccines.

The Prime Minister has also addressed a virtual workshop on the theme "Covid-19 Management: Experience, good practices and way-forward." It is organised by India comprising of health officials as well as experts from the eight members of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), including Pakistan and also from extended neighbourhood, Mauritius and Seychelles, Indian Ocean countries in India.

Modi also called for a regional air ambulance agreement for medical contingencies. The participating countries, including Pakistan, backed the five measures and proposed a

structured discussion on regional cooperation to take them forward.

Though Pakistan is an ally of China, their representatives participated in a meeting organised by India after a long gap, even though the country was part of a meet of SAARC leaders convened by Modi in March 2020 to forge a coordinated response to the

Covid-19 pandemic. "After all, we share so many common challenges – climate change, natural disasters, poverty, illiteracy and social and gender imbalances. But we also share the power of centuries-old cultural and people-to-people linkages. If we focus on all that unite us, our region can overcome not only the present pandemic but all other

challenges too," Indian PM Modi said in a solidarity message to Pakistan.

Modi further said that India was willing to share its successful public health policies and schemes. He referred to Ayushman Bharat and Jan Arogya schemes which might be useful case studies for the neighbouring countries. "Such collaboration can become the

pathway for greater regional cooperation in other areas too", said Modi.

India has the capacity to be the world's top maker of COVID-19 shots. India has gifted or sold more than 17 million doses to 20 countries including Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka and the Maldives, as the country is a dominant power in and around South Asia.

Courageous and bold judgment: Former attorney general Mukul Rohatgi on Disha Ravi's bail order

(Insider Bureau)-A day after a Delhi court granted bail to Bengaluru activist Disha Ravi in the 'toolkit' case, former attorney general Mukul Rohatgi on Wednesday called it a "bold and courageous" judgment while saying that there was no material to establish the charge of sedition.

"Happy that a courageous and bold judgment has come from a district court and not the Supreme Court. Full marks to the judgment and court for

keeping the flag of liberty flying," Rohatgi told India Today TV. "The charge of sedition is a grave



charge. In this case, there was no material to establish the charge. Supreme Court and High Courts are more reluctant to give

bail than lower courts. Lower and district courts have set an example for other courts to follow," Rohatgi further said.

While granting bail to Disha Ravi, Additional Sessions Judge Dharmender Rana observed that "citizens are conscience keepers of government in any democratic nation" and "cannot be put behind the bars simply because they choose to disagree with the

state policies". Disha was arrested by the Delhi Police's Cyber Cell on February 13 in connection with a "toolkit" on the farmer protests that was tweeted by Swedish activist Greta Thunberg. "The offence of sedition cannot be invoked to minister to the wounded vanity of the governments," the judge said in an 18-page order while terming the evidence produced by the police "scanty and sketchy". Disha was released from Tihar jail on Tuesday night.

Farmers in Punjab, Haryana misread Tikait's 'Fasal Jalao' threat, destroy own crops

Some farmers in Punjab and Haryana have taken BKU leader Rakesh Tikait's 'Fasal Jalao' threat to the government a little too seriously, too soon.

(News Agencies)-Taking Bharatiya Kisan Union (BKU) leader Rakesh Tikait's 'Fasal Jalao' threat seriously, nearly a dozen farmers in Haryana and Punjab razed a sizeable part of their standing wheat crop to protest against the new farm laws. On February 18, Tikait while addressing a Kisan Mahapanchayat in Haryana's Hisar had threatened to burn crops as a mark of protest if the Union government continued with its decision not to repeal the farm laws. "If required, we will sacrifice one crop. We will have to burn the standing crops. The government should not think that

the farmers will return to villages to harvest the crops. The protest and harvesting will go simultaneously," Rakesh Tikait had said. Tikait had justified his threat as a mark of protest against the Union government. He had said that perception is being created that the farmers will return to their homes to harvest the wheat crop after two months. "The protests will continue as Punjab and Rajasthan farmers harvest crops at a different period. Those not harvesting will continue to protest," Tikait had told supporters. Various farmers in Punjab and Haryana are

destroying their standing crops in protest against the three contentious agriculture reform laws. Most of the farmers started raising their crops after Tikait's controversial statement. Despite Rakesh Tikait having clarified that there was no need to burn the crops at this moment, farmers at many places have already razed their crops. Mandeep Singh, who hails from Bhaini Surjan village in Rohtak district, is one such farmer who destroyed his standing wheat crop over an area of three acres. He said he did this to protest against the new farm laws. Mandeep is a small farmer



and owns just one-and-a-half-acre land. He survives by cultivating nearly 25 acres of land which he got on a lease of Rs 30,000 per acre. Mandeep and many other farmers of his village have decided not to sell their crops this season. They will either donate their crops or will keep them for self-consumption. "I am incurring a

loss of over Rs 30,000 per acre. I did this as my protest against the farm laws. We have decided not to sell our crops this year," said Mandeep. Balraj Singh of Gadholi, Jind, also razed his standing wheat crop over one acre and donated it to a local cowshed which will be used as fodder. The crop was to be harvested in April.

After kisan panchayats, Priyanka Gandhi to go on 'Nadi Adhikar Yatra' to woo fishermen community in UP



(News Agencies)- After a whirlwind tour of western Uttar Pradesh, Congress general secretary Priyanka Gandhi Vadra will now shift her focus to the east. From March 1, Priyanka will take part in 'Nadi Adhikar Yatra' in support of the fishermen community. The 20-day-long campaign will see

Priyanka interacting with fishermen across eight major towns in eastern UP, party sources told India Today. "Priyanka Gandhi will launch the 'Nadi Adhikar Yatra' campaign in support of the Nishad community (OBC) in eastern Uttar Pradesh. She will begin her yatra from Prayagraj and will conclude in Ballia while covering Mirzapur, Bhadohi, Varanasi, Chandausi and Gazipur," party sources said. Last week, the Congress General Secretary visited Prayagraj to support the

boatmen who were allegedly harassed by the local police. During an earlier visit to Prayagraj, she took a holy dip at the Sangam, a confluence of the Ganga, Yamuna and Saraswati river and even rowed a boat for some time on her way back. In a series of tweets, she said the fishermen community had a primary right over river resources and demanded that the UP government investigate the illegal sand mining being done by big companies. Nishads are a riverine community having a sizeable population in

Kaushambi, Mirzapur, Chandauli, Prayagraj, Gorakhpur, Sant Kabir Nagar and Maharajganj. They belong to the OBC category, and their support for the 2022 Assembly elections is being seen as crucial for political parties. The announcement of the yatra comes close on the heels of Priyanka addressing a slew of kisan mahapanchayats in western Uttar Pradesh, where she said the Congress would continue to fight for the cause of farmers till the "anti-farmer" laws were repealed.

Farm laws unshackled potential of India's agriculture: Indo-Canadian groups in letter to PM Modi



The organisations said the laws provide greater choice and freedom to farmers to sell their produce to buyers, thereby creating competition in the agricultural market.

(News Agencies)- Various Indo-Canadian organisations have written a joint letter to Prime Minister Narendra Modi supporting the three farm reform laws, saying it has

unshackled the potential of India's agriculture and would bring about greater prosperity and welfare for farmers. "The farm reform laws...break the monopolistic powers of

entrenched interests, allow for contract farming, which will encourage greater inputs and use of technology, and liberalise the stocking regime of commodities," the letter, signed by eight organisations, said. Farmers, mostly from Punjab, Haryana and Uttar Pradesh, have been protesting at Delhi's borders against the laws for the last three months. The farmers have demanded the repeal of the laws while claiming that it

would weaken the minimum support price (MSP) system -- an argument rejected by the government. In the letter, the organisations said the laws provide greater choice and freedom to farmers to sell their produce to buyers, thereby creating competition in the agricultural market. "It will help build more efficient value chains by reducing marketing costs, improving price discovery and ensuring better

price realization for farmers," it said. "It will eventually benefit the consumers and encourage more investment from the private sector. It will also help create better farming infrastructure and help in the infusion of new technology in the farming sector, which will improve the productivity and help mitigate the seasonality in Indian agriculture," the letter said.

UP Assembly passes anti-'love jihad' law amid Opposition protest

(News Agencies)- Amid protests by the Opposition, the Uttar Pradesh Legislative Assembly on Wednesday passed by voice vote a bill aimed at curbing religious conversions by fraudulent or any other undue means, including through marriage.

The Uttar Pradesh Prohibition of Unlawful Conversion of Religion Bill, 2021 seeks to replace the ordinance

promulgated in November last year that provides for imprisonment up to 10 years and a maximum fine of Rs 50,000 for violators.

The bill was passed in the House even as Aradhana Misra, the Congress Legislative Party leader and Lalji Verma, the leader of BSP in the Assembly,

protested. Under the bill, a marriage will be declared "null and void" if the conversion is solely for that purpose, and those wishing to change their religion



after marriage need to apply to the district magistrate.

The bill mainly envisages that no person shall convert, either directly or indirectly from one religion to another by use or practice of misrepresentation, force, undue influence, coercion, allurement or by any fraudulent means or by

marriage nor shall any person abet, convince or conspire such conversion.

The onus to prove that the conversion has not been done forcibly will lie on the person accused of the act and the convert, it said.

An aggrieved person, his/her parents, brother, sister, or any other person who is related to him/her by blood,

marriage or adoption may lodge an FIR about such conversion, according to the bill. BJP leaders had said the legislation intends to counter alleged attempts to convert Hindu women to Islam in the guise of marriage, which right-wing Hindu activists refer to as "love jihad".

India's new negative defence import list may include larger weapon systems like tanks, aircraft

(News Agencies)-To boost indigenous defence manufacturing, Chief of Defence Staff General Bipin Rawat is likely to include tanks and aircraft in the second negative list of defence items and ban their import in the future.

"For the new negative list, the CDS is preparing it in consultation with industry stakeholders and discussing inclusion of bigger weapon systems such as tanks and aircraft," top defence sources told India Today. Industry leaders are also discussing timeframes in which the domestic industry would be ready to supply the larger integrated platforms for the defence forces, sources said. Last year, the government announced a ban on import of 101 weapons, platforms, and equipment. The list comprises simple parts to high technology weapon systems like artillery guns, assault

rifles, sonar systems, transport aircraft and radars.

The task of preparing the negative arms import list has been assigned to the Department of Military Affairs under General Bipin Rawat.

India has for years been among the world's top three importers of defence equipment. Every year, the forces spend over Rs 2 lakh crore in acquiring defence hardware under both capital and revenue heads.

The development is in line with the government's aim of creating its own private defence industry, which can produce large scale platforms and provide jobs within the country. The government also wants to cut its large defence import bill. An estimated Rs 4 lakh crore worth of orders for the armed forces are likely to be placed with domestic manufacturers over the next seven years, Defence Minister Rajnath Singh has said.

NCB seizes large quantity of psychotropic drugs from flat in Delhi's Burari



(News Agencies)-The Narcotics Control Bureau (NCB) conducted a raid at a flat in Delhi's Burari locality and seized large quantity of psychotropic drugs. An NCB official said 2,700 Alprazolam tablets, 2,835 Tramadol tablets, 100 ampoules of Tramadol injections and 6.9 kilograms of codeine was seized during the raid on Tuesday.

The development comes a day after an NCB team seized 4,824 Tramadol tablets, also known as 'ISIS drug', weighing around 2.613 kg, from a courier office in Mumbai's Kurla area and arrested a drug supplier, identified as Mohammad Anas, from Delhi. Officials suspect that the drugs were being smuggled to some Middle East country

from where it would have been sent to terror outfits linked to ISIS or Boko Haram in Africa.

After interrogating Anas, NCB Zonal Director (Mumbai) Sameer Wankhede sent officials to the hideout in Delhi's Burari locality. NCB sources said that multiple raids could happen in other states in the coming days.

Tramadol, a painkiller pharmaceutical drug, has been declared a "psychotropic substance" by the Union government and its sale in the country is strictly monitored. The drug was brought under the control of the Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances (NDPS) Act in 2018, banning it from being sold freely over the counter.

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I got vaccinated. What now? *A \$15 minimum wage isn't just about justice. It's good economics*

The United States Covid-19 vaccination program is gaining steam. As of Tuesday, more than 40 million people have received the first dose, representing about 13% of the country. At the same time, national rates of new infection have decreased, presenting a real opportunity to control the pandemic. With this progress, though, has come no small amount of consternation. A new set of daunting questions has arisen, the product of an increasing number of vaccines and vaccinees. Reasonably enough, people now want to know the specific dos and don'ts of daily living for the vaccinated and the unvaccinated.

The nub is this: are we re-approaching the glory days of before this pandemic began or is the lockdown drag-out pod-life still necessary? And within this broad question are a million smaller questions: if you are two vaccines in, is double-masking still necessary? What about the 20-second hand wash? And all those pocket-friendly bottles of hand sanitizer -- can I toss them already?

Despite being top of mind for so many, there is still no real guide for how to proceed most safely. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has addressed this a little, though their guidance has risen only to the level of a Frequently Asked Question response not their more common multi-page, multi-referenced tome. Other than side-stepping the need to quarantine after an exposure, the message to vaccinees basically is this: act like you have not been vaccinated at all.

True, Dr Anthony Fauci, the chief medical adviser to the President, has indicated that revised guidelines, which he believes "will be coming soon," may "relax the stringency ... when people have been vaccinated," but, presumably, these guidelines will not mandate specific behavior in every day-to-day decision. Continued caution makes sense. Health experts are hamstrung by a complete lack of evidence-based information and are all too aware of the dangers created if they wing it and try to reconcile public clamoring to lighten it up against basic public health rules of the road. And attempts over the last six months to loosen things up in various states -- for example, easing restaurant restrictions or starting up college campus life -- have not gone well.

So as a public service, I would like to give my view, as a vaccinated American, on life with (putative) immunity.

Let me start by saying this: it is weird. I have about a month under my belt since the second vaccine and still experience a dizzying mix of guilt and delight. Note to fellow vaccinees about this topic: dealing with this juggling act interests absolutely no one who has not been

vaccinated (but everyone who has). Here, then, is what daily life now feels like. Stated simply, every moment brings a small crisis, a gnawing personal decision arising from the exact same place: is it OK to sneak outside my old Covid-ified boundaries? Can I -- gasp -- cut a few (small, very small) corners and pretend however briefly that life once again resembles the workaday dullness of 2019, that shining year on the hill?

Take, as an example, the experience of getting onto an elevator. At the start of the pandemic, this seemed a high-risk, Apollo 11 sort of dangerous blast-off moment. Now, however, it has become a test of will. Can I remove my mask ... while still in the elevator? No one will see me! What would happen if I did? And what about touching the elevator button not with my elbow but with a bare fingertip? Or what is the best plan for going to a grocery store? Extra masks? A scarf? Should I pay cash (requires receiving coins back) or credit card (Who knows where that machine has been?). Does my newly jazzed up immune system allow me to live a little? Do I dare eat a peach?

For me, the answer is clear. Not yet. The best advice, alas, is what the CDC is pushing: continue to hunker down and keep on doing what you're doing.

We shouldn't expect much relief from the uncertainty any time soon -- uncertainty, after all, has characterized the Covid-19 pandemic every day for the last 12 months. Early on, no one knew who was infected since few cities had a diagnostic test; no one knew how transmissible the virus was or how it spread; no one knew why it caused such sudden and severe worsening; no one knew how to treat the infection.

These particular uncertainties were settled -- more or less -- but they quickly were followed by a new wave of uncertainty: how long does natural immunity last? How long does vaccine-induced immunity last? Will the current vaccines be effective against the ever-evolving tangle of new viral variants?

And add to this the latest: when can we all return to business as usual? Viewed in a certain context, this graduation from one uncertainty to the next is a type of progress. We started with the most rudimentary -- what is happening? -- and now are debating sophisticated concerns about the underpinnings of durable viral immunity and whether spike proteins are the future of vaccinology. But the basic problem remains the same: no one knows what's ahead. Though unsettling, this is what happens when a completely new virus with completely new and unexpected epidemiology and an unexpected clinical spectrum is unleashed upon a non-immune global village.

A \$15 minimum wage isn't just about justice. It's good economics

There's one important aspect of the fight for a \$15 minimum wage that is little understood: the fight isn't so much about raising pay for a few million workers. Rather it's about the far more ambitious goal of putting the US economy on a higher road, on a different track from being a low-wage economy. In Europe, many people scoff at the US as a country of low-wage McJobs with paltry benefits -- often no paid sick days, no paid vacation and no health insurance. In Denmark, a McDonald's hamburger flipper averages \$22 an hour (with six weeks' paid vacation), while in the US, fast-food jobs pay half that on average. You might wonder: how can the United States, the world's wealthiest nation, be a low-wage economy? Of the 37 nations in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, the unofficial club of rich and near-rich nations, the US has the third-highest percentage of low-wage workers, with nearly one in four workers defined as low-wage. Only Latvia and Romania are worse. (That study defines low-wage as earning less than two-thirds of a nation's median wage.) In another study, Brookings found that 53 million Americans hold low-wage jobs, with a median pay of \$10.22 an hour and median annual earnings of \$17,950.

The US also has the lowest minimum wage among the G7 industrial nations in terms of purchasing power. America's \$7.25-an-hour federal minimum is 38% lower than Germany's and 30% lower than Britain's, Canada's and France's. This helps explain why the US has among the worst income inequality of the 37 OECD nations -- only Mexico, Chile, Costa Rica and Bulgaria have greater inequality. And the US has the third

highest poverty rate; only Hungary and Costa Rica are worse.

The US didn't always have a low-road economy. In the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, it had a high-road economy: labor unions were at their strongest, American businesses were booming (for the most part), and corporations shared their profits and prosperity with their workers as never before, helping build the world's largest and richest middle class. But beginning in the 1980s, many corporations pushed the US economy and American workers on to a lower road, as corporate America felt the sting of global competition, as Wall Street pushed companies ever harder to maximize profits, as labor unions grew weaker and as President Reagan and other Republicans weakened worker protections and did little to raise the minimum wage.

Because of persistent Republican opposition, the federal minimum wage hasn't increased since July 2009 -- the longest stretch without an increase since Congress first enacted a minimum wage in 1938. Franklin Roosevelt signed the minimum wage into law during the Great Depression because he thought workers had far too little bargaining power and consumers far too little purchasing power. Roosevelt urged companies to pay fair wages, saying, "No business which depends for existence on paying less than living wages to its workers has any right to continue in this country." Today's federal minimum wage is just \$7.25 an hour -- ?try maintaining a decent living at that pay level. The minimum wage is down 18% since it was last raised in 2009, after factoring in inflation, and down over 30%, after inflation, since 1968, during Lyndon Johnson's Great Society years.



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Dear Rahul Gandhi: A big share of the blame for India's authoritarian slide will have to be shouldered by you

To return to the electorate a third time with exactly what it rejected overwhelmingly in two successive elections is not to proffer an alternative. It is to offer an insult.

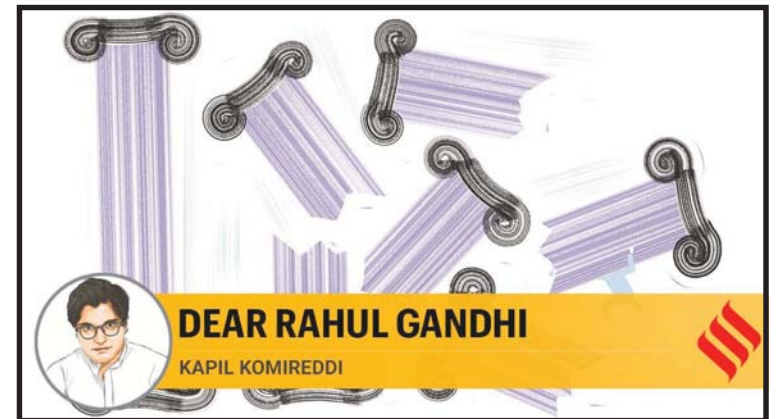
Indian democracy is being disfigured each day beyond repair and recovery. This ought not to be possible in the presence of an energetic Opposition. So why do we find ourselves here? If Narendra Modi is one aspect of the Indian tragedy, you, despite all your decency and lofty intentions, are the other. The ground for the steep authoritarian slide of today was laid in Modi's first term, when autonomous institutions were methodically debilitated. I invite you to picture the consequences for our country if this regime were to sail to a third consecutive victory.

If that happens, a big share of the blame will have to be shouldered by you for refusing, despite two historic defeats, to vacate the pinnacle of India's only other pan-national party. To return to the electorate a third time with exactly what it rejected overwhelmingly in two successive elections is not to proffer an alternative. It is to offer an insult. The half-a-dozen

assembly polls scheduled for April should have pushed your party to search for a full-time leader. Instead, Congress chose to shelve the question of leadership. The reason is obvious enough. The hunt for a leader was not delayed to concentrate Congress's energies on the upcoming elections. It was postponed to spare you the blushes for the party's inevitable defeats. Yet again, the pressing priority of the governing apparatus of Congress was protecting you - not winning elections. Political parties in mature democracies the world over appoint leaders to take them into electoral battles. Congress, uniquely, cites electoral battles as a reason to defer appointing a leader.

To the extent that the Congress party has a discernible strategy, it appears to be that ordinary voters, tiring of Modi, will eventually turn elsewhere - and, because Congress is the only other pan-national alternative, you will emerge as the

beneficiary of their frustrations. If you believe this, you are in the grip of a delusion. It is no affront to you to state the blindingly obvious: The Gandhi dynasty's hold on the Congress party, in addition to infantilising self-respecting Indians who still value secularism, is an invaluable gift to Modi. Contrast the responses evoked by your biographies. Your kindness and compassion are eclipsed by what people see as your hereditary privilege and entitlement. On the other hand, the story of the prime minister's rise from the margins of society - born to a mother who cleaned dishes and a father who hawked tea - to the centre of power is uplifting enough to overshadow the malevolence of his politics. It is this contrast that helped loft him into high office in 2014. In the nearly six years since, he has succeeded in expanding the footprint of his party to corners of the country that were once proudly hostile to Hindutva. A year after coasting to re-election with an enlarged



majority, the BJP proceeded to induct fresh blood into its leadership ranks. The only notable promotion in the Congress was of your sibling. Your party hierarchy's principal priority was to ostracise, humiliate, and unperson anybody who entertained the mildest doubt about the competence of the leadership that led Congress to two total defeats. In August, the Congress Working Committee stamped on the clamour for internal democracy with a resolution to "strengthen" your "hands" on the basis that your leadership had "inspired a generation of Indians". If any part of that claim were accurate, there would be no Modi government. The upkeep and worship of one family has

become the existential purpose of what was once one of the world's great political parties. If you love India as much as you say you do, this squalid spectacle of self-annihilating sycophancy ought to revolt and appall you to your marrow. The truth is that the prospects of a generation have been wiped out in no small part because the Congress party, preoccupied with preserving the interests of its proprietors, has failed to supply effective opposition. You speak of the mortal threat to Indian democracy from Modi. But you cannot restore democracy to India while maintaining a hereditary dictatorship in the institution that incubated Indian democracy.

As one of the most

Biden is already backtracking on his promises to provide student debt relief



At his recent town hall, Joe Biden made a series of convoluted and condescending comments about American student debt. His remarks cast doubt on his ability, or willingness, to confront this country's ballooning student loan crisis. Within hours, #cancelstudentdebt was trending on Twitter. Biden's rambling justification of the status quo was peppered with straw men, invocations of false scarcity and non-solutions. He pitted

working-class Americans against each other, implying that people who attend private schools aren't worthy of relief, as though poor students don't also attend such schools. He said that money would be better spent on early childhood education instead of debt cancellation, as if educators aren't themselves drowning in student debt, and as if we can't address both concerns at once. He suggested relying on parents or selling a home at a profit to

settle your debt, a luxury those without intergenerational wealth or property cannot afford. And he touted various programs, including Public Service Loan Forgiveness (PSLF), that have totally failed borrowers: over 95% of PSLF applicants have been denied. In contrast to Biden's smug comments, Congresswoman Ayanna Pressley recently revealed that she defaulted on her student loans. Similarly, at a recent Debt Collective event, congressional hopeful Nina Turner said that she and her son owe a combined \$100,000. Former Georgia gubernatorial candidate Stacey Abrams has, of course, proudly confessed to being in debt, and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez has said that becoming a congressperson was easier than paying off her debt. Philadelphia councilmember Kendra Brooks

(who is planning to introduce a city resolution calling on the Biden administration to cancel all student debt) has also spoken out about her own struggles as a borrower. Their experience and candor - and commitment to real solutions including cancellation - demonstrate why we need debtors, not millionaires, in our public offices. Let's be clear about another thing. Biden absolutely has the legal authority to use executive power to cancel all federal student debt. Congress granted this authority decades ago as part of the Higher Education Act. It's even been put to the test: in response to the Covid pandemic, Donald Trump and his former education secretary, Betsy DeVos, used that authority three times to suspend payments and student loan interest. As he rambled on, Biden gave the distinct impression that

he preferred not to have the power to do so. That way he could blame Congress should his campaign promises go unkept. (The day after the town hall, Biden's press secretary, Jen Psaki, attempted to clarify her boss's remarks about whether he will use executive authority to cancel student debt. She stated that the administration was still considering the possibility.) Adding to the confusion, Biden seemed unable to keep his own campaign pledges straight, muddling his student debt cancellation proposals. For the record, he campaigned on two distinct planks. One: "immediate" cancellation of \$10,000 for every borrower as a form of Covid relief. Two: the cancellation of all undergraduate student loans for debt-holders who attended public universities and HBCUs and who earn up to \$125,000 a year.

The disruptive social effects of Hindutva 2.0

It is the electoral hegemony of the BJP which can deepen the sense of betrayal among those who feel short-changed by the side effects of Hindutva 2.0

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)'s victory in the 2019 Lok Sabha elections was a result of the transformation of three crucial Ms in Indian politics: Mandal, Mandir and Markets. Almost two years later, the BJP seems to be sticking to the script, but its tactical manoeuvres, even though they have delivered in elections, are beginning to show their disruptive side effects, with the possibility of unrest. Three seemingly disparate events over the past week highlight this trend.

First, Congress leader Rahul Gandhi, while campaigning in Assam, said that a Congress government, if elected, would not let the Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA) be implemented in Assam. Gandhi was silent on the National Register of Citizens (NRC). Politically, this makes sense. Assam has had a long and bloody ethnic conflict, which was rooted in Ahoms - the indigenous landed elite - protesting against the large-scale influx of Bengalis in the state. Decades of negotiations and judicial processes ultimately culminated in the

decision to update NRC, which was aimed at detecting illegal migrants in the state. Because a large number of Bengalis in Assam - migrants or not - happen to be Muslims, it suited the BJP to appropriate the demand for NRC.

However, the outcome of the NRC process, which is reported to have excluded a large number of Hindu Bengalis, who are current and potential supporters of the BJP, created a challenge. This forced the BJP into rolling out CAA, a law which provides for granting of retrospective citizenship rights to non-Muslims from India's neighbouring countries. If a large number of Bengali Hindus were to gain from the CAA route, it would leave the Ahoms with a feeling of betrayal, for they oppose immigrants, irrespective of religion. This is the constituency the Congress is seeking to tap, and the BJP is now seeking to reassure by putting CAA on hold.

Second, an Economic Times report said that the Justice Rohini Commission, examining the reorganisation of reservations for Other Backward Classes

(OBCs), is likely to propose a segregation of the existing 27% reservations into four bands of two, six, nine and 10%. Immediately after that, Bihar chief minister Nitish Kumar demanded that a caste census be conducted in the country.

The BJP's success in the Hindi belt, especially Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, can be attributed to building a rainbow Hindu collation of upper castes and non-dominant OBCs. By championing a narrative that the politically dominant OBCs had usurped most of the benefits of reservation and that the Narendra Modi government will correct this historic injustice by creating sub-categories within OBC quota, the BJP aims to consolidate its base and marginalise traditional Mandal parties such as the Samajwadi Party and the Rashtriya Janata Dal.

But this approach has the potential to trigger an adverse side-effect. India does not have sub-caste wise population data. This means that whether or not the new categories of OBC reservation do justice to demographic weights of sub-



castes will remain in the realm of speculation. This will create a fertile ground for disputes among various sub-castes who could perceive the new formula as an effective reduction in reservations. There is another possibility, linked to the demand of conducting a caste census, which can create an even bigger challenge. If a caste census shows that the actual population share of communities which are eligible for reservations exceeds 49.5%, there may well be demands to do away with the 50% cap on reservations - which has, in any case, been breached in recent times. Both of these have the potential to create large-scale social unrest. And finally, facing a backlash in the traditional green revolution belt of Punjab, Haryana and western Uttar Pradesh (UP), and after having performed badly in the local body polls in Punjab, the BJP has begun an outreach programme among Jats. The

community supported the BJP in the 2014 and 2017 elections in UP.

In one such outreach event at Soram village of Muzaffarnagar, violence erupted between the supporters of Cabinet minister and the BJP's important Jat leader, Sanjeev Balyan, and local residents. Earlier, farm protest leaders have issued calls for social boycott of BJP leaders and collective punishment for those who fail to comply with these diktats. Given the maximalist positions which the protesting farmers have taken, such altercations are likely to increase. And since the BJP enjoys power in Haryana and UP, the possibility of the landed elite in these regions seeing the State as an agent of persecution cannot be ruled out.

None of these implies that the BJP will suffer electorally. It has a solid social coalition and is pitted against an emaciated

The Brahmaputra is in danger. Delhi and Dhaka must challenge Beijing

China's decision represents a strike at the heart of a sacred and ancient land and tampering with forces we do not fully comprehend



In recent weeks, reports of China's plans to build the world's largest dam project in the greatest gorge on the face of the earth has shaken many of us. For this is the heart of the river which we know as the Brahmaputra. It has flowed unimpeded for millennia, carving and clawing its way through rock, sand and ice, as the Yarlung-Tsangpo, through the Tibetan plateau and meadow,

before rushing through the hidden gorge and entering India at the village of Gelling in Arunachal Pradesh. The Chinese had earlier planned to build a series of 11 dams on the river, of which several are complete. Most of these were cascade dams without pondage or reservoirs but used the fall of the river to maximise the gravitational surge of power through the turbines.

China's hydro engineers and political and economic establishment have now set their eyes on the heart of the river in the Namcha Barwa gorge, where it gathers its phenomenal pace and power on its way to Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Bangladesh and eventually the Bay of Bengal.

While infrastructure building is not a new development on either side of Himalayas, there has been a huge push on the Chinese side with a surge of roads, railroads, bridges, tunnels and power plants. What is the impact of noise and dynamite blasting, excavators and heavy drills on such

sensitive ecosystems? Trains thunder through once silent gorges and valleys where only the chants of monks or rumble of occasional trucks, or the gurgle of the flood in summer and the cries of birds would pierce the air. But there are limits to the knowledge of engineers. We also do not know of any assessments by either Chinese or independent experts on the damage to permafrost, the vast volume of water trapped in ice form below the earth's surface.

Thawing permafrost alters natural ecosystem; makes soil vulnerable to landslides and erosion; introduces new

sediment to waterways, which may alter the flow of rivers and streams; degrades water quality; impacts human life, livelihoods, and aquatic wildlife; and introduces new threats of ancient microbes.

India says that issues of trans-border rivers with China are discussed through "an institutionalised expert-level mechanism which was established in 2000" as well as through "diplomatic channels".

Does exchange of data contain the impact of these huge interventions? India and Bangladesh, which is also enriched by the

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India will have to step up climate diplomacy

Ministries in India are notorious for working in silos. Climate is an honourable exception with the ministries of environment and external affairs working together for years. These ministries need to be even stronger in partnership for more intensive engagement across the globe, including through coalitions that push Growth with Renewable Energy, Entrepreneurship and Nature (GREEN). The International Solar Alliance needs to add to this push.

The Energy and Resources Institute (TERI) hosts an annual event, the World Sustainable Development Summit (WSDS). Its focus this year was, naturally, on the climate crisis. The summit was inaugurated by Prime Minister (PM) Narendra Modi. Leaders from Guyana, Maldives, the United Kingdom (UK) and the European Union (EU), apart from the United Nations deputy secretary-general (S-G), the United States (US) Special Envoy for Climate, John Kerry, and India's external affairs and environment ministers spoke at the summit. This heavyweight participation from across the globe clearly testified to India as a major climate stakeholder. PM Modi strongly underscored India's resolve to fight the climate crisis with concrete action. He noted that India's emissions intensity of Gross Domestic Product had fallen by 24%, well on the way to the committed 33%-35% reduction by 2030. Moreover, India is on track for its huge target of 450 GW of renewable energy gener-

ating capacity by 2030. He also underlined climate justice. And he couldn't be more right. More than 75% of the carbon space available to humankind has already been taken up by emissions, current and over time, of the US, Europe and China, with countries such as India - with huge development imperatives and small carbon footprints - needing carbon and policy space.

For years, India was known in climate circles as an obstructionist but, in 2015, India strongly facilitated the Paris Accord and today it is, perhaps, the only country in the G20 that is well on its way to realising its Nationally Determined Commitments (NDCs). This was acknowledged at WSDS with the former Maldivian president and global climate leader, Mohammad Nasheed, noting that India's (renewable) target is "the biggest improvement in terms of climate benefit of any country on earth". Studies show that despite the Covid-19 slowdown, even an ag-

gregation of NDCs leaves the world short on the Paris commitment of limiting temperature rise to 1.5 degrees C. The election of President Joe Biden and the US re-joining the Paris Accord has given the international climate scene a new impetus to aim for even higher ambition. Net-zero emissions of greenhouse gas (GHG) by 2050 is the new mantra. This goal has already been accepted by EU, UK, Japan, South Korea and is in tandem with US thinking. The Chinese have announced they will meet the target by 2060. At WSDS, India was strongly urged to move in that direction. Nasheed said: "127 countries responsible for 63% of emissions are considering or have adopted net-zero targets. Now, India, Prime Minister." Kerry was explicit, saying, "We all have to adopt the notion of zero emissions." And his finger pointed towards India when he noted that "90% of the world's emissions come from somewhere other than our country (US)" and "70% come from somewhere other than



China". Strange as this may appear, but the US and China could be on the same side in global climate negotiations for enhanced mitigation. And, this time, it will also be about the credibility of commitments with UN deputy S-G Amina Mohammad saying that she looked forward to "seeing the path that you (India) will chart to get to net zero emission".

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Growth with Renewable Energy, Entrepreneurship and Nature (GREEN). The International Solar Alliance needs to add to this push. Kerry's appointment exemplifies the western tradition of special envoys for major issues of interest to them. On one occasion, India, too, has had a special envoy for climate, and on another, the principal scientific adviser led the Indian participation at the major economies meeting (on climate). Such an appointment of a special envoy is something that the government may wish to consider again. India also needs to strongly step up the projection of its most laudable climate actions and bring adaptation to focus in the climate discourse.

Linking fashion, crafts and livelihood

The pandemic has resulted in reduced domestic demand, shrinking exports, and unemployment. The sector needs support.

Luxury textiles and jewellery are not new to India. The maharajahs patronised guilds with master craftspeople working in fine weaving and embroideries for centuries. They created custom-made clothes and saris for royalty, some of which are yet to be matched for their sophisticated concepts and superb workmanship. Indian luxury goods have always been defined by their exceptional heritage value in that they were invariably handmade, using skills inherited over generations. Bespoke textiles in India, therefore, were never meant for mass consumption, but were produced under the patronage of kings and temples. This order has changed radically in the western world. In the last five decades, many European fashion houses, created by highly talented but a small number of designers, have been bought over by multinational

companies. They then began mass producing one-of-a-kind couture collections and sold them at enormously expensive prices. Marketing and not handcrafted quality dictated the sales, and technology started playing a large and vital part in the manufacture, till they were no longer totally hand-tooled. In the post-pandemic world, we will need to look at a different concept of luxury goods, especially from an Indian perspective. There are at least 16 million craftspeople in India, whose works are not showcased in museums. The production of Indian luxury goods takes place in modest environments, mostly villages in the unorganised sector. What is not modest is the creativity and handiwork of the artistes who toil in relative obscurity. It is remarkable that this sector still functions in India. In the absence of institutional

support, bank credit and government financial packages, these artistes and craftspeople find no space or sympathy from any quarter. Handcrafted luxury goods are our inheritance and we have to find solutions which are innovative, and not leave it to the ministry of textiles alone.

The existence of our textile heritage is almost like a miracle. It has survived due to a number of accidental factors. In its initial phases, National Institute of Fashion Technology was born, which produced the first batches of Indian fashion designers. They were encouraged to show collections, which focused on artisanal handicrafts that had survived the test of time. Part of this was due to the relatively small financial outlay required to put together collections.

Though modest in commercial terms, the Indian fashion industry was able to create disproport-



tionate hype across the country. It influenced the film world and found traction even in the rural hinterland, creating a unique identity. There was an aspiration to belong to this new fashion phenomenon, which was purely indigenous. This is rare anywhere in the world.

The media had just found its wings and was only endlessly happy to cover the flow of new collections from young designers. Glamorous wedding trousseaus echoed the feudal styles of the maharajahs of yore. Fashion designers were on top of their game in India and the

trickle-down effect led to the celebration of folk arts such as bandhini, zardozi and the fabulous embroideries of Kutch. Handwoven Benarasi saris, paithanis and patolas from Gujarat were also showcased across the world. There was a premium on handmade textiles and garments. In real terms, before the pandemic, the textile and apparel industry in India employed nearly 45 million people, next only to the agriculture sector. Handicraft exports from India to the United States increased 2% year on year; it was \$3.39 billion in February 2020.

Agitating farmers of Uttar Pradesh change course of action, shift focus to hinterland



By Neelam Jeena with Aruna Singh

Committed to disallow any outside element to penetrate and try to abet violence in the peaceful farmers agitation, the Uttar Pradesh Kisan Morcha has decided to change the course of its agitation shifting focus from Gazipur border to the villages where mahapanchayat with sea of crowd would congregate to protest against the three contentious farm sector bills that Modi government has imposed on them.

They also decided to continue until all three bills are withdrawn and a legislation is put in place that constitutional guarantee purchasing their crops on minimum support. The convenor of Rashtriya Kisan Mazdoor Sangathan V M Singh held a press conference to highlight future course of action of the agitation. He said farmers gathered at Gazipur were mainly sugarcane growers who are untouched in the new bills because for sugarcane there is separate laws.

Here are excerpts of interview with him:

Q. Why did you decide to part



company with Samyukt Kisan Morcha after Republic Day incident?

A: All those who are part of Kisan Morcha, I brought them to Delhi. The people in Morcha had in December decided to oust me. They talk of MSP and we have never been part of Kisan Morcha. After January 26 we had said the shape of agitation would be changed and that is what we have done now.

Q: Would you like to elaborate about the news outfit that you have formed in the UP and what are your plans for future?

A: There are 22 organizations in

this new grouping. We will spread the cause of farmers to all the villages of the state and would bring those farmers into its folds who have not been able to reach Delhi. We agitate in every village and thus messages will be go to the Prime Minister who won't be able to say this movement doesn't belong to farmers, it's crowd that have been instigated against the government. The farmer will mount

pressure and explain to the government look this my land and I am facing troubles with you bills. I think this way Prime Minister understand better.

Q: You said the areas of eastern UP where majority of farmers are small and medium and they are also facing problems. What are their issues?

A: I have no idea as to how many of them come at Gazipur. We recently held meeting in Lucknow. There were few farmers there. We start working after everyone is on board. Every farmer will fight his fight they way he wants to fight and we will start from March. Modiji has said that MSP was there, is there and will be there. We want him to prove his words.

Q: After you deserted the agitation in the aftermath of 26 January incident, there were apprehension about the agitation becoming weak. Now you have chalked out your separate programme, Do you think this division would help

mount pressure on the government?

A: The prices of sugarcane were not fixed at our behest. We had filed an application on 10 and the government called the cabinet meeting on Sunday and fixed the MSP for sugarcane. We want people get benefitted. How and in what way they get benefits is to be watched.

Q: Do you think if government bring a law on MSP, will all three laws will be redundant?

A: Not they will not immediately but certainly in the future. We are ready to call off if they agree to give us MSP law.

Q: Would you accept law on MSP

A: I have said on earlier occasions also that MSP is there in Punjab and Haryana we want MSP also in UP. We would accept it. We want government to invite us for talks and now we have a separate front of farmers, the government should call us for talks.



Where Nepali and Indian interests meet

With the judiciary standing up to Oli, the room is open for an alternative. India must revise its approach

On Tuesday evening, in a historic judgment, Nepal's Supreme Court struck down Prime Minister (PM) KP Sharma Oli's decision to dissolve Parliament as unconstitutional, ordered the restoration of the House of Representatives, and called for a sitting of the House within 13 days. With this, Nepal has possibly averted a deep crisis, which would have torn apart its nascent democratic system, shaken the constitutional structure of republicanism, federalism and parliamentary system, pushed the country towards prolonged political instability, led to the entrenched authoritarianism of KP Sharma Oli, and eroded India standing as a democratic ally and eventually hurt its interests. To understand the significance of what has happened in Nepal, rewind to December 20. Increasingly facing pressure from his internal party rivals - former PMs Prachanda and Madhav Nepal - Oli decided to dissolve the Parliament itself. In a traditional Westminster system, the PM - who enjoys a majority - has the right to do so. But Nepal's new Constitution specifically prohib-

ited a PM from doing so. This was meant to prevent instability in a country which has seen close to two dozen PMs in three decades. Oli's move to dissolve Parliament was accompanied by his push to take over all State institutions - through appointments of pliant individuals. This, therefore, was creating a dynamic where Oli enjoyed untrammelled power with no accountability. Elections sound democratic but there were multiple layers here. If polls happened, it would mean departing from the constitutional order and whether it would be fair and legitimate under Oli was a big question; if elections did not happen, and the House remained dissolved, there would be a period of unrest without an institutional mechanism to find a political alternative even as the government's popular legitimacy dipped. This would then open the door for all forces - including conservative, royalist and anti-federal forces - which are uncomfortable within the political changes enshrined in the Constitution. Nepal's democratic forces, civil society and the media were quick to understand the nature of the

crisis. The Nepal Communist Party (NCP) has undergone a de facto split, with Prachanda and Madhav Nepal taking to the streets against Oli - though this split has not been formalised yet. The Nepali Congress (NC) leader Sher Bahadur Deuba, tempted by the possibility of becoming PM after fresh elections, was ambivalent - but the entire rank and file of Nepal's oldest democratic force was against Oli's decision. The Janata Samajwadi Party (JSP), led by Madhesi leaders and former PM Baburam Bhattarai, could see that despite their reservations with the current Constitution, its alternative would be a further regressive turn with a setback to their cherished principles of inclusion and federalism. It is in this context that Nepal's Supreme Court, providing a stellar example of constitutionalism in a region where the judiciary has been perhaps too aligned with executive preferences, stepped in. The decision to restore the House is a firm rebuke to Oli - who should, on moral grounds, resign from office now. If he doesn't, he should be prepared for a floor test as soon as the



House meets - for it is unlikely he still enjoys the confidence of the Parliament he attempted to kill. The court's decision also throws questions on the judgment of President Bidya Bhandari - who was, given her political proximity to the PM, too quick to go with an unconstitutional recommendation in dissolving the House. But more significantly, this is a moment to look forward and correct the undemocratic turn Nepal took. Oli's aides have claimed that the court verdict will not solve the political problem - they are right. The political problem is Oli, a deeply polarising figure who has stepped outside the constitutional framework. And he has to go. The good news is that there is a possible democratic al-

ternative which, with some handholding and careful management, can emerge. The Nepali Congress, the Prachanda-Nepal faction of the NCP, and the JSP should now come together - under the leadership of the NC - to form an alternative government, with a common minimum programme which re-commits Nepal to a democratic constitutional path, pledges progressive constitutional amendments to take into account concerns of marginalised communities, and reorients Nepal's foreign policy to underscore the centrality of India even as Nepal engages with China within a clear framework. India had, to put it bluntly, misread the situation in Nepal.

India can't lose out on this window of economic reforms



The government is not inclined to repeal the farm laws. The responsibility of building the right narrative for it rests on all well-meaning citizens. It cannot be left to political class alone. Politics will be what it is with limitations in a democratic ecosystem. Let us all rise to the occasion.

There is a marked difference between the agitating farmers and the anti-social, ultra-Left and pro-Khalistani elements who are piggy-backing on them. Understanding this difference is important for citizens in general, and politicians in particular. One, this agitation is not merely a law and order issue, and dealing with it as such will be a mistake. Two, it is not focused on the interest of the farmers, and it is also not

about the three farm laws alone - so any effort to explain the benefits of these laws will not cut any ice. Three, there are emerging strains between two different factions - the Sikhs of Punjab, concentrated at the Singhu border, and Jats from western Uttar Pradesh, stationed at the Ghazipur border. While those at Singhu are averse to any political intervention, at Ghazipur, Rakesh Tikait has shown indica-

tions of political ambition. How the government deals with these two strains will be important in the coming days. The plot has got thicker with global players, spanning both State and non-State actors, jumping on to the bandwagon. All of this makes it clear that this is a political movement against the Narendra Modi government, and it has to be dealt with politically. The farm laws are good for agriculture and will benefit farmers to a large extent by creating an alternative and transparent ecosystem for attracting private investment in this capital-deficient sector, which has been starved of market reforms for decades. But leaders of the movement insist on a repeal of the laws and will not accept any amendments. The government has already

bent backwards, agreeing to more than a dozen amendments, allaying concerns on Minimum Support Price, and offering to suspend these three laws for up to 18 months, which will make them ineffective till that time. The government's reluctance to repeal the laws stems from the conviction about the need for market-oriented reforms in the sector and increasing the role of private players in the agri-economy. This stand has been reiterated over two decades by agro-economists, parliamentary standing committees, empowered committees of the state agriculture ministers and several commissions. If this moment of reckoning is lost, it will cause irreparable damage to the democratic polity of the country. The question, thus, is, will India move

towards anarchy? Will there be tyranny of the unelected, or will we respect democratic institutions such as Parliament, the Supreme Court and the process of law-making as envisaged in the Constitution? Reforms are difficult. Benefits come with a time lag and are spread thin, while their adverse impact on certain stakeholders are marked and immediate. Reforms need extraordinary political capital, and so the political class is reluctant to carry them out. As such, we have not seen many major reforms since 1991 (except the Goods and Services Tax and Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code, 2016); even the original ones were limited and carried out under compulsion of imminent sovereign default.



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The BJP's ruthless expansion drive

Long before Puducherry, there was Goa. In 1994, riding on the Ram Janmabhoomi wave, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) won four seats for the first time in the 40-member Goa assembly. It caused a ripple in Goa's turbulent political waters, prompting the late Pramod Mahajan, then the party's chief strategist for Goa, to boast that the BJP would form a government in Panaji within 10 years. Mahajan was spot on - aided by Goa's infamous tradition of brazen defections, a BJP government led by Manohar Parrikar was formed in 2002. By 2012, Parrikar headed the first BJP-majority government in the state. What transpired in the erstwhile Portuguese colony on the west coast is now sought to be replicated on the south-east coast in the tranquil one-time French outpost of Puducherry.

Where the smooth-talking Mahajan was a key BJP tactician in the 1990s, that role has now been taken over by the hard-nosed Amit Shah. Where the BJP was then emerging as a national player, it is now the dominant party at the Centre, possessing resources to topple any opposition state government it possibly can.

Why Puducherry, when assembly elections are a few months away and the BJP, it seems, has little at stake in a region traditionally dominated by the Congress and local parties? First, to borrow the words of the Union home minister, "chronology samajhiye" (understand the chronology). The V Narayanasamy-led Congress government was elected in Puducherry in May 2016. Almost immediately, Kiran Bedi, the pugnacious Indian Police Service

officer who had lost out as the BJP's Delhi chief ministerial face, was sent as Lieutenant-Governor (L-G). For five years, there was a constant and bruising face-off between the chief minister and L-G that only undermined an elected government. Bedi was recalled last week after it became apparent that she had antagonised almost the entire political class. She was replaced by the former Tamil Nadu BJP president, Tamilisai Soundararajan, to assuage local concerns. Simultaneously, the BJP fast-forwarded a plan to engineer defections from the ruling Congress-Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam alliance and ensured that, with the help of three nominated legislators and a compliant Speaker, the Narayanasamy government was reduced to a minority.

Incidentally, at least four of the six defecting legislators have either income-tax queries or links to the lucrative real estate sector. Moreover, by toppling a Congress government in Puducherry, the BJP has sent a message to neighbouring Tamil Nadu, where it is contesting the assembly elections with the ruling All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam, that the Congress is a greatly diminished force, and the party can be vanquished at any time. In a sense, Puducherry is now part of a pattern of Machiavellian intrigue that has been repeated from Arunachal and Manipur to Goa, Karnataka and Madhya Pradesh where a ruthlessly expansionist BJP seeks to consolidate its ascendancy by wangling either wholesale or retail defections. That the Congress leadership

appears to have been taken by surprise, yet again, reveals how the original party of realpolitik is floundering to counter the BJP's vaulting ambitions. The "new" BJP under Narendra Modi-Amit Shah is a bit like the "old" Congress in the Indira Gandhi era - ethically compromised, but politically uncompromising in its actions. The truth is no state government run by a non-BJP force is safe. India's non-BJP governments can now be bracketed into three categories. The Congress-led governments, of which only three are left in the country, are squarely on the BJP's radar. A bid to capture Rajasthan failed last year, but the Modi-Shah model doesn't delve into failure for long: More attempts at divide-and-rule on Jaipur's uneasy turf cannot be ruled out.

Australia's battle with Facebook, Google has wider implications

At stake are the question of sovereignty and the risks of governments losing control over national communication and their public sphere.

As of this Tuesday, Facebook has decided to begin restoring news pages for its users in Australia. This decision to unblock follows an ugly spat with the Australian government that had been festering for close to a week, during which time Facebook was aggressively seeking to get the Australian government to scrap an upcoming law - the News Media Bargaining Code (NMBC).

While it is yet unclear who blinked first and what the new agreements between the Australian government and the social media giant amount to, there is strong reason to believe that the plot is only about to thicken. At stake are the question of sovereignty and the risks of governments losing control over national communication and their public sphere.

In contrast, the face-off between the Australian government and Facebook has been overwhelmingly presented as being a bitter dust-up over money. That is, the NMBC legislation is only aimed at readjusting the existing digital

revenue sharing ratios between news publishers and distribution platforms. If implemented, the belief is that the legacy media would no longer remain a financial hostage to the digital distributor who controls the market.

The NMBC stipulates steep penalties - up to 10 per cent of all revenues generated by platforms within Australia - if the platform corporation fails to reach an acceptable understanding or bargain with a news publisher. While the Australian intervention to protect its media industry - especially the legacy media - has been seen by governments and authorities elsewhere in the world as pioneering and precedent-setting, it has drawn sharp criticism and opposition not just from the usual suspects of Google and Facebook, but from many others who see the legislation as flawed in its understanding of how the internet works and as really an attempt to protect News Corp. One must note that the ownership of Australia's newspapers is one of the most concentrated in the world. A 2016 study on media ownership and concentration showed that Australia has the

most concentrated newspaper industry in the world, after China and Egypt.

While Google's initial reaction was to dismiss the NMBC as "unworkable" and it threatened to pull out of Australia, Prime Minister Scott Morrison remained unperturbed and kept his response short and stern: "We don't respond to threats." But after Microsoft Corp stepped in with the offer to lend its search engine, Bing, Google fell in line, realising, perhaps, that losses from Google's lucrative search and non-news business in Australia would far outweigh whatever it would forfeit in terms of additional payouts to news and media companies. The search giant quickly broke rank with Facebook and signed up a slew of deals with nine Australian media companies, including a global contract with News Corp. Facebook, on the other hand, decided to hold out. It not only chose to block its users in Australia from sharing news content but also removed pages from government organisations and charities, including those providing essential information



on the COVID-19 vaccination programme (some were restored later following a public outrage). Facebook insists it pays news companies in Australia much more than the revenue it makes from allowing their content to be shared on its platform. It claims that the Australian media companies earned about \$316 million from an estimated 5.1 billion clicks generated by it. Secondly, unlike Google, news content accounts for only 4 per cent of Facebook's revenues in Australia. So, the social media giant would rather forego that share of its revenue than risk a penalty of a whopping 10 per cent of its entire revenue in Australia should it fail to reach a bargain with local media companies. Also, if Australia does manage to set the precedent for revenue sharing, Facebook justifiably fears that other governments

would follow. So was all this a fight over money? Not entirely. Anyone familiar with Benedict Anderson's great classic *Imagined Communities* will recollect the central and defining role of newspapers in the imagining and creation of a national consciousness. India's post-Independence legacy media, too, was no spectator to nation-making nor did they stay on the sidelines in the shaping of the country's national sovereignty.

Facebook, on the other hand, is a multinational digital platform with its storage servers located elsewhere and its algorithms hidden as a trade secret. It harvests a vast scale of metadata or what Shoshana Zuboff refers to as "surplus behaviour" from close to 310 million users in India and puts it to a range of applications.

Punjab's history has cautionary lessons for New Delhi, farm unions

Punjab's history dictates that the effort should be to isolate and punish miscreants. Blaming everyone for the misdeeds of motley groups could foment social divides, possibly fetching the popularly discarded K-word a wider communal-political traction

From the 1980s through the mid-1990s, India pushed back the secessionist Khalistani thrust on the strength of three factors — creative diplomacy, a resolute security response and an accommodative, albeit belated, political outreach. The strategy worked because unlike in Kashmir, the insurgency's external backer, Pakistan, had no historical-territorial claim to India's side of the Punjab. The road to peace was as arduous as it was bloody. The late Arjun Singh, as the state's governor, midwived the Punjab accord between Rajiv Gandhi and HS Longowal, but it couldn't prove to be the antidote it was meant to be. The pact, nevertheless, set the stage for the 1985 assembly elections. Longowal was assassinated during the campaign, with the slain leader's confidante, SS Barnala becoming chief minister (CM). The violence that continued unabated

under the new incumbent took a deeper communal overtone, rendering governance dysfunctional and President's Rule inevitable. The state's walk to normalcy cost another election and a political assassination. In 1995, Congress CM Beant Singh was killed by a suicide bomber. In tandem with the doughty police chief, KPS Gill, he was rooting out militancy from the state. Also killed in the intervening period (1990) was Balwant Singh. Besides Longowal and Barnala, he constituted the Akali trinity that had initialed the Punjab accord. The flashback to the insurgency's peak period holds lessons for New Delhi. The satyagraha template the farm unions so assiduously constructed undoubtedly lay asunder after the Republic Day mayhem. But that cannot be the basis for tarring all opponents of the reform legislations as votaries of Khalistan. That cause, if it ever was one, was defeated in the

1990s. Its vestiges survived on the margins of the diasporic Sikh identity, not as much in the community's mainstream. The protests have a national security dimension. It's imperative, however, for official India to be conscious of the perils of conflating the inveterate separatist goals with those of the wider farm protests. The political establishment has to be mindful of the proclivity of its probe agencies to over-hype the Khalistani threat to discredit the broader agitation. Punjab's history dictates that the effort should be to isolate and punish miscreants. Blaming everyone for the misdeeds of motley groups could foment social divides, possibly fetching the popularly discarded K-word a wider communal-political traction.

Synonymous words of caution could be of as much use for the farm unions. The Samyukta Kisan Morcha's hydra-headed



construct, and the maximalist position it has against the reforms, made talks with the government unwieldy and the outcome difficult. How? Even while talking from a position of strength in multiple sessions before the Red Fort bedlam, a consensus on exploring some middle-ground with the Centre seemed impossible. The dialogue dynamics ran counter to the established rules of engagement.

A veteran of many complex negotiations, former national security adviser, JN Dixit, would often say that for a deal to happen and get executed, one has to give the other side a stake to make it work. That's deeply instructive for the farmers. The government, for

its part, must appreciate the opposite side's predicament. Given the multiplicity of the unions, the farmers had engaged with it in a complicated, multilateral format. The impasse lingered also because the farmers were less than diplomatic and the government short on statesmanship. The latter's offer of placing the laws on hold for 18 months and talk through a bipartisan panel came when the trust levels between them had touched the nadir. On the flip side, the Centre's offer that seemed a "good bargain" to many adherents of the farm cause fell afoul of the Morcha because its leaders lacked the mandate to accept anything short of a repeal of the laws.

Give young environmentalists a voice



The climate advocacy group, Fridays for Future, has been in the news recently due to the arrest of one of its members, Disha Ravi, in connection with allegedly playing a role in producing and sharing a protest "toolkit". On the face of it, producing and sharing a toolkit is usual for advocacy groups seeking to mobilise attention and action around an issue, and it is hard to understand the serious allegations being made. Since I am not privy to the details of the case, I want to flag some broader, problematic, perspectives in the public conversation about this case. First, a prominent theme in public conversations around this episode is that climate activists should stick to narrow environ-

mental issues. Environmentalists, some imply, should play among themselves in a sandbox at one corner of the public debate. The irony is that India and Indian stakeholders — activists, diplomats and political leaders alike — have played a leading role in successfully arguing that the climate crisis is not only an environmental issue, it is a question of development choices, livelihoods and equity. Notably, Fridays for Future appears to have taken on board this broader view: "ensure climate justice and equity" is the second "demand" listed in a August 2019 declaration on its website (the first and third are "limit temperature rise to 1.5 degrees C" and "listen to the science"). This recognition of

India has always argued that climate is linked to development choices, livelihoods and equity. Don't ask activists to narrow down their concerns

equity is essential to ensuring that poor people and poor countries do not bear the cost of climate adjustment, which India has been in the forefront of arguing internationally. The bottom line is that environmental and social outcomes are inter-connected, and one cannot come at the cost of the other.

This broad perspective on environment is just as salient domestically as it is internationally. And from this point of view, it is reasonable — and even necessary — to look at not only the environmental problems arising from farming, but also the social condition of farmers, and the political and economic forces shaping farmer choices. Calling for Indian environmentalists to limit the scope of their interests not only impoverishes the national conversation, but also contradicts a uniquely powerful Indian stance espoused by activists and government alike, and that has served the national interest well in climate negotiations.

Second, it would be deeply problematic if the grumbling about the international linkages of the "toolkit" at the centre of this issue diluted the truth that it is strongly in India's national interests to address environmental concerns; this is not just some international fiction. Environmental issues affect Indian interests in multiple ways.

To begin with, the local environment is despoiled in much of India. The Centre for Science and Environment found that, as of 2018, 275 of 445 monitored rivers were polluted and that unprocessed solid waste is the norm even in many cities. A dire air pollution problem is taking a toll on the health of Indians, with air pollution estimated to cause 1.2 million premature deaths a year, about one-eighth of all annual deaths in India, according to Indian scientists who have contributed to the Global Burden of Disease study. While much remains to be done, some potentially useful steps have been taken, such as creation of a new Commission

on Air Quality Management. In addition, the climate crisis is an enormous threat multiplier in India, according to a comprehensive Indian Institute of Tropical Meteorology compilation. It could increase the destructive power of natural disasters, affect crop productivity, impact labour productivity through heat stress, disrupt the monsoons, and affect India's water supply. Simply put, the climate crisis will make India's development aspirations much harder to achieve. Not least, the landscape of economic opportunity and job creation, both in India and globally, is changing in response to the environmental and climate crises. In energy, fossil fuels are giving way to solar, wind and battery technology; in transport, the days of the internal combustion engine may be numbered — GM recently announced their phase-out; in food, meat substitutes are taking off, and all these changes are driven by environmental concerns.

Biden is locking up migrant children. Will the world still care with Trump gone?

This week, the Biden administration did the unthinkable. It reopened a Trump-era detention site for migrant children. The detention center, a reconverted camp for oil field workers in Carrizo Springs, Texas, is expected to hold 700 children between the ages of 13 and 17, and dozens of kids have already arrived there.

This is an awful development, reminding me of some of the worst abuses of the Trump years. And while we obviously don't know how this ominous development will play out in the long run, what we do know is this: unaccompanied migrant children deserve compassion, not detention. But rather than seeking out new and better solutions, the Biden administration is instead trying to sell us an image of a kinder, gentler imprisonment.

How else are we to understand the words of Mark Weber, spokesperson for Health and Human Services (HHS), the agency that oversees the welfare of unaccompanied migrant children? Weber told the Washington Post that "the Biden administration is moving away from the 'law-enforcement focused' approach of the Trump administration to one in which child welfare is more centric". That may play well as a



soundbite, but how welfare-centric is it to place children in jail in the first place? And if you don't think it's a jail, you should know that the "unaccompanied teens sent to the Carrizo Springs shelter will not be allowed to leave the facility", as reported by the news website BorderReport.com.

It gets worse. The camp's operation will be "based on a federal emergency management system", where "trailers are labeled with names such as Alpha, Charlie and Echo", names which are commonly used in military detention practices. (Camp Echo, for example, is a notorious site in Guantánamo Bay.) And while staff members will thankfully not be sporting military gear, the government spokesman makes a point to tell us that they will "wear matching black-

and-white T-shirts displaying their roles: disaster case manager, incident support, emergency management" and that "the most colorful trailer is at the entryway, where flowers, butterflies and handmade posters still hang on its walls from Carrizo's first opening in 2019".

Give me a break. The problem with this sort of language is that it hides the brute reality of detention and covers it up with the rosy rhetoric of summer camp. The Post story describes the center as a 66-acre site where "groups of beige trailers encircle a giant white dining tent, a soccer field and a basketball court. There is a bright blue hospital tent with white bunk beds inside. A legal services trailer has the Spanish word 'Bienvenidos,' or welcome, on a banner on its roof. There are trailers for class-

rooms, a barber shop, a hair salon." Who, I wonder, is really comforted by a "welcome banner" on a roof, the jailers or the jailed?

Think I'm being ungenerous? That the Biden administration is merely trying to articulate to the public how its detention scheme will be more salubrious than Trump's? Well, if that's the case, then health concerns, especially during a pandemic, would be paramount. We've been told by the government that these children will arrive at Carrizo Springs after a period of quarantine and will all be tested for Covid before entry. Yet, when BorderReport.com asked HHS whether everyone entering the facility, and not just these teens, will be tested for the virus, they did not receive a direct answer.

It doesn't stop there. Despite the language coming from the administration, these children are facing a terrible and possibly illegal situation. In 1997, a class-action lawsuit settlement established standards for the detention and release of unaccompanied minors taken into custody by the authorities. According to the Flores Settlement Agreement, the federal government must transfer these unaccompanied

children to a non-secure and licensed facility within days of being in custody. In an emergency, the government can keep the children for up to 20 days while seeking to reunite them with family members or place them with a sponsor.

Meanwhile, the Carrizo Springs site is a secure site (the kids can't leave), is unlicensed by the state of Texas (it's operated by a government contractor for the Office of Refugee Resettlement), and is expected to hold children for 30 days, as reported by the Washington Post, which is obviously longer than the 20 days dictated by the Flores Agreement. The detention is also very expensive, coming in at a cost of \$775 a day per child compared with \$290 a day for permanent centers.

All of these extremely disturbing facts surrounding this detention should elicit massive amounts of outrage in all of us, but the Biden administration seeks to deflect the criticism by assuring us their version of childhood detention is thoughtful and humane, even while opening a facility where kids are delivered in unmarked vans to an internment camp that is geographically remote and difficult to access.

Does it feel like we're being sold a bill of goods? It sure does to me. Yes, it's not as malevolent as the family separation policies of Trump, but if our way of judging political conduct now is whether something is simply "better" or "worse" than Trump was, then we've elevated Trump's actions into our new standard of behavior. And when we do that, we've lost any genuine sense of judgement in the first place.

There's no question that, with rising numbers of unaccompanied minors arriving at the border during Covid, the Biden administration has a difficult road ahead. But expanding a long discredited system that detains children cannot be the answer, no matter how good the government wants to make it sound.

Every government spins their message. But if we fall unthinkingly for the spin, the fault isn't with them. It's with us.

Gutfeld on Dr. Fauci's mixed messaging on COVID

If you know one thing about me, it's that I follow the science.

Wherever the science goes, I'm there.

If it heads to the bar, I'll follow it and buy it a shot.

If it says room 110 and bring the whip -- I'll be there... in a mask. But, if you follow the science, and think it's always Dr. Fauci, you'll be chasing your tail like a Beagle with OCD. -- The man changes his story more often than a suspect on "Columbo." Here are just a few examples.

Let's review these flashbacks: FAUCI ON "TODAY" / NBC FEBRUARY 29, 2020: Right now, at this moment, there is no need to change anything that you're doing on a day-by-day basis. FAUCI ON MSNBC APRIL 12, 2020: As soon as it became clear that there was community spread... then it became clear that we were in real trouble. FUCI: That was probably to-

wards the middle to end of January.

FAUCI ON CBS NEWS, MARCH 8, 2020: Right now, in the United States, people should not be walking around with masks.

FAUCI ON PBS, APRIL 3, 2020:

better.

You could wear Fauci on the beach -- he's such a flip flop. But it's not his fault. Science changes and as we learn more, we don't ignore new facts.

Unless you still think the Earth



Putting a mask on yourself is more to prevent you from infecting someone else. And if everybody does that, we're each protecting each other.

FAUCI TO NEW YORK PRESS CLUB JANUARY 29, 2021: If one mask is good, two masks are

is flat, the dumbest lie ever told was that "the science is settled." And Fauci's right to say what he thinks is right for that moment. He's not blinded by science, just spotlights.

It's when he looks backward and opinions replace prescriptions

just to tickle the media.

Reuters claims Fauci said, "the pandemic arrived in the U.S. as the country was riven by political divisions in which wearing a mask became a political statement...." And maybe that killed more people?

That's an opinion and an odd one for a doctor who has made equivocation an art form.

You could say wear a mask all the time or take it off outdoors... You can say no to closing schools, then yes!

You could say it's safe to travel, then it's not.

You can say vaccines will return us to normalcy, except minus the normalcy.

You could say all this...

And he did.

But this was a novel virus. So it's all novel.

But assigning a death count to an opinion is a bit much, especially when expert opinions change so much.

Found naked along UP highway, college student says set on fire for resisting gang-rape



The girl, a BA second-year student, is undergoing treatment at a hospital in Lucknow where she was brought with 72 per cent burns. Villagers had found her without clothes and severely burnt along a national highway in UP's Shahjahanpur.

(News Agencies)-A college student in Uttar Pradesh has alleged that she was set on fire after a failed attempt to gang-rape her. The girl, a student of BA second-year, is currently undergoing treatment at a government hospital in Lucknow. The matter first came to light on Wednesday when locals found the girl without clothes and severely burnt along a national highway in Uttar Pradesh's Shahjahanpur district. She was immediately rushed to a hospital

in the district and later referred to Lucknow with 72 per cent burns. Director of the Syama Prasad Mookerjee Civil Hospital in Lucknow, Dr SC Saundriyal told news agency PTI that the girl's condition is now stable.

A native of a village in the Jalalabad police station area, the girl's father demanded the arrest of three boys who he claims set his daughter on fire.

What happened

Asked about the case, Superin-

tendent of Police (SP) S Anand said the girl told investigators that three people tried to rape her in a field near Rai Kheda village on Monday. When they did not succeed, they poured kerosene on her and set her ablaze, the girl said.

Prior to the incident, CCTV cameras show the girl talking to her friends outside a classroom on the third floor of her college building before going to the library. The girl said she does not know how she reached the hospital from the third floor of her college building, SP S Anand added.

"Investigations with the help of CCTV footage have found that the girl went out of the college campus from a broken outer wall about 20 minutes after entering the pre-

mises and was seen walking alone on a canal road," the Superintendent of Police told news agency PTI.

One of the first people who found the girl, Asif Ali said that she was lying alongside the national highway without clothes. Villagers covered her with a stole before alerting the police, he added.

Police to record girl's statement The police have already questioned more than a dozen students of the girl's college, including her friends. A villager from her native village, who received a phone call from her on the day of the incident, has also been questioned. As many as three teams led by deputy superintendents of police (Dy SPs) and a Special Operations Group (SOG)

have been deployed to probe the case. In addition, another team of five policemen led by a Deputy SP has been stationed at the hospital in Lucknow where the girl is undergoing treatment. The investigating officer (IO) will take up the matter once the girl's statement is recorded, Superintendent of Police (SP) S Anand said.

Chinmayanand connection The girl is a student of Swami Shukdevanand Post Graduate College, which is run by Mumukshu Ashram Trust of Swami Chinmayanand. A former BJP leader, Swami Chinmayanand was at the centre of a controversy in 2019 after a female student of a law college run by his trust had accused him of sexual assault.

Odisha: Former BJD MLA, associate arrested for assaulting, looting man

Debendra Kanhar along with his 4 associates thrashed a group of tourists when they were visiting Urmagarh and snatched away money from them on February 2.

Former Biju Janata Dal (BJD) MLA Debendra Kanhar and one of his associates were arrested Tuesday in Odisha's Kandhamal district on charges of assault and loot.

Reportedly, the former MLA along with his four associates thrashed Dhenkanal's Kamakhya Behera and his friends when they were visiting Urmagarh in Kandhamal district and snatched away money from them on February 2.

Two of his associates have been identified as Deputy Subedar Sibabrata Behera and Havildar Srinivas Kanhar, from India Reserve Battalion (IRBn). Talking to India Today TV, Kandhamal

SP Vinit Agarwal said both jawans have been suspended.

Based on a complaint filed by Kamakhya, a case was registered at Phulbani Police Station under Section 170/417/419/384/395 of IPC against Debendra and his associates on February 11. Thereafter, the Phulbani Town Police on Tuesday arrested the duo from FCI Chak in Phulbani area. Kanhar was elected to the assembly from Phulbani constituency on a BJD ticket. Notably, Kanhar was arrested twice in 2018 for allegedly torturing his wife over dowry demand and for molesting a tribal girl.



Pamela Goswami cocaine case: BJP leader Rakesh Singh sent to police custody till March 1

(News Agencies)-BJP leader Rakesh Singh has been remanded to police custody till March 1. A member of the BJP's West Bengal state committee, Rakesh Singh was arrested on Tuesday in connection with the Pamela Goswami cocaine case.

Kolkata Police produced Rakesh Singh (52) before the Alipore NDPS court on Wednesday, a day after he was arrested while trying to 'flee' the state. As he was being produced in court, supporters of Rakesh Singh were heard chanting slogans in his support.

Alleging that his arrest was orchestrated by the Trinamool Congress, Rakesh Singh told media reporters outside the court that this was "Mamata Banerjee and Abhishek Banerjee's dadagiri".

A member of the BJP's youth wing, Bharatiya Janata Yuva Morcha (BJYM), Pamela Goswami was arrested



for alleged possession of cocaine recovered from her car. During interrogation, Pamela Goswami told police to arrest Rakesh Singh.

Considered to be a close associate of BJP's West

Bengal in-charge Kailash Vijayvargiya, Rakesh Singh was served a notice to appear before the police for his statement to be recorded under Section 160 of the CrPC. Singh responded to the summon by saying that he will not be able to make the appearance before February 26.

As part of a joint-operation, New Alipore Police in Kolkata searched the home of BJP leader Rakesh Singh on Tuesday and arrested both of his sons.

Later in the day, Rakesh Singh was nabbed from Galsi in West Bengal's Purba Bardhaman district while allegedly trying to flee the state. He was taken to the Galsi police station where he was handed over to a team of Kolkata Police in connection with the Pamela Goswami case.

"Satisfied There's Evidence Nirav Modi Could Be Convicted": UK Judge

Nirav Modi's legal battle marks one of several high-profile extradition cases involving accused Indian economic offenders in the UK

A UK court ruling in the nearly two-year-long legal battle of jeweller Nirav Modi's extradition, who is wanted for fraud and money laundering in the ₹14,000-crore Punjab National Bank (PNB) scam, has said "I am satisfied that there is evidence that Mr Modi could be convicted". Nirav Modi, 49, is appearing via video conferencing from Wandsworth Prison in south-west London at Westminster Magistrates' Court, where District Judge Samuel Goozee delivering his judgment on whether the jeweller has a case to answer before the Indian courts. The magistrates' court ruling will then be sent back to UK Home Secretary Priti Patel for a sign-off, with the possibility of appeals in the High Court on either side depending on the outcome.

1. Nirav Modi was arrested on an extradition warrant on March 19, 2019, and has appeared via video conferencing from Wandsworth Prison for a series of court hearings in the extradition case. His multiple attempts at seeking bail have been repeatedly turned down, both at the Magistrates' and High Court level, as he was deemed a flight

risk.

2. Nirav Modi is the subject of two sets of criminal proceedings, with the Central Bureau of Investigation or CBI case relating to a large-scale fraud upon PNB through by obtaining illegal letters of undertaking (LoUs) or loan agreements, and the Enforcement Directorate (ED) case relating to the laundering of the proceeds of that fraud. He also faces two additional charges of evidence tampering and intimidating witnesses, which were added to the CBI case.

3. The Crown Prosecution Service (CPS), arguing on behalf of the Indian government, has sought to establish a case against him and also to establish that there are no human rights issues blocking his extradition to India. CPS barrister Helen Malcolm has argued that the jeweller presided over a "Ponzi-like scheme where new LoUs were used to repay old ones".

4. A Ponzi scheme typically refers to an investment scam that generates funds for earlier investors with money taken from later investors and the CPS has claimed that Nirav Modi used his firms - Diamonds R Us, Solar Exports and Stellar Diamonds - to

make fraudulent use of PNB's LoUs in a conspiracy with banking officials. They have also played videos in court as proof of Nirav Modi's involvement in intimidating dummy officers of his companies to remain out of the reach of Indian investigating authorities.

5. Nirav Modi's defence team, led by barrister Clare Montgomery, has claimed that the entire issue is a commercial dispute involving "authorised though ill-advised lending" that took place in "broad daylight". It is also claimed that none of his actions meets the legal threshold of perverting the course of justice or amounted to fraud. The defence has also relied on arguments around Nirav Modi's mental health condition, as someone who has a family history of depression and suicide.

6. During a series of hearings in the course of the extradition case last year and early this year, Westminster Magistrates Court has also heard detailed arguments from both sides about why Nirav Modi's "deteriorating" mental health condition does or does not



meet the Section 91 threshold of the Extradition Act 2003 - which was most recently been used in the UK to block the extradition of WikiLeaks Founder Julian Assange on the grounds of it being "unjust and oppressive" as he is a high suicide risk.

7. The CPS has challenged the defence's stance and had called for an independent evaluation of medical records by a consultant psychiatrist for appropriate assurances to be acquired by the authorities in terms of his care in India.

8. Prison conditions at Barrack 12 in Arthur Road Jail in Mumbai, where Nirav Modi is to be held, have also been in focus as the Indian government submitted an updated video recording of the cell to highlight that it meets all human rights requirements of natural light and ventilation.

9. Nirav Modi's legal battle

marks one of several high-profile extradition cases involving accused Indian economic offenders in the UK. While former Kingfisher Airlines boss Vijay Mallya remains on bail as a "confidential" matter related to his extradition to India is resolved, accused arms dealer Sanjay Bhandari's extradition case is scheduled for its next hearing in April.

10. In February 2020, wanted cricket bookie Sanjeev Chawla was extradited to face charges in India and became the first extradition of its kind under the India-UK Extradition Treaty, signed in 1992. A previous extradition of Samirbhai Vinubhai Patel, wanted in connection with the Godhra riots in Gujarat, from the UK to India in October 2016 had been uncontested and therefore did not have to go through various levels of appeals in the UK courts.

Bhanwari Devi case: Supreme Court directs SC-ST court to record statements of all accused by Apr 12



(News Agencies)-The Supreme Court Wednesday directed the SC-ST court to record the statements of all the accused in the Bhanwari Devi kidnapping-cum-murder case by April 12. The apex

court passed this order while hearing the petition of accused Parasram Vishnoi.

The petitioner's side was presented in the Supreme Court by advocates Mahesh Jethmalani and Sanjay Vishnoi.

In 2011, this case had brought upheaval in the political landscape of Rajasthan. Bhanwari, posted as an auxiliary nurse midwife at a sub-center in Jaliwada village, around 120 km from Jodhpur, had gone missing on September 1, 2011. She disappeared after a CD allegedly showing then Rajasthan minister Mahipal Maderna in a compromising position with the 36-year-old nurse was aired by some news channels.

Two Congress leaders, including minister Mahipal Maderna and Malkhan Singh Bishnoi, along with 15 other accused of the case, have been under judicial custody since 2011 and facing trial in a special court for cases under the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act.

Murder Accused Cooked Victim's Heart With Potatoes To Serve His Family

(News Agencies)-A man accused of a triple murder in the US state of Oklahoma sliced one victim's heart from her body and cooked it with potatoes to serve to other victims before attacking them, US media reported Wednesday. The suspect, Lawrence Paul



Anderson, allegedly removed the organ from the body of a neighbor he had stabbed to death, according to Oklahoma City News 4 TV and the Oklahoman newspaper. He allegedly then brought the heart to his uncle's home where he cooked it and tried to serve it to the uncle and his wife, in-

vestigators reportedly told the Grady County Court in Chickasha on Tuesday. Anderson then allegedly killed the uncle and his four-year-old granddaughter in the home and severely injured the wife in the February 9 spree.

"He cooked the heart with potatoes to feed to his family to release the demons," an agent wrote in a search warrant presented in court.

The crime came just weeks after Anderson, who has a long arrest record, was released from prison on a general commutation by Oklahoma Governor Kevin Stitt.

He was sentenced to 20 years in prison in 2017 on drug charges.

He confessed to the murders in court on Tuesday, according to the reports.



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France summons Pakistan envoy over criticism of 'separatism' bill



(News Agencies)-The French foreign ministry has summoned Pakistan's envoy to protest against claims by President Arif Alvi that a French bill cracking down on what it terms "Islamist extremism" stigmatises Muslims. Addressing a conference on religion on Saturday, Alvi said: "When you see that laws are being changed in favour of a majority to isolate a minority, that is a dangerous precedent." Specifically referring to the legislation drafted after the beheading of a French teacher over cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad, Alvi said: "When you insult the prophet, you insult all Muslims." I urge the political leadership of France not to entrench these attitudes into laws ... You have to bring people together - not to stamp a religion in a certain manner and create

disharmony among the people or create bias." Pakistan was one of several Muslim countries that saw angry anti-French protests in October over President Emmanuel Macron's defence of the right to show cartoons depicting the Prophet Muhammad.

Pakistan, a country with the second-largest number of Muslims in the world after Indonesia, does not have an ambassador in France.

The French foreign ministry said late Monday it had called in Pakistan's charge d'affaires to mark "our surprise and our disapproval (over Alvi's remarks), given that the bill contains no discriminatory element". "It is guided by the basic principles of freedom of religion and conscience, makes no distinction between the different religions and applies therefore equally to all faiths," the ministry said. "Pakistan must understand this and adopt a constructive attitude for our bilateral relations," it added. The bill adopted by the lower house of the French parliament last week is dubbed the "anti-separatism" bill in reference to Macron's claim that "Islamists" are closing themselves off from French society by refusing to embrace secularism, gender equality and other French values.

Let's blade, brah! Pakistani police shred the gnar while shredding crime



(News Agencies)- Pakistani police are being outfitted with pieces of gear the likes of which have always been seen.

According to a recent report, 5-0 in the city of Karachi are being issued rollerblades to help in their mission to fight theft and harassment.

"Why is this news? Must be a slow day," you're angrily typing for the millionth time into the black hole that is a Facebook comment thread. Know what isn't slow? Crime fighters on inline skates ripping down streets and catching sick air off janky obstacles.

Think about it. There a thief is, just having secured a treasured item, enjoying the thrill of the heist and riding 25-foot waves of

positivity until ... whoa! A bladed Usain Bolt appears out of nowhere - after unnecessarily jumping a motorcycle instead of skating conveniently around it. So rad.

You wanted to go for broke, but instead, you just got apprehended by the stoke.

Oh, and have we mentioned these exuberant units are armed?

Think about what sort of combat glide improvements the U.S. military could make if service members were actually, you know, gliding. Of course, all anyone has to do to get away from the gnar police is run into an area with dirt or rocks, but whatever. Let's blade, brah. Roll on down below to check out the specialized unit.

NYC: STOP THE SPREAD OF CORONAVIRUS!

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



PROTECT YOURSELF AND OTHERS

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



STAY HOME IF SICK

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



PROTECT THE MOST VULNERABLE

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



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

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Commissioner

What's Behind the Planned Uzbekistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan Railway?

The three countries agreed on a roadmap for building a new railway, but what are the prospects of, and problems along, the route?

(News Agencies)- From the first tracks laid in 1879 at Gyzyarbat, northwest of the capital of modern-day Turkmenistan, locomotive transport has always been central to Central Asia due to the region's distance from the open sea. Although first set down amid the expansion of the Russian Empire, today, railways have a central role in the economic planning of the Central Asian states, especially in Kyrgyzstan and double-landlocked Uzbekistan.

Afghanistan Expansion

In Tashkent on February 2, Pakistan, Uzbekistan, and Afghanistan agreed to a roadmap for the building of a 573-kilometer route from Mazar-e-Sharif to Peshawar, via Kabul. This project, at an estimated cost of \$5 billion, will open Pakistani seaports on the Arabian Gulf to Uzbekistan and continue

Afghanistan's gradual integration into the Central Asian economic system.

Within Uzbekistan, the agreement has been hailed as the "event of the century" by the chairperson of the Senate, Tanzila Narbaeva, who called it another example of Uzbekistan "actively pursuing an open and pragmatic foreign policy."

However, such a potentially momentous accord needs to be couched in the realities of the region. There are immense infrastructural and logistical difficulties ahead for the proposed railway. The agreed route traverses the Hindu-Kush range and tops out at a whopping 3,500 meters, which would make it one of the highest railroads in the world if completed. This ambitious route design will test the supply of materials while the ability to attract laborers and companies to work in

Afghanistan will not be an easy task either.

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The security situation in Afghanistan is of central concern in this regard. The Taliban have shown an interest in engaging regionally, holding talks in January with Turkmenistan over energy supply to Taliban-held areas of Afghanistan and security of the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline. Coupled with continuing peace negotiations between the government and the insurgents, there could be hope for the safety and viability of the complex, long-term railway project. Indeed, the commitment of Pakistan and Uzbekistan could signal their belief in the continued stability of Afghanistan. Another big issue is the variable gauges of the railway



and its connections with Uzbekistan. Uzbekistan uses exclusively the Russian, 1520mm gauge, while Pakistan uses 1676mm gauge. In 2010, Afghanistan opted to build using the international standard, 1435mm, gauge.

Russia's Role

The gauge issue is a legacy of Russian Imperialism, a parting gift to the region which effectively means that any use of existing track must allow for reloading of cargo onto different trains at border points. Coupled with fierce debates over routes and political

inertia, the incompatibility of the 1520mm gauge with neighboring tracks has hamstrung connectivity in Central Asia for decades.

The Mazar-e-Sharif-Kabul-Peshawar line is the latest in a succession of railway projects concocted by interior Central Asian states to solve the issue of access to the sea and move away from Russia's orbit. One famous example of this is the prospective major railway connection from the Chinese port of Lanzhou to Tashkent via the city of Osh in Kyrgyzstan.

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Taliban blames Kabul, Washington for not abiding by Doha deal

Taliban accuses the Afghan government and the US of not fully honouring the agreement signed last year.

The Taliban has blamed the Afghan government and its Western allies for not living up to the agreement signed last year despite months of negotiations, including the release of prisoners and withdrawal of foreign forces. A senior member of the Taliban's political office in Doha told Al Jazeera all Taliban prisoners were to be released three months after the initiation of intra-Afghan dialogue in the Qatari capital.

"It's been [more than] five months and they haven't released a single prisoner," said the Taliban official, who did not wish to be named, blaming the Afghan government led by President Ashraf Ghani for the delay.

The comments came as the Afghan armed group resumed talks with the Afghan government in Doha on Tuesday after weeks of delays and a change in US leadership.

The Taliban official also raised concerns over the delay in the withdrawal of remaining US

forces as the new US administration of President Joe Biden has been reviewing the February 2020 Doha agreement. Biden has backed political solution for the conflict but may not honour the troop withdrawal deadline agreed to by his predecessor, Donald Trump.

"We have an agreement with the legal government of the United States and we expect them to abide by their deal. Taliban remains committed to the written deal and we expect the other side to do the same," the Taliban official said.

Last week, the Taliban issued an "open letter" calling on Washington to pull out the troops.

Stands by its promise

In recent weeks, NATO and US officials have voiced concern about alleged links between the Taliban and hardline armed groups such as al-Qaeda and ISIL (ISIS). According to the Doha agreement, the Taliban was expected to sever ties with

armed groups and ensure Afghan soil is not used for attacks on US interests.

"We are closely monitoring the situation on the ground in Afghanistan ... There is an ongoing monitoring situation and based on that allies will be able to make decisions together," NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg told Al Jazeera last week.

Taliban leaders insist they do not have ties with any armed group and they still stand by their promise not to allow Afghan soil to be used for attacks against any other country.

Kabul has already freed 5,000 Taliban fighters as part of the Taliban-US deal, while the 1,000 Afghan troops were freed by the Taliban as a "goodwill gesture" to kick-start the intra-Afghan talks in September.

But the rival sides have been haggling over issues, achieving little progress while deadly violence in Afghanistan continued.



Afghan officials have rejected the Taliban's demands saying they cannot be held responsible for agreements that were made between the armed group and the US.

A member of the Afghan government negotiating team in Doha told Al Jazeera Kabul released 5,000 Taliban prisoners, as per the decision of the Grand Jirga not because of the US-Taliban deal. "It's a false allegation to say we have not

released prisoners." But the Taliban says the Doha agreement has provisions that called for the release of all prisoners through intra-Afghan talks. Nader Nadery, a senior adviser to President Ghani, said: "The Afghan government delegation has been there in full faith and all readiness. If we are real and genuine about ending this war, we should start talking about everything that both sides have put forward."

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Mass "Real World" Study Confirms Pfizer Covid Vaccine 94% Effective

The Israeli study, published in the New England Journal of Medicine, also demonstrated there is likely a strong protective benefit against infection, a crucial element in breaking onward transmission.

(News Agencies)-The Pfizer Covid-19 vaccine proved 94 percent effective in a huge real world study published Wednesday that involved 1.2 million people in Israel, confirming the power of mass immunization campaigns to end the coronavirus pandemic.

The good news came as Ghana became the first country to receive shots under the global Covax scheme, paving the way for poorer nations to catch up with wealthier parts of the world.

The Israeli study, published in the New England Journal of Medicine, also demonstrated there is likely a strong protective benefit against infection, a crucial element in breaking onward transmission.

"This is the first peer-reviewed large scale evidence for the effectiveness of a vaccine in real world conditions," Ben Reis, a researcher at Harvard Medical School and one of the paper's authors, told AFP.

It involved almost 600,000 people who received the shots and an equal number who hadn't but were closely matched to their

vaccinated counterparts by age, sex, geographic, medical and other characteristics.

The efficacy against symptomatic Covid-19 was 94 percent seven or more days after the second dose -- very close to the 95 percent achieved during Phase 3 clinical trials.

More than 217 million vaccine doses have been administered globally, according to an AFP tally Wednesday, though the vast majority have been given in high-income countries.

Hopes are high that the inoculations will allow the world to finally emerge from a pandemic that has killed more than 2.4 million, infected 112 million, and hammered the global economy. But health experts have warned that unless the whole world has access to vaccines, the pandemic will not end.

The head of the World Health Organization applauded the first delivery of the Covax vaccines Wednesday. "At last!" WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said in a tweet. The WHO is one of several organizations behind

Covax, which aims to deliver at least two billion doses globally by the end of the year.

The 600,000 doses delivered to Ghana in a ceremony broadcast live on television are from Oxford-AstraZeneca, and will be administered in several Ghanaian cities from Tuesday.

They are part of an initial tranche of deliveries bound for several low- and middle-income countries, including to Ivory Coast this week. Covax, led by Gavi the Vaccine Alliance, the WHO and the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations (CEPI), is seeking to ensure vaccines are equitably distributed globally.

In South Africa, struggling with a recession as well as the pandemic, Finance Minister Tito Mboweni said the government planned to allocate 10 billion rand (\$688 million) to buy and deliver coronavirus vaccines over the next two years.

Single-shot vaccine

More upbeat data meanwhile emerged about Johnson & Johnson's single-shot vaccine, which was shown to be highly



effective against severe Covid-19, including newer variants, in detailed data released by the US regulator.

The vaccine is likely to be authorized soon, making it the third available in the hardest-hit country.

US biotech firm Moderna also announced its new Covid vaccine candidate aimed at the dangerous South African coronavirus variant had been shipped to government labs for testing.

But Europe's vaccine rollout faced fresh problems after AstraZeneca said it would only be able to deliver half its promised doses to the EU, deepening tensions with the bloc over supply shortfalls. It is the latest setback for the bloc, which has come under fire for its sluggish vaccine rollout.

EU chief Ursula von der Leyen was locked in a war of words with AstraZeneca earlier this year after accusing the British-Swedish firm of breaking a contract by delaying vaccine deliveries.

But she struck a more affable tone Wednesday, saying she was "optimistic" about the rollout.

"New questions are always arising that we can generally resolve amicably," she told a German newspaper.

Six Nations match on

Elsewhere on the continent, Hungary forged ahead with its own campaign, administering Chinese-made Sinopharm jabs in a first for the EU, having already become the first EU nation to administer Russia's Sputnik V vaccine.

Pentagon report reveals disturbing details about White supremacists in the ranks



(News Agencies)- A Pentagon report on extremism obtained by CNN gives disturbing insight into how White supremacists are active in the military and offers recommendations to better identify domestic extremists and prevent them from serving.

It details an instance of a former National Guardsman who is a member of a dangerous neo-Nazi group bragging about openly discussing extremist views while serving and separately describes

service members describing how they recognize fellow White supremacists by their fascist tattoos and T-shirt logos.

While the report, commissioned by Congress and dated October 2020, concluded that extremist views were not widespread and identified "a low number of cases in absolute terms," it underlines the urgency of the problem because "individuals with extremist affiliations and military experience are a concern to U.S. national security because of their

proven ability to execute high-impact events."

Roll Call was first to report on the Pentagon's findings.

President Joe Biden's new defense secretary, Lloyd Austin, has made confronting extremism a top priority, following the violent insurrection at the Capitol in January. Earlier this month he ordered a militarywide stand-down within 60 days so commanders can have "needed discussions" with service members about the issue of extremism. The urgency of the problem was underlined by a CNN analysis that found that at least 27 current or former members of the US military are facing federal charges in connection with the riot.

"There's never been an acknowledgment from the top ranks that this has to be handled, so the fact that we now have that and there is an effort underway to

do something is actually quite encouraging," said Heidi Beirich, co-founder of the Global Project Against Hate and Extremism. "Now, how well that's done and executed and all the pieces are put in place, that's a different question that we'll have to wait and see what the results are."

The report offers recommendations on how the Pentagon can use other government resources like FBI units to identify signs that recruits might have ties to extremist groups during the vetting and recruitment process. It also underscores some of the reasons these groups are targeting members of the military and how they are doing it.

Current or former members of the military are primary targets for extremist groups, because members with military service give the groups legitimacy and bring "combat and tactical

experience" in order to carry out their attacks, the report states.

"Access to service members with combat training and technical weapons expertise can also increase both the probability of success and the potency of planned violent attacks," it adds. While members of the military are prohibited from "participating in or advocating for supremacist and other extremist ideology," right now there is no official military rule or regulation that service members identified as domestic extremists or White supremacists be required to leave the military, except in the Navy. The authors of the report believe one should be added for all branches of military service.

"I'd say the craziest sh*t and get away with it."

The report includes disturbing instances of service members openly touting their White supremacist beliefs.

Lawyers make progress in locating parents of children split from families at the border, latest court filing says

(News Agencies)- Lawyers are still trying to locate the parents of 506 children who had been split from their families at the US-Mexico border by the Trump administration, according to a new court filing -- down from a month ago, when attorneys were looking for the parents of 611 children.

Wednesday's filing is the first under the Biden administration, which is now responsible for the reunification of families separated at the US-Mexico border as a result of former President Donald Trump's controversial "zero tolerance" immigration policy.

The new administration has taken a markedly different tone in talking about the Trump-era policy, which called for the criminal prosecutions of every adult illegally crossing the border and, as a result, led to

the separation of thousands of families.

Earlier this month, President Joe Biden signed an executive order establishing a new task force designed to identify and reunify separated families. The task force, chaired by the Homeland Security secretary, is intended to work across the US government, along with partners, to find parents separated from their children under the former administration. Biden called the policy a "stain" on the country's reputation during the signing of the executive order setting up the task force. "By the grace of God and goodwill of the neighbors, we'll reunite these children and reestablish our reputation as being a haven for people in need," he said at the time. Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas, who chairs

the task force, recently recalled what had gone through his mind when he heard the cries of children who had been taken from their parents.

"I am a father. I am a husband. I am a son. I am a brother. I have not heard before a pain as acute and heartbreaking as that, and it is our commitment to make sure that pain is not felt again," he told CNN.

"Our responsibility is to reunite the families and to support and facilitate their healing," Mayorkas said, adding that that could include health care and using authorities in the immigration system.

Wednesday's filing nods to the task force and its efforts. "Defendants believe that the work of the Task Force will resolve many-if not all-outstanding issues in this litigation, and Defendants look



forward to working with Plaintiffs with that goal in mind," the filing reads, adding that discussions are ongoing to "develop more comprehensive plans regarding how it will move forward."

The family separation case, Ms. L et al. vs. Immigration and Customs Enforcement et al., was initially prompted by the separation of a Congolese woman from her 7-year-old daughter. The American Civil Liberties Union filed the case in

2018 and it was later expanded to a class action lawsuit.

US District Judge Dana Sabraw issued a preliminary injunction blocking most family separations at the US-Mexico border and ordered the government to reunite the families it had divided. Since then, the federal government has provided regular reports to the court on the reunification status of children and parents whom the government separated.

Steve Bannon investigation gains steam as Manhattan prosecutors subpoena financial records



The Manhattan district attorney's office has subpoenaed financial records related to Steve Bannon's crowd-funding border-wall effort, signaling that its criminal investigation into former President Donald Trump's chief strategist is advancing, according to people familiar with the matter.

Prosecutors sent the subpoenas after Trump pardoned Bannon in late January for federal conspiracy crimes tied to the southern border-wall project, making Bannon among the Trump world figures -- including the former president -- subjects of criminal investigations by

Manhattan district attorney Cyrus Vance. The grand jury subpoenas were sent to Wells Fargo, one of the financial institutions that handled some of the accounts used in the fundraising effort, and to GoFundMe, the crowdfunding platform where Bannon's project, "We Build the Wall," once operated, the people said.

The state grand jury investigation revives the possibility that Bannon, the conservative and outspoken political strategist, could face state criminal charges after shedding the federal case last month. In addition to the criminal investigation, the New

Jersey attorney general's office has launched a civil inquiry into We Build the Wall. In September, the New Jersey Division of Consumer Affairs subpoenaed We Build the Wall for documents seeking a wide range of records, according to court filings.

The move by Vance comes as he is investigating Trump and the Trump Organization for potential financial crimes, including insurance fraud and tax fraud, according to people familiar with the matter. Trump has called the investigation a witch hunt and fishing expedition.

Robert Costello, an attorney for Bannon, could not be reached for comment. A spokesman for GoFundMe said the company "does not comment on or confirm requests for information from any law enforcement officials."

Spokesmen for Wells Fargo and the district attorney's office declined to comment.

A representative for the New Jersey attorney general told CNN, "The Division of Consumer Affairs neither confirms nor denies the existence or status of investigations." The district

attorney's investigation into Bannon's fundraising activities is focused, so far, on the same allegations of fraud brought by federal prosecutors, the people say.

Last summer, federal prosecutors with the US attorney's office in Manhattan announced charges against Bannon and three other men alleging they defrauded donors in the border wall effort that raised more than \$25 million.

Prosecutors alleged Bannon diverted more than \$1 million to pay a co-conspirator and cover hundreds of thousands of dollars in personal expenses. They alleged the victims, including some in New York, were falsely told that all the money donated would go toward the construction effort. Bannon pleaded not guilty to the federal charges. Following his arraignment, Bannon said, "This entire fiasco is to stop people who want to build the wall."

Of the four men charged, Bannon was the only one pardoned. Federal prosecutors are still pursuing criminal charges

against the others, who have all pleaded not guilty. Federal prosecutors have not addressed Bannon's pardon and it isn't clear if they are going to challenge it.

In some situations, the district attorney's office could enter into an information-sharing agreement to obtain grand jury material collected during the federal investigation. There's no indication that such an arrangement has been reached. Vance has brought charges before when there were concerns about a pardon.

In 2019 Vance announced a 16-count indictment charging Paul Manafort, Trump's former campaign chairman, with state crimes just hours after he was sentenced on federal fraud charges. Manafort was pardoned by Trump late last year. Earlier this month, a state appeals court threw out the state charges on double jeopardy grounds.

Potential charges against Bannon would not face the same legal challenge since Bannon was charged with federal crimes but was not convicted, lawyers tell CNN.

Grand jury votes not to indict police officers in Rochester death of Daniel Prude

(News Agencies)-A grand jury voted not to indict any officers in the death of Daniel Prude, a Black man who died after police pinned him to the ground in March, New York Attorney General Letitia James said Tuesday.

"Daniel Prude was in the throes of a mental health crisis and what he needed was compassion, care, and help from trained professionals. Tragically, he received none of those things," James said in a statement. "We concluded that there was sufficient evidence surrounding Mr. Prude's death to warrant presenting the case to a grand jury, and we presented the most comprehensive case possible. "While I know that the Prude family, the Rochester

community, and communities across the country will rightfully be devastated and disappointed, we have to respect this decision," James said.

In a statement Tuesday evening, James said a judge had granted her motion for the court to unseal the grand jury minutes for release to the public.

"This is a critical step in effecting the change that is so desperately needed," she said.

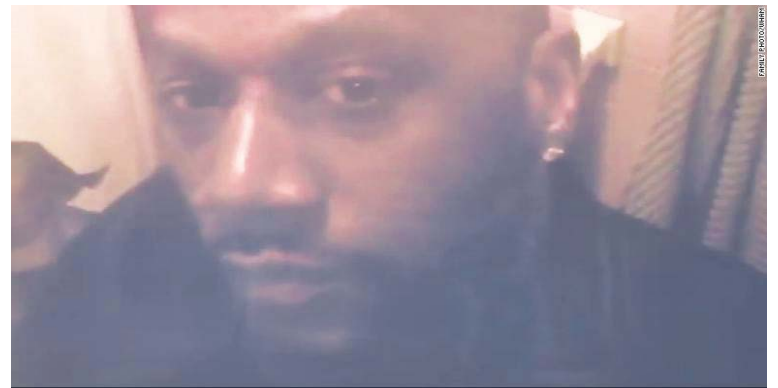
James said earlier that laws on deadly force have "created a system that utterly and abjectly failed Mr. Prude and so many others before him."

"Serious reform is needed, not only at the Rochester Police Department, but to our criminal justice system as a whole," said the attorney general, who started

an investigation of the case in April.

Attorneys Ben Crump and Antonio Romanucci, who are representing Prude's family, said they're "deeply disappointed that the officers will not face criminal charges for killing Daniel Prude during what was clearly a mental health crisis as he lay naked in the cold streets with a spit hood they placed over his head."

"This tragedy could have been avoided if officers had been properly trained but also used basic human decency and common sense to treat Mr. Prude with compassion and get him the medical attention he deserved," the attorneys said in a statement. "We will continue to advocate for justice in the civil courts, while also seeking federal



police reform so that these continued tragedies against Black citizens end once and for all." In a statement, the US Justice Department said: "We intend to review the comprehensive report issued by the New York State Attorney General, as well as any other relevant materials, and will determine whether any further federal response is warranted." Attorney urges city to

push reforms, not punish officers. The officers involved in the Prude case will remain on leave pending the outcome of an internal investigation, Police Chief Cynthia Herriott-Sullivan said in a statement via Twitter. Mayor Lovely Warren said the decision is "hard for many of us to understand" but that the city will make sure Prude's death was not in vain.

More Americans are identifying as LGBTQ than ever before, poll finds



(News Agencies)-A new poll shows that an unprecedented number of US adults identify as LGBTQ -- and that young people, especially Generation Z, are driving the increase.

Gallup reported a jump from 4.5% to 5.6% of Americans who identify as lesbian, gay,

bisexual, transgender or queer since its last poll in 2017.

The finding proves a steady rise in LGBTQ identification since the analytics company began tracking in 2012, and constitutes, based on the US Census Bureau's most recent population count, nearly 18 million Americans.

But LGBTQ advocacy groups aren't surprised.

Alphonso David, president of the Human Rights Campaign, told CNN that the data confirms what advocates have long suspected: There are more LGBTQ people in the US than statistics reflect. "We've always had LGBTQ people in this country," he said. "The question is whether they identify as LGBTQ -- meaning the label itself -- and whether they're comfortable publicly identifying."

Are people newly LGBTQ, or is it just safer to say so?

The rising numbers raise the question of whether more identification reflects more LGBTQ people -- or just more people willing to self-identify.

David said he leans toward the latter, citing pro-equality legislation as a driver of the increase.

"Several decades ago, LGBTQ identity and conduct were illegal in several states," he said. "As we remove the vestiges of bias and discrimination from our laws, we see more LGBTQ people come out of the shadows."

Leading the migration from the "shadows" is Gen Z -- young adults aged 18 to 23 -- which, in the poll, accounted for 15.9% of LGBTQ American adults.

Young people, David said, weren't around during the years when being LGBTQ was criminal. And they're able to view issues of identity in a different, less fearful way.

"They're not looking at sexuality and gender identity through a lens of fear and stigma," he said. "Many of them are looking at gender identity and sexual orientation as just a factor in what makes them who they are."

The majority of LGBTQ Americans identify as bisexual. As fear and stigma unravel, so do myths surrounding specific identities.

Gallup's report reveals that the majority of LGBTQ-identifying Americans -- 54.6% -- say they are bisexual.

David said he attributes this to both a marked increase in bisexual visibility and the social establishment of bisexuality as a valid sexual orientation.

Tiger Woods won't face charges after sheriff says car crash was an accident

(News Agencies)- The rollover car crash that seriously injured Tiger Woods outside Los Angeles on Tuesday was an accident and investigators won't pursue any charges against the golf great, Los Angeles County Sheriff Alex Villanueva said Wednesday.

"We don't contemplate any charges whatsoever in this crash," Villanueva said in a Facebook Live chat. "This remains an accident. An accident is not a crime. They do happen, unfortunately." As of

overnight Wednesday, Woods was "awake, responsive, and recovering" in the hospital from major surgery, according to a statement on his Twitter account. The 45-year-old golf legend was driving shortly after 7 a.m. PT Tuesday in Rancho Palos Verdes when his SUV crossed a median and veered across two lanes of road before hitting a curb, hitting a tree and landing on its side in the brush, Villanueva said Tuesday. Woods remained conscious and calm but sustained serious leg injuries.

Villanueva told CNN's Erin Burnett on Wednesday that Woods made no comments at the scene regarding the cause of the crash, and when investigators asked him about it at the hospital, "he had no recollection of the crash itself." Woods underwent a lengthy emergency surgery on his lower right leg and ankle at the Harbor-UCLA Medical Center, the statement said. The leg fractures were "comminuted," meaning the bone was broken into more than two parts, and "open," meaning



the broken bone was exposed to open air, creating risk of an infection, Chief Medical Officer Dr. Anish Mahajan said in the statement. Orthopedic trauma specialists inserted a rod into his tibia to stabilize both the tibia and

fibula bones, stabilized the foot and ankle bones with a combination of screws and pins, and relieved pressure to the muscle and soft tissue of his leg by surgically releasing the covering of the muscle, Mahajan said.

Manhattan DA receives Trump's tax returns: Prosecutors pore over 'millions of pages' hours after SCOTUS ruling in tax fraud and Stormy Daniels probe

So now, for more than two years, New York City has been looking at almost every transaction I've ever done, including seeking tax returns which were done by among the biggest and most prestigious law and accounting firms in the U.S. 'The Supreme Court never should have let this "fishing expedition" happen, but they did. This is something which has never happened to a President before, it is all Democrat-inspired in a totally Democrat location, New York City and State, completely controlled and dominated by a heavily reported enemy of mine, Governor Andrew Cuomo,' the statement said.

It even went into the first person - using the word 'I' repeatedly. The justices' ruling did not - and will not - make Trump's tax records public but gives Vance access to eight years of returns. The high court's action is a blow to Trump because he has for so long fought on so many fronts to keep his tax records shielded from view.

The justices did not disclose whether the court was split on taking the case, although at times justices who want to take a case but have been outvoted will make public their dissent. None did so Monday.

The ongoing investigation the records are part of could also

become an issue for Trump in his life after the presidency.

The ruling against Trump came just days before his planned political comeback, which will be a speech to the conservative conference CPAC on Sunday. But the ruling indicates how litigation could hang over a Trump comeback - and Vance's probe is not the only one.

In Georgia, the Fulton District Attorney, Fani Willis, has opened an investigation into attempts to overturn the election result, which includes Trump's infamous call to Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger saying to him: 'I just want to find 11,780 votes.'

And Merrick Garland, Joe Biden's nominee for attorney general, faces deciding on whether the DOJ should investigate Trump over the January 6 MAGA rally. Trump was given one piece of good news by the justices, when they rejected a plea from Stormy Daniels to overturn a ruling that she could not sue Trump for defamation for Tweeting that she was a 'con job.'

But the Manhattan probe is the most advanced.

Vance has disclosed little about what prompted him to request the records. In one court filing last year, however, prosecutors said they were justified in demanding the records because of public reports of 'possibly extensive and

protracted criminal conduct at the Trump Organization.'

Part of the probe involves payments to two women - porn actress Daniels and model McDougal - to keep them quiet during the 2016 presidential campaign about alleged extramarital affairs with Trump. Trump has denied the affairs.

In July, the justices in a 7-2 ruling rejected Trump's argument that the president is immune from investigation while he holds office or that a prosecutor must show a greater need than normal to obtain the tax records.

Justices Neil Gorsuch and Brett Kavanaugh, whom Trump nominated to the high court, joined that decision. It was issued before Trump's third nominee, Justice Amy Coney Barrett, replaced the late Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg on the court.

As part of its July decision, the high court returned the Vance case and a similar case involving records sought by Congress to lower courts. And the court prevented the records from being turned over while the cases proceeded. Since the high court's ruling, in the Vance case, Trump's attorneys made additional arguments that his tax records should not be turned over, but they lost again in federal court in New York and on appeal. It was



those rulings that Trump had sought to put on hold.

The Supreme Court waited months to act in the case. The last of the written briefs in the case was filed October 19. But a court that includes three Trump appointees waited through the election, Trump's challenge to his defeat and a month after Trump left office before issuing its order.

The court offered no explanation for the delay, and the legal issue before the justices did not involve whether Trump was due any special deference because he was president. Vance has hired a high-profile attorney with decades of experience with white collar crime cases as it ramps up its investigation.

Mark Pomerantz, a former prosecutor for the US Attorney's Office for the Southern District of New York, joined Vance's team

as a special assistant district attorney earlier this month. Pomerantz has already hit the ground running, conducting an interview with Trump's former lawyer Michael Cohen last Thursday, Reuters reported. His hiring is part of a flurry of recent activity in Vance's investigation into the Trump family business, a probe which has been open for two and a half years. Pomerantz, 69, has long been called a leading figure in New York legal circles, having served as chief of the criminal division in the US Attorney's Office for SDNY from 1997 to 1999 before moving into private practice with the law firm Paul Weiss. As a private attorney, Pomerantz has regularly represented major companies and officials in state and federal prosecutions, including cases brought by the US Department of Justice.

New Jersey governor signs law decriminalizing marijuana use for those 21 years and older



New Jersey Gov. Phil Murphy on Monday signed bills to legalize and regulate marijuana use for those 21 and older, decriminalize possession of limited amounts of marijuana and clarify marijuana and cannabis use and possession penalties for those younger than 21. "This legislation will

establish an industry that brings equity and economic opportunity to our communities, while establishing minimum standards for safe products and allowing law enforcement to focus their resources on real public safety matters," Murphy, a Democrat, said in a news release, thanking legislative and

community partners for their work on the issue. "Today, we're taking a monumental step forward to reduce racial disparities in our criminal justice system, while building a promising new industry and standing on the right side of history."

Murphy's signature comes on the heels of a 2020 ballot measure that saw New Jersey vote to legalize recreational marijuana. State lawmakers, unable to drum up enough support to pass a bill to fully legalize marijuana, agreed to place the question directly to voters: "Do you approve amending the Constitution to legalize a controlled form of marijuana called 'cannabis'?"

Public Question No. 1 amended the state constitution to legalize cannabis for personal, non-medical use by adults 21 and older, with the state commission that oversees the medical market also regulating the personal market.

The US House of Representatives passed a bill in December to end the federal prohibition on cannabis. While historic, the vote was largely symbolic and was never taken up by the Senate before the congressional session ended. Several states have looked to loosen restrictions on marijuana, with New Jersey joining a growing cohort of states legalizing cannabis use. Voters in all five states with

marijuana legalization on the ballot in November approved the measures, CNN reported last year. Like New Jersey, Arizona also voted to legalize recreational marijuana, and Montana voted to both establish 21 as the legal age to purchase, possess and consume cannabis by constitutional amendment and to legalize marijuana for recreational use. South Dakota approved legalization for both recreational and medical use -- the first state ever to approve medical and recreational marijuana measures at the same time -- and Mississippi voted to legalize medical marijuana, becoming one of the first southern states to do so.

To stop climate disaster, make ecocide an international crime. It's the only way



consequences of actions such as deforestation, reckless drilling and mining. This threshold implicates a number of global and corporate leaders through their complicity in deforesting the Amazon and Congo basins, drilling recklessly in the Arctic and the Niger delta, or permitting unsustainable palm oil plantations in south-east Asia, among other destructive practices.

As a term, "ecocide" dates to 1970, when Arthur Galston, an American botanist, used it to describe the appalling effects of Agent Orange on the vast forests of Vietnam and Cambodia. On the 50th anniversary of the concept, we can take heart in the growing civic will to officially make ecocide an international crime. Already, citizens, scientists and youth activists including Greta Thunberg are calling on global leaders to introduce ecocide at the international criminal court (ICC). Following the lead of climate-vulnerable ocean states Vanuatu and the Maldives in December 2019, President Emmanuel Macron of France vowed to champion it

on the international stage last June and has proposed a version of it in French law. Finland and Belgium both expressed interest during the ICC's annual assembly, and Spain's parliamentary foreign affairs committee has issued recommendations to consider it. The EU has also voted to encourage its recognition by member states. And Pope Francis was ahead of the game in November 2019 when he called for ecocide to become an international crime against peace. The Stop Ecocide Foundation has recently convened a panel of heavyweight international lawyers to draft a robust legal definition of ecocide which this growing list of states can seriously consider proposing as an amendment to the ICC's Rome Statute. Criminalizing ecocide gives us the unprecedented chance to create a protective measure with legal teeth that could deter reckless leaders from damaging, short-sighted policies creating accountability in a way that Paris does not. Just as important, we could motivate corporations to make dramatic

shifts away from an unacceptable status quo that too often favors the destruction of nature for short-term profits. As ecocide becomes an impending legal reality, corporate leaders would be forced to adapt, and quickly, re-examining the way they do business and make decisions with our planet in mind. But ecocide would not just be a punitive measure for corporate leaders. It would also offer considerable opportunities for new sustainable ventures. The pristine areas that ecocide targets - virgin forests, wetlands and our oceans - are precisely the places that have value far beyond mere extractive industries, including in sustainably developing new pharmaceuticals that may help in the current Covid-19 pandemic and in future pandemics. True leaders in the public and private sector would much prefer ethical, sustainable and long-term value creation that does not exploit nature or humanity. By outlawing bad actors, we will empower many more good ones. As a global community, we cannot wait for more warning signs or the "right moment".

Currently, much of humanity feels hopeless, but the establishment of ecocide as a crime offers something for people to get behind. Enacting laws against ecocide, as is under consideration in a growing number of jurisdictions, offers a way to correct the shortcomings of the Paris agreement. Whereas Paris lacks sufficient ambition, transparency and accountability, the criminalization of ecocide would be an enforceable deterrent. Outlawing ecocide would also address a key root cause of global climate change: the widespread destruction of nature, which, in addition to increasing greenhouse gas emissions, has devastating impacts on global health, food and water security, and sustainable development - to name a few. Ecocide shares its roots with other landmark concepts in international law, including genocide. Indeed, ecocide and genocide often go hand in hand. Around the globe, ecological destruction is also decimating indigenous communities. To give just a few cases: Brazil's Yanomami are facing mercury poisoning generated by the 20,000 illegal miners in their territories. 87% of Native Alaskan villages are experiencing climate-related erosion, even as they face growing calls to drill on their lands. Conviction for ecocide would require demonstrating willful disregard for the

A solar panel in space is collecting energy that could one day be beamed to anywhere on Earth

light from the sun to convert to electricity. The drone is looping Earth every 90 minutes.

The panel is designed to make best use of the light in space, which doesn't pass through the atmosphere, and so retains the energy of blue waves, making it more powerful than the sunlight that reaches Earth. Blue light diffuses on entry into the atmosphere, which is why the sky appears blue.

"We're getting a ton of extra sunlight in space just because of that," said Paul Jaffe, a co-developer of the project.

The latest experiments show that the 12x12-inch panel is capable of producing about 10 watts of energy for transmission, Jaffe told CNN. That's about enough to power a tablet computer.

But the project envisages an array of dozens of panels and, if scaled up, its success could revolutionize both how power is generated and distributed to remote corners of the globe. It could contribute to the Earth's largest grid networks, Jaffe said.

"Some visions have space solar matching or exceeding the largest power plants today -- multiple gigawatts -- so enough for a city," he said.

The unit has yet to actually send power directly back to Earth, but that technology has already been proven. If the project develops into huge kilometers-wide space solar antennae, it could beam microwaves that would then be converted into fuel-free electricity to any part of the planet at a moment's notice.

"The unique advantage the solar power satellites have over any other source of power is this global transmissibility," Jaffe said. "You can send power to Chicago and a fraction of a second later, if you needed, send it instead to London or Brasilia."

But a key factor to be proven, Jaffe said, is economic viability. "Building hardware for space is expensive," he said. "And those [costs] are, in the last 10 years, finally starting to come down."

There are some advantages to building in space. "On Earth, we have this pesky gravity, which is helpful in that it keeps things in

place, but is a problem when you start to build very large things, as they have to support their own weight," Jaffe said.

The mission of the US' X-37B space plane is shrouded in secrecy, with the PRAM experiment being one of the few details known of its purpose. In January, Jaffe and PRAM co-leader Chris DePuma, released the first results of their experiments in IEEE Journal of Microwaves, which showed "the experiment is working," Jaffe said.

The project has been funded and developed under the Pentagon, the Operational Energy Capability Improvement Fund (OECIF) and the US Naval Research Laboratory in Washington, DC.

A solution during natural disasters

The temperature at which the PRAM functions is key. Colder electronics are more efficient, Jaffe said, degrading in their ability to generate power as they heat up. The X-37B's low-earth orbit means it spends about half of each 90-minute loop in



darkness, and therefore in the cold.

Any future version of the PRAM might sit in a geosynchronous orbit, which means a loop takes about a day, in which the device would mostly be in sunlight, as it is travelling much further away from Earth.

The experiment used heaters to try to keep the PRAM at a constant, warm temperature to prove how efficient it would be if it were circling 36,000 kilometers from Earth.

It worked. "The next logical step is to scale it up to a larger area that collects more sunlight, that converts more into microwaves," Jaffe said.

Beyond that, scientists will have to test sending the energy back to Earth. The panels would know precisely where to send the microwaves -- and not accidentally fire it at the wrong target -- using a technique called "retro-directive beam control." This sends a pilot signal up from the destination antenna on Earth to the panels in space.

The microwave beams would only be transmitted once the pilot signal was received, meaning the receiver was in place below and ready. The microwaves -- which would easily be turned into electricity on Earth -- could be sent to any point on the planet with a receiver, Jaffe said.

Two years after arrest, UK court paves way for Nirav Modi extradition

"Therefore, in accordance with S.87(3) EA 2003 I am sending this case to the Secretary of State for a decision as to whether Nirav Modi is to be extradited."

The court, however, said Modi would have the right to appeal to the High Court against the decision to send the case to the Secretary of State. However, this appeal would not be heard until the Secretary of State has made a decision, it said.

"The appeal can be on a point of law or fact or both," the court said adding the appeal has to be made within 14 days of the Secretary of State decision.

Sources said now that the court has cleared the extradition, the UK government would likely move in favour of India's request. "Today's judgement of Westminster Magistrates' Court is a significant achievement in the context of CBI's efforts to curb corruption and is a reminder that fugitives, who have eluded the process of law after commission of large value frauds, cannot consider themselves above the process merely because they have changed jurisdictions," the CBI said in a statement. The 49-year-old jeweller appeared via video link



from Wandsworth Prison in south-west London as District Judge Samuel Goozee handed down his judgment at Westminster Magistrate's Court in London. He has been lodged here since his arrest on an extradition warrant in March 2019 at a central London bank branch, where he was trying to set up a new account.

While hearing arguments on whether Modi would get a fair trial, the court also examined retired Justice Markandey Katju's submissions in defence of Modi only to reject it finally. The court noted that Justice Katju's evidence centered primarily on

the fact that Indian Courts have become politicised. He states that in recent years the Supreme Court in India has 'practically surrendered before the Indian Government and is doing its bidding and is not acting as an independent organ of the state protecting the rights of the people as it was supposed to be' and in his view the 'Indian judiciary has largely surrendered before the political executive'.

The court also noted Katju's opinions on CBI and ED saying, "In relation to the CBI, Justice Katju explains there is evidence that the Government blatantly interferes with the CBI's functions

and that it functions under the direction of the ruling government. 'Justice cannot be expected from an institution which itself is caged'. As far as the ED is concerned his opinion is that they are under the complete control of the government."

Rejecting these assertions, the judge said, "I attach little weight to Justice Katju's expert opinion. Despite having been a former Supreme Court judge in India until his retirement in 2011 his evidence was in my assessment less than objective and reliable. His evidence in Court appeared tinged with resentment towards former senior judicial colleagues. It had hallmarks of an outspoken critic with his own personal agenda."

It also rejected his assertion of politicisation of the Supreme Court through the example of a former CJI becoming a member of Parliament from the ruling party post retirement, stating that Katju had himself accepted appointment as Press Council of India chief after he retired.

The defence argument that the trial had been prejudiced since top politicians from the ruling party had made comments about Nirav Modi and his

culpability was also rejected by the court.

Modi along with his uncle Mehul Choksi had been booked by investigative agencies CBI and ED in January 2018 for what is now known as the Punjab National Bank loan scam. In July, 2018, India sent a request to the UK to extradite Modi based on ED and CBI chargesheets.

On February 11, 2020, India issued a further extradition request for two additional offences which Modi faces as part of the CBI case. These offences relate to allegations that Modi has interfered with the CBI investigation by causing the disappearance of evidence and intimidating witnesses.

Modi had been staying nearby at a plush penthouse in Centrepont in the heart of the UK capital at the time of his arrest.

Following his arrest in 2019, he had petitioned the court multiple times for bail, but these were rejected based on evidence provided by ED and CBI.

Diamond traders Modi and Choksi had together defrauded PNB of Rs 13,500 crore through fraudulent letters of undertaking. Both fled the country before an FIR was registered by the CBI against them in 2018.

2 Indians Plead Guilty In US In Multimillion-Dollar Robocalls Fraud, Thousands Duped



Two Indian nationals have pleaded guilty to conspiracy and identity theft in connection with an overseas multi-million dollar robocall scam that defrauded thousands in the US, mostly elderly, the Department of Justice has said. Pradipsinh Parmar, 41, and Sumer Patel, 37, face a maximum sentence of 20 years each in prison for the conspiracy count. Parmar faces an additional mandatory

minimum sentence of two years on the aggravated identity theft count, the justice department said in a press statement on Monday. Shehzadkhan Pathan, 39, leader of the conspiracy, operated a call centre in Gujarat's Ahmedabad from which automated robocalls were made to victims in the US. Pathan pleaded guilty in the case on January 15. After establishing contact with victims through these automated calls, Shehzadkhan

Pathan and other "closers" at his call centre would coerce, cajole, and trick victims to send bulk cash through physical shipments and electronic money transfers. According to court documents, Parmar collected money on behalf of the robocall conspiracy that those who were duped had sent either by a parcel delivery carrier or through a wire service. Upon receiving their money, Pradipsinh Parmar deposited these funds into bank accounts as directed by Shehzadkhan Pathan. Shehzadkhan Pathan and his conspirators used a variety of schemes to convince victims to send money, including impersonating law enforcement officials from the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), and representatives of other government agencies, such as the Social Security

Administration, to threaten victims with severe legal and financial consequences. Conspirators also convinced victims to send money via wire transfer as initial installments for falsely promised loans. A significant number of victims who were tricked or coerced into sending bulk cash were elderly, the statement said. Patel, on the other hand, retrieved over 250 individual wire transfers from 230 individual victims from October 2018 to March 2019 on behalf of Pathan, according to court documents. These wires totalled USD 219,520.98. Patel deposited the funds as instructed by Pathan. While living in Virginia Chesterfield County, Patel also received eight packages of cash sent by victims. Four of the eight packages are known to have contained a total of USD 56,200 in cash, it said. Parmar

crisscrossed the US to collect nearly USD 6 million "that was stolen from more than 4,000 victims" in the international robocall scam, said Raj Parekh, Acting US Attorney for the Eastern District of Virginia. As part of his guilty plea, Parmar admitted that over a two-year period from March 2017 to April 2019, he travelled to 30 states and collected at least 4,358 wire transfers sent by victims, with losses totalling at least USD 4,312,585. Additionally, Parmar received and attempted to receive at least 91 packages of bulk cash sent by victims from several states, totalling at least USD 1,593,591. Parmar also received at least 549 counterfeit identification documents sent to him by Pathan for his use in retrieving these packages and wires sent by victims, federal prosecutors alleged.

Biden's Covid stimulus plan: It costs \$1.9tn but what's in it?

The US is poised to pass its third major spending package of the pandemic - a \$1.9tn (£1.4tn) plan that President Joe Biden has championed as a way to help struggling Americans. Leaders of his Democratic Party, which has a slim majority in Congress, are planning to pass the so-called American Rescue Plan by the end of the month. Republicans say the plan is unnecessarily large and stuffed with Democratic priorities unrelated to the pandemic. But Mr Biden and his team maintain the US must "act big" and that the extra cash is being spent on those most affected by the crisis - the poor, minorities and women.

Democrats on Thursday saw their push for a minimum wage hike thrown into question after a Senate arbiter ruled it must be removed from the Covid package.

Can Biden succeed in economic rescue mission?

Here are some of the key elements, with analysis by BBC correspondent Anthony Zurcher who ranks how much each component has support from Republicans (party mascot the elephant).

Direct payments - \$422bn

The plan calls on the government to send out \$1,400 per person, with the payments phasing out for those with higher incomes - at \$75,000 for a single person and couples making more than \$150,000.

This will be the third stimulus cheque since the pandemic. The US approved \$1,200 cheques last spring, and another \$600 in late December.

Supporters see the payments as critical financial support for families - many of which have seen incomes drop, even if they have not lost work entirely. But opponents say the measure is overly broad.

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

AZ: Many Republicans have been open to another round of stimulus cheques ever since it became a campaign issue in the December Georgia special Senate elections (which Republicans lost). The only sticking point has been where to put the income cap so wealthier families don't receive the payments - and while some Republicans still have concerns, the numbers in the bill represent



a compromise. Additional jobless assistance - \$246bn

The bill provides money to extend jobless benefits until the end of August. That's a critical reprieve for the more than 11 million long-term unemployed, whose eligibility for benefits is currently due to expire in mid-March. The plan also boosts the weekly amount received by workers through state unemployment programmes by \$400.

AZ: There is bipartisan agreement that widespread unemployment continues to be a very real problem for the US economy. While many Republicans weren't happy with the \$600 a week supplement last spring, \$400 - up from \$300 in the December stimulus bill - seems palatable for many.

Support for parents - \$120bn

Democrats intend to give parents of children under the age of 18 a year of monthly benefits worth \$250-\$300, depending on age.

The measure works by temporarily increasing the worth of America's existing child tax credit from \$2,000 annually to as much as \$3,600, and making the benefits available in advance.

Why the US is eyeing a \$300 monthly child benefit

The bill also increases how much parents - many of whom have been juggling extra childcare duties due to school closures - may reclaim from their annual tax bill for childcare expenses.

AZ: Boosting support for those caring for children is one of the few issues that has enthusiastic support on both the left and the right. While the details have been open to negotiation, all but the

most aggressive budget hawks have found it a worthy cause.

Money for Covid-19 tests and vaccines - \$70bn

Mr Biden has called for devoting \$50bn to improve testing centres and another \$20bn to develop a national vaccination campaign, including setting up community centres and hiring new workers to administer the shots.

"We cannot rescue our economy without first containing the virus," Democrats said as they advanced the plans.

AZ: Some states have struggled to find the funding necessary to organise and administer a comprehensive vaccination programme, creating a disparity of results across the US. This is one of the few areas where an influx of federal funds will have an immediate tangible result.

School reopening funds - \$170bn
The bill sends \$170bn to schools and universities to help them take steps to reopen, like buying masks and cleaning supplies, upgrading ventilation systems and creating smaller class sizes. Mr Biden has made reopening a top priority, responding to studies that show students with remote schooling falling behind. It's also seen as a factor preventing parents from returning to work.

AZ: Many conservatives are wary of expanding federal involvement in public school systems - which are administered on a state and local level - and they're critical of the funding in this bill, which they say won't even be available to schools this year. They want schools to reopen before they get more aid from Congress.

Business support - \$110bn

The bill includes grants for small businesses as well as more targeted funds: \$25bn for restaurants and bars; \$15bn for airlines and another \$8bn for airports; \$30bn for transit; \$1.5bn for Amtrak and \$3bn for aerospace manufacturing.

AZ: Republicans aren't going to have an issues with more support for small businesses - particularly hard-hit areas like the travel, dining and hospitality industries.

Funds for local governments - \$350bn

Unlike prior stimulus packages, this one provides money for local governments, many of which are facing higher expenses and lower revenues due to the economic downturn.

But Republicans have fought it as a handout to primarily Democratic states, noting research that shows that the budget situation in many states is better than expected. California even has a surprise surplus.

The Democratic plan would send at least \$500m to every state, with additional funds determined by the number of jobless workers. Cities and countries, tribes and territories are also in line for money.

AZ: This has been one of the big political battlegrounds in every Covid-19 stimulus bill. Republicans have been able to successfully block aid to states and cities in the past, saying they were a handout to high-tax liberal enclaves. This time around, however, they may not have the votes to stop it.

Paid leave and health insurance help - \$55bn
The plan reinstates

the requirement - which expired at the end of 2020 - that employers offer paid sick leave to staff who contract Covid-19, are exposed to the virus and must quarantine; or are caring for sick family members.

The provision is estimated to cost the government, which reimburses most employers for those costs, about \$6bn.

It also aims to make it easier for more people to buy health insurance independently, with credits worth an estimated \$46bn.

How many Covid vaccines has my country given?

How are other economies dealing with the downturn?

How the pandemic has changed the world economy

AZ: Republicans have been OK with providing temporary support for those directly affected by the coronavirus pandemic. They balk, however, at more money going to the government workforce - and the thought that this could be a back door to a permanent federally mandated family leave programme.

\$15 minimum wage

The plan includes provisions to increase the national minimum wage to \$15 per hour by 2025, more than doubling the current rate. It also requires that employers pay the full amount to workers that have been exempt in the past, such as those like restaurant servers receiving tips. The move, estimated to boost the wages of some 27 million people, is among the most controversial elements of the plan. Republicans say it will cost jobs, pointing to a study by the Congressional Budget Office which said the move could put 1.4 million positions at risk. The CBO also said the increase could lift 900,000 people out of poverty.

In the Senate, some moderate Democrats have also voiced concerns. Even Mr Biden has expressed doubts the wage hike will make it into the final version of the package. Though the plan before the House still includes the minimum wage provision, a Senate parliamentarian on Thursday said it must be removed from the bill. AZ: Many conservatives are already howling that a minimum wage increase has nothing to do with Covid-19 relief and will, in their view, place an increased financial burden on small businesses at a time when they're already under financial stress.



Stimulus vote Friday morning?

What that means for the \$1,400 check timeline

The first major vote on the \$1.9 trillion COVID-19 relief package is set to take place Friday morning, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi said Thursday in her weekly press conference. The bill is expected to pass along party lines, using an unusual political maneuver. The vote milestone in making the \$1,400 stimulus check a reality, and in setting the timeline of its arrival. If Biden signs the bill into law by March 14, it will cement one possible course for delivering the third stimulus check. Any delay could push back the already complex delivery process by days or weeks.

Tax season 2020 could complicate the size of your check and when you get it all. And, because the IRS uses de-facto payment groups, not everyone will get their money at once. In addition, some people, like SSDI and SSI recipients, could receive their payment a different way. Any delivery, calculation or processing problem could mean you're waiting months for your stimulus money. (By the way, here's every important difference between the \$1,400, \$600 and \$1,200 checks.)

We share the latest information about the third stimulus check priority payment groups, some possible dates you could expect the IRS to deliver the first wave of each group, and the IRS deadline. For more details, here's how the "targeted" third check could change the fine print and every way you could get more money, less money or no new check at all. Here's a guide on all the money you could get for child care and older adults. This story was recently updated.

Will the IRS send stimulus checks in waves? That's likely. The IRS organized the first two stimulus checks according to payment groups, with direct deposit recipients the first in line, followed by people receiving physical checks and then EIP cards. Using the timeline from the second payment, we can take an educated guess as to when the IRS could start sending the first checks for each group.

We also know that Democrats, who hold the majority in Congress, have a goalpost of March 14 to pass the \$1.9 trillion stimulus bill -- this is the date federal unemployment insurance for \$300 a week expires. We also factor in what happens if the timeline slips a week. For example, if the bill passes the House and the Senate makes substantial changes, it would go back to the House for a vote.

Complicating matters, the IRS is also dealing with tax returns at the same -- more on that below. Keep in mind, it could take weeks for the IRS to process every group's funds, so consider the possible dates below as just a starting point. We refresh this timeline as the situation evolves. Why could your stimulus payment group change?

When you get your stimulus money would likely depend on how you get it. That was largely true with the first two checks (there are always some exceptions) and is expected to play out similarly the third time around. Direct-deposit recipients typically get their stimulus money faster, as evidenced by how the government handled the first two rounds of payments in March and December. But both times there

were issues involving deposits going to temporary accounts that were rejected by banks.

The IRS told CNET in January that some people who received a physical check or EIP card the first time may get paid by the other method the second time around. And, anecdotally, we've heard of people who received direct deposit payments the first time finally getting an EIP card in the mail -- and not an electronic bank transfer -- weeks after the IRS tool said the payment was issued. While you won't have the final say in how you get your payment, we recommend signing up for direct deposit with the IRS when you submit your 2020 tax return, if you ordinarily file taxes. If you already have an account, make sure your details are correct. We also suggest you try to file your taxes quickly. While you can file an extension to submit your taxes later (you'd still have to pay taxes owed now,) whether that will help or hurt you may get a little complicated.

The other payment groups loosely defined (by us) include Social Security beneficiaries who received payments a different way the first time if they're part of the SSI or SSDI programs, and people with more complex scenarios that could lead to potential issues or holdups receiving their money. People in different child support situations are one example we've seen, as are people who are incarcerated and people with complex citizenship scenarios.

We might know the IRS deadline for sending new stimulus checks. The Jan. 15 deadline for the second stimulus check approved in December was written into the

text of the bill without explanation. Anyone who didn't receive all or part of their second payment must claim it as part of the IRS' Recovery Rebate Credit on their tax return to get the funds owed - even if they have non-filer status and aren't typically required to file taxes.

The latest proposal (PDF) would give the IRS a Dec. 31, 2021 cutoff to complete sending out the third stimulus checks.

Tax season adds a layer to stimulus checks

Since a third stimulus check is likely to drop in the middle of tax season (taxes are due April 15), the IRS may have to calculate your total based on the most recent tax filing it has. That would be your 2020 taxes if you file early, or 2019 taxes if the check is ready before your tax return is. This could also disqualify some people from getting a third stimulus payment. (Learn more about some of the stimulus check exceptions and catches here.) If you're owed money, you might have to wait a year to claim it, until you file your 2021 taxes in 2022, according to the latest proposal (PDF) under consideration. Filing for a tax extension could also change your timeline in a way that could be different if the IRS date itself.

By mid-March, tens of millions of Americans may have already received their tax refunds, which could make it tricky for the IRS

to straighten out problems or redact refunds after issuing.

How could you get your stimulus check faster?

There may be a few things you can do to help speed up receipt of a third payment, assuming the stimulus bill is approved. For example, signing up for direct deposit with your 2020 tax return would put you in the priority category for a third stimulus payment.

If you've moved recently, tell the IRS and USPS. Here are our other suggestions for how people can make it more likely they'll get their checks faster. Note that there could be some changes to qualifications that may not apply to a possible third stimulus check. More stimulus check details to know if you're in these groups. Stimulus checks aren't necessarily a one-size-fits-all situation. Here are our guides for:

" Older adults, people who are retired and veterans

" People who receive SSI or SSDI

" Other tax non-filers

" Families with mixed-status citizenship

" Households with dependents, or people trying to understand if they'd receive their own check

" Families with child support situations

Here's everything you need to know about stimulus checks, including what to do if you ran into problems with either of the first two payments.



Biden's stimulus checks bill could cut your taxes by \$3,100



Congress has President Joe Biden's pandemic rescue package moving on a fast track in a race against time to get Americans the relief they need. A key vote is expected on Friday.

Along with the much-discussed stimulus checks, additional proposals in the bill would offer the average household \$3,100 in tax savings for 2021, according to the Urban-Brookings Tax Policy Center.

So, the \$1.9 trillion legislation would provide not only a stimulus check of up to \$1,400, extended unemployment benefits and more funding for the COVID vaccine rollout, but also some tax relief. You may get more of your tax dollars back from the IRS to help you pay

down debt or build up your emergency fund.

How does it work?

The House of Representatives plans to vote on the economic stimulus bill on Friday, according to a tweet from House Majority Leader Steny Hoyer.

In the legislation, families would see tax savings from four major provisions:

"Your \$1,400 stimulus check, which is actually just an advance on a tax credit.

"An expanded earned income tax credit.

"An expanded child tax credit.

"A bigger credit for those paying for child care. When you file your taxes, the credits give you a dollar-for-dollar reduction in how much you owe in income

taxes. Plus, some of those credits would be refundable for 2021. This means if your tax liability drops to zero, the IRS will send you a refund for a set amount - putting money directly back in your pocket.

Who would benefit from the tax savings?

Two-thirds of the tax savings will go to households earning less than \$91,000 a year, according to the tax center's analysis. That's not to say higher-income households won't also receive some relief: About 11% of the proposed benefits will go to families making more than \$164,000.

Under the plan, the child tax credit not only gets a boost, but it also becomes refundable meaning families would receive

even more money. Low-income parents would be able to claim \$3,600 (up from \$2,000) for children under the age of 6 and \$3,000 for children under 18.

Nearly 80% of those expanded benefits will go to low- to moderate-income families, according to the tax center's analysis. The proposed changes to the child tax credit would help lift 11 million children out of poverty, says the Center for American Progress.

As for the earned income tax credit, the boost included in the bill would nearly triple the maximum credit for workers without children and extend eligibility to more people.

What if I need money right now? If you're running short on funds and can't wait for these tax

breaks, there are a few things you can do. If you're carrying some big debts, don't let interest weigh you down:

"Cut back on the cost of your debt. If plastic has been holding you up throughout the pandemic, you're probably facing a ton of expensive interest. Make your debt more affordable and easier to shake off by folding your balances into a single debt consolidation loan at a lower interest rate.

"Cut back on college costs. The average student loan borrower carries \$32,731 in debt, according to the Federal Reserve. Refinancing your student loan is quick, painless and could save you thousands in interest.

"Get a better rate on your mortgage. If it's been more than a year since you refinanced your home loan, you're overdue. And rates have been the lowest ever, so refinancing your existing mortgage could reap big savings. An estimated 16.7 million U.S. homeowners could reduce their monthly house payments by an average \$303 through a refi, according to mortgage tech and data provider Black Knight. Here are other ways to find some room in your budget:

"Get creative with savings. Cut back on your streaming services and get a library card for free entertainment. Instead of ordering takeout for family pizza night, make it at home together. And download a free browser extension that automatically hunts for the best deals and coupons whenever you shop online." Get new rates on insurance. If you're driving way less because of the pandemic, ask your auto insurance provider to give you a discount.

Biden, Pelosi, Schumer push \$1.9T stimulus as debt, deficit balloon to eye-popping amounts

The U.S. national debt will swell to nearly \$30 trillion if Democrats are able to ram through their COVID-19 relief package via budget reconciliation. The \$1.9 trillion spending package will grow the U.S. budget deficit to \$3.8 trillion in 2021 and put the government on a path to spend more money in one year than the previous 200+ years.

"Biden and company are set to borrow more money over the next 12 months than the U.S. government borrowed to finance the Revolutionary War, the Civil War, World War I, World War II, and the Cold War," wrote Stephen Moore, former economic adviser to President Trump, in his Committee to Unleash Prosperity newsletter. The bill, which includes \$1,400 direct payments to American households and extends federal unemployment

benefits, was approved by the House Budget Committee on Monday evening by a 19 to 16 tally, paving the way for a full House vote later week. Democrats hold a slim 221 to 211 majority in the lower chamber and the vote is expected to pass along party lines. Congress has already authorized about \$4 trillion in direct COVID relief.

"We must act swiftly to put an end to this pandemic and to stem the suffering felt by so many millions," House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif. said in a statement.

The size of the package has come under increased scrutiny from Republican lawmakers. Rep. Steve Scalise of Louisiana labeled the plan a "blue state bailout" for awarding \$350 billion to state and local governments to fix budget problems that have been festering

for years well before the pandemic began in March. The aid plan also grants \$750 million for COVID relief outside the U.S., \$100 million for a Silicon Valley underground rail project and \$50 million toward environmental justice purposes, among other things.

"If Republicans are ready to work with Democrats on constructive amendments that will improve the bill, we are ready to work," wrote Sen. Majority Leader Chuck Schumer of New York. "However, we must not allow Republican obstructionism to deter us from our mission of delivering help to Americans who desperately need this relief." Without amendments, the relief package could have a difficult time passing in the Senate, where two moderate Democrats, Joe Manchin of West Virginia and Kyrsten Sinema of

Arizona, have expressed concerns about backing the bill due to the inclusion of a \$15 federal minimum wage. The Senate's 50-50 split between Democrats and Republicans means both Manchin and Sinema, barring Republican defections, would have to support the measure before Vice President Kamala Harris could cast a tie-breaking vote.

Passage of the \$1.9 trillion COVID-19 relief package may not mark the end of Biden's unprecedented spending spree. Reports have been circulating in recent days that his administration has begun working on a recovery package that could address infrastructure, climate change, inequality or some of the other promises that Biden made on the campaign trail.

How a Winter Storm Tested Texas' Go-It-Alone Attitude

Texans have long prided themselves on bucking federal oversight and standing apart from the rest of the country. But this week revealed the risk that comes with that independence.

EL PASO — More than 4 million people across Texas lost power on Monday in the middle of a deadly winter snowstorm. In Austin, my father-in-law spent hours desperately searching for a place to stay and a way to get there, before making it to the safety of a hotel with the help of a heroic Uber driver. Friends texted me stories about putting on all their clothes and huddling under covers with their kids, braving icy roads to get to a relative's house where the lights were still on or making use of their formerly decorative fireplaces. They were the lucky ones.

Here, the lights were on, and that was how I learned that my new hometown, El Paso, is not just in a different time zone from the rest of Texas—it's also on a different power grid. The winter storm hit this border town, too. But even as demand surged, there were sources to help fill the need, and the outages were relatively minor.

El Paso's power lines are attached to the Western grid, which connects 14 states and parts of Canada and Mexico. The rest of Texas, however, is on its own grid—making it the only state that tries to manage its power independent from the rest of the United States. It was this energy grid that failed so catastrophically as people cranked up their heat while energy sources literally froze. The rest of the country experienced power outages too, but none as long-lasting or severe as in Texas—none that have turned into a humanitarian crisis. According to the operator of the Texas grid, the situation was so dire that the state avoided a months-long blackout by just a minute or two. Republican Governor Greg Abbott blamed the grid's managers—an independent nonprofit called the Electric Reliability Council of Texas, or ERCOT—calling on Wednesday for the council's leadership to resign. He and other Republican leaders here also pointed to the state's frozen wind turbines and condemned the rise of clean energy—going as far as to target the Green New Deal, even though it's a proposal, not federal law. (While the frozen turbines were a factor, natural gas wells, oil pipelines and coal-burning plants still dominate the Texas

grid, and they froze, too.)

But another way to see it is that the problem was the Texas system itself. With a standalone grid, and no access to power plants elsewhere, Texas couldn't draw power from other states and was forced to switch off power for whole swaths of the state to prevent permanent damage to the grid. The state also could have required energy producers to prepare better for the cold weather, as other states do, but that didn't happen either.

Texans have long seen this independence as a point of pride. Texas' independent grid was created a century ago in the image that Texans have of themselves: standalone, free from federal oversight and largely deregulated. But this week's blackout has come as a rebuke to that idea—or, at least, highlighted the limits of Texas as a brash, go-it-alone state, big enough not to have to rely on the rest of America. For six days, people living in the energy capital of the world have been without electricity in freezing cold temperatures. About 200,000 Texans are still without power, but millions are now without water, too—with lowest-income households hit hardest.

"It's tougher when you aren't interconnected and not part of the mix," says Pat Wood III, CEO of Dallas-based Hunt Energy Network and a former Texas and federal energy regulator. Wood, who was appointed to the Public Utility Commission of Texas by Governor George W. Bush, lost power for 36 straight hours in Houston before rolling blackouts kicked in on Tuesday. "At least you could recharge your stuff and cook dinner," he says.

I think a go-it-alone attitude within a republic of states is always a very tricky situation," adds Carlos Kevin Blanton, head of the history department at Texas A&M University.

As politicians call for investigations and committee hearings—with ERCOT as the focal point—energy experts say the council's leaders are being used as a scapegoat. ERCOT, which runs as a nonprofit with a board of directors, is overseen by the state Legislature and the state's Public Utility Commission, whose members the governor appoints;

all three of the commission's current members are Abbott appointees. An investigation might turn up more details, and possibly some serious failures on ERCOT's part, but it is state executives who ultimately make the decisions about the Texas energy grid.

"I always viewed ERCOT as the air traffic controllers and plumbing contractors for the state's electric grid, but the policymakers are the legislators and the [public utility commission]," says Ray Sullivan, who served as chief of staff to former Governor Rick Perry and also worked for Bush. Sullivan says he doesn't recall having a single meeting with ERCOT staff when he was working for Perry.

Texas took control of its grid in the 1930s after the Federal Power Act was passed to regulate interstate electricity sales. ERCOT was created in 1970 and took on more responsibility for managing the Texas grid over the following decades. The current structure of Texas' energy system has its roots in the mid-1990s, when the state government moved to deregulate the energy market here. ERCOT at that point became the country's first independent service operator. According to both Sullivan and Wood, Republicans and Democrats agreed back then on restructuring the state's power industry and breaking up utility monopolies in an effort to make the market more competitive.

"It didn't get that partisan," Wood recalls. "Everybody agreed wholesale competition made sense." A 1995 law required the state to study connecting the Texas grid to the rest of the country, but the resulting report recommended against it so the state could maintain access to cheaper power, according to Wood. A series of reforms over the next few legislative sessions in the late 1990s and early 2000s—the regular session lasts only 140 days every other year—focused on keeping energy costs low, especially for industrial customers, and bringing in new power companies. The reforms helped to usher in new technology, like wind and solar energy, while helping to meet demand for the state's burgeoning population—and keeping prices low.



ERCOT's role was and is essentially as the intermediary, mostly acting as a broker between energy buyers and sellers. It was never tasked with deciding on the state's overarching approach to energy policy; it just carries it out. While ERCOT does have to make sure the grid is reliable, it can't force changes such as infrastructure upgrades.

The trade-off that Texas lawmakers and regulators have made over the years, says Michael Webber, an energy resources professor at the University of Texas at Austin, is focusing on cost over reliability. Some states like Georgia require operators to maintain energy reserves almost double what Texas requires. This costs energy companies more money, but it also ensures that a grid is more reliable. Treating turbines, natural gas wells, coal plants and nuclear plants so that they can withstand winter weather also costs money. The state government in Texas, which has no state income tax, has avoided budgeting funds to prepare the grid for winter, knowing that customers would have faced higher bills.

"There is always a balance between just going as far as you can and keeping the market affordable," says Texas energy lobbyist Michael Jewell.

After a major winter storm knocked out power in Texas almost exactly a decade ago, federal regulators called on the state to fortify its grid against deep freezes. But the federal government had no authority to mandate such measures. Wood says this is typical of Texas' approach to federal oversight. Even though the federal intervention was "relatively benign," Texas still didn't want to deal with it. "I just threw my hands up in the air," he says.

Even at the height of the crisis

this week, Rick Perry said Texans would rather go without power for days than deal with federal energy regulations. Never mind that Texas readily accepts federal help when disaster strikes: So far this week, Abbott has made at least two official requests to the White House for federal aid.

Instead, for decades, Texas has let power operators decide whether and how to prepare for extreme weather. For the most part, they do this. Texas generators focus on summer, planning for peak demand from air conditioning during 108-degree August days, which are all too common in most of the state. These companies plan for minor winter storms, too. ERCOT said last week that it was ready for this week's storm. Of course, that turned out not to be true.

After the state was plunged into darkness, Abbott on Thursday asked the Legislature to mandate and find funding for the "winterization" of Texas' power system. But beyond this step, state leaders are unlikely to fundamentally change the Texas energy grid, by subjecting it to more federal oversight or connecting it to the rest of the country. Some Texas Democrats have said the state should consider joining the national grid, and there is a debate about whether it would have made a difference, considering the whole country was struggling with power problems over the course of a frigid week.

But it's unthinkable to Republicans governing the state, who still sell the idea of Texas' independence. This is the state, after all, where a Republican state lawmaker recently filed a bill to pave the way for Texas to leave the United States—a long shot, but a powerful symbol.

China can extend Hambantota port lease to 198 years, Sri Lankan minister says

Sri Lanka's foreign minister said the 99-year lease of the Hambantota port to China could be extended to 198 years, calling it a "mistake" made by the previous government, after reports that Colombo was revisiting the agreement.

The port deal – signed in 2017 by the previous Sri Lankan government to cover its debts to China – has been the subject of intense international scrutiny amid accusations Beijing is using "debt trap diplomacy" for geopolitical clout. Hambantota's location at the southern tip of Sri Lanka, overlooking South Asia's vital sea lanes, makes it a potential key maritime hub in the Indian Ocean.

Sri Lankan President Gotabaya Rajapaksa, younger brother of two-time former president Mahinda Rajapaksa, said he wanted to renegotiate the deal with China soon after he took office in late 2019, but later denied he had such a plan.

However, on February 6 the chairman of the Sri Lanka Ports Authority told Ceylon Today that the president was revisiting the port deal. General Daya Ratnayake also said Sri Lanka had not gained



much from the agreement and that it had relocated its naval base from the area controlled by China "after many discussions with the Chinese officials".

"We are revisiting the proposal even now," Ratnayake was quoted as saying. "It was unfortunate and such a deal on Hambantota port shouldn't have been done. But the review process is going on."

Foreign Minister Dinesh Gunawardena added to uncertainty over the deal on Saturday, telling the same newspaper that "the previous government made a mistake on the Hambantota port deal when they cancelled the lease and gave it on a longer period of 99 years plus another 99 years once the first term ends". But he did not say whether the government intended to make

changes to the agreement.

China on Wednesday denied the deal was being renegotiated, with foreign ministry spokesman Wang Wenbin instead saying that the port's operations were expanding.

"The relevant reports are inconsistent with facts," Wang said at a regular press briefing in Beijing.

He said the deal was negotiated

under an "equal and voluntary basis" between the two countries, and that it was intended to transform the port into a logistics, transport and industrial hub in the Indian Ocean. "With mutual efforts from the Chinese and Sri Lankan sides, the Hambantota port has overcome the challenges of the pandemic and has maintained good momentum in expanding operations," he said. The port deal, a key project in China's controversial Belt and Road Initiative, has been closely watched, with critics saying it could add to Sri Lanka's heavy debt burden, which could push Colombo to accept Beijing's geopolitical demands. Pang Zhongying, an international relations scholar with the Ocean University of China, said Beijing was likely to face more pressure over its activities in Sri Lanka given its growing rivalry with the United States and also India in the region. "Sri Lanka has long been in India's backyard and it has a complicated relationship with India. And as the [Joe] Biden administration pushes to deepen [America's] Indo-Pacific strategy, China is likely to face even more challenges in the region," he said.

America's unemployment problem is much worse than it seems

The national unemployment rate is masking how much some groups are still struggling in the pandemic economy. That's why the Federal Reserve looks at more than just the average jobless numbers to determine the nation's economic health.

"When we say maximum employment is a broad and inclusive goal, we don't only look at the headline numbers," Fed Chairman Jerome Powell said in his semi-annual testimony to the Senate Banking Committee on Tuesday. Some groups are bearing the brunt of the pandemic fallout, facing unemployment rates still higher than the national average, Powell told the committee.

Although the national jobless rate dropped to 6.3% in January, unemployment is much lower for White workers — at 5.7% — than for other groups: The Black unemployment rate was 9.2% in January, and the Hispanic jobless rate was 8.6%, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

The jobless rate for women over the age of 20 is the same as that for men: 6%. But this too doesn't tell the whole story. The pandemic has forced some women to drop out of the workforce to take on family care responsibilities, and they aren't counted in the unem-



ployment rate. Meanwhile, of the 140,000 jobs lost in the US in December, all were held by women.

Powell said he hoped these effects would be temporary, adding that it limited these workers' ability to fully contribute to the economy.

At the end of the day, "policies that bring the pandemic to an end would help," he said.

Senator Pat Toomey, the ranking member of the committee, said at the hearing's start that he would prefer that the Fed did not stray from its core objectives of

price stability and full employment to focus on racial inequality and climate change.

And while Powell acknowledged that fiscal policy, and not the blunt tools of monetary policy, are more appropriate to target issues of inequality, he continued to stress that added support for some groups is still necessary.

"The economic recovery remains uneven and far from complete, and the path ahead is highly uncertain," Powell said in his prepared remarks to the committee.

"The single best thing [the Fed] can do about that is to keep monetary policy accommodative," he told the senators.

The Fed has repeatedly signaled that it

won't raise interest rates as the unemployment situation remains grave and inflation is nowhere near its target of around 2%. But inflationary pressures could mount as the economy reopens fully this year. This expectation led to a rise in Treasury bond yields in recent days, which in turn caused some wobbles in the stock market. Bond prices and yields move inversely to one another.

Powell will return to Capitol Hill Wednesday to testify before the House Financial Services Committee.

India's groundwater crisis threatens food security for hundreds of millions, study says

Hundreds of millions of people in India face a serious threat to their livelihoods and food security due to overexploitation of vital water supplies, according to the authors of a new study. India is one of the world's biggest crop producers and more than half of its 1.3 billion people rely on agriculture for their livelihoods. But the groundwater that makes up 40% of the country's water supply has been steadily depleting for years.

The study, published Wednesday in the journal *Science Advances*, found that overuse of groundwater could cause winter harvests in some regions of the country to fall up to two thirds by 2025.

A team of international researchers analyzed satellite imagery and census data to gauge the impact on winter harvests, which account for 44% of the country's annual cropped acreage for food grains, according to the study. Winter agriculture relies heavily on groundwater irrigation -- as opposed to other seasons that can take advantage of heavy monsoon rains.

Indian food production has skyrocketed since the 1960s, as farmers began widely using tube wells, which draw water from deep underground. This has allowed them to continue farming even during dry seasons when there isn't rain or sufficient surface water -- but over-extraction has left "critically low groundwater availability" in the country's northwest and south, according to the research.

"Many studies have shown that India has large groundwater depletion, but to date it has been unclear what the impacts of this depletion could have on agricultural production," said lead author Meha Jain, an assistant professor at the University of Michigan's School for Environment and Sustainability.

The researchers found that if farmers in over-exploited regions lose all access to groundwater, and if that irrigation water isn't replaced by water from other sources, winter harvests could decrease by 20% nationwide and by 68% in the most severely affected areas. This is a worst-case scenario, and the damage could be mitigated if authorities take action and adopt alternative irrigation



options, the study said. The government has already been widely pushing the adoption of canal irrigation, which diverts surface water from lakes and rivers, and could help offset some of the losses.

But it's far from a perfect solution -- even if all regions currently using depleted groundwater switched to canal irrigation, winter harvests could still decline by 7% nationwide and by 24% in the worst hit locations, according to the study.

And canal irrigation comes at its own cost -- it would mean farmers are more vulnerable to weather changes, since lakes and rivers depend on rainfall. Groundwater is also a more equitable way to distribute water across villages, since wells are decentralized as opposed to large-scale canal projects.

"Our results highlight the critical importance of groundwater for Indian agriculture and rural livelihoods, and we were able to show that simply providing canal irrigation as a substitute irrigation source will likely not be enough to maintain current production levels in the face of groundwater depletion," said Jain in a news release.

Instead, the government needs to adopt a wide range of strategies -- for instance, switching from winter rice to less water-intensive cereals, the use of sprinklers and drip irrigation to conserve water, and policies to increase the efficiency of irrigation canals, according to the study.

Farmers hard hit

India's water crisis has been building for years, gaining international attention in 2019 when Chennai, the country's sixth largest city, faced an acute water shortage.

The city's four main reservoirs ran nearly dry due to insufficient rain-

fall and low groundwater levels. Water had to be trucked into Chennai from other states and regions, forcing hundreds of thousands of residents to stand in line for hours in the summer heat to receive rationed water.

It's a national problem: 100 mil-



lion people, including those in the large cities of Delhi, Bangalore and Hyderabad, face the threat of groundwater running out entirely, according to a 2018 report by Niti Aayog, an Indian government think tank.

The agricultural sector has been one of the hardest hit. The regions with the most severe water depletion fall along India's food bowl -- states like Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu, which support the whole country's food security, said Bharat Sharma, scientist emeritus at the International Water Management Institution, who was not involved in the study.

"The water table is depleting very fast in north India ... That is why the farmers started making use of groundwater, because surface water was not available and the explosive use of groundwater began," he said. "The cropping system we are using requires more water than is available."

The devastating effects of climate change have also added to the difficulties facing farmers. Monsoon rains, which they depend on to water their crops, have been

more erratic and droughts more common.

"Indian farmers are in a very challenging situation right now," Jain, from the University of Michigan, told CNN. "On top of groundwater depletion, there's also going to be negative impacts of climate change in the coming decades."

This years-long crisis has been linked to persistently high rates of farmer suicide, with many farmers driven to desperation by growing debts, bankruptcies and crop loss. Every year, more than 10,000 farmers and agricultural workers die by suicide, according to data from the National Crime Records Bureau. In 2019, that number was 10,281 -- aver-

age and artificially recharge depleted groundwater, using strategies like canals, injection wells, and groundwater reservoirs.

One sustainable solution could be changing the types of crops grown in different regions -- for instance, reducing up to 20% of the land used to grow rice and wheat in Central Punjab, said Sharma. These are thirsty crops -- replacing a portion with less water-reliant crops could turn the land "water neutral," meaning "the rate of depletion of water will be equal to the rate by the recharge."

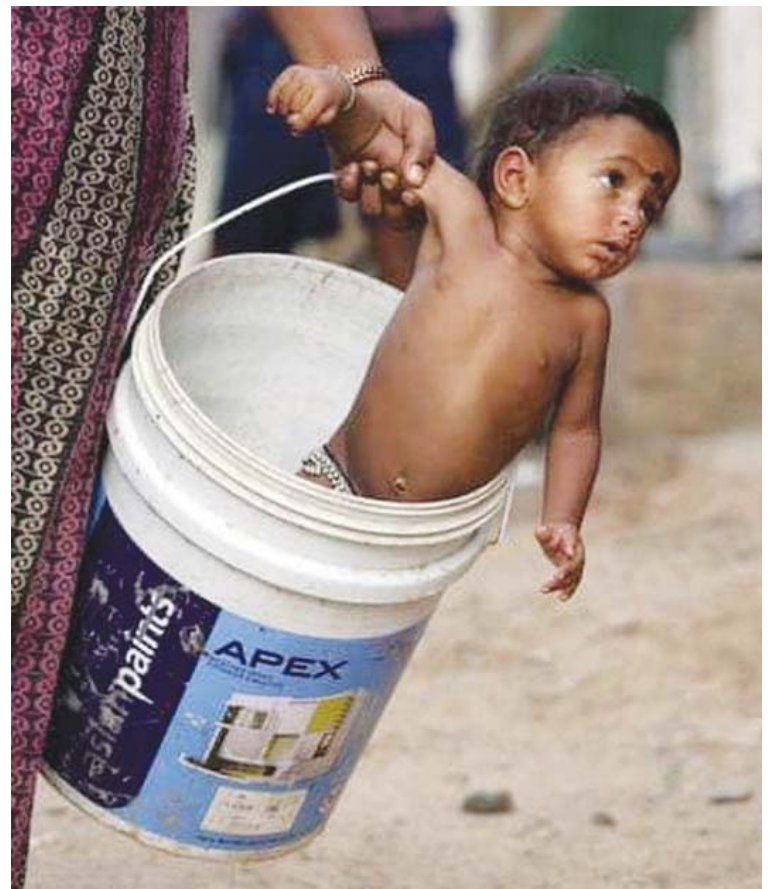
Prime Minister Narendra Modi made agriculture a key focus of his 2019 re-election campaign, pledging to double farmers' incomes by 2022. After he won, Modi created the Jal Shakti Ministry, a government branch focused on water resources, conservation and sanitation.

But efforts by Modi and his Bharatiya Janata Party to reform the agricultural sector have backfired. A series of new agricultural laws passed last September have prompted the biggest nationwide protests seen in years, that are still ongoing now months later.

Though the government says the laws are necessary to modernize the industry and grant farmers more autonomy, farmers fear the laws could instead allow big companies to drive down prices, thus further devastating their livelihoods.

aging 28 suicides a day.

The government has taken action in recent years to try to address these various crisis points. In 2020, the federal Central Ground Water Board agency released a "Master Plan" to con-





US cities are losing 36 million trees a year. Here's why it matters and how you can stop it

If you're looking for a reason to care about tree loss, this summer's record-breaking heat waves might be it. Trees can lower summer daytime temperatures by as much as 10 degrees Fahrenheit, according to a recent study.

But tree cover in US cities is shrinking. A study published last year by the US Forest Service found that we lost 36 million trees annually from urban and rural communities over a five-year period. That's a 1% drop from 2009 to 2014.

If we continue on this path, "cities will become warmer, more polluted and generally more unhealthy for inhabitants," said David Nowak, a senior US Forest Service scientist and co-author of the study.

Nowak says there are many reasons our tree canopy is declining, including hurricanes, tornadoes, fires, insects and disease. But the one reason for tree loss that humans can control is sensible development.

"We see the tree cover being swapped out for impervious cover, which means when we look at the photographs, what was there is now replaced with a parking lot or a building," Nowak said.

More than 80% of the US population lives in urban areas, and most Americans live in forested regions along the East and West coasts, Nowak says.

"Every time we put a road down, we put a building and we cut a tree or add a tree, it not only affects that site, it affects the re-

gion."

The study placed a value on tree loss based on trees' role in air pollution removal and energy conservation. The lost value amounted to \$96 million a year. Nowak lists 10 benefits trees provide to society:

Heat reduction: Trees provide shade for homes, office buildings, parks and roadways, cooling surface temperatures. They also take in and evaporate water, cooling the air around them. "Just walk in the shade of a tree on a hot day. You can't get that from grass," Nowak said. To get the full temperature benefit, tree canopy cover should exceed 40% of the area to be cooled, according to a recent study in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences. "A single city block would need to be nearly half-covered by a leafy green network of branches and leaves," the authors wrote.

Air pollution reduction: Trees absorb carbon and remove pollutants from the atmosphere.

Energy emissions reduction: Trees reduce energy costs by \$4 billion a year, according to Nowak's study. "The shading of those trees on buildings reduce your air conditioning costs. Take those trees away; now your buildings are heating up, you're running your air conditioning more, and you're burning more fuel from the power plants, so the pollution and emissions go up."

Water quality improvement: Trees act as water filters, taking in dirty surface water and ab-

sorbing nitrogen and phosphorus into the soil.

Flooding reduction: Trees reduce flooding by absorbing water and reducing runoff into streams.

Noise reduction: Trees can deflect sound, one reason you'll see them lining highways, along fences and between roads and neighborhoods. They can also add sound through birds chirping and wind blowing through leaves, noises that have shown psychological benefits.

Protection from UV radiation: Trees absorb 96% of ultraviolet radiation, Nowak says.

Improved aesthetics: Ask any real estate agent, architect or city planner: Trees and leaf cover improve the looks and value of any property.

Improved human health: Many studies have found connections between exposure to nature and better mental and physical health. Some hospitals have added tree views and plantings for patients as a result of these studies. Doctors are even prescribing walks in nature for children and families due to evidence that nature exposure lowers blood pressure and stress hormones. And studies have associated living near green areas with lower death rates.

Wildlife habitat: Birds rely on trees for shelter, food and nesting. Worldwide, forests provide for a huge diversity of animal life. Nowak says there's a downside to trees too, such as pollen allergies or large falling branches in storms, "and people don't like

raking leaves." But, he says, there are ways cities and counties can manage trees to help communities thrive. "You can't just say 'we're not going to have forests.' We might as well manage and work with the trees."

"You don't want a tree in the middle of a baseball field. It's very difficult to play sports if you have trees in the way. Or trees in the middle of freeways."

Nowak says we can design and manage tree canopies in our cities to help "affect the air, to affect the water, to affect our well-being."

Urban forests especially need our help to replace fallen trees. Unlike rural areas, it is very difficult for trees to repopulate themselves in a city environment with so much pavement and asphalt. "A lot of our native trees can't actually find a place to drop an acorn so they can regenerate," explains Greg Levine, co-executive director for Trees Atlanta.

"That's why the community has to go in and actually plant a tree because the areas just aren't natural anymore."

The job is not complete when the saplings take root. Organizations like Trees Atlanta and their volunteers plan most of their year to care for these young trees until they're mature enough to thrive on their own.

"We try to prune trees for 10 years to make sure they get a good healthy structure," Levine adds. "We also add mulch around trees to help keep the moisture in the ground so the

tree doesn't dry up. We have to have a lot of patience with planting trees around pavement, making sure that they can rise to the challenge."

How you can help stop tree loss
Protect what you have: Nowak says the first step is caring for the trees on your own property. "We think we pay for our house, and so we must maintain it. But because we don't pay for nature, we don't need to. And that's not necessarily true."

Prune the dead limbs out of your trees: If they're small enough, do it yourself or hire a company. The risk of limbs damaging your house is significantly lowered when there's tree upkeep, Nowak said.

Notice where your trees may be in trouble: Often, you can observe when something's wrong, such as when branches are losing leaves and breaking or when mushrooms are growing at the base or on the trees. You can also hire an arborist or tree canopy expert to assess the health of your trees on an annual basis. Or you can contact your local agricultural extension office for advice.

Don't remove old trees if it's not necessary: Instead, try taking smaller actions like removing branches. "It takes a long time for these big trees to get big: 50 to 100 years. And once they're established, they can live a long time. But taking a big tree out and saying 'we'll replant,' there's no guarantee small trees will make it, and it will take a very long time to grow."

Allow trees to grow on your property: Although everyone's aesthetic is different, it's the cheap way to get cooler yards and lower energy bills. It's also an inexpensive approach to flood and noise control.

Nowak says he laughs when his neighbors wonder why their property doesn't have more trees, because "I hear people running their lawn mowers." Fallen seeds need a chance to implant, and constant mowing prevents that. If you don't like where a seedling is growing, you can dig it up and plant it or a new tree where you like.

Educate yourself about trees and get involved: Many cities have tree ordinances that seek to protect very old, significant trees. You can get involved by attending city council meetings. You can also help your city plant trees by joining local nonprofit groups.

Gamestop Rallies Again; Some Puzzle Over Ice Cream Cone Tweet

(News Agencies)- GameStop Corp shares more than doubled in afternoon trading on Wednesday, surprising those who thought the video game retailer's stock price would stabilize after a fierce rally and steep dive that upended Wall Street in January. The shares soared nearly 104 per cent during the session in which trading was halted several times, then jumped another 85 per cent after hours.

The rally began after 2:30 p.m. (1930 GMT). Other so-called "stonks" - an intentional misspelling of 'stocks' - favored by retail traders on sites such as Reddit's WallStreetBets, also shot higher.

AMC Entertainment Holdings Inc gained 18 per cent, Koss Corp rallied more than 50 per cent and BlackBerry Corp rose nearly 9 per cent. Shares of Canadian cannabis company Tilray Inc gained nearly 13 per cent.

Analysts could not pinpoint one reason for the sharp move. At least one ruled out a short squeeze like that which fired the "Reddit rally" in January when mom-and-pop investors bought GameStop furiously to punish hedge funds that had bet against the retailer.

Some Twitter users pointed to an activist investor's tweet of an ice cream cone picture.

Others cited factors including a reshuffling of top executives and options trading. Shortly before 2

p.m., activist investor Ryan Cohen, a major shareholder of GameStop and founder of Chewy.com, tweeted a picture of a McDonald's ice cream cone with a frog emoji.

Some GameStop bulls wondered online whether it was a veiled message that Cohen would fix GameStop's business, like the fast-food chain fixed its ice cream machines. "I don't know what an ice-cream means," said Michael Pachter, an analyst covering GameStop at Wedbush Securities. "People are looking for signals." Others pointed to the resignation of GameStop Chief Financial Officer Jim Bell as the company focuses on shifting into technology-driven sales. "Game Stop announced the resignation



of its CFO last night. Some may have taken this as a good sign that RC Ventures is making a difference at the company in terms of trying to accelerate the shift to digital," said Joseph Feldman, an analyst at Telsey Advisory Group. Stephanie Wissink, analyst at Jefferies Research cited her research

report noting that the CFO resigned after the company settled with activist investor Ryan Cohen's RC Ventures. Her note said the chain of stores would likely signal a change in business model by going after "a CFO with a more extensive tech (vs retail) background."

When the fantasy of better battery science doesn't match reality



(News Agencies)- With billions of dollars flowing to electric cars, investors are eagerly waiting for the next breakthrough in battery technology - one that will

underpin the future adoption of green vehicles.

They may be waiting a while: The technical challenges of making better batteries (and therefore, electric vehicles) are enormous

and the expectations associated with them are even more fantastical.

Such disproportionate enthusiasm is misplaced. Battery costs, which make up almost half the expense of an electric car, have come down, while their energy density has gone up, meaning vehicles can go further. Government subsidies are helping too. Despite these improvements, we are nowhere near the affordability, guaranteed safety or optimistic forecasts of years past. In fact, installations of older battery technologies that are safer and cheaper are rising as

carmakers try to keep up with the hype.

It's clear the path to better batteries is far tougher and longer than all the rosy estimates.

Technology has been forced to chase investors' expectations. In China, the world's largest market for electric cars where sales are growing steadily, battery installations of so-called lithium iron phosphate, or LFP, batteries - the technology of the last decade - accounted for 38% of the market, up from 33% the year before. Such batteries lag behind newer ones by as much

as 30% in terms of energy density. The reality is, these powertrains are highly complex. Even as some promising advances are made, commercial viability remains a stumbling block. Chief among those hurdles is boosting energy density and along with it, safety. The more energy a battery has, the further a car can go. However, that also hastens the pace of degradation and shortens battery life. Several higher-density batteries don't have stable chemical compositions either, leaving them dangerously vulnerable to combustion.

AT&T accused of lobbying against sanctions on Chinese state-owned telecom company

(News Agencies)-AT&T pressured the Commerce Department to keep a Chinese military-controlled telecom company off the United States' sanction list despite its use of forced labor and other human rights abuses against Uyghur Muslims, former Commerce Department undersecretary Corey Stewart told "Tucker Carlson Tonight" Wednesday. Stewart verified allegations first reported by the National File, revealing that AT&T executive Ed Gillespie requested that the department keep China Telecom off of what is called the "entities list," reserved for foreign companies who are engaged in human rights or national security

violations. China Telecom, headquartered in Beijing, is involved in a joint venture with AT&T -- which owns Warner Media, the parent company of CNN -- and was set to be sanctioned due to its alleged support of human rights abuses by China's Communist government.

"It was very disturbing because we had a lot of indications, there is very good intelligence out there, that the Chinese government, through its basically state-owned subsidiary of China Telecom has been using cell phone technology, telecommunications technology, to track minority populations in China, to spy on them, and then

to hand this information over to the China police state, and they are rounding up the Uyghur population..." Stewart said. Stewart cited intelligence revealing that the Chinese government was regularly "placing these people in essentially modern-day concentration camps, where there is widespread reports of gang rapes, torture, human rights abuses, potentially even executions and genocides happening in these camps, and China Telecom was assisting the government of China in helping to do that." When we learned of this, of course, the Trump Administration began to place China Telecom on the entities list, to put sanctions upon them, when



we were contacted by Ed Gillespie, the executive vice president of AT&T, who urged us not to place China Telecom, despite these abuses, on the entity list. Needless to say, we were pretty much shocked by that." Stewart added that AT&T's action "doesn't make sense unless you assume that despite

what CNN and its corporate parent say about protecting minorities and standing up for human rights, it's all a lie, and what they are actually doing is placing profit over and above human rights, over and above U.S. national security concerns. And you know, I have to say that AT&T is not alone."

I Care a Lot movie review:

Rosamund Pike is in Gone Girl mode in devilishly entertaining dark comedy on Netflix

I Care a Lot movie review: Rosamund Pike is in proper Gone Girl mode in director J Blakeson's devilishly entertaining dark comedy, out on Netflix.

I Care a Lot

Director - J Blakeson

Cast - Rosamund Pike, Eiza Gonzalez, Peter Dinklage, Dianne Wiest, Chris Messina
Congratulations to David Fincher for watching Rosamund Pike in *Pride & Prejudice* like the rest of us, but being the only one to notice that she had a hint of mania in her eyes. Had it not been for Fincher, who famously cast Pike against type in *Gone Girl*, Hollywood might have pigeonholed her into forgettable action sequels, or playing sharply dressed attorneys opposite whichever white male was hot at the moment. We most certainly wouldn't have had the pleasure of watching her flex her inner psychopath in director J Blakeson's *I Care a Lot*, out in India on Netflix, and in certain other territories on Amazon

Prime Video. Equal parts Fincher noir and Guy Ritchie caper, *I Care a Lot* is precisely the sort of film that Blakeson should've made after his phenomenal debut, *The Disappearance of Alice Creed*, had he not been sidetracked by the allure of a possible Hollywood franchise. Like *The Disappearance of Alice Creed*, which incidentally also starred a former Bond girl (Gemma Arterton), *I Care a Lot* is a mashup of many genres. It begins as a dark comedy about a scheming woman, turns into a crime movie midway through, and towards the end, blossoms into a full-blown satire. Ros Pike plays a high-stakes grifter named Marla, who scams unsuspecting old people by having them declared unfit to take care of themselves, and subsequently assumes their guardianship. Once the poor old folks are

under her care, she takes over their assets and proceeds to rob them of their life savings. She carries out her operation in broad daylight, working within legal parameters as much as possible, which is something that Blakeson highlights regularly - Marla is able to get away with her scam not by slipping under the radar, but by walking confidently through loopholes in the law.

Even though most of the elderly that she zeroes in on are fully capable of taking care of themselves, they're eventually rendered helpless after all - by the same machinery that should be protecting them. Marla has, at her disposal, corrupt men and women working within the judiciary, the healthcare sector, and even the assisted living facility where she transfers her prey. Everyone gets a slice of the pie.



But Marla gets the biggest.

Things quickly go south for her, however, when her newest victim turns out to be the mother of a Russian gangster, played by Peter Dinklage. She is presented with two options: take a hefty bribe and release the woman from her clutches, or risk losing her life. "There are two kinds of people in this world: lions and lambs," Marla says in her opening narration, almost as if she is channeling Balram Halwai from *The White Tiger*. And after pausing for effect, she continues, "I am not a lamb. I am a f**king lioness." It is with this ruthless-

ness that she decides to ignore open threats, and instead extort the gangster for \$10 million.

I Care a Lot belongs to the Gillian Flynn school of feminism, which proposes, rather boldly, that the act of taking back control in a male-dominated society shouldn't be reserved for honourable women. Because after all, there's a gender imbalance in the world of villainy, too. And that is the film's greatest success. *I Care a Lot* is a devilishly entertaining film, featuring a central performance that simply steamrolls over any and all narrative creases.

Eeswaran Movie Review:

Simbu excels in this largely satisfying rural drama



Eeswaran, starring Simbu and Niddhi Agerwal, released in theatres today (January 14) on the occasion of Pongal. Barring a few cliches, Simbu's film is definitely a crowd-pleaser, says our review. Eeswaran isn't a great film, but director Suseenthiran gets many things right. At a time when fans are longing to witness that energetic Simbu on screen, which has been missing for years now, Suseenthiran delivers a perfect rural entertainer that serves just that. The screenplay has been developed in a manner to please both the star's fans and

family audience. Unlike the actor's previous films, there is adequate emotion in the script which works big time. The film begins with the introduction of Periyasamy (Bharathiraja), his wife Paapathi (Vinodhini) and their four kids, who lead a happy life in a small village near Tenkasi. The director takes almost 10 minutes to introduce his family members to the audience and these scenes are structured very similar to director Pandiraj's *Namma Veetu Pillai* and *Kadaikutty Singam*. After his wife's death, Periyasamy raises his kids all alone and helps them lead a

better life in the city. His only request to them was to visit him every year on their mother's death anniversary. However, their busy lives don't let them keep their promise. After almost 20 years, Periyasamy's sons and their family members decide to stay in their hometown for a month due to the increase in the spread of Covid-19 in Chennai. Eeswaran (Simbu), a caretaker of Periyasamy, is delighted and makes all the arrangements for them to reach home safely despite the lockdown. Eeswaran's only motive is to safeguard Periyasamy's family and help him to lead a peaceful life. Trouble begins when an astrologer visits their place and predicts that their family is in danger. Much to their grief, a rape accused, who served a sentence because of Periyasamy, sends them death threats. Can Eeswaran save Periyasamy's family or will he become the most misunderstood person in the

house?

Though Eeswaran revolves around Simbu's character, he isn't glorified. That's one of the reasons why the film works. Bharathiraja and his son Manoj Bharathiraja (who plays the younger version of Periyasamy) occupies major screen time and it's refreshing to watch. With Eeswaran, Suseenthiran once again proves he can make commercial films that strike a chord with all. There's nothing quite new, and it's pretty much everything that we have witnessed before. But he has managed to put it across in a different way. The father-son sentiment, which comes in the second half of the film, is one of the highlights. Simbu and Bala's scenes together have worked big time and it is something to watch out for. Their comedy track helps one overlook the flaws in the film, which comes with such rural dramas. Suseenthiran also managed to incorporate a romantic track between Simbu and Niddhi Agerwal, keeping the audience

engaged. Though too many characters disturb the flow of the film, the director makes sure that the screenplay is engaging. The flashback portions featuring Manoj Bharathiraja (Periyasamy) and Parvathy reveal secrets about Simbu's past which comes as a surprise in the second half.

S Thaman's background score has helped the audience connect with some of the emotional sequences in the film. Especially songs like *Velli Nilavu* and the Eeswaran title number add a lot of value to the script. Saving the best for the last though Simbu's last few films didn't do well at the box office, the charm and the energy that he carries throughout this film would help him to get back his lost fans. His transformation in the lockdown did help bring back the aura that we missed in him for a long time. It looks like the star is truly back in business. Overall, Eeswaran, is an engaging rural drama that will largely satisfy the family audience this festive season.

Gangubai Kathiawadi Teaser: Alia Bhatt As Mafia Queen Is The Fear And Strength Of Kamathipura

The Gangubai Kathiawadi teaser, shared on Wednesday, is Alia Bhatt's gift birthday gift to director Sanjay Leela Bhansali. "Happy Birthday Sir... I can think of no better way to celebrate you and your birthday. Presenting a part of my heart and soul. Meet... Gangu," Alia wrote in her note to Sanjay Leela Bhansali while sharing the teaser on Twitter. Alia Bhatt plays the titular role in Gangubai Kathiawadi, which is based on a chapter from Hussain Zaidi's book Mafia Queens Of Mumbai. The character Alia Bhatt portrays - Gangubai Kathiawadi - was a sex worker in Mumbai's Kamathipura, who was pushed into prostitution at an early age. She became synonymous with power and strength for her inspiring journey as the head of a brothel and a political leader of Kamathipura. Strength. Power. Fear," is how Sanjay Leela Bhansali had described Alia Bhatt's character and teaser intensifies the concept. The Gangubai Kathiawadi teaser begins with a glimpse of Alia Bhatt as the source of light in the Kamathipura. "Gangu chand thi, aur chand hi rahegi," says Alia Bhatt. Soon, we are introduced to Gangubai's rough and tough mantra: "Live with dignity. Don't be afraid of anybody - neither the police, nor the MLA or ministers or anybody." The teaser features glimpses of Gangubai's early life as a sex worker and wraps with Gangubai being elected as the President of Kamathipura. Karan Johar, who launched Alia Bhatt in Bollywood, couldn't contain his excitement as he tweeted: "With

Alia Bhatt and Sanjay Leela Bhansali working together, it's bound to be magical.... What a brilliant teaser! Super super proud of you baby girl! Can't wait to see this on the big screen!" Gangubai Kathiawadi marks Alia Bhatt's first collaboration with Sanjay Leela Bhansali. The film has booked July 30 as the release date.



How Sonu Ke Titu Ki Sweety sold us old misogyny in a new bottle. On Monday Masala



The phrase 'old wine in a new bottle' is a particularly unique one. Aside from its obvious connotation, it also stands as a reminder as to why a 2.0 version of the same thing worked - because we were already sold on it in the first place. Luv Ranjan's Sonu Ke Titu Ki Sweety was quite that - a reminder of the decades of misogyny systematically sold to us under the garb of a Bollywood entertainer. Old wine in new bottle, anyone? There was quite the stir in this wine bottle though, at the time of release. Many pointed out that Monologue King Kartik Aaryan was once again going after 'golddigger' Nushrat Barucha, which was both a gross generalisation of womenfolk as well as a net-net of every Luv Ranjan film in recent times.

Between spewing hate on Luv and Sunny Singh's overdependence on bachpan ka dost Kartik, sometimes weirdly so, Sonu Ke Titu Ki Sweety went on to become a superhit. Why? We decode on Monday Masala. In Luv Ranjan's universe, women are to be blamed for everything, not Nehru. Luv doesn't even try to conceal his warped thoughts. He, in fact, makes his lead, Sonu (Kartik), the overprotective dost to the ever-indecisive Titu (Sunny) say, "Girls cause pain," about Sweety (Nushrat). Now, Luv has carved a niche for himself with such films, and the Pyaar Ka PUNCHNAAMA series is proof. But the reason he managed to do so is because there was a thriving market for the same already. He only needed to identify his TG and stop trying to appease anyone

else. WOMEN, THE GOOD, THE BAD AND THE UGLY Back in the 80s, Bollywood saw an onslaught of films that sold the idea of a joint family as opposed to a nuclear one. We saw sons walking out of their parents' homes, either after being manipulated by their vamp-like wives or after being driven away because of unmotherly step-moms. The root cause was the same - a woman - and perhaps in many ways an extension of Kaikeyi as both the manipulative wife and the unmotherly step-mom. In the early 2000s, when sex comedies became popular, women were portrayed as mere distractions, seductresses who moved only to manipulate the men around them. Ahem, Menka.

Suhana Khan is living it up in New York with her friends, shares new adorable pic



Suhana Khan is enjoying her life to the fullest in New York. From gorgeous party pictures with her friends to stunning snowy views of the city from her window, the star kid frequently shares updates with her fans. Recently, she posted a photo of herself with her friends on Instagram. Yes, she looked stunning. SUHANA KHAN IS A BEAUTY IN NEW PIC Suhana Khan posed with her girlfriends making the most of New York's golden hour. In a black ribbed tee, she looked radiant in her make-up and sported pink lipstick. Suhana also kept her hair neatly parted. Sharing the perfect snap, the star kid made a heart on her Instagram

story. SUHANA KHAN PARTIES WITH HER FRIENDS A couple of days ago, Suhana Khan shared glamorous pictures of herself from a party in New York. She can be seen donning a two-piece bodycon beige dress and looked absolutely breathtaking. She opted to keep her hair open and had her make-up on point. As for accessories, Suhana wore statement earrings and a neckpiece. She completed her look with red high heels. Suhana Khan posed with her friends at the party. Her girlfriends chose to wear in little black dresses. Sharing the glam photos, she wrote, "L8r, not. now (sic)."



From the makers of Hindi Medium, Angrezi Medium and Bala comes a hilarious social comedy **Dasvi** starring Abhishek Bachchan, Yami Gautam and Nimrat Kaur. With debutant director Tushar Jalota, the film is written by Ritesh Shah. Jio Studios & Dinesh Vijan Present **Dasvi**. Produced by Dinesh Vijan, Sandeep Leyzell and Shobhana Yadav.

Janhvi doubles the trouble in Panghat



Mirror mirror on the wall, Janhvi's set to charm us in the cinema hall! Audiences are in for quite a killer combo as Janhvi Kapoor dons not one, but two super looks in *Panghat*, the latest track from her upcoming horror comedy *Roohi*. A demure dame in one part, a smoking siren in another, the actress switches from adorably innocent to scintillatingly scary while shaking a leg with co stars Rajkummar Rao and Varun Sharma. The *Dhadak* star can also be seen dressed in ravishing red as well as blistering black in the catchy melody. The track is composed by music maestros Sachin-Jigar, penned by ace

lyricist Amitabh Bhattacharya and crooned by singers Asees Kaur and Dev Negi. Not just a groovy tune with foot thumping music, what is unique about the number is the way it retains the surreal and eerie feel that the film offers. On crafting such an enjoyable chartbuster, musical duo Sachin-Jigar say, "Once in a while, there is a combination you can strike for a song. Quirky, stylish, modern yet familiar, and catchy! That is *Panghat* for us. With Maddock and Dinoo (Dinesh Vijan) sir we have always done newer funkier things, but this is also our association with Amitabh Bhattacharya after a long while".

Chloe Ferry, 25, puts on a sizzling display in a tiny red thong bikini after it was revealed her 'engagement' to Wayne Lineker, 58, was a 'wind up'

She was the talk of Twitter on Wednesday night after her *Celebs Go Dating* co-star Wayne Lineker, 58, announced they were 'engaged'. But after it was revealed the proposal was wind-up, Chloe sent pulses racing as she took to Instagram to share a slew of scantily-clad snaps on Thursday.

The *Geordie Shore* star, 25, showcased her killer curves in a tiny red thong bikini as she seductively sat on her hot tub. The plunging triangle bikini top highlighted Chloe's surgically-enhanced cleavage while the tiny bottoms hugged her peachy derriere. The reality star wore her long hair in a half up half down do and enhanced her bronzed tan with a glamorous make-up look. She cheekily captioned the

shot: 'Coming in.....?'. On Wednesday evening, Chloe and Wayne tricked fans into believing they were set to tie the knot as they staged an engagement photo - with Chloe flashing a huge diamond on her ring finger.

They posed for a loved-up Instagram snap from the E4 show mansion, with Chloe showing off a huge dazzling diamond ring.

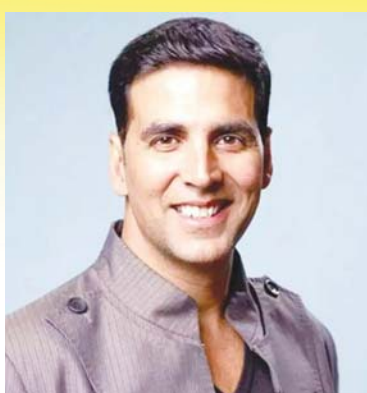


Akshay Kumar Awarded 'Best Actor' at the DADASAHEB PHALKE International Film Festival Awards 2021

International megastar Akshay Kumar has continued to show why he is one of the most loved stars of Indian cinema as he claimed the award for 'Best Actor' at the annual Dadasaheb Phalke International Film Festival Awards.

Since 1969, the Dadasaheb Phalke International Film Festival Awards have honoured the best in Indian cinema, television, music, and OTT. It is named in honour of the 'father

of Indian cinema' Dadasaheb Phalke, a renowned producer-director-screenwriter. With the impact of Covid19 wreaking havoc on the entertainment industry, many blockbusters have been halted, while companies have seen drastic losses in revenue in what has been one of the toughest ever periods for the industry in India and abroad. However, the awards still went ahead this year as the releases which did make it on to our screens over



the past year certainly brought smiles to our faces during such uncertain times. Akshay Kumar,

who is one of the most celebrated actors in the world, was recognised for his outstanding performance in the hit film *Laxmii*, which revolves around a man who gets possessed by the ghost of a transgender person.

In addition to this success, other notable award winners were Deepika Padukone, who won 'Best Female Actor' for her role in *Chhapaak* while the late Sushant Singh Rajput was posthumously honoured with

the 'Critic's Best Actor' award. Despite a 30-year career in the industry, Akshay Kumar shows no signs of slowing down. The actor continues to go from strength to strength as his work ethic and efforts to help those effected by the pandemic throughout the past 12 months have won many plaudits.

Later this year, fans will get to enjoy seeing him on screen soon again with films such as *Sooryavanshi*, *Prithviraj* and *Bell Bottom*.

To stop climate disaster, make ecocide an international crime. It's the only way

(SAI Bureau)- The Paris agreement is failing. Yet there is new hope for preserving a livable planet: the growing global campaign to criminalize ecocide can address the root causes of the climate crisis and safeguard our planet - the common home of all humanity and, indeed, all life on Earth.

Nearly five years after the negotiation of the landmark Paris agreement to limit greenhouse gas emissions and associated global warming to "well below 2.0C above pre-industrial levels and to

pursue efforts to limit the temperature increase even further to 1.5C", we are experiencing drastically accelerating warming. 2020 was the second warmest year on record, following the record-setting 2019. Carbon in the atmosphere reached 417 parts per million (ppm) - the highest in the last 3m years. Even



if we magically flipped a switch to a fully green economy tomorrow, there is still enough carbon in the atmosphere to continue warming the planet for decades.

The science is clear: without drastic action to limit temperature rise below 1.5C, the Earth, and all life on it, including all human beings, will suffer devastating consequences. Yet only two countries - Morocco and the Gambia - are on track to meet the 1.5C target. The largest emitters, including the United States, China, Russia and Saudi Arabia, are putting the world

on course for 4C. At that rate, the polar ice caps will melt, causing dramatic sea level rise that will - in combination with other devastating effects like strengthening storms and droughts - cause mass famine, displacement and extinction.

(Contd on page 36)

A solar panel in space is collecting energy that could one day be beamed to anywhere on Earth



(SAI Bureau)- Scientists working for the Pentagon have successfully tested a solar panel the size of a pizza box in space, designed as a prototype for a future system to send electricity from space back to any point on Earth.

The panel -- known as a Photovoltaic Radiofrequency Antenna Module (PRAM) -- was first launched in May 2020, attached to the Pentagon's X-37B unmanned drone, to harness

(Contd on page 36)

Two years after arrest, UK court paves way for Nirav Modi extradition



(SAI Bureau)- A UK court Thursday ordered the extradition of fugitive jeweller Nirav Modi - wanted by the Central Bureau of Investigation and the Enforcement Directorate in a Rs 13,500-crore bank loan fraud case - to India. The UK Court delivered the verdict holding that the evidence against Modi was prima facie sufficient to order his extradition to India to face the charges. The Court also upheld the assurances of the Indian government and rejected the submissions of defence regarding human rights violations, fair trial, and prison conditions. Declaring it was satisfied with all conditions necessary for extradition, the court said,

(Contd on page 35)

Manhattan DA receives Trump's tax returns

(SAI Bureau)- The Manhattan district attorney has 'millions of pages' of Donald Trump's tax returns and financial records, the prosecutor's office said Thursday. Cy Vance's office spokesman, Danny Frost, said it had received the documents within hours of the Supreme Court refusing to hear Trump's attempt to keep the records from them. They were handed over by his longtime accounting firm Mazars, which had promised to comply with the subpoena as soon as it was upheld by the courts. Vance's prosecutors are investigating whether Trump committed tax fraud through inflating the value of his properties to get loans and deflating them for tax purposes, and are also believed to still



be investigating hush-money payments to Stormy Daniels and Karen McDougal over their claims of having sex with him. In a three-word statement after the Supreme Court ruled on Monday, Vance said only: 'The work continues.'

Trump had blasted the ruling on Monday, saying: 'This investigation is a continuation of the greatest political Witch Hunt in the history of our Country.' In a nearly-400 word statement, clearly dictated by Trump himself,

he recited a litany of past complaints by the former president: calling the investigation a 'witch hunt,' blasting former special counsel Robert Mueller, and falsely claiming he won the election.

(Contd on page 35)