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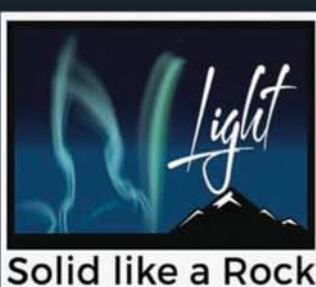
Why are Indian farmers protesting?

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi says recently enacted farm laws will free farmers from bullying middlemen; farmers say they fear big corporations.

Some of India's farmers are among the country's poorest people, but government policies have long protected them from the ravages of open market prices. Just like the big fish eat small fish, big businesses will eat us up now, says a farmer camping outside India's capital, Delhi



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Turkey and Vegetarian bags giveaway by Rotary Club of Hicksville South



how 100 turkeys and 50 bags of vegetarian items as well as other non-vegetarian food cans were so systematically distributed as the pre-registered recipients in their cars passed by. Special thanks to all guests, Nassau County Executive Laura Curran, Nassau County Asian American Affairs Exec. Dir. Farah Mozawala and Office of Hispanic Affairs and the Office of Minority Affairs, Nassau Exec. Dir. Lionel Chitty who attended with several volunteers & staff and RCHS members, Vice President Rizwan Qureshi and Shashi Malik, Services Director Jasbir Singh, Past Presidents Roopam Maini and Quddus Mohammed, Project Chair and Secretary Mizan Rahman, Jt. Secretary Aleya Jung, Project CoChair, Tahira Sharif, Member Sandy Bhatia and Treasurer Arjen Bathija who were present to help and share this amazing giveaway experience. The County Executive recognized this wonderful initiative and charitable effort with Citation awards given out to, Nilima Madan,



President of this Rotary Club, Vice President Rizwan Qureshi as a major donor for this event, Project Chairs Secretary Mizan Rahman and Tahira Sharif besides Hunter Brodman of Casanova Market Inc. for providing excellent quality turkeys for a discount as his effort to help.

(Insider Bureau)- Rotary Club of Hicksville South, Long Island, recently organized the Turkey and vegetarian food giveaway drive in Nassau County. It was well time spaced for 100 cars, pre-planned with prior registration of needy recipients, amazing teamwork, and a noteworthy collaboration with the Nassau

County Asian American Affairs, Office of Hispanic Affairs and the Office of Minority Affairs, Nassau. Under the leadership of President Nilima Madan, Rotary Club has shone once again in this pandemic year with its spirit of volunteerism and philanthropy work! It was a fascinating experience to see and witness



Indian Doctor Cleared Of Molestation Charges In UAE



(Insider Bureau)-An Indian doctor in the UAE has been cleared of the charge of sexually molesting a woman after a Botox therapy session at his clinic in Dubai. The Dubai Court of First Instance heard that the 31-year-old American victim had earlier said in court that in August this year, she visited the clinic in Bur Dubai when the 42-year-old doctor put his hands on her cheek, kissed her twice and hugged her, the Gulf News reported on Wednesday. "After the defendant put the Botox on my face, I went to the consultation room based on his request to discuss plastic surgery. I was exhausted and was terrified of Botox and also because of a recent break-up with my friend. I was surprised when

the defendant put both of his hands on my cheek and kissed me twice," she said on record. She claimed that the Indian defendant tried to kiss her on her lips, but she moved her head away and tried to leave the room. "He tried to calm me down and said I needed to rest, but he hugged and kissed me again," the victim added. The woman managed to escape from the clinic and alerted Dubai Police. Prosecution charged the defendant with sexually abusing the woman. However, the court found the doctor not guilty, the report said. Prosecution has appealed against the verdict and the case has been referred to Dubai Court of Appeal. A date for hearing the appeal will be set later, it said.



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)



Dr. Manju Sheth: An Inspiring Role Model For Women



(By Ajay Ghosh) A physician by profession, having a passion for media and commitment to serve the larger humanity, with special focus on women's empowerment, Dr. Manju Sheth is a Board Certified Internist, currently serving patients at Beth Israel Lahey Hospital in the Boston Region in Massachusetts.

Dr. Sheth wears many hats to her credit. A multi-tasker and with full of energy, Dr. Sheth says, "If you want to do something in life then you will find a way." It has not been easy to be "a physician, mother, media personality, and be involved in our vibrant New England community and the media world, but each of my involvements is truly important to me, and I give my full heart and energy to each of them. I always remind myself, that anything worth having has to be worked for."

Recalling her childhood, growing up in India, and about her ambitions in life, Dr. Sheth says,

"Growing up in a close-knit family, I had a wonderful childhood with two great parents and two wonderful brothers." Dr. Sheth is proud that "I have made

stories." Having endowed with the gift of writing, Dr. Sheth is known to be a natural storyteller and "I truly believe that every life has a story and a dream. I'm

unauthentic in what I do. I am very creative with a big vision, always looking to create & conceptualize the next exciting project. I am also a very positive

and women empowerment, this noble initiative was co-founded by Dr. Sheth, her daughter, Shaleen Sheth, and her close friend, Deepa Jhaveri. The new global



my mom's dream a reality by becoming an accomplished Doctor."

Dr. Sheth had a passion for writing from school days onwards. "I always loved to write and was also the editor of my school magazine and wrote for local magazines as well. Although journalism was not the most popular career for women

in India, always looking to hear stories of everybody's life, in everyone that I meet, and then I look to find the right platform and the right medium to showcase it." Her popular "Chai with Manju" celebrity series is one of the most read news features in the New England region, where she featured celebrities and spiritual leaders such as Sadhguru, Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, the Kennedys and the like. Dr. Sheth was the co-founder and CEO of INE MultiMedia, a non-profit organization devoted to promoting and supporting charitable organizations, art, culture, education and empowerment through workshops, seminars and multimedia. Dr. Sheth is a former trustee of the Indian-American Forum for Political Education. Dr. Sheth is very dedicated to the education of the community about health related issues, and is also the producer and chair of the annual free mega Health & Wellness Expo.

"I am a very genuine person, what you see is what you get," says Dr. Sheth about herself. "There is nothing fake or

person and make conscious effort to not have any negativity around me because I believe that negativity & conflicts crush creativity." Dr. Sheth has been a big advocate for empowerment of women and she has invested her time, energy and efforts all her life more than any other cause. "I've always had a passion for women empowerment, and I bring that to all the projects and opportunities I pursue," she says. She has served on the board of ATASK (Asian Task Force Against Domestic Violence) and as the Chairperson of Saheli, a prestigious Boston based organization, whose mission is to empower South Asian women to lead safe and healthy lives.

Having served on spreading awareness on women's rights, Dr. Sheth says, "My biggest focus right now is the new Women who win # Dreamcatchers platform where we showcase dreams, passions & life lessons of a women's journey on our website, womenwhowin100.com and on multiple social media platforms. And this initiative keeps me stay motivated each and every day." Born out of combination of her passions for both media

media platform is founded with the "mission to empower women across all ages, industries, and backgrounds, bringing women from around the world together daily with our inspiring, relatable, and relevant original stories," Dr. Sheth explains. "With thousands of members and daily readers, our membership and our readership spans over 80 countries, and across the United States on our multiple social media channels." How does this new platform reach and inspire women across the world, especially during the Covid pandemic? The new and unforeseen challenges did not deter the creative energy of Dr. Sheth. "We wanted to bring positivity and inspiration, reminding women to continue chasing their dreams and make it a reality. Through story-sharing and skill-sharing, we equip our readers and members to pursue their next dream. By voicing their story on our platform, they see that their dream is achievable, and there is a whole network of women and mentors around the world encouraging them and celebrating each other.



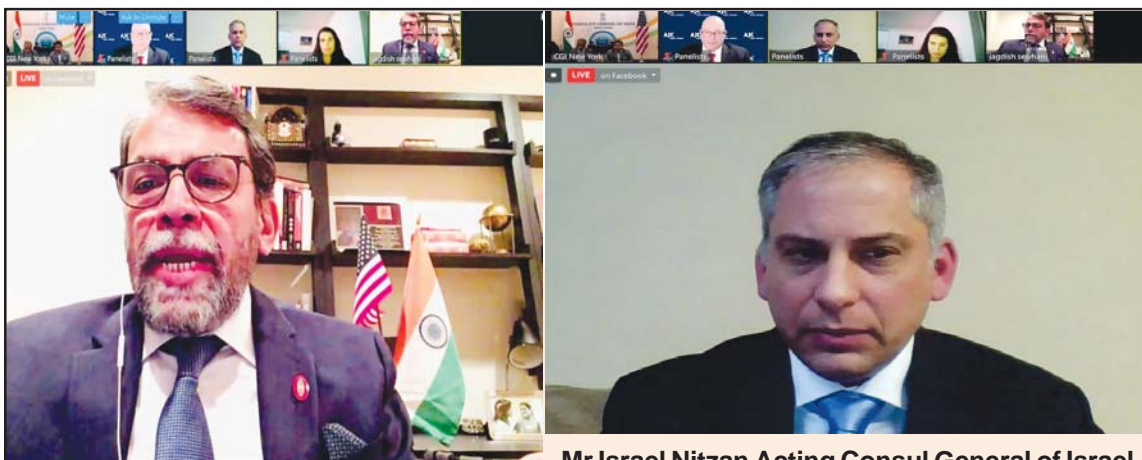
Commemorative Anniversary of 26/11 Mumbai attack jointly Organized by Indian Americans and Jewish Americans in New York



Shatrughan Sinha , Dy Consul General, Randhir Jaiswal , Consul General of New York, Rabbi David Levy, Regional Director : American Jewish Committee, Adva Vinchinsky , Consul fir Public Diplomacy, Jagdish Sewhani President: The American India Public Affairs Committee



Mr Shatrughna Sinha Dy CG , Randhir Jaiswal Consul General of India in New York



Jagdish Sewhani

Mr Israel Nitzan Acting Consul General of Israel in New York

(Insider Bureau)- Addressing a Commemoration Anniversary of 26/11 attacks in Mumbai Organized jointly by The American India Public Affairs Committee and American Jewish Committee in New York Mr Jagdish Sewhani a prominent community Leader and President of the American India Public Affairs Committee described The November 26, 2008 terrorist attack on Mumbai, the worst terrorist attack that India has ever seen, One that shook the world after 9/11.

A group of terrorists, In fact, they were 10 terrorist commandoes from Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) trained by Pakistani establishment and its ISI goon to create mayhem in India's financial capital. said Mr Sewhani.

At least 174 innocent lives were lost, including nine LeT terrorists. Several of the dead were foreign nationals including from Israel and the United States of America. More than 300 people were wounded. We will never forget those four days in 2008. It's etched in our memory for ever said Mr Sewhani.

Mr Sewhani further said that 12 years later, under Prime Minister Narendra Bhai Modi, with unprecedented co-operation from Israel and the US, India is a much safer place. Under the dynamic Leadership of Prime Minister Modi, the Indian government has taken strong steps against terrorist groups, its sympathizers and financiers, both inside India and outside, we appear to have won several battles against State-sponsored terrorist groups from across the border, said Mr Sewhani.

Pakistan today is more isolated than ever. It's in a financial crisis. Globally there are no takers for its BS, even in the Islamic world, but its masters continue to survive and thrive in Pakistan. The Pakistani Army, in particular ISI, has not given up on its anti-India activities. Terrorist training camps continue to exist in Pakistan and terrorists continue to try sneak inside India, said Mr Sewhani.

Mr Sewhani further said that It's a matter of pride and thanks to our ever-alert security officials, intelligence agencies and armed forces, most of the time, we have

been successful in preventing their nefarious activities.

But remember, they have to be successful once to create a mayhem like the one we witnessed 12 years ago. This is because the jihadi factories continue to exist in Pakistan, ISI continues to fund and train anti-India terrorist, perpetrators of Mumbai terrorist attack continue to roam freely in Pakistan.

Pakistan continues with its anti-India propaganda inside the country and globally Mr Sewhani urged Jewish friends, in particular the powerful and influential AJC ; American Jewish Committee to support India to impress upon the next Biden Administration not to restore financial aid to Pakistan. The Epicenter of Terrorism.

It is a matter of great satisfaction that President-elect Joe Biden and Tony Blinken, who has been nominated as the Secretary of State, have said that they have zero tolerance against terrorism in South Asia. President-elect Biden understands the ground realities in South Asia and what Pakistan is up to, said Mr

Sewhani. Thanking President Donald Trump for standing with India in the hour of crisis after the Pulwama terrorist attack, Mr Sewhani said that It is under him that the United States for the first time stopped all security assistance to Pakistan.

It was during his administration that UN Security Council declared Azhar Masood, the mastermind of Mumbai terrorist attack, as a global terrorist.

Consul General of India in New York Mr Randhir Jaiswal said that it is important for the world and Global community for justice that those responsible are brought to book. Pakistan must do what is required to bring the perpetrators of this heinous crime to justice. Mr Jaiswal described the 26/11 attacks as ghastly attack unknown annals of history.

As in time of Covid19 the world has come together to fight this pandemic, we must all come together to fight terrorize, a global problem tooth and nail. Let's remember on this occasion those who fell to the barbaric and bloody bullets of insanity and inhumanity and those who sacrificed life to save our tomorrow, said Mr Jaiswal.

Mr Jaiswal said terrorism needs a very strong global cooperation and called on the international community to ensure that the Comprehensive Convention on International Terrorism, Which India sponsored at the UN, is adopted at the earliest.

Mr Israel Nitzan, Acting consul General of Israel in New York said that country was shocked by the barbaric Terrorist attacks carried out against innocent civilians and foreign tourists

across Mumbai in November 2008.

He stressed that Israel, India and U.S. share deep bonds based on shared experiences. This Horrific attack in Mumbai strengthens our deep bond and friendship, Mr Nitzan said.

Mr Nitzan said that we will not allow terrorism to break us, the attack is a lesson about our resiliency. The objective of attack in Mumbai was to cripple the economy, society and its vivid and wonderful culture and they (terrorist) Failed miserably. Indian Economy has continued to grow stronger, its Society is resilient and the relations with Israel grows stronger. We will not allow hate to prevail said Mr Nitzan.

The presence of Chavda House in Mumbai, which also came under attack, is testimony to the tolerance and acceptance of other traditions, beliefs and pluralism of Indian society. Mr Nitzan said that Israel, India and the U.S. have extraordinary cooperation in counterterrorism and fighting hate and radicalism.

Mr Shatrughna Sinha India's Dy Consul General said that 12 years after the heinous attack the perpetrators of this Ghai attack are still roaming free. Acts of terror not only violate the right of life of the individual who suffers these Attacks but also families whose rights are also violated.

Mr Sinha also shared profiles of few individuals and foreign nationals who lost their lives in the Mumbai Attack. Among them were Rabbi Gavriel and his wife Rivka, who was five months pregnant at the time, who was killed when Pakistani terrorist stormed Nariman House.

Indian-origin scientist-led US team finds new system to extract oxygen from Mars's salty water

A US team led by an Indian-origin scientist has developed a new system that extracts oxygen from Mars' salty water.

(News Agencies)-A new system that can extract oxygen and hydrogen fuel from the salty water on Mars has been developed by a team in the US, led by an Indian-origin scientist. According to a report in Edexlive, the new finding by the team, led by Vijay Ramani, a professor at the Washington University in the US, has the potential to change the logistics of future mission to Mars and beyond.

How does the new system work? As per the report, the researchers noted that Mars is very cold, and water that is not frozen is almost certainly full of salt from the Martian soil, which lowers its freezing temperature. Using the existing method of electricity to break the briny water down into oxygen and hydrogen fuel requires removing the salt, which is a cumbersome and a costly endeavour in a harsh, dangerous martian environment, they said.

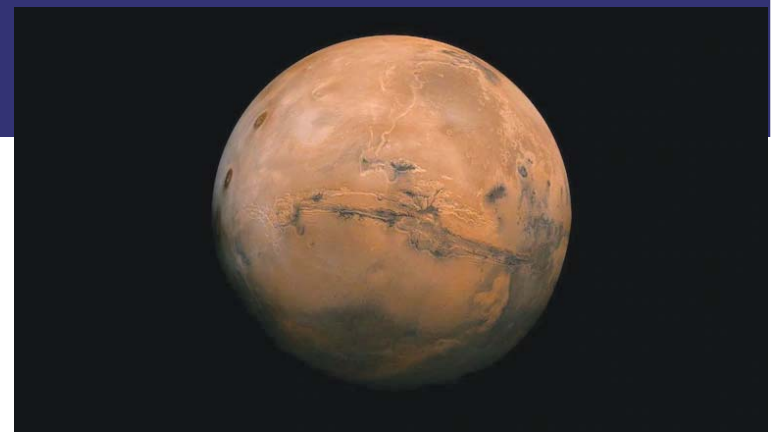
The team examined the new system in a simulated Martian

atmosphere at minus 36 degrees Celsius. "Our Martian brine electrolyser radically changes the logistical calculus of missions to Mars and beyond. This technology is equally useful on Earth where it opens up the oceans as a viable oxygen and fuel source," the report quoted Ramani as saying. In 2008, Nasa's Phoenix Mars Lander "touched and tasted" Martian water, vapours from melted ice dug up by the lander.

Oxygen, fuel needed to live on Mars - Since then, the European Space Agency's Mars Express has discovered several underground ponds of water which remain in a liquid state thanks to the presence of magnesium perchlorate salt. In the journal Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences (PNAS), the researchers noted that in order to live - even temporarily - on Mars, not to mention to return to Earth, astronauts will need to manufacture some of the necessities, including water and

fuel, on the Red Planet, the report said. New system better than Nasa's - Nasa's Perseverance rover that is en-route to Mars will be producing oxygen only, from the carbon dioxide in the air. It will be using the Mars Oxygen In-Situ Resource Utilization Experiment (MOXIE). The system developed in Ramani's lab can produce 25 times more oxygen than Nasa's rover using the same amount of power, said the researchers, adding it also produces hydrogen, which could be used to fuel astronauts' trip home.

"Our novel brine electrolyser incorporates a lead ruthenate pyrochlore anode developed by our team in conjunction with a platinum on carbon cathode" Ramani said. "These carefully designed components coupled with the optimal use of traditional electrochemical engineering principles has yielded this high performance," the report quoted Ramani as saying. The careful design and unique anode allow the system to function without



the need for heating or purifying the water source, the researchers said. "Paradoxically, the dissolved perchlorate in the water, so-called impurities, actually help in an environment like that of Mars," Edexlive quoted Shrihari Sankarasubramanian, a research scientist in Ramani's group as saying. "They prevent the water from freezing and also improve the performance of the electrolyser system by lowering the electrical resistance," said Sankarasubramanian who is also the joint first author of the research paper on the study.

New system better than water electrolyser Water electrolyser typically use highly purified, deionized water, which

adds to the cost of the system, according to the researchers. A system that can work with "sub-optimal" or salty water, such as the technology demonstrated by the team, can significantly enhance the economic value proposition of water electrolyser everywhere, even on the Earth, they said. "Having demonstrated these electrolyser under demanding Martian conditions, we intend to also deploy them under much milder conditions on Earth to utilize brackish or salt water feeds to produce hydrogen and oxygen, for example through seawater electrolysis," the report quoted Pralay Gayen, a postdoctoral research associate in Ramani's group as saying. He is also a joint first author on the study.

Indian-Origin Man Charged With His Mother's Murder In London



(News Agencies)- A 31-year-old Indian-origin man has been charged with the murder of his mother and produced before Wimbledon Magistrates' Court in London on Friday.

Shanil Patel was arrested following an incident at a home in Greenford, west London, on Wednesday, when his mother, 62-year-old Hansa Patel, was found dead with head injuries.

"This follows an incident on Wednesday, November 25, at an address in Drew Gardens,

Greenford, where a woman died after being found with head injuries. Shanil Patel is the son of Hansa Patel," the Metropolitan Police said in a statement.

A murder investigation was launched after the incident and police appealed for information after being called to reports of an injured woman at the home in Greenford. Officers and paramedics, as well as a police helicopter, went to the area and found her with injuries to the head.

Earlier this week, the Met Police said detectives had an "open mind" about the motive and asked anyone with information to urgently get in touch.

"This is a devastating incident and my thoughts are with the victim's family at this difficult time," Chief Superintendent Peter Gardner, of the Met's West Area Command, said at the time. Indian-Origin Man Charged With His Mother's Murder In London

The man was produced before Wimbledon Magistrates' Court in London on Friday. (Representational)

London: A 31-year-old Indian-origin man has been charged with the murder of his mother and produced before Wimbledon Magistrates' Court in London on Friday. Shanil Patel was arrested following an incident at a home in Greenford, west London, on Wednesday, when his mother, 62-year-old Hansa Patel, was found dead with head injuries.

Indian-Origin MP In New Zealand Takes Oath In Sanskrit

(Insider Bureau)- Dr Gaurav Sharma, one of the youngest and newly-elected MPs in New Zealand, on Wednesday took oath in Sanskrit in the country's Parliament. Dr Sharma, 33, hailing from Himachal Pradesh's Hamirpur, was recently elected as the Member of Parliament from the Labour

deep respect for cultural traditions of both India and New Zealand. "Dr Sharma, who did his MBBS from Auckland and MBA from Washington, is working as a General Practitioner (GP) in Nawton, Hamilton. He has previously been involved in public health, policy, medicine and consulting



in New Zealand, Spain, the US, Nepal, Vietnam, Mongolia, Switzerland and India. Replying to a Twitter user who asked why he didn't take oath in Hindi, Dr Sharma said it is

Party for Hamilton West in New Zealand. India's High Commissioner to New Zealand and Samoa, Muktesh Pardeshi said on Twitter that Sharma took oath first in "New Zealand's indigenous Maori language, followed by India's classical language - Sanskrit, showing

hard to keep everyone happy so he decided Sanskrit as it pays homage to all the Indian languages. To be honest I did think of that, but then there was the question of doing it in Pahari (my first language) or Punjabi. Hard to keep everyone happy.

Olive ridley turtles return to Odisha beach for nesting

Gahirmatha beach in Kendrapara district is acclaimed as the world's largest-known nesting ground of these endangered marine species. Apart from Gahirmatha, these aquatic animals turn up at Rushikulya river mouth and Devi river mouth for mass nesting.

(News Agencies)- Forest personnel on patrolling drives have sighted pairs of mating turtles. For undisturbed breeding of the aquatic animals, prohibition on sea fishing continues to remain in force in the marine sanctuary, they said. Gahirmatha beach in Kendrapara district is acclaimed as the world's largest-known nesting ground of these endangered marine species. Apart from Gahirmatha, these aquatic animals turn up at Rushikulya river mouth and Devi river mouth for mass nesting.

"On the serene surface of sea waters, the turtle surveying teams spotted hundreds of mating pairs along the Gahirmatha coast. Fishing prohibition is presently clamped in Gahirmatha zone to ensure disturbance-free mating of the marine animals," said Divisional Forest Officer, Rajnagar Mangrove, Bikash Chandra Dash.

After the end of the mating season, most of the male turtles usually return, leaving behind the female turtles to lay their eggs, he said. The female turtles virtually invade the nesting beaches, usually at the dead of the night for laying eggs, the phenomenon described as 'arribada'.

After indulgence in instinctive egg-laying, the turtles leave the nesting ground to stride into the deep seawater. Hatchlings emerge from these eggs after 45-60 days.

It is a rare natural phenomenon where the babies grow without their mother, the officer said.

The ban on sea fishing remains in force round the year in Gahirmatha marine sanctuary as the seawater here is the most conducive habitat for these delicate species.

The rise in the mortality rate of mating turtles along the coastal water surface led to the clamping of prohibition as the gill nets

used by the trawls prove to be messengers of death for breeding turtles.

The mute species, accorded schedule-1 animal under Wildlife Protection Act for its highly threatened status, get entangled in the nets for prolonged periods and die of asphyxiation. Many turtles also perish after getting hit by the fast-moving propeller of the fishing trawlers, forest officials said.

The rate of mortality of these endangered species is quite high. An olive ridley usually lays about 120 to 150 eggs from which hatchlings emerge after about 45 to 60 days. But not all eggs remain intact as predators devour it.

Besides, eggs are also washed away by sea waves during high tide. The eggs are incubated in the nest and grow, sans mother, to emerge as hatchlings, they said.

Around 7.30 lakh olive ridley turtles had turned up for their



annual sojourn of mass nesting in the 2019-20 season. The female turtles had emerged from

the sea to crawl on to the serene beach and dig pits to lay millions of eggs.

Declare journalists who die of coronavirus as Covid-19 warriors: Press council to Centre

(News Agencies)- The Press Council of India (PCI) has written a letter to the Centre and state governments saying journalists, who die of coronavirus, be treated as Covid-19 warriors like doctors and offered benefits that those at the forefront of fighting the pandemic get. It has sought group insurance schemes for journalists such as the one implemented by the Haryana government.

"The Council recommends to the Central Government to include the journalists, who died due to

Covid-19, in the category of Covid warriors like the doctors and others and confer them with the same benefits," the letter said.

The Centre has announced Rs50 lakh compensation for doctors and other frontline workers who die fighting the pandemic.

Press Associations such as the Indian Journalists Union, Indian News Cameramen Association, and National Union of Journalists have also submitted a memorandum to Prime Minister Narendra Modi to declare journalists as Covid-19 warriors.

Former Haryana chief minister Chautala tests Covid-19 positive



(News Agencies)-Former Haryana chief minister Om Prakash Chautala, 85, has tested positive for Covid-19 and has been admitted to Gurugram's Medanta Hospital, a state health department official said.

The official, who spoke on the condition of anonymity, said Chautala was admitted to the hospital on Wednesday and has symptoms like fever and cold. "Considering his age, several other tests were also conducted to keep a check on his health condition. Currently,

his condition is stable."

A leader of Chautala's Indian National Lok Dal also confirmed the former chief minister has tested positive for the disease after he attended his grandson's wedding. "The wedding reception of Chauatala's grandson took place at a Sirsa farmhouse on November 30. It was a closed family function with limited gathering."

The hospital authorities did not immediately comment about Chautala's illness.

India's Covid-19 caseload crosses 9.5 million with 35,551 new cases

Health minister Harsh Vardhan said on Wednesday that the Covid-19 pandemic taught countries that such challenges require shared responsibilities and collaborations had become the order of the day.

(News Agencies)- India on Thursday recorded 35,551 new cases of the coronavirus disease (Covid-19), which pushed the country's overall tally to 95,34,964, according to Union health ministry update at 8 am. The number of active cases stood at 4,22,943, while 89,73,373 patients have been cured or discharged from hospitals.

The health ministry data also showed that in the last 24 hours, 526 people died due to the disease and the death toll now stands at 1,38,648.

India's total active caseload significantly dropped to 4.28 lakh (4,28,644) on Wednesday, the lowest after 132 days, according to the health ministry. It further said that India's present active caseload consists of just 4.51 per cent of the country's total positive cases.



Health minister Harsh Vardhan said on Wednesday that the Covid-19 pandemic taught countries that such challenges require shared responsibilities and collaborations had become the order of the day.

Vardhan was charing the inaugural session of the annual conference of the India-Sweden Healthcare Innovation Centre under the Sweden-India Nobel

memorial week.

Meanwhile, the difference in new recoveries outnumbering new cases has also improved the recovery rate to 94.03 per cent as on date, according to the health ministry.

Of the new recovered cases, 78.35 per cent are observed to be concentrated in 10 states and union territories, it further said.

CCTVs must in offices of CBI, ED, police stations: Supreme Court

With the aim of preventing custodial torture, the Supreme Court on Wednesday ordered for installation of CCTV cameras in the offices of the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI), Enforcement Directorate (ED), the National Investigation Agency (NIA) and other agencies, in addition to police stations across the country.

(News Agencies)-With the aim of preventing custodial torture, the Supreme Court on Wednesday ordered for installation of CCTV cameras in the offices of the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI), Enforcement Directorate (ED), the National Investigation Agency (NIA) and other agencies, in addition to police stations across the country.

Extending the ambit of its 2018 order, the top court maintained that not only police stations but all the other agencies, which have the power to make arrests and interrogate, must also have CCTVs and recording devices installed in their premises. Therefore, the bench headed by Justice Rohinton F Nariman directed the central government to get CCTV cameras with audio-recording facility installed in the

offices of CBI, ED, NIA, Narcotics Control Bureau (NCB), Department of Revenue Intelligence (DRI), Serious Fraud Investigation Office (SFIO) and all such agencies.

"As most of these agencies carry out interrogation in their office(s), CCTVs shall be compulsorily installed in all offices where such interrogation and holding of accused takes place in the same manner as it would in a police station," directed the bench. In 2018, the court had passed a judgment for bringing all police stations under the surveillance of the CCTV cameras to check human rights abuses. For this purpose, all states were required to constitute independent committees that could study CCTV camera footages and periodically publish reports of its

observations.

Further, this judgment asked the Central government to set up a Central Oversight Body (COB) and provide necessary funds so that it could issue necessary directions to states and union territories to facilitate videography of the crime scenes and compliance with other directions of the apex court.

Two years on, when the bench sought to evaluate the progress made by the states, it noted severe deficiencies in complying with its judgment across the board. At this point, the court sought assistance of attorney general KK Venugopal and appointed senior advocate Siddhartha Dave as amicus curiae (friend of the court) to navigate the matter to a fruitful outcome.

After receiving suggestions from



Venugopal and Dave, the bench expanded the ambit of its order and included central agencies too. Besides, the court order made SHO of each police station responsible for upkeep and maintenance of CCTV cameras. The cameras need to be installed at all entry and exit points, main gate of the police station, all lock-ups, reception area, officials' rooms, and station hall.

The court has directed the states to make sure that good quality cameras with high resolution, night vision and a recording

retention facility for at least a year are purchased and installed immediately in all police stations. It added that a State Level Oversight Committee, comprising secretary or additional secretary from home and finance departments, director general of police or inspector general of police and a member of the state women's commission, must also be constituted to make certain the court's directions are duly complied with, besides taking care of budgetary allocations and supervision at the state level.

Bar Council of Delhi writes to PM Modi, calls for repeal of farm laws



(News Agencies)-Extending support to farmers' protest against new farm laws, the Bar Council of Delhi has written a letter to Prime Minister Narendra Modi urging him to repeal the new farm laws. The letter said it seems that while framing the laws, it was not brought to the notice of Prime Minister that they are "more detrimental" to the interest of legal professionals across the country.

It said "bar of civil court jurisdiction" will substantially affect district court as well as high courts in some states.

The letter said the nature of subject matters covered under

these laws are so vast that all disputes up till now entertained by civil courts will be adjudicated by SDMs/ADMs, who are not part of regular courts.

Senior Advocate Ramesh Gupta, Chairman Bar Council of Delhi, said the government should have consulted and taken lawyers into confidence when farm laws are simply not related to routine revenue matters but matters which are basically contractual and commercial. "How can any litigation having civil consequences be given for adjudication to a structure involving administrative agencies, controlled and run by executive authorities?" he asked.

"Your kind attention is invited to constitutional provision for separation of judiciary from executive to maintain its independence and probity as enshrined under the Constitution but by resorting to these laws, what is not permissible under our Constitution has been provided," the letter said.

"It will substantially damage district courts in particular and uproot the lawyers. Under our Constitution, a fine pyramid of justice dispensation system has been envisioned. The district courts are part of basic structure and being the principal courts of original jurisdiction is the

According to the lawyer's body, these laws are not only detrimental to the peasants but also affect the lawyer community, the litigants and the general public.

foundation of the pyramid. These courts are at the doorstep of people, where one approaches for access to justice but the trend in the recent past is to destroy courts. This will seriously jeopardize the interest of the public, as getting justice at the doors of bureaucracy is far from reality," it added. According to the lawyer's body, these laws are not only detrimental to the peasants but also affect the lawyer community, the litigants

and the general public. "The mindset behind the move to oust the jurisdiction of civil courts and transfer of power to bureaucrats, acting as executive officers, to decide disputes between the traders and the farmers, will lead to corruption, and touts will victimize unimaginably. Shutting the doors of civil courts to entertain disputes, pertaining to the subject matter under these Acts will prove disastrous," the letter said.



Most of Delhi borders closed, farmer leaders accuse govt of indulging in divisive agenda



(News Agencies)- The Centre will hold another round of talks with farmers on Thursday, in a bid to end the protest over farm bills that has severely affected traffic movement in and out of Delhi. The farmers have been protesting near Delhi for more than a week, jamming roads and engaging in confrontation with the police which are guarding the national capital's borders.

Here are updates on farmers protest and what the government

is doing:

- The Delhi Traffic Police tweeted on Thursday morning that the Chilla border on Noida link road is closed for traffic due to farmers protests near Gautam Budh Gate. It also said that people who want to go to Noida from Delhi should use NH-24 and Delhi-Noida Direct (DND) flyway.
- On the Haryana side, Tikri border, Jharoda border and Jhatikra border are closed, according to Delhi Traffic Police.

"Available open borders to Haryana are following: Dhansa, Daurala, Kapashera, Rajokri NH 8, Bijwasan/Bajghera, Palam Vihar and Dundahera borders."

- Meanwhile, a delegation of farmers will meet Union agriculture minister Narendra Singh Tomar on Thursday. A spokesperson of Bharatiya Kisan Union (BKU), which is spearheading the protest, said on Wednesday that all farmer organisations across the country

should hit the streets now.

- Several farmers from different parts of the country like Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh are marching towards Delhi to join the protest against new farm laws.
- Punjab chief minister Amarinder Singh will meet Union home minister Amit Shah at his residence on Thursday, ahead of the talks between the Centre and farmer leaders. Singh will hold deliberations with Shah in a bid to work out an amicable solution to the deadlock.
- The Punjab chief minister and his Congress party have been supporting the farmers' stir and the state Assembly had also passed a set of bills aimed at negating the Centre's farm legislation.
- The Centre has, however, maintained that the new farm laws, passed by Parliament in September, are in the interest of farmers. Agriculture minister Narendra Singh Tomar said the

reforms have been done after a long wait and the government is ready to address their concerns.

- The leaders of the protesting farmers wrote to Tomar on Wednesday, demanding a special session of Parliament to repeal the new farm laws and asking the government to not "indulge in divisive agenda" to break farmers' unity.

• The government had held talks with farmer representatives on Tuesday. But the outcome remained inconclusive as farmer unions rejected the government's offer to set up a committee and said they will continue their protest.

• The farmers are protesting against The Farmers' Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Act, 2020, The Farmers (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement on Price Assurance and Farm Services Act, 2020, and The Essential Commodities (Amendment) Act, 2020.

Scribe held on way to Hathras: 'Shocking findings' have emerged during probe



(News Agencies)- The Uttar Pradesh government told Supreme Court on Wednesday that "shocking findings" have emerged during the investigations into the arrest of Kerala journalist Siddique Kappan near Hathras on October 5 and his alleged links with radical Muslim organization Popular Front of India (PFI). Seeking time to file a response to the affidavit filed on behalf of Kappan by Kerala Union of Working Journalists (KUWJ), Solicitor General Tushar Mehta who appeared for UP government said, "Accused is not before the Court. How can an association contest a habeas corpus petition on his behalf... He (Kappan) claims to be a journalist of a paper called Thejus which closed three years ago. Investigation conducted so far against him is shocking."

A three-judge bench headed by Chief Justice of India (CJI) SA Bobde told senior counsel Kapil Sibal appearing for KUWJ to approach the Allahabad High Court and asked for any precedent where an association or union has filed a habeas corpus on behalf of an accused lodged in jail for a criminal case. Sibal agreed to add Kappan's wife as a party to their petition. The bench, also comprising Justices AS Bopanna and V Ramasubramanian said, "Even if you implead the wife (of Kappan) we will still ask you why should you not go to the High Court." Sibal gave the instance of the Supreme Court interfering directly on the arrest of journalist Arnab Goswami and cited this as a precedent for the Court to step in where individual liberty was concerned.

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Centre must pay heed to protesting farmers' concerns, dispel fears

The present farmers' movement began to take shape in Punjab when the three ordinances were promulgated in the first week of June. These ordinances were converted into bills for the enactment of three Acts in Parliament and passed hurriedly, ignoring serious objections within both Houses and the opposition outside. The farmers started a widespread mobilisation within Punjab — holding flag marches in villages, demonstrations in cities and dharnas in front of the houses of MPs and MLAs. They formed a front of 31 farmers' unions in the state and held rallies in Chandigarh. They decided to remain completely peaceful in their movement. They also constituted a committee to hold talks with the government at various levels. They got these Acts translated into Punjabi and held extensive discussions between themselves and experts in the state and outside to sharpen their understanding of the gamut of issues related to the economics of farming and the implications of the new legislation. They also held meetings with the Punjab chief minister to do something to block the implementation of these Acts to save the future of farming and farmers. During the Parliament session in October, one of the oldest allies of BJP, the Shiromani Akali Dal, came out in support of the farmers and its representative in the Union cabinet resigned. This forced the Punjab government to pass a resolution in the state assembly not to implement the laws. This resolution was supported by all political parties except the BJP and submitted to the Governor for approval. The approval of this resolution is still awaited. The farmers started protesting in front of the houses of BJP leaders, toll plazas on highways, Reliance petrol pumps and shopping malls and occupied railway lines to block the movement of trains. The Government of India suspended the movement of goods trains to discontinue the movement of grains from Punjab, and coal, fertiliser and other goods into Punjab. This was done so that the farmer unions would be blamed for the blockade of all commodities. The nature of the peaceful protest not only got the support of political parties but a wide range of people, including traders, commission agents, trade unions, teachers, writers, poets, singers, artists and lawyers. At this stage, the Punjab farmers began to contact farmers from other states to oppose the three laws. Initially, farmers from Haryana began to join them, followed by those from Uttarakhand, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and others. The Centre invited the Punjab farmers to Delhi for talks but they were met only by the agricultural secretary, not a Union

minister, leading the farmers to walk out. This episode led to the government losing some of its credibility. But the farmers did not lose hope and faith in negotiations. The farmers then thought of putting pressure on the government by moving their protest from the states to Delhi from November 25-26. As they began to move towards Delhi from Punjab and Haryana, the Haryana government began to put serious restrictions on their entry on the highways passing through its territory. When farmers tried to cross the barriers, the police used tear gas and water cannons to stop them. They were also lathi-charged at some places. But the farmers remained peaceful despite the provocations from the Haryana police. Rather, they provided lunch to the cops who lathicharged them. The farmers contend that the Acts will be extremely harmful to agriculture. These laws, they argue, have been enacted to involve big players in the trade of agricultural commodities by amending the Essential Commodities Act 1955 and withdrawing the Food Corporation of India (FCI) from public procurement of foodgrain like wheat and paddy. This was also recommended by the Shanta Kumar committee. By removing the ceiling on stock holdings for wholesale traders, processors of agricultural produce and exporters, the government is preparing to withdraw from the procurement of foodgrain and hand it over to the corporate players. The government is thrusting contract farming on farmers in association with corporates who represent crony capitalism and whose track record in contract farming is not up to the mark. This is also borne out by an earlier, very bitter experience of farmers in Punjab, and recently with the sugar mills, which did not pay them for 3-5 years. The Farmers (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement Act takes out the dispute resolution mechanism from the purview of courts and hands it over to the SDM (sub-divisional magistrate) and the DC (district collector) — who are perceived as being under pressure from their political masters. The Farmers Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Act allows any trader with a PAN card to trade in agricultural commodities anywhere in the country. They will be exempted from any tax, cess or fee charged under the Agriculture Produce Market Committee (APMC) Act, which are used for rural development and market infrastructure. This is a fabulous favour to traders. This also allows many traders to operate in agricultural commodities trading and lure farmers and cheat them. The government argues that these laws facilitate the farmers to sell anywhere in the country to get maximum prices.

What Biden's top economic priority must be

When President-elect Joe Biden assumes office in January, he will face economic challenges that are arguably greater than any president has dealt with since Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

Since January, nearly one in seven Americans have lost full-time work. Permanent job losses have erased almost seven years of gains, and the nature of today's unemployment exposes some of our most vulnerable citizens to the worst economic hardships. All of this comes against the backdrop of a rapidly surging Covid-19 pandemic.

As 2020 draws to a close, we say goodbye to the worst year for our economy since the Great Depression. However, all the news is not bad news. There are no obvious financial bubbles, and given the stock market expansion, consumers and investors appear confident about the long run. Meanwhile, American household savings are substantially better than a year ago. Moreover, the end of the pandemic could unleash strong economic growth from pent up demand. And the news about vaccine development provides more certainty about the end date of the pandemic.

Still, the short-term economic damage from the pandemic will likely persist for several more years. And the long-term damage, particularly to children and young adults, may last for decades. Because of this, Covid-19 relief should be the first economic policy priority of the Biden administration.

The next round of Covid relief must accomplish two things. First, it must extend the supplemental pandemic unemployment insurance that has

sustained more than 10 million families since March. Second, the bill must provide support to state and local governments that face catastrophic revenue shortfalls well into 2022.

Failure to replace state and local government tax losses will have damaging effects, deepening the downturn and potentially adding years to a full recovery. The scope of tax losses could mean layoffs of teachers, firefighters and police across much of the nation.

In fact, since January, approximately 1 million local government employees have already lost their jobs. But it also means significant reductions in public services next year. Education and health care, which comprise more than half of state and local budgets, will be hard hit, but summer 2021 may also see public pools and parks remain closed as municipal and state governments struggle to balance budgets.

The House passed a version of pandemic relief with a \$2.2 trillion estimated cost in the spring. That eye-popping figure is obviously a starting point for budget reconciliation, but with potential vaccine availability limiting the impact of this disease next year, a more modestly funded compromise between the House and Senate may be possible.

While GOP resistance to this size of relief has been characterized as a bailout to poorly run states, that rhetoric is simply wrong. Estimates of fiscal shortfalls produced by Ball State University's Center for Business and Economic Research calculate that California will remain solvent long after Indiana, Missouri and Arkansas have exhausted their rainy-day funds.



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On farm laws, how the Centre faltered

The farmers' agitation at Delhi's doorstep exposes deep fault lines and new possibilities in the politics of representation, the politics of reforms and the politics of Centre-state relations. These have significant consequences not only for the future of agriculture, but also for the future of negotiating economic reforms and federal relations in India.

First, on the politics of representation. Yogendra Yadav's repeated reference to the Mahendra Singh Tikait-led farmers' protest of 1988 to emphasise the "historic" nature of the current protests is a reminder of the deep vacuum of agrarian interests in contemporary party politics. This was the result of an economic consensus that sought to push agriculture to the margins — the best way to improve agricultural productivity is to get people out of agriculture was the well-accepted policy mantra. Agrarian interests were depoliticised and farmers treated as a constituency to be managed. However, in recent years, growing agricultural distress has led to a resurgence of farmer agitations — for instance, the long march in Mumbai in 2018 — which pushed agriculture into the mainstream discourse of the 2019 election and highlighted the return of farmers as a political constituency.

The post-Green Revolution mobilisation coalesced around



Rebuilding trust with farmers is essential for India's reform process and federal compact

the interests of landed farmers. However, deepening agrarian distress led to a broadening of solidarities, as documented by the scholar Shreya Sinha in the specific instance of Punjab, that cut across traditional class, caste and gender lines. In the long march of 2018, Adivasi and landless farmers walked alongside the landed, demanding political recognition. The current protests, although dominated by landed farmers, also include small farmers and farm labourers. Regardless of their economic rationale, the new farm laws have amplified uncertainties for all those whose livelihoods are intertwined with agriculture, and it is these collective anxieties that are finding political expression today. The Centre's refusal to address these anxieties, and instead clamp

down hard and discredit protests as voices of vested interests or worse, is a great disservice to the genuine fears that are seeking expression. But, in its hubris, the government is also opening up new sites of mobilisation that have the potential to shift the current status quo in agrarian politics. Second, the entire chain of events from the promulgation of the ordinances to their passage as Acts exposes the deep failures of our politics of reforms. India's reform narrative has repeatedly pitted politics against "good economics", demonstrating impatience with the often endless negotiations and compromises that politics necessitates. It is this impatience that has legitimised bypassing political and

institutional processes in the name of reforms. The three farm laws are a textbook example of this approach. Choosing to introduce central legislation on state subjects without any debate, refusing to consult farmers or even to give their anxieties a hearing, and pushing the bills through Parliament without debate are, at one level, typical of the modus operandi of this government. But, at another level, they also have deep legitimacy in a policy discourse that is impatient with the pulls and pressures of realpolitik. By riding roughshod over processes and bypassing politics, reforms, especially those that seek to bring about far-reaching changes in the existing status quo as the current farm laws seek to do, fail to overcome resistance and push poor policy

design. There is no question that India's agriculture markets are in urgent need of reform, but to assume this can be done without responding to the anxieties of those impacted — farmers, middlemen and labourers — and without assurances of protection and finding a middle ground, is a recipe for failure. Worse, we are now locked in a politics of distrust where arriving at a consensus for reforming the subsidy regime, price support system and procurement will be near-impossible. Reforming agriculture needs a politics and institutional process where farmers have a stake in reforms and an assurance that their concerns will be responded to. Finally, the federal question looms large in the entire reform approach. On the one hand, it risks weak implementation. By centralising agriculture reforms, the laws leave unaddressed the question of ownership of state-specific functions — from taxation to dispute resolution and building physical markets, vital to effective implementation. States can easily pass the buck to the Centre, leaving in its wake a vicious cycle of reform failure, not unfamiliar to India. Successful reforms need Centre-state coordination, and not centralisation. But the greater challenge is political. By introducing legislation on state subjects, the farm laws set a dangerous precedent that risks reopening the federal consensus.

Dear President Trump: election officials are facing death threats on your watch

In a press conference, a Republican election official from Georgia, Gabriel Sterling, condemned Trump for encouraging the intimidation of election workers. Here are his remarks

On Tuesday, a Republican senior election official in Georgia, Gabriel Sterling, gave an emotional and scathing press conference in which he described death threats and abuse he and others affiliated with counting the presidential vote in Georgia have endured. Sterling called out Donald Trump and other Republicans for stoking conspiracy theories about the election and encouraging an atmosphere of intimidation against people trying to do their jobs.

Here is a transcript of his public remarks: I'm going to do my best

to keep it together because it all gone too far, all of it. Joe diGenova [an attorney for the Trump campaign] today asked for Chris Krebs, a patriot who ran [the federal Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency], to be shot. A twentysomething [voting technician] in Gwinnett county today has death threats and a noose put out saying he should be hung for treason because he was transferring a report on batches from a [voting machine] to a county computer so he could read it. It has to stop. Mr President, you have not condemned these actions or this

language. Senators, you have not condemned this language or these actions. This has to stop. We need you to step up, and if you're going to take a position of leadership, show some. Georgia Republican warns Trump is inciting violence over election: 'Someone will get hurt' My boss, [Georgia secretary of state Brad] Raffensperger, his address is out there. They have people doing caravans in front of their house. They've had people come on to their property. Tricia, his wife of 40 years, is getting sexualized threats through her cellphone.



It has to stop. This is elections. This is the backbone of democracy, and all of you who have not said a damn word are complicit in this. It's too much. Yes, fight for every legal vote. Go through your due process.

We encourage you. Use your first amendment. That's fine. Death threats, physical threats, intimidation, it's too much. It's not right. They've lost the moral high ground to claim that it is.

Tycoon-Led Banks Could Be Dangerous For India

From the conditional nature of the recommendation, it doesn't appear that the regulator will soon reverse its policy of keeping conglomerates away from banking. But the report could pave the way for backdoor entry.

Is India opening the door for big businesses to take over its banking industry? A working group set up by the Reserve Bank, the regulator, has suggestions for what to do with ownership of private-sector banks. Large industrial houses may be permitted to own controlling stakes, it says, but only after strengthening regulation and supervision to deal with the problem of "connected lending" - basically diverting depositors' funds to their other businesses. From the conditional nature of the recommendation, it doesn't appear that the regulator will soon reverse its policy of keeping conglomerates away from banking. But the report could pave the way for backdoor entry. Large groups could acquire nonbank finance firms, which may be allowed to convert into banks. In India's post-Covid desperation for capital, the financial system might go from being state-dominated to tycoon-led. The 1997-98 Asian financial crisis ought to be a cautionary tale. In Indonesia, unchecked commingling of financial and non-financial activities within a corporate group pushed up the cost of bank rescue to 40% of 1998 GDP. From telecommunications to transportation, India's business

landscape is already starting to resemble a Monopoly board. An Indian reprise of J.P. Morgan, the U.S. banker-businessman who used finance to control railroad pricing and stitch together a steel behemoth, would bring the country even closer to the American Gilded Age of the late 19th century. (The eponymous JPMorgan Chase & Co., the world's sixth-largest bank, works under strict Federal Reserve limits on lenders' dealings with affiliates; those restrictions help keep commerce and banking separate.) Crony capitalism has built up slowly in India, emerging as a Frankenstein's monster a decade and a half after politicians began to unchain the private sector in the early 1990s. That's when - in the name of public-private partnership and rapid economic growth - serious misallocation of credit got under way. In 2018, financier IL&FS Group, which wrote the playbook on how to cynically exploit a poor country's desire for better infrastructure, went bankrupt. The ensuing funding crunch brought down several titans who were controlling hefty assets with slivers of equity. The great churning since then has reduced competition and raised concentration. Today, the names of domestic balance sheets available to Prime Minister

Narendra Modi for any serious heavy lifting can fit on the back of a postage stamp. But his need to find fresh risk-taking private capital is high, especially after the carnage from the pandemic. Per capita gross domestic product in 2025 may be 12% below pre-virus estimates, "implying the largest amount of scarring among major economies globally," says Oxford Economics' Priyanka Kishore. That's the backdrop to the RBI internal group's review of bank ownership. The report came just as the regulator solemnized the sale to Singapore's DBS Group Holdings Ltd. of one such lender, the third failure of a major deposit-taking institution in 15 months. Before that shotgun marriage, the country had 22 universal banks (and 10 so-called small finance banks) in the private sector, with a 30% share of deposits, up from 13% two decades ago. Foreign banks' low 5% share has remained unchanged. Dominant public-sector banks' market share is down to 65%, from 82% in 2000. This process will only accelerate as state-run institutions consolidate to four from 12. More private banking capital will no doubt be needed. Still, should the country really look to big business to provide it? There are less risky options.



For instance, the RBI can stop insisting that bank licensees - who typically come from another corner of the financing industry - must in the long term dilute their stakes to 15%. The working group wants the ceiling on a controlling stake raised to 26%, but it could have gone higher. The monetary authority seeks a minimum 40% shareholding for a bank's controlling owner in the first five years. It could easily say: "Keep it at that level if you want for 15 years. Enjoy a greater share of the spoils of sensible risk-taking. If you misbehave, give credit against kickbacks, evergreen bad loans, or run a competing business on the side, we'll restrict your voting rights to 5%, replace your board, and make your bank an M&A target." The argument in favor of diversified bank ownership - and hence shareholding limits of 15% or 26% - works when boards do their jobs. That didn't happen at Axis Bank Ltd., ICICI Bank Ltd. and Yes

Bank Ltd., which failed to rein in their long-standing chief executives as bad loans piled up. The regulator had to seek or bless their ouster. Why pretend that the future will be any different? For overleveraged groups, bank licenses are a ticket to too-big-to-fail nirvana. Savers trust the explicit deposit guarantee and have implicit faith in the regulator. In Lakshmi Vilas Bank Ltd., where the central bank got DBS to mount a rescue, deposits fell just 2% in the six months to September. This is when everyone knew that the lender - with a negative capital adequacy ratio - was toast. The regulator mustn't take the public's trust for granted. The IL&FS debacle shows little institutional capacity to stop mischief outside the balance sheet of a traditional bank. To roll out the red carpet to wannabe J.P. Morgans would be an abdication of the RBI's financial stability mandate.

Why MSP is not a solution

Instituting MSPs through law will lead to inflation and distort markets

A key debate after the enactment of three farm-reform laws and the subsequent protests is around the issue of federally-fixed minimum support prices (MSPs), a system guaranteeing farmers assured prices for their produce through procurement. MSP is an obligatory, not a statutory exercise. Farmers have demanded a legislation to prohibit sale of any farm produce below these minimum prices. If the government agrees to this, it is likely they will end their protests against the three new farm reforms. But a law making MSPs the legal floor price defies

economic logic. The government sets MSPs for 23 crops, but it is effective only in case of rice and wheat because it buys only these two commodities in sufficiently large quantities. MSPs are an assurance that the government will intervene if market rates fall below that threshold, thereby helping avoid distress sale. This policy was salutary when India faced acute food shortages. Farm policies to deal with surpluses will fundamentally have to be different from measures adopted to overcome a previous era of scarcity. A law barring purchases of the other 21 crops below MSPs by any private trader will

also, immediately, fuel high inflation. Every one percentage point increase in MSPs leads to a 15-basis point increase in inflation. Higher MSPs could also upend the Reserve Bank of India's inflation targets, hurting economic growth. An MSP mechanism that ignores demand and global prices creates market distortions. If it is not profitable for traders to buy at MSPs, then the private sector will exit the markets. In such a scenario, the government cannot be a monopoly buyer. Mandatory MSPs will render India's agri-exports non-competitive because the government's assured prices



are way higher than both domestic and international market prices. MSPs have also incentivised foodgrains over other crops, giving rise to imbalances of water and land resources and shifting land away from crops such as pulses and oilseeds, necessitating costly imports. Surplus cereals can't be

exported without a subsidy, which invites the World Trade Organization (WTO)'s objections. WTO rules cap government procurement for subsidised food programmes by developing countries at 10% of the total value of agricultural production based on 1986-88 prices in dollar terms.

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From India's wars, five lessons for the present

As India matures as a democracy and its aspirations to emerge as a leading power gains momentum, all these stakeholders must understand the conduct of war and the utility of force as an instrument of statecraft

Having spent eight years researching and writing in a focused manner on war and conflict in independent India, it is time to distil five big lessons for a diverse constituency of stakeholders in India's national security matrix. These range from the policymaker and the practitioner to the academic and the common citizen. As India matures as a democracy and its aspirations to emerge as a leading power gains momentum, all these stakeholders must understand the conduct of war and the utility of force as an instrument of statecraft. The first lesson is that contrary to the largely peaceful trajectory of growth envisaged by the drafters of the Constitution, India has been a "reluctantly warring democracy" to protect its sovereignty and internal fabric. It has fought four major wars and one high-intensity but limited conflict with its principal adversaries, Pakistan and China. It has quelled four insurgencies (Mizoram, Tripura, Punjab and Assam), in which the latter two also displayed shades of terrorism. It continues to search for a solution to the longest insurgency in the post-World War-II era (the Naga

insurgency) that has merged with another violent expression of ethnic angst in Manipur. Left-wing extremism has shown signs of fatigue, but security forces continue to search for conflict termination before the phase of conflict resolution offers some light at the end of what has been an intense struggle of ideas. In what has been a mother of all struggles, the Indian State continues to grapple with a waxing and waning proxy war in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) that has shown chameleon-like shades of insurgency, terrorism and hybrid war. The second lesson is that India has not been averse to the application and demonstration of force outside its geographical boundaries in response to a call for help from neighbours and the global community. The Indian Peacekeeping Force (IPKF) intervention in Sri Lanka; the foiling of the 1988 coup in Maldives; the sustained contribution to United Nations peacekeeping and peace enforcement operations, many of which have led to violent armed confrontations and resulted in casualties; and the resolute action in Doklam, are all examples of India's willingness to stand up as a responsible

international player. The third lesson is a corollary of the first and a consequence of both moral and developmental dilemmas in the Indian strategic DNA. In its quest to emerge as a responsible and restrained power that strives to uphold the ideals of its pioneering leaders, India has often been surprised by assertive and relatively clear-headed adversaries, both at the state and non-state levels. While moral dilemmas have often delayed military responses, developmental dilemmas have resulted in the creation of suboptimal military capabilities. A fourth lesson of realpolitik and umbilical linkages between politics, policy and war in contemporary India emerges from the propositions laid out by Kautilya, the ancient Indian strategist and Clausewitz, the Prussian military thinker of the early 19th century. While the former suggested "hard" and seemingly "amoral" decisions in pursuit of power for the common good, the latter advocated close coordination between political entities, policymakers and practitioners of war as the only way to ensure the successful conduct of war as an instrument of statecraft. These have been clearly validated in India's experience over the last



74 years. The orchestration of the 1971 War and the occupation of the Saltoro Ridge that overlooks the Siachen Glacier were examples of hard-nosed decisions that went against the grain of conventional Indian statecraft. Similarly, Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee's decision not to allow Indian forces to cross the Line of Control during the Kargil conflict was another example of political clarity that led to the occupation of a high ground by India that demonstrated that it could balance the application of force with restraint. The fifth and last lesson, based on recent events in the security domain, highlight India's attempts to shape new policies, strategies and structures to meet contemporary national security challenges. There is clearly a reduced threshold to absorb "first blows" and an articulated aspiration to migrate from diffidence and excessive restraint to a more assertive and proactive response

mechanism. India's recent cross-border strikes on its eastern and western frontiers, its response at Doklam and the firm, albeit delayed, reaction to transgressions by the People's Liberation Army in eastern Ladakh have demonstrated this clearly. What emerges is that for any significant shift in strategy to be effective, there needs to be a strong bridge that connects politics, policy, strategy, doctrine, structures and capability, much like the Strategy Bridge suggested by the renowned English scholar, Colin Gray. Clearly, it is this bridge that needs significant bolstering at every level. Recent initiatives indicate that this process has commenced in right earnest with a top-down approach; there will be hits and misses along the way as India seeks a "new normal" in its national security and warfighting discourse. Lessons from the past will always offer instructive guidance.

Justin Trudeau is wrong, yet again

Intervening on a policy or legislative issue within a democracy defies international norms

The ministry of external affairs sharply rebuked comments by Canadian politicians on the farmer protests, coming close to calling Prime Minister Justin Trudeau a speaker of untruths. There is a certain pattern in this. Canadian liberal politicians, under pressure from local Sikh voters, often feel the need to comment on anything concerning Punjab. What is unusual is that the present protests have no international repercussions. The Narendra Modi government has the legitimacy and mandate to carry

out domestic reforms. Punjab's farmers have the right to protest while the rest of India will express its viewpoint when it next goes to polls. All of this is within the realms of normal democratic procedure. There is of course room to criticise totalitarian regimes if they violate basic human rights - which is why calling out China for its Uighur concentration camps, for instance, which Canada has done more vociferously than India, is legitimate. But intervening on a policy or legislative issue within

a democracy defies international norms. What emerged was a blatantly gratuitous intervention over an issue Mr Trudeau probably knows little about. Ironically, Canada has, for years, officially criticised India's Minimum Support Price policy. There has been a global tendency towards letting diplomacy be infected by localitis, where local politics is allowed to overwhelm foreign policy positions. Judgments are best arrived by focusing on the overall bilateral relations which, in this case, face only one



challenge - Mr Trudeau's messaging prevail over a key penchant for letting domestic partnership.

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

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

Stay home except to get medical care

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



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

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



Call ahead before visiting your doctor

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



Wear a facemask if you are sick

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



Cover your coughs and sneezes

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



Clean your hands often

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



Avoid sharing personal household items

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



Don't create a world of immunity haves and have-nots

Governments and businesses must chart a path out of this pandemic that minimises inequities.

On November 23, Qantas CEO Alan Joyce said his airline is considering a rule requiring passengers to get a coronavirus vaccine before they can board its planes. Joyce added the idea was being discussed in a broader conversation among his peers, although the International Air Transport Association called the idea "a bit premature". Premature as it may be, similar ideas - such as what has been referred to as immunity passport - have been spoken of in the context of the pandemic, and as vaccines begin shipping, it is likely to take centre-stage soon.

There are legal and practical precedents for what Joyce suggested, known as vaccination certificates recognised by the World Health Organization's International Health Regulations (IHR). At present, the sole universal disease recognised is the Yellow Fever - passengers arriving from affected regions (mostly African and South America nations) or travelling to them may be required to produce them. Covid-19 vaccination certificates could be included in WHO recommendations under its "public health emergency of international concern" guidelines or any of 196 member-states could ask for an inclusion of it



under IHR. But mandating these certificates at any level, international or domestic, comes with ethical and economic implications till vaccines become affordable, accessible and are in adequate supply for all. Assessments of vaccine supply deals suggest high-income countries have secured the bulk of the supply available till the end of the next year - some have enough commitments to cover their populations twice over. Once they do receive a vaccine, low and middle-income countries (LMICs) are likely to take longer to inoculate their large populations. The lack of adequate supply chain

infrastructure and electricity can compound these challenges, as can typically endemic issues of corruption and domestic inequity that often afflict the Global South. WHO's state of inequality report in 2019 found that full childhood immunisation - possibly the closest example of vaccines that are a must - coverage varies wildly in LMICs. In the 67 LMICs surveyed (excluding India and China), the median coverage varied from 51% to 83% for children under the age of one. In 16 countries, less than one in four children got full immunisation. In 11 of these countries, children in the richest quintile were twice as likely to be immunised as children in the

poorest. Pharmaceutical powerhouses such as India and China are likely to be able to minimise their disadvantage, but - at least in the case of India - estimates by experts suggest only about 30-40% of the country is likely to be vaccinated till the end of 2021. For populations that do not have widespread coverage, this could translate into lopsided restrictions on even essential travel. The difference between the immunity haves and have-nots will not just impact lives but also livelihoods. Covid-19 has exacerbated inequities. People who have had the most capital have had access to better health care at a time when most public

utilities have been overwhelmed. People in white collar jobs have been able to quarantine, isolate and earn while working from home, while others have lost pay and employment as their workplaces shut. Children who have the means continued studying online, while millions of others without phones or internet face a lost academic year. Governments and businesses must chart a path out of this pandemic that minimises inequities. These conversations have begun in some of the richest countries, such as the United States where President Donald Trump had access to potentially life-saving coronavirus treatment that is out of reach for ordinary Americans. It is a conversation that has been reignited by the high prices of the most effective vaccine candidates, which cost up to 10 times as much as the cheapest. Bioethicists and philanthropists had indeed flagged the issue as poorer countries struggled with lack of political or economic leverage. India must evaluate any decision that could lead us to prioritise those with immunocapital because the ones without it will likely be the victims of choices they did not make.

Find a meeting point on farm laws

Reach out sensitively, and find a mechanism to assure farmers that their incomes will be protected, including through an amendment if necessary

The farmer protests, primarily led by land-owning agriculturists of Punjab, have raised a range of questions - about India's larger political economy, relations between Centre and states and between states, the salience of identity politics in Punjab, especially given its troubled history of the 1980s, and the capacity of the Indian State to allow dissent and be politically accommodative. But at the root of it is the question of finding a meeting point between what is a reality and the apprehensions generated by that reality.

The reality is that Parliament has passed laws which will change the manner in which agricultural produce is procured and traded. As this newspaper has argued, there is sound rationale for the move - agricultural markets needed to be liberalised, there is a greater need for interface between industry and farmers, and this will potentially enhance farm incomes. At the same time, the laws have generated apprehensions because of two reasons. The first was the rather abrupt manner in which the

change was brought about - the Centre should have invested more in engaging with all stakeholders. And the second is the fear of the mandi and minimum support price (MSP) regime getting undermined. Farmers will have to recognise that the reality of the laws will not change. They also need to understand that extremist rhetoric and action - including flirting with extreme identity-issues when the demand is largely economic - is wrong, unacceptable, and undermines their own cause. At the same



time, the government must recognise the depth of the sentiment of farmers, reach out sensitively, and find a mechanism to assure farmers that their incomes will be protected, including through an amendment if necessary.



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The Centre Miscalculated Farmer Rage And Frustration



Farmers' protests over the hurriedly passed Farm Bills in the Lok Sabha's monsoon session have been brewing since September. The union government made half-hearted attempts to engage their leaders, failing initially when farmers' representatives objected to being received by bureaucrats and not the concerned minister. The distrust level worsened after the Akali Dal's sole cabinet representative, Harsimrat Badal, resigned. Most saw it as the Akalis belatedly trying to retrieve their falling credibility amongst their core rural base.

The present "invasion" of the capital by farmers of Punjab, Haryana and Uttar Pradesh is the latest chapter in a face-off that the Modi government had

taken lightly. Although a complete volte face by Delhi is not easily achievable, statesmanship and an empathetic assessment of factors driving rural rage is still possible.

The background to the fracas is as follows. The Agriculture Prices Commission (APC) was set up in 1965 to address the chronic shortage of food grains and fluctuation in their prices. The Green Revolution that followed rested on luring farmers to grow high-yielding varieties of wheat and rice, in combination with mechanisation and fertiliser-cum-pesticide use. For this, the Minimum Support Price (MSP) mechanism was devised to assure price support to the farmers' output. It caused the

miracle of food self-sufficiency in a nation ravaged for centuries by famines after failed monsoons. But in recent decades, the MSP scheme has created a wheat-rice cycle in states like Punjab and Haryana, where traditionally rice was not grown due to its excess water need. Their governments' food godowns have been overflowing with stocks for years. It is undoubtedly sensible for any government to break this cycle and have farmers diversify their crops and adopt a new pattern that is economically and ecologically more sustainable. For instance, the water table in Punjab is not only dropping dangerously fast but also getting leached with run-off chemicals. The lingering river water dispute

between Punjab and Haryana is a spin-off from this monetary gain that farmers are addicted to from the extra rice crop.

But the devil, as they say, lies in the detail. The union government's proclivity to implement big ticket and revolutionary schemes without adequate preparation had already been witnessed in case of demonetisation and GST regime. In the case of agriculture, the leap towards reform has been equally precipitate and ill-timed. Perhaps the government felt the raging pandemic would keep farmers from gathering and agitating. Obviously, it miscalculated the depth of rural ire and frustration. This was inevitable as no serious debate took place in parliament, nor was the matter referred to a parliamentary committee for weighing its pros and cons.

The contemporary agricultural dilemma, as the NSSO survey of 2014 surmised, flows from the fragmentation of holdings and the dominance of marginal and small farmers (86.8% of the total) with less than one hectare farms. However, any change cannot be wished into existence by simply deconstructing the existing market and mandi system. Punjab, for instance, has 22,000 registered commission agents servicing 5.5 lakh farmers. They are more than money-lenders or

crop-purchasers. They are a part of the socio-economic system of Punjab's rural economy, providing help and advice to farmers. At one go, the union government has destroyed this rural compact without outlining how the transition is to be made to a new order and what safety provisions the farmers can count on.

Additionally, taking the example of Punjab, it earned last year ? 3,642 crores as fees from grain purchasers. This went into the Rural Development Fund (RDF) for the upkeep of rural infrastructure like roads, bridges etc. Thus, the union government has picked a subject like agriculture, allocated to states under the constitution, and affected by its legislation the vital income of states. This is an attack on India's federal system, as no compensation to affected states is envisaged.

What then are farmers fearing, and what assurances, if any, may allay their concerns? One, the government should go beyond giving verbal assurances that MSP shall continue to be paid. They need to write it down. The farmers fear that the government plans to gradually stop buying their crops and allow market forces, in the shape of a handful of billionaires diversifying into food retail, to bring them to their knees.

Adityanath's New Hitler-Like Rule On Inter-Faith Marriages

1934, Nazi Germany enacted a set of laws that prohibited marriage or sexual relations between "Aryans and Jews." Jews were quite wrongly considered a "race" in Nazi doctrine instead of a religious group, but in effect, the ban was based on religious affinity defined by whether or not the individual concerned belonged to a "Jewish congregation." The punishment for such marriages was imprisonment and later, concentration camps.

Such examples from history come to mind in the light of the outrageous and draconian ordinance adopted by the UP cabinet. This is the first of the anti-"Love Jihad" laws which

several BJP state governments have declared they will enact. Although the words "love jihad" are not specifically mentioned, the difference between the UP ordinance and the existing stringent and undemocratic anti-conversion laws already existing in at least eight states is that it includes specifically "conversion for marriage."

The UP Chief Minister has threatened violence against Muslim men married to Hindu women who had converted. He recently said, "I warn those who conceal their identity and play with our sisters' respect - if you don't mend your ways, your 'Ram naam satya' (chant at Hindu funerals) journey will begin."

With this new ordinance, which is part of the poisonous "love jihad" campaign, what has begun is the Ram Naam Satya of the Indian constitution.

It is called the "UP Prohibition of Unlawful Religious Conversion 2020" and the purpose is to target inter-faith marriages through ill-defined and extremely general clauses. The marriage will be declared "null and void if the marriage is solemnised for the primary purpose of converting a woman from one religion to another". Any "blood relation" of the couple can make a complaint to the police. The norm that a person is innocent unless proven guilty is overturned by shifting the onus on the person converting,



Image posted on Facebook by MYogiAdityanath

or those who facilitated it, to prove that the conversion was not done through misrepresentation, force, undue influence, coercion, allurement, fraudulent means or for marriage. Moreover, a person seeking to convert to another

religion for marriage would have to inform the District Magistrate two months prior to through a prescribed form. The punishment ranges from one to three years and to ten years if an SC or ST person is "converted."

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Why I'm Losing Hope In India



My generation of Indians has often been disappointed in our country, and we have sometimes despaired about the direction it was taking, but it's been impossible for us to stop hoping.

Our own past has trained us to see the silver lining.

Opportunities we couldn't imagine growing up in the 1970s and '80s emerged from nowhere and changed our lives, and many of us believe history will keep repeating, with the pain of the pandemic shocking the economy out of its pre-Covid inertia.

So it breaks my heart to have to suggest to today's rising generation that this crisis is different than others we have weathered, that the walls are closing in again, and the

opportunity set for India is shrinking, perhaps for a very long time. The national dream of emulating China's rapid growth is receding - by some economic yardsticks, we can't even keep up with Bangladesh.

A disturbing arbitrariness has crept into policymaking, institutions have decayed and the economy's structural deficiencies have worsened. Animal spirits have been sucked out of all but a handful of firms. Zombie business groups are perched atop the debris of debt-fuelled expansion, waiting for politicians to signal what role they still have, if any. The defeatist slogan of self-reliance, which blighted our parents' generation, is back. Politicians are using religious discord and caste conflicts to drive a wedge

in the society. To make matters worse, India has handled the coronavirus pandemic with the same inept authoritarianism that's come to define its approach in all spheres, economic, political and social. With more than 9 million infections, India is the second-worst affected country after the United States. The economy slipped into an unprecedented recession last quarter.

The post-lockdown economy will simply not have enough demand to consume what can be produced. There's some attempt to reform the supply side - labour and farm markets, in particular. But not much is being done to revive demand, either in the short or the long run. Some of us are wondering if this callousness will cause India's demographic dividend - two out of three Indians are still in the magic age group of 15 to 64 years - to go unclaimed.

Yes, there's time. If India stops turning inward and embraces an open, transparent partnership with global investors, hundreds of millions more would get a shot at prosperity. A stagnant world economy could tap a new source of future demand. The West might win a strong and

reliable security partner in Asia. The '90s optimism will renew itself. But if India remains stuck in a middle-income trap, people will soon stop asking if it could be the next China. My generation already has.

Stagnation

A previous generation of Indians also knew violent change. My parents went from being British subjects to citizens of an independent republic. They carried the trauma of partition and lived through four post-World War II armed conflicts, one with China, three with Pakistan.

They recoiled in horror when Prime Minister Indira Gandhi - the child of the great democrat and freedom hero Jawaharlal Nehru - suspended democracy for two years in the mid-1970s. Amid this turmoil, they underestimated the shadow on their lives of the mid-'60s economic crisis, when after a bad drought, India devalued the rupee by 37% because that was the World Bank's condition for assistance.

The promised funds didn't arrive in full. Indira Gandhi, too new to power to be in control, took a sharp pro-Moscow turn and rejected the capitalist path that

South Korea, almost as poor as India back then, was choosing for itself. She raised tariffs, nationalized the banks, but failed to democratize credit. The government bloated up; small firms remained stunted.

The "developmental enthusiasm" of Nehru's idealistic socialism gave way to political expediency and policy incoherence. The post-colonial dream of rapid industrialization faded. India remained agrarian and poor, led by a tiny English-educated urban elite. At the top of the order were bureaucrats with the power to say "no" to any expansion in the private sector. The economy's speed limit was 3.5%, pejoratively described by scholars as the "Hindu rate of growth."

To those of us whose families neither owned rural land nor had secure urban jobs, life was about making the most of a heavily state-subsidized education. Very few experienced upward mobility, and often only when the U.S. or U.K. embassy stamped their passports. The friends and family who came to see off the newly minted doctor or engineer at the airport went back to their unchanging lives.

PM Modi's Farm Reforms Should Be Welcomed - Feroze Varun Gandhi



politics, reforming agricultural marketing can and often is construed as playing with the economic wellbeing of marginal farmers and the urban poor. With agriculture a state subject, the reform of marketing channels has been an ad hoc process across India's states, with contract farming in particular mistrusted, given its similarity to the old zamindari days.

In this regard, the government, under the visionary leadership of the Prime Minister, has taken a courageous step to reform the sector - the central government introduced and parliament passed the "The Farmers' Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Bill, 2020". Let's consider the content of this bill - Section 4 simply states "Any trader may engage in the inter-State trade or intra-State trade of scheduled farmers'

produce with a farmer or another trader in a trade area"; this allows farmers to sell across state boundaries. Section 6 states that "No market fee or cess or levy, by whatever name called, under any State APMC Act or any other State law, shall be levied on any farmer or trader or electronic trading and transaction platform for trade and commerce in scheduled farmers' produce in a trade area"; this simply means that state governments cannot levy market fees, cess or levies outside APMC areas. Additionally, parliament also passed the "The Farmers (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement on Price Assurance and Farm Services Bill, 2020" - Section 3 states "A farmer may enter into a written farming agreement in respect of any farming produce"; it lays out a framework for contract farming.

Nowhere do the bills talk about removing the MSP regime or abandoning the current APMC system. In fact, the centre has increased its purchase of staple crops at MSP prices - ~38.9 million tonnes of wheat was procured in 2020 compared to 34.1 in 2019; 31.6 million tonnes of rice in 2020 compare to 26.6 million tonnes in 2019; ~69% of the procurement in the kharif season was done in Punjab.

This was not done in isolation; states (including Punjab) have tried to reform the sector but mostly failed. Punjab has implemented significant reforms to its APMC Act, allowing for direct purchase of perishable crops, including fruits and vegetables, by retail chains, but further reforms are significantly opposed by commission agents (many of whom are currently protesting).

300,000 farmers have blockaded Delhi, setting up camps in five major border areas with Haryana; most of them have travelled from Punjab and Haryana on foot and in a convoy of tractors, bringing supplies to make this a lasting protest. The farmers are protesting against a recent set of agricultural reforms, which the opposition claims will leave such farmers at the whims of large

corporations. The government has responded with empathy, seeking to have a discussion. Meanwhile, the opposition has played an unconstructive role, misinforming farmers to the true intent of such reforms. This has led to unreasonable demands - a push for removing a marginal fine for stubble burning, for example. While agriculture is considered the third rail of Indian

Where India and China differ in the Indian Ocean region



In the wake of the trilateral, it is important to examine ways to deepen co-operation between India and its Indian Ocean neighbours

(News Agencies)-The national security adviser-level trilateral between India, Sri Lanka and Maldives was held in Colombo last week, after a gap of six years, underlining the renewed urgency for cooperation in the region, particularly in the wake of China's ambitious geopolitical tactics. In the wake of the trilateral, it is important to examine ways to deepen co-operation between India and its Indian Ocean neighbours. One way to do this is strengthening India's policy of development cooperation and economic diplomacy in the region vis-à-vis China's engagement track. India's development cooperation has been a consolidated effort

over several decades, across four key verticals. One, housing and rehabilitation projects and high impact community development projects have involved grassroots development and large-scale local participation.

Two, education-based tourism programmes and skill-building initiatives such as the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) and the Technology Adoption Project were fully sponsored by the government of India, in coordination with over 68 premier institutions. Three, infrastructure projects have followed the Security and Growth for All in the Region

(SAGAR) policy and aimed to deepen economic and security cooperation with its maritime neighbours. Some key Indian projects in Sri Lanka are the Kankesanthurai harbour in Northern Sri Lanka and the Indo-Japanese East Container Terminal (ECT) at Colombo Port. Similarly, for Maldives, India is assisting with the Greater Male Connectivity Project. And, finally, India is also committed to improving energy infrastructure and helping cope with the climate crisis in the region, aided by its expertise in solar energy.

India's investments have thus been focused on human capital development and deployed largely in employment-intensive sectors. This is in contrast to Beijing's efforts. China had developed particularly close ties with past regimes in Sri Lanka and Maldives. During the earlier presidency of Mahinda Rajapaksa and Maithripala Sirisena, Sri Lanka had committed to its participation in the Belt and Road Initiative. It was then that China

became the largest investor in Sri Lanka and one of its projects, the deep-sea Hambantota Port, was leased to it for 99 years due to staggering debt. Similarly, in Maldives, President Abdullah Yameen's tenure in office (2013-2018) was regarded as a time of a pro-China tilt for the Maldives. And it was then that large investments in infrastructure were made.

Since most of the Chinese investment has been in infrastructure projects, which have long gestation periods, and the majority of the development assistance is in the form of non-concessional loans, Sri Lanka and Maldives find themselves in a debt trap. The Maldives, for instance, has run up a debt of \$1.3 billion to China, which is more than a quarter of the GDP of Maldives. The unsustainable levels of debt have made the new governments in both countries wary of foreign participation in large-scale infrastructure projects. However, India can look to increase its

engagement in a threefold manner. First, New Delhi can play a much bigger role through climate diplomacy with Maldives and Sri Lanka, since it has taken the lead in promoting two initiatives globally: The International Solar Alliance and Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure (CDRI).

Second, India could take a leaf out of China's "sharp power" diplomacy and utilise its information broadcasting capacity to showcase its own global initiatives. This would help soften its "big brother" image in the region.

And finally, a key grouping that can play a bigger role in strengthening cooperation with Sri Lanka and Maldives vis-à-vis China is the Quad. Key individual actors - namely Japan, India and United States (US) - are present in both the countries as independent donor nations and can do much more through coordinated actions, to promote soft power and economic diplomacy.

Pakistan's opposition holds Multan rally day after arrests



(News Agencies)- Despite a government ban and arrests of hundreds of activists, Pakistani opposition supporters rallied in a central city on Monday, calling on Prime Minister Imran Khan to resign over alleged bad governance and incompetence. The rally in the city of Multan was held a day after police, on orders from the government, carried out the arrests and banned the

gathering, defending the move as necessary to combat the coronavirus pandemic in Pakistan. Police earlier in the day acknowledged arresting over 370 people, while opposition groups put the number at more than 1,800. Authorities in Multan also switched off the area's mobile phone network.

On Sunday night, security forces placed shipping containers on

major roads to block off the path to a public park where the opposition planned to hold the protest. But opposition leaders defied that to march to the park, setting off clashes that led to the arrests.

Among those arrested was Ali Musa Gillani, the son of former Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gilani.

The government blamed the pandemic for banning the protest, though security forces have over recent months repeatedly disrupted opposition events and arrested its leaders. Since February when the outbreak started, Pakistan has reported more than 398,000 cases and 8,025 deaths.

Ahead of the rally, government spokeswoman Firdous Ashiq Awan accused the opposition of "doing politics at the cost of people's lives," Maryam Nawaz, the daughter of former Prime

Minister Nawaz Sharif, who lives in exile in London despite being sought on corruption charges by a Pakistani court, attended the rally. Earlier in the day, she told reporters she was not afraid of arrest and that the rally would take place at all costs.

"There is no doubt that this government will no more be in power in the coming days, God willing, and I have no doubt about it," she said.

Also in attendance and marking her political debut was Assefa Bhutto Zardari, the daughter of former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, who was assassinated at an election rally in the garrison city of Rawalpindi in 2007.

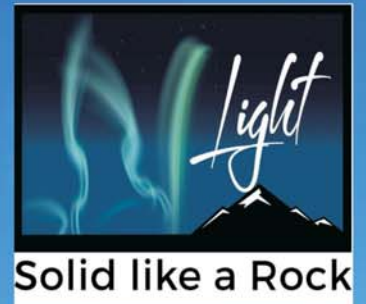
Assefa received an emotional welcome and applause as she represented her brother Bilawal Bhutto Zardari, the chairman of Pakistan People's Party who was unable to attend after testing positive for the coronavirus.

Assefa said that the countdown for Khan's ouster has started.

Firebrand opposition politician Maulana Fazlur Rehman of the Pakistan Democratic Movement vowed to hold a massive in Lahore on Dec. 13, after which he and his supporters would march toward the capital, Islamabad, to "kick out" Khan's government. Pakistan's military has ruled this country of 220 million people - directly or indirectly - for most of its history. Successive attempts at protracted democracy have been interrupted by military coups, the last one in 1999.

Pakistanis went to the polls in 2008 and elected their first civilian government in 12 years. There have been three consecutive elections after that. The military and intelligence services maintain a tight grip on the country's politics and are believed to back Khan, who came to power in 2018.

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Taliban denies targeting media after 50th journalist dies in Afghanistan

(News Agencies)- The Taliban have denied they are deliberately targeting journalists in attacks amid the surge in violence throughout Afghanistan.

The US watchdog Sigar (Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction) says Taliban violence has risen by 50% since September, with media workers saying they don't feel safe doing their jobs.

A spokesman for the Taliban told the Guardian they maintain a positive interaction with the media.

"By our policy, we give great importance to the work of journalists," Muhammad Naeem said, adding that the Taliban have given access to journalists in areas under their control.

"Targeting civilians is not the policy of the Islamic emirate," he said.

But as talks between the militants and the Afghan government slowly progress, Afghan media are worried for their future. Last week reporter

Elyas Dayee became the 50th journalist killed in the country since 2001, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists, when he was hit by a car bomb in Helmand province.

Just days before Dayee's death, Yama Siawash of Tolo TV, Afghanistan's biggest news channel, died in a similar attack in Kabul. No group has claimed either attack.

"A series of targeted killings of civilians has recently begun in Kabul, including attacks on mosque imams, university professors and educational institutions," Naeem acknowledged, though denying Taliban involvement.

Human Rights Watch (HRW) said Dayee had received numerous death threats, warning him to stop reporting on Taliban military operations.

"This is part of an alarming pattern of increased threats and attacks on the media by the Taliban," said Patricia Gossman, an HRW director, after Dayee's murder. "This brutal killing of a journalist is nothing more than a cold-

blooded execution and raises serious doubts about the protection of free expression in any peace deal with the Taliban." US troops are due to depart by May and Afghan journalists have told the Guardian they increasingly fear for their lives.

"I don't feel safe in Lashkar Gah any more," said Mohammad Omar Lemar, a freelance in Helmand. "I can't live in a place where people are killed for no reason. I want to leave."

Afghanistan has enjoyed significant press freedom since the US-led invasion in 2001, with newspapers and television channels mushrooming and journalists working freely.

In recent years the Taliban have started engaging with journalists regularly but Rahmatullah Amiri, a political analyst in Kabul, worries that press freedom could quickly be lost. "There wouldn't be any free press under the Taliban - they are strict and would heavily regulate media; we can already see this in areas they control," he said. Media workers across Afghanistan have received



varying levels of security. Many are exposed at home, even if they work in heavily fortified compounds; others have been relocated - even sent overseas - but challenges continue.

"It's more than a threat," said Saad Mohseni, CEO of the Moby Group. "This strategy of intimidating, bullying and punishing members of the civil society has had a devastating impact. The Taliban send the message that they are the only ones able to provide safety. It's a deliberate attempt to undermine the government and bully voices different to theirs." With the Taliban gaining momentum and Islamic State staging large-scale attacks, many Afghans have lost

faith in their leaders' ability to protect them. Journalists, too afraid to go public, keep quiet about the warnings they receive.

"All journalists are facing serious threats, but it is difficult - even impossible - for us to ensure safety while reporting," said Anisa Shaheed of Tolonews, who was recognised for her courageous reporting by Reporters Without Borders this summer. "We live in a country at war; there is no way out," she said. "Our families are concerned and ask us to leave our work, but this is our homeland. It's our responsibility to inform, to work - whether we stay alive or are killed."

Afghan Government And Taliban Reach Breakthrough To Proceed With Peace Talks

(News Agencies)-The Afghan government and the Taliban have agreed to forge ahead with substantive negotiations aimed at ending decades of almost continuous war in the country, representatives from the two sides said in near-twin tweets on Wednesday. Although peace talks ostensibly began on Sept. 12 in Qatar, the negotiations quickly bogged down in procedural matters, like which form of Islamic law should govern disputes between negotiators.

Nader Nadery, a leading member of the Afghan government negotiations team, signaled a breakthrough, tweeting, "The procedure including its preamble of the negotiation has been finalized and from now on, the [negotiations] will begin on the agenda." Minutes later, Taliban spokesman Mohammad Naeem echoed him: "The procedures including its

preamble of the Intra-Afghan Negotiations has been finalized and from now on, the negotiations will begin on the agenda."

Neither side said precisely when the more substantive negotiations would begin or offered further detail. However, U.S. Special Representative Zalmay Khalilzad, architect of the peace process, tweeted that the two sides had created "a three-page agreement [codifying] rules and procedures for their negotiations on a political roadmap and a comprehensive ceasefire."

It was unclear when a comprehensive ceasefire would go into effect. The Afghan government has demanded that the Taliban immediately halt its attacks, but the insurgents insist they will lay down their arms only after a peace deal is concluded. Since the two sides first agreed to negotiations, the Taliban have escalated violence

across Afghanistan, particularly targeting Afghan security forces. Suggesting he expects hostilities to continue, Khalilzad tweeted that as negotiations begin, his



team will work with all sides for a "serious reduction of violence and even a ceasefire during this period." Still, the near carbon-copy statements indicated the two sides were making a concerted effort to keep the talks on track. Nadery and Naeem later issued another pair of matching tweets, saying they had formed a committee to prepare "draft topics" for the agenda, adding:

"The current negotiations ... show that there is willingness among Afghans to reach a sustainable peace."

The latest agreement amid spiraling tensions appears to have been a result of the efforts of late-night informal discussions between the two sides, said Andrew Watkins, senior analyst for Afghanistan for the International Crisis Group.

This was beautifully the result of two sides talking to each other," he added. The Afghan government negotiators in particular, Watkins said, were "feeling all this incredible pressure," from the U.S., the international community and Afghans who, he said, "watch this process fill up the news everyday but not see it change their lives on the ground." Watkins warned the next phase of talks has its own

perils. "The next preliminary step is a big one: discussing the agenda of these talks - what order are they going to bring up and discuss each topic?"

The agreement to move forward with substantive negotiations was welcomed by the United Nations, country representatives in Kabul, Afghanistan's neighbor Pakistan and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, who described Wednesday's announcements by the Afghan government and the Taliban as "a major milestone."

The Taliban agreed to begin Afghan peace talks as a condition of a deal they made separately with the U.S. in February that will see most U.S. and other foreign forces withdraw from Afghanistan by next spring.

This has raised questions about whether the insurgents are stalling until foreign forces withdraw.

Bangladesh extends school shutdown over second COVID-19 wave



shown a rising trend this month, with 1,845 new cases and 13 deaths reported on Thursday. "The coronavirus situation could worsen further in the winter when viral and bacterial diseases increase," said virologist Nazrul Islam, a member of the national technical advisory committee to tackle COVID-19.

"People are eager for the vaccine, but nobody is caring about the health rules like wearing masks and maintaining physical distancing," Islam said. The government is broadcasting lessons on television for school students, and universities are conducting online classes. Most children in Bangladesh do not have access to the internet. Rights groups fear many are placed at risk by not returning to school, and said many children have been forced to work to help their families.

(News Agencies)- Bangladesh has extended its closure of schools and educational institutions, which were last open in March, until December 19 amid fears of a second wave of coronavirus infections during the coming Bangladeshi winter, the education ministry said on Thursday. Experts said the South Asian country, with patchy healthcare facilities, could face another surge in infections, having so far confirmed 427,198 cases and 6,140 deaths from COVID-19. The government closed schools and educational institutions on March 17 and has extended the closure several times, most recently until November 15. "The decision has been taken considering the second wave ... We can't play with the lives of our children," said a senior official of the education ministry, who declined to be named. The government, however, has lifted most other restrictions. Daily infections have

Pakistan's new regulations aim to 'silence the internet'

(News Agencies)- As journalist Bilal Farooqi was led to a dark cell in a police station in the southern Pakistani city of Karachi, a dirty towel hooded over his head, he prepared for a long night ahead. "I had been thinking, as soon as I had been brought to the police station, the first thing in my mind was that I'm definitely going to be fired," he says. "I realised that it was going to be a tough few hours." Farooqi's 'crime, for which he was arrested at his home on the evening of September 11, was to have tweeted criticism of the Pakistani government and military, particularly regarding the actions of a religious organisation known for inciting violence against the minority Shia Muslim sect. He was arrested under Pakistan's Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA), a law passed in 2016 that regulates Pakistanis' use of the internet and authorises the government to censor content.

Increasingly in recent years, PECA's defamation clauses have been used to target journalists and rights activists who express dissent against the government and the country's powerful military, which has ruled Pakistan for roughly half of its 73-year history. Last month, the government made public a new expansion to PECA that would outlaw online criticism of the government and public office holders; allow the government to ban online platforms like Facebook, Twitter and YouTube; and require all platforms - including messaging apps like WhatsApp - to share users' decrypted data with authorities without judicial oversight. On Tuesday, authorities said they were withdrawing the explicit ban on criticising the government, but maintained other provisions that have been used to block online dissent and arrest those who express it.

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What Biden will and won't do for Pakistan



(News Agencies)-The transition from US President Donald Trump to Joe Biden inspires equal measures of hope and fear in Pakistan given the president-elect's expressed views on rights, equality and democracy. Analysts say Pakistan's ability to balance ties with the US and China amid growing friction between the two superpowers will also set the tone for the US policy toward Pakistan under Biden.

Some analysts like to say that Pakistan runs with the hare and hunts with the hounds in regard to its policies towards the US and China. In late August, Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan clearly took China's side in an interview newscast with local TV channels.

Khan linked the future of Pakistan with China saying, "There should be no doubt in our mind that Pakistan's economic well-being has now been intertwined with China, which stood by us through thick and thin as no other did."

In contrast, Special Assistant on National Security to the Prime Minister Moeed Yousaf said that

Pakistan is not picking over the past two decades, its economic and defense relations with China have grown by leaps and bounds. Over the period China has become Pakistan's closest strategic ally, supplying it with top-of-the-line defense equipment to make it into a regional military powerhouse. In exchange, Pakistan openly supports China's stance on Xinjiang, Tibet and Taiwan, while China backs Pakistan on its Kashmir issue with India.

In an online debate arranged by the Washington-based Atlantic Council think tank in October, Yousaf took the middle path in saying "We ultimately want to see ourselves as an economic melting pot for the region."

As Pakistan's relationship has deteriorated with the US on an array of issues ranging from terrorism to nuclear proliferation

cemented by China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and its local flagship China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), entailing over \$60 billion worth of Chinese investments in infrastructure consisting mostly of loans.

Trump's administration, in line with its wider rivalry with China in recent years, galvanized a spirited resistance against Chinese BRI connectivity plans in Central and South Asia, and especially in Pakistan.

In November 2019, US Assistant Secretary for South and Central Asian Affairs Alice Wells delivered a forceful assessment of CPEC at the Woodrow Wilson Center in Washington, wherein she spelled out the Trump administration's general concerns about the BRI and CPEC, including in regard to "debt traps." Wells questioned the high cost and long-term impacts the debts incurred in the program would have on Pakistan's faltering economy.

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UN to open special session on coronavirus crisis, India's Secretary West listed as speaker



(News Agencies)- A special two-day session will be held at the UN General Assembly (UNGA) on Thursday with more than 100 world leaders -- some 53 heads of state, 39 heads of government and 38 ministers due to make pre-recorded video statements, including India's Secretary West Vikas Swarup. Among the leaders slated to address the session are French President Emmanuel Macron, German Chancellor Angela Merkel, British Prime Minister Boris Johnson, Japan's Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga, South African President Cyril Ramaphosa, and European Union chief Charles Michel. The United States will be represented by Health and Human Services Secretary Alex Azar. The President of the UNGA, Turkish diplomat Volkan Bozkir, will host the assembly's 31st special session Thursday to Friday in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. "Following 1.5 million deaths, more than 62 million cases worldwide and one of the largest social and economic crises in living memory, controlling and recovering from Covid-19 is the

international community's top priority," according to a UNGA press release. The two-day special session will primarily consist of a general debate on Thursday and interactive dialogues with experts, UN agencies and leading scientists, on Friday. Serum Institute of India Chief Executive Officer Adar Poonawalla will also address the session through a pre-recorded video on December 4. President Donald Trump is not listed as a speaker for the session and the United States has reportedly claimed that the United Nations meeting of world leaders on the Covid-19 pandemic was being designed to allow Beijing to spread "propaganda." The U.N. General Assembly agreed in October to hold the Covid-19 special session by adopting a resolution with 150 votes in favor. The United States, Israel and Armenia abstained and the remaining members didn't vote.

US bans cotton imports from Chinese firm on 'slave labor'

(News Agencies)- The Trump administration banned cotton imports from a military-linked Chinese firm it accuses of relying on "slave labor," as the US seeks to ramp up economic pressure on Beijing over its treatment of Muslim ethnic minority groups. The US Department of Homeland Security said Wednesday that customs officers at American ports would impound "shipments containing cotton and cotton products originating" from the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps., one of China's largest producers. The organization -- set up by the Communist Party more than 60 years ago to help develop the far western region of Xinjiang -- was previously hit by Treasury Department sanctions barring it from transactions with American companies and citizens. "The human rights abuses taking place at the hand of the Chinese Communist government will not be tolerated by President Trump and the

American people," DHS Acting Deputy Secretary Ken Cuccinelli said in a statement. US businesses shouldn't be allowed to "profit from slave labor" he said, adding that "Made in China" is not just a country of origin, it is a warning label. "The Trump administration and other critics of Beijing have targeted cotton from China, which supplies about one-third of US apparel, as a way to increase pressure over the mass detention of Turkic-speaking ethnic Uighurs. Xinjiang produces more than 80% of China's cotton, much of it from XPCC. The US's action could potentially affect clothing exports from other Asian producers like Bangladesh, Vietnam, and Cambodia, if they contain cotton from China, according to Sheng Lu, an associate professor in the Department of Fashion & Apparel Studies at the University of Delaware. "Cotton made by XPCC are used by garment factories throughout China and exported to other apparel producing countries," he said.

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Laguardia Airport Worker Sentenced to jail for using cell phone to record Woman in Bathroom

Defendant Pleaded Guilty to Stashing Mobile Phone in Women's Bathroom

(News Agencies)- Queens District Attorney Melinda Katz today announced that Samuel Rodriguez, 39, was sentenced to six months in jail after pleading guilty to using his cell phone to secretly record "pretty girls" using a public restroom at LaGuardia Airport where he worked in December 2018. District Attorney Katz said, "In pleading guilty, this defendant admitted to preying on unwitting individuals by setting up his phone to record women using the bathroom. He turned an airport restroom into his own personal peep show. This is unconscionable and as a result of his actions the defendant is going to jail." Rodriguez, of College Point, pleaded guilty in September to unlawful surveillance in the second degree. Acting Queens Supreme Court Justice Gia Morris today sentenced the defendant to six months in jail to be followed by ten years' post release supervision. Rodriguez will also be required to register as a sex

offender. According to the charges, shortly before 9 p.m. on December 19, 2018, a woman entered a one-stall unisex restroom right after the defendant had stepped out. Moments later, the woman heard a beeping sound. She walked toward the sound and spotted a cell phone actively recording inside the paper towel dispenser. The DA

said the victim examined the phone and played back a previous clip that captured video footage of the defendant setting up the phone inside the paper towel dispenser and angling the device to capture anyone using the toilet opposite the dispenser. Continuing, the District Attorney said, when Rodriguez was approached by

law enforcement he responded by stating "I know what this is about and I'm sorry" and further detailed that he went to the bathroom and put his phone in there because, "I was trying to video pretty girls. I was going to masturbate to it at home." The investigation was conducted by the Port Authority Police

Department. Assistant District Attorney Shannon Riordan of the District Attorney's Felony Trials Bureau prosecuted the case, under the supervision of Assistant District Attorney Mark Osnowitz, Bureau Chief, and under the overall supervision of Executive Assistant District Attorney for Supreme Court Trial Division Pishoy Yacoub.

Did Canada's pre-election politics spark Justin Trudeau's remarks on the farmers' protest in India?

(News Agencies)- Politics ahead of possible mid-term elections in Canada in the spring of 2021 may have been the reason behind Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's comments on India's farm laws that could cause bilateral ties to reset back to the lows of 2017.

An Indian official said the remarks during a virtual event were a "setback" given that the relationship had warmed in preceding months after Trudeau returned to power in October 2019, though as the leader of a minority government.

Canada foreign ministry, Global Affairs Canada, had been in touch with India on the farm legislations, and their necessity

had been conveyed over multiple conversations.

In fact, New Delhi expected the matter to be raised in Canada's House of Commons and was prepared for foreign minister Francoise-Philippe Champagne's response that the concerns had been made clear. However, an official pointed out that Trudeau "escalated" the matter by raising it unprompted during a Facebook live event to celebrate the birth anniversary of Guru Nanak.

The event was to be private and was closed to media, but the video was placed in the public domain, causing damage to the relationship akin to Trudeau's appearance

at a social event in Toronto in 2017, where pro-Khalistan flags and banners were waved and Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale and the assassins of Indira Gandhi featured on floats participating in the accompanying parade.

"It was not inadvertent," Vishnu Prakash, former Indian High Commissioner to Ottawa, said of Trudeau's comments. He said for the Canadian PM, it was the "primacy" of the vote bank that appeared to matter "without much regard for the relationship". There is a possibility that Canada may be headed for snap elections next year and that could have been part of the calculation for Trudeau.

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Belgians can invite four people for Christmas party. Only one can use the bathroom

In Belgium, people have been allowed to have people over at their homes for Christmas parties but with restrictions. One of the rules is that only one guest will be allowed to use the bathroom.

The pandemic has ruined the holidays. But in Belgium, it has made the government to think of implementing weird rules that the people will have to follow while celebrating Christmas with their loved ones this year. In Belgium, though people will be allowed to celebrate Christmas dinner with a few people, only one lucky guest will be allowed to use the bathroom. Yes, you read that right. PEOPLE IN BELGIUM TO CELEBRATE CHRISTMAS WITH LOVED ONES

According to a report by The Washington Post, people in Belgium can invite few people to

their homes for Christmas dinner. But if the authorities have a say in the matter, only one selected person will be allowed to use the washroom.

The one guest, who is allowed to use the washroom, will be chosen as a close contact and will be allowed inside the house. Whereas, other guests will be banned from going inside for any reason, including grabbing a drink or food. So, if one would have the urge to go to the washroom, they will have to leave for their home. Additionally, non-essential stores have also been opened for Christmas

shopping, and social gatherings have been allowed with four people in the outdoors. Reportedly, the four-people rule will be applied for Christmas celebrations, so that people who show up at other people's backyard parties do not end up spending time indoors. Moreover, people inviting guests over their homes for celebrations will need to have a garden or backyard that can be accessed without walking through the house. Therefore, if one does not have a backyard, they cannot have guests over at their



place. Interior Minister Annelies Verlinden told Het Laatste Nieuws, "You are not allowed to go through an interior space first, because then there is a risk that many people will be together in a small space." All these rules are part of broader shutdown regulations, that were imposed in the country at the

beginning of November. These will be extended till February. The rules also include the practice of cuddle contact, which means that a person who lives alone will be allowed to have physical contact with only one person outside of their household.

Chinese step up attempts to influence Biden team - US official



(News Agencies)-Chinese agents have stepped up their efforts to influence President-elect Joe Biden's incoming administration, a US intelligence official has said. William Evanina, from the US Office of the Director of National Intelligence, said the Chinese were also focusing on people close to Mr Biden's team.

Mr Evanina said it was an influence campaign "on steroids". Separately, a justice department official said more than 1,000

suspected Chinese agents had fled the US.

In Wednesday's virtual discussion at the Aspen Institute think tank, Mr Evanina, chief of the Director of National Intelligence's counter-intelligence branch, said China had been attempting to meddle in the US efforts to develop a coronavirus vaccine and recent American elections.

He continued: "We've also seen an uptick, which was planned

and we predicted, that China would now re-vector their influence campaigns to the new [Biden] administration. "And when I say that, that malign foreign influence, that diplomatic influence plus, or on steroids, we're starting to see that play across the country to not only the folks starting in the new administration, but those who are around those folks in the new administration.

"So that's one area we're going to be very keen on making sure the new administration understands that influence, what it looks like, what it tastes like, what it feels like when you see it."

Both Mr Biden and President Donald Trump traded bitter accusations during the recent White House campaign of being influenced by Beijing. Mr Trump focused on business dealings by his rival's son Hunter Biden in China, while the Democratic

candidate highlighted Mr Trump's Chinese bank account.

"What was Hunter Biden doing in Ukraine and China? During the same think tank discussion on Wednesday, John Demers, chief of the justice department's national security division, said hundreds of Chinese researchers with ties to their country's military had been identified by FBI investigators over the summer.

Mr Demers said the inquiry began when US authorities arrested five or six Chinese researchers who had hidden their affiliation with the People's Liberation Army (PLA).

"Neither the US nor China wants us"

"Those five or six arrests were just the tip of the iceberg and honestly the size of the iceberg was one that I don't know that we or other folks realised how large it was," he said.

Hong Kong pro-democracy tycoon Jimmy Lai detained for fraud

(News Agencies)- Hong Kong media tycoon and pro-democracy supporter Jimmy Lai has been charged with fraud and detained until a court hearing in April next year.

On Thursday a court denied him bail over a charge relating to the illegal use of his company's premises.

It comes a day after three prominent pro-democracy activists were jailed.

The cases have raised fears of a renewed crackdown on the city's

activists and media figures, spurred by a controversial new security law.

Mr Lai was arrested under the National Security Law earlier this year and later released on bail.

China has said the new law will return stability to the territory after a year of unrest, but critics say it has silenced dissent.

"China's new law: Why is Hong Kong worried?"

"Hong Kong's rebel mogul and pro-democracy voice

"The Hong Kong paper that pushed the boundary In another development, former Hong Kong pro-democracy legislator Ted Hui has announced during a trip to Denmark that he is going into exile.

What happened to Jimmy Lai? Mr Lai, 73, was arrested on Wednesday night along with two other senior executives from media company Next Digital. Mr Lai is the founder of Next Digital which publishes

Apple Daily, a well-read tabloid which is frequently critical of Hong Kong and mainland Chinese leadership.

On Thursday, the three men appeared in court to face charges relating to the alleged illegal use of their company's headquarters for purposes not permitted by its lease.

The charges stated that they had sublet a section of the premises. The landlord is a corporation established by the government to run the city's industrial parks.

The fraud charge is not being heard under the National Security Law but, according to an Apple Daily report, the judge presiding over the case had been hand-picked by the city's leader, Carrie Lam, to handle national security cases. A police statement on the arrests did not name those detained but pointed out that one of them - Jimmy Lai - was still under investigation for violating the National Security Law.

Nurses wanted: Swamped hospitals scramble for pandemic help



(News Agencies)- U.S. hospitals slammed with COVID-19 patients are trying to lure nurses and doctors out of retirement, recruiting students and new graduates who have yet to earn their licenses and offering eye-popping salaries in a desperate bid to ease staffing shortages. With the virus surging from coast to coast, the number of patients in the hospital with the virus has more than doubled over the past month to a record high of nearly 100,000, pushing medical centers and health care workers to the

breaking point. Nurses are increasingly burned out and getting sick on the job, and the stress on the nation's medical system prompted a dire warning from the head of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. "The reality is December and January and February are going to be rough times. I actually believe they are going to be the most difficult time in the public health history of this nation," Dr. Robert Redfield said. Governors in hard-hit states like Wisconsin and Nebraska are

making it easier for retired nurses to come back, including by waiving licensing requirements and fees, though it can be a tough sell for older nurses, who would be in more danger than many of their colleagues if they contracted the virus.

Some are taking jobs that don't involve working directly with patients to free up front-line nurses, McMillan said.

Iowa is allowing temporary, emergency licenses for new nurses who have met the state's educational requirements but haven't yet taken the state licensing exam. Some Minnesota hospitals are offering winter internships to nursing students to boost their staffs. The internships are typically offered in the summer but were canceled this year because of COVID-19.

Methodist Hospital in Minneapolis will place 25 interns for one to two months to work with COVID-19 patients, though certain tasks will remain off-limits, such as inserting IVs or urinary catheters, said Tina Kvalheim, a nurse who runs the program.

"They'll be fully supported in their roles so that our patients receive the best possible, safe care," Kvalheim said..

Landon Brown, 21, of Des Moines, Iowa, a senior nursing student at Minnesota State University, Mankato, recently accepted an internship at the Mayo Clinic Health System in Mankato. He was assigned to the pediatric unit's medical-surgical area but said he might come across patients with the coronavirus.

Brown's resolve to help patients as a nurse was reaffirmed after his 90-year-old grandfather contracted the virus and died over the weekend.

"The staff that he had were great, and they really took a lot of pressure off of my folks and my family," he said. "I think that if I can be that for another family, that would be great." The University of Iowa's College of Nursing is also trying to get graduates into the workforce quickly. It worked to fast-track students' transcripts to the Iowa Board of Nursing

so they could get licensed sooner upon graduating, said Anita Nicholson, associate dean for undergraduate programs.

Nicholson said the college also scheduled senior internships earlier than normal and created a program that allows students to gain hospital experience under a nurse's supervision. Those students aren't caring for coronavirus patients, but their work frees up nurses to do so, Nicholson said.

"The sooner we can get our graduates out and into the workforce, the better," she said.

Wausau, Wisconsin-based Aspirus Health Care is offering signing bonuses of up to \$15,000 for nurses with a year of experience.

Hospitals also are turning to nurses who travel from state to state. But that's expensive, because hospitals around the country are competing for them, driving salaries as high as \$6,200 per week, according to postings for travel nursing jobs.

Russia moves to expel American human rights activist



(News Agencies)-A prominent US human rights activist faces expulsion from Russia as it ratchets up pressure on non-governmental organisations fighting abuses, particularly those who receive financial support from abroad. Vanessa Kogan, director of the Justice Initiative project, told the Guardian that Russian migration officials had revoked her residency permit under a statute that indicates she is a threat to Russia's national security. Kogan has lived in Russia for over a decade and is married to a Russian man with whom she has two children.. She has been given two weeks to leave the country,

she said. Justice Initiative provides legal support to Russians seeking justice for human rights abuses in both local courts and the European court of human rights in Strasbourg. The organisation's work in Russia's North Caucasus region, targeting abuses by law enforcement and the military as well as gender discrimination, has angered Russia's security services and powerful local leaders like Chechnya's Ramzan Kadyrov. "They saw their chance to get rid of me, essentially," Kogan told the Guardian after learning of the government's intention to revoke her residency

permit. "I think that it's purely connected to the work that I do and my organisation does." Justice Initiative has been under intense government scrutiny, Kogan said, including pressure from security services for "cooperation" in their investigations (she has always declined). Kogan said she was approached by FSB officers shortly after receiving residency in Russia in 2017 and felt the two events may have been connected. "It was almost like an ultimatum: either you cooperate with us or we won't let you stay in Russia."

Kogan learned that she would be expelled from the country on Wednesday when she met migration officials to discuss her application for citizenship. She said the family is now considering what to do next. "Most of the borders are closed and we're also faced with the prospect of family separation," she said. Kogan said the decision also targets her husband, Grigor Avetisyan, a human rights lawyer who serves as Justice Initiative's advocacy director.

Avetisyan was forced out of Uzbekistan in 2006 for his human rights work, and Kogan said this would be his "second forced emigration". "They're killing two birds with one stone," Kogan said. The expulsion comes amid growing pressure on Justice Initiative and its partners. An affiliate based in Ingushetia in the North Caucasus was labelled a foreign agent last year, and the group's offices in Dagestan, Moscow, and Nazran have been raided since 2019. "We've been a thorn in the authorities' side for years," Kogan said, noting the organisation's success at winning cases, including the first judgment on domestic violence in Russia at the ECHR last year. "Since the organisation's founding, we've secured •25,000,000 for our clients. Many of them are from the North Caucasus, many of them have been accused of terrorism offences. Of course, in the eyes of the security services, we defend terrorists," she said. Justice Initiative, a partner of the Netherlands-based Stichting Justice Initiative, is one of a

dwindling number of foreign-backed human rights organisations still operating in Russia. The last decade has seen growing restrictions on human rights organisations and their funding, including the expulsion of USAID in 2012, and the institution of aggressive laws on foreign agents and "undesirable" organisations, which can be banned outright. Russian lawmakers are seeking to expand the foreign agent law to include individuals, potentially including foreign journalists.

Another American human rights activist, Jennifer Gaspar, was expelled from Russia in 2014 in a case similar to Kogan's. In 2018, the ECHR ruled that Russia had illegally revoked Gaspar's residency. Gaspar is married to a prominent human rights lawyer, Ivan Pavlov. Justice Initiative's original founding mission was to seek accountability for grave human rights abuses during the second war in Chechnya beginning in 2001, and later expanded its work into the rest of the North Caucasus, and into the area of gender discrimination.

Biden urges America to mask up for 100 days as coronavirus surges

... There's genuine, genuine anxiety." FDR told Americans in his first inaugural address that "the only thing we have to fear, is fear itself," steeling a demoralized citizenry to hold firm amid a banking crisis that threatened to destroy an already devastated economy.

Biden will take office amid the most extreme domestic circumstances of any president since Roosevelt, with sickness and death rampant and millions of Americans unemployed, hungry or at risk of losing their homes. Like his Democratic forbear, he will use the iconic opening moments of his term to summon an exhausted people to unite, in common cause -- with the help of new vaccines -- this time to beat the virus and save the economy.

There is a question, however, whether Biden's calls for national unity will resonate among people who didn't vote for him after Trump's relentless attacks on the legitimacy of his victory in the presidential election. But Biden's call to action may carry greater urgency now that the virus is taking hold in rural areas of the heartland with comparatively rudimentary health care systems, which escaped the first wave of infection that concentrated in many cities that tend to vote for Democrats.

Biden's interview -- his first since the election that also included Harris -- underscored a complete course correction from Trump's attitude towards the virus. The pandemic has never been worse



than it is now in the United States. One American is dying every 30 seconds amid record fatality figures and hospitalizations. Doctors and nurses are exhausted after months inside overflowing under-resourced Covid wards.

More than 276,000 people have now died from coronavirus in the United States and the nation set a new record for hospitalizations on Thursday with more than 100,667 people being treated for Covid-19.

Yet the current President is ignoring the carnage, as he pursues his fantastical lies and claims the election that he lost by a comfortable margin was stolen.

Trump has frequently mocked the wearing of masks. He is holding holiday parties inside the White House in defiance of his own government's health recommendations. When he returned home after his bout in military hospital with Covid-19 he famously turned to the cameras and ripped off his mask. By contrast, and if past behavior is

any guide, it is conceivable that one of Biden's first acts after delivering his inaugural address in 47 days will be to put his mask back on.

Biden asks Fauci to stay in his current role

another sign of a fresh approach to the pandemic, Biden said in the interview he had asked Dr. Anthony Fauci, who Trump has marginalized and insulted, to continue his current role as the nation's top infectious diseases specialist in Biden's administration and announced an effective promotion for the globally respected expert.

"I asked him to stay on the exact same role he's had for the past several presidents, and I asked him to be a chief medical adviser for me as well, and be part of the Covid team," Biden told Tapper, in a gesture that implies a return to continuity and science based policy-making after Trump's wild presidency.

Biden emphasized that he and Fauci spoke about the fact that "you don't have to close down the economy" if Americans are

following through with other safety protocols to prevent the spread of the virus. And he noted that even before they spoke, Fauci has been speaking regularly with Ron Klain, Biden's incoming chief of staff, and the two forged a close working relationship during the Ebola outbreak. The President-elect also said during the interview that he would get the vaccine publicly to show the public his confidence in it.

"When Dr. Fauci says we have a vaccine that is safe, that's the moment in which I will stand before the public and say that," Biden said. People have lost faith in the ability of the vaccine to work. Already the numbers are really staggeringly low, and it matters what the president and vice president do."

Earlier this week, former Presidents Bill Clinton, George W. Bush and Barack Obama all pledged to get the vaccine in public view to help combat vaccine skepticism. Biden said his three predecessors "have set the model as to what should be done."

Aid to states and struggling Americans

already clear to him from his conversations with governors across the country, as well as 50 Democratic and Republican mayors, that they will need a significant amount of money to get the vaccine where it needs to go. "It's one thing to get the vaccine delivered -- in cases, some frozen, some not -- and another thing to get the vaccine

to move from the case to a vaccination in someone's arm. That's the really complicated piece," Biden said, noting that governors and mayors told him they need far more financial assistance to get the vaccine delivered, which he described as "an incredibly expensive proposition."

"That's why we're continuing to hope that the Senate does something and responds to the immediate need to provide dollars. But we're going to need a lot more" once in office, Biden said. "It's going to cost literally billions of dollars to get this done. We can keep schools open. We can keep businesses open. But you have to be able to get the vaccine distributed."

The President-elect noted that the Trump administration has been "cooperating with us of late" and looping them in on the plans for how they are going to deliver on the vaccine, but he said, "There's not any help getting out there."

"Look at all the businesses that are being hurt so badly," he said. "No money to help them. Come Christmas time, there's going to be millions of people see their unemployment run out. So, there's a whole range of things that have to be done."

Biden called the \$900 billion framework for a congressional aid package proposed by a bipartisan group of members "a good start," but said more aid would be needed and he urged members to focus on what struggling Americans need most.

'We can be the swing vote': Asian Americans are key part in Georgia runoff strategy

The homeowner in Duluth, Georgia, opened her screen door and softly said, "I'm not good at English." The two volunteers, clutching clipboards and political fliers, were on the Korean woman's porch to talk about the January 5 Senate runoffs.

"I speak some Korean," said Grace Pai, in Korean. "It's terrible," Pai added in broken Korean. Pai explained how she and her fellow volunteer, Syed Hussain, were canvassing houses for the Asian American Advocacy Fund to talk to Asian American voters for Democratic challengers in the runoffs.

"My mother immigrated to the US from Korea as a girl," explained Pai. The homeowner, delighted to hear her native language,

explained to the canvassers how much affordable health care meant to her family.

Pai pressed the woman to send her absentee ballot in by mail for Democrats Jon Ossoff and Reverend Raphael Warnock.

As Pai and Hussain left the woman's porch, the homeowner pumped her fist in the air, promising she would.

Conversations like these are key for volunteers who believe the only chance to flip the two Republican Senate seats in Georgia to the Democrats is through broad based coalitions, which includes Asian Americans. In the state where President-elect Joe Biden defeated President Donald Trump by just 12,284 votes in November, activists say there's

little question the surge in Asian American voters helped flip the state in November.

They just have to reach them.

"There are so many people like that woman, Asian American voters who have never been asked about their political beliefs, who have never been asked why voting is important to them," Pai said. "I think this tailored outreach means a lot."

"It's counties like this, at least in my view, that gave Joe Biden that win," said Hussain, 21. The college student grew up in Gwinnett County, which has seen Korean immigrants drive the growth of Asian Americans in the Atlanta suburbs. Across the entire



Atlanta metro area, the Asian American and Pacific Islander electorate has grown significantly in recent years -- mirroring the trend of the increasing and diversifying population across the state -- specifically in and

around the capital city of Atlanta. While AAPIs are a small share of the electorate in Georgia, the number of Asian American voters grew seven times as much as other racial and ethnic groups combined.

Bangladesh Is Everyone's Economic Darling. It Might Not Last.

Despite the dire expectations, military coups in 1975, 1982, and 2007, and a series of natural disasters, Bangladesh has in fact made significant progress in reducing poverty and in promoting economic growth. Last month, the International Monetary Fund forecast that Bangladesh's gross domestic product per capita would exceed that of India's in 2020.

The particulars of the IMF's prediction are quite stark; it suggests that India's GDP per capita, mostly as a consequence of the effects of the coronavirus pandemic, is likely to shrink by 10.3 percent. Bangladesh's GDP per capita, on the other hand, is expected to grow by as much as 4 percent.

How did a country that was widely seen as teetering on the brink of economic disaster manage to so dramatically improve its prospects and even threaten to overtake India's economic standing, at least on a per capita basis? The immediate answer lies in how Bangladesh sustained fast economic growth over the past five years while India's performance over the same time span significantly lagged. But Dhaka's success in promoting rapid growth (and thereby also reducing poverty) begs the question: How exactly did it perform such an economic miracle?

The answers are complex. At one level, Bangladesh's success stems from a substantial inflow of funds from expatriate Bangladeshi workers, most of whom live in the Persian Gulf states. More than 10 million Bangladeshis remit \$15 billion on an annual basis. Apart from their

substantial financial contributions, these expatriate workers have also helped ease unemployment at home, where there are more than 160 million people packed into a country about the size of Illinois. Furthermore, this

mostly steady infusion of funds has gone a long way toward easing poverty across the country.

But foreign remittances alone do not explain Bangladesh's success story. Another important contributor to the country's recent march toward some prosperity must be attributed to the extraordinary success of its garment industry, which employs nearly 4 million workers and generates more than 80 percent of the country's export income. This industry, which Bangladesh carefully nurtured as China and Vietnam started to focus on other areas, has proved to be both a vital source of employment for

Bangladeshi women and a critical source of income for the country. Employment in this sector has been an important source of women's empowerment both in terms of their social as well as their economic status.

Beyond these two factors, the country's economic success can



also be attributed to another source. Unlike India, which has made mostly piecemeal interventions in its social sector, several Bangladeshi governments, regardless of their ideological underpinnings, have made vast strides in boosting maternal health and providing rudimentary health care. These interventions have helped reduce infant mortality, alleviated widespread malnutrition, and fended off a range of diseases.

But despite Dhaka's smart economic planning, political trends in the country remain a cause for considerable concern. Unbridled political power concentrated in the hands of the ruling party could, over time, contribute to cronyism and corruption—a development that would damage the country's economic progress. Like several other countries, Bangladesh has been increasingly lurching toward authoritarianism. Prime

Minister Sheikh Hasina, the daughter of the founder of the country, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, is in her fourth term in office with her party, the Awami League, whose coalition controls 288 out of 300 directly elected seats in Parliament. The 2018 elections which saw her

reelection were marked by allegations of widespread electoral irregularities. Earlier that year, the leader of the principal opposition party, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party, was given a 17-year prison

term on charges of corruption. The opposition, quite unsurprisingly, has alleged that these charges are baseless and politically motivated.

Hasina has shown no interest in tolerating any legitimate challenge to her government. Her government has used existing and new legislation to harass, intimidate, and silence dissidents and critics. One of the most striking examples of these practices was the 2018 detention of a noted photographer and activist, Shahidul Alam, for his support for schoolchildren who were protesting the poor quality of traffic safety in Dhaka. Alam, who was ultimately released after an international outcry, was forced to spend more than 100 days in custody, during which time he was tortured. Beyond the dubious grounds for his confinement, the government has also used a draconian law,

the Digital Security Act of 2018, to suppress dissent. With its sweeping provisions on speech on the Internet, Dhaka can now impose on its critics a sentence of up to 10 years in prison.

This suppression of dissent is inherently undesirable, as it corrodes democratic norms. Worse still, it can give leeway to corruption and cronyism, as electronic news outlets will be chary of investigating dubious practices. In the end, those willing to cozy up to the government but willing to cut corners could end up counting on its protection. Others could easily run afoul under the sweeping provisions of the act.

Bangladesh's economic progress is certainly worth celebrating. However, a couple of caveats are in order. A reliance on a single sector—the garment industry—does not bode well for its economic future. For example, an economic downturn in any of the countries that import its garments can exact significant costs on this industry. Nor, for that matter, can it indefinitely count on the receipt of remittances. As the coronavirus pandemic has demonstrated, migrant workers can be shed at a moment's notice. Finally, if at least part of the gains came from empowering the country's poorest, those advances could easily be reversed by a turn toward authoritarianism, which would lead to policies designed for an elite class focused on preserving its political and economic capital. For Bangladesh's economic success to continue, it needs to return to one of its founding principles, back when it was Kissinger's basket case: democracy.

Donald Trump's last push in West Asia



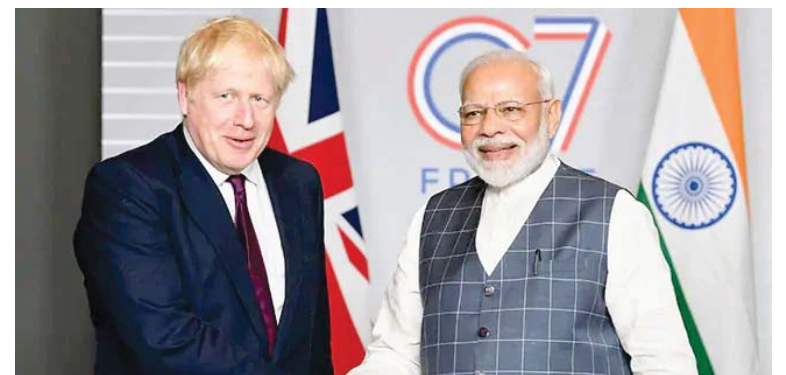
enriched uranium than the original agreement allowed while Washington has zero diplomatic credibility.

The stakes are high. The Arab Street has no love for Israel. Iran's informal empire remains intact but broke. Outsiders must tread this minefield carefully. India has even more reason to avoid a regional role and continue to maintain a set of bilateral

relationships. Pakistan is struggling. The United Arab Emirates banned visas for Pakistan and others who opposed normalisation of ties with Israel. As West Asian politics becomes ever more cut-throat, Islamabad may have to choose between ideological sanctity and economic stability. Either way will be to New Delhi's advantage.

India makes its move, invites Boris Johnson to be Republic Day chief guest

With Europe prepared for a hard border and incoming US President Joe Biden having expressed his apprehensions about Brexit, the UK is facing uncertainty on trade issues. From the Indian point of view, it is necessary for New Delhi to engage London as the latter is part of the P-5 (the five permanent members of the UN Security Council) and still has the ear of the US on Afghanistan and



Pakistan. The UK also has a strong political lobby from Mirpur in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir

(PoK), which often steers its course on issues such as Jammu and Kashmir.

Why are thousands of Indian farmers protesting?

Some of India's farmers are among the country's poorest people, but government policies have long protected them from the ravages of open market prices.

That is changing.

A set of three laws passed in September aims to deregulate India's enormous agriculture sector. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has said they will "liberate" farmers from the tyranny of middlemen.

But many farmers fear that they stand to lose more than they could gain from the new regulations and that the main beneficiaries will be agricultural corporations with gargantuan financial firepower.

As a result, the farmers have taken to the streets in the biggest such protests in years.

The demonstrations ramped up last week when several thousand protesters from the northern states of Punjab and Haryana set out to converge on the capital, New Delhi. Police blocked them at the city's borders, denying them permission to gather in a place of their choice.

So what do India's new farm laws do?

Firstly, they make it easier for farmers to bypass government-regulated markets (known locally as mandis) and sell produce directly to private buyers. They can now enter into contracts with



private companies, a practice known in India as contract farming, and sell across state borders.

The new regulations also allow traders to stockpile food. This is a shift away from prohibitions against hoarding, which could make it easier for traders to take advantage of rising prices, such as during a pandemic. Such practices were criminal offences under the old rules.

Why is any of this a problem?

Farmers have some genuine concerns.

A big one is that the new rules remove many of their safeguards. More than 86 percent of India's cultivated farmland is controlled

by smallholder farmers who own less than two hectares (five acres) of land each. They fear that they just do not have enough bargaining power to get the kinds of prices they need for a decent standard of living when they negotiate to sell their produce to larger companies.

"The government has left us at the mercy of big corporations," Rashpinder Singh, 27, a farmer from Punjab state, told Al Jazeera in September.

"It is preposterous to believe that farmers who have small land holdings will have any bargaining power over private players."

Can't they take such disputes to court?

One of the new legal provisions says that to resolve disputes, farmers can seek out a so-called conciliation board, district-level administrative officers or an appellate authority. In other words, these cases will not go to a regular court.

But you said farmers can enter into contracts with buyers. Surely this will give them legal protection?

The new laws also do not make written contracts mandatory. So in the case of any violation of their terms, it can be very hard for a farmer to prove that he or she has been aggrieved, giving them little recourse. It also does not help that, in general, there's a bit of a

bad odour around doing business with large companies.

Farmers have seen the costs of things like fertilisers and seeds shoot up over the years as those farming inputs are predominantly sold by the private sector.

Is there a minimum price at which farmers are guaranteed to be able to sell their produce?

There is, for certain crops such as rice and wheat.

Producers have been able to rely on the so-called minimum support price (MSP), the assured price the government pays for these crops.

But the new rules do not guarantee any minimum price for any product, and farmers worry that the existing MSP will be abolished at some point.

This would be a big blow to farmers who grow the foods that are currently eligible for the MSP, many of whom are from Punjab and Haryana, the home states of a large proportion of the protesters out on the roads.

So who else is affected by the rule changes?

Farmers are not the only people feeling like they are losing out. In fact, the new rules have upset a lot of other people with vested interests.

Under the old regulations, state governments earned a fee for all the stuff sold through the mandis.

As those sales fall, so do their state revenues.

Then there are the middlemen who pretty much control the mandis and also stand to be big losers if farmers skip past their doors to sell directly to customers.

The laws were passed in September. Why are the farmers protesting now?

Because no one bothered to check with them before they were passed!

The governing Bharatiya Janata Party initially enforced the new laws as the coronavirus pandemic ramped up in June, first as emergency ordinances. It then passed them in Parliament in September. It did all that without consulting the farmers. They responded initially with a month-long protest in their respective states. In Punjab, they blocked the passage of trains.

Farmers' protest explained: What are the big concerns, what can the government negotiate?

Even as the farmer protests against the three new agriculture-related laws have gathered momentum, one thing seems obvious: Much of the opposition really is just to one of the three laws. Even in that one - the Farmers' Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Act - there are only some contentious provisions, which, although key, can still leave doors open for negotiation.

The other two laws

Consider first the two laws that ought not to be serious cause for farmer angst.

The Essential Commodities (Amendment) Act is about doing away with the Centre's powers to impose stockholding limits on foodstuffs, except under "extraordinary conditions". These could be war, famine,



other natural calamities of grave nature and annual retail price rise exceeding 100% in horticultural produce (basically onions and potato) and 50% for non-perishables (cereals, pulses and edible oils).

Given that stock limits apply only to traders - the amendment exempts processors, exporters and other "value chain

participants" as long as they don't keep quantities beyond their installed capacity/demand requirements - it shouldn't concern farmers at all. Farmers, if anything, would gain from removal of stocking restrictions on the trade, as it potentially translates into unlimited buying and demand for their produce. The Farmers (Empowerment and

Protection) Agreement on Price Assurance and Farm Services Act has to do with providing a regulatory framework for contract cultivation. This specifically concerns agreements entered into by farmers with agribusiness firms (processors, large retailers or exporters) ahead of any planting/rearing season for supplying produce of predetermined quality at minimum guaranteed prices.

Again, there is little rationale for objecting to an Act that merely enables contract farming. Such exclusive agreements between companies and farmers are already operational in crops of particular processing grades (the potatoes used by beverages and snacks giant PepsiCo for its Lay's and Uncle Chipps wafers) or dedicated for exports

Why tens of thousands of farmers are blocking roads into India's capital city



More than 200,000 Indian farmers and their supporters have occupied the streets of New Delhi for days in protest against three new agriculture reform laws, blocking major highways into the capital city and vowing to remain camped there until the laws are repealed.

The legislation, enacted by Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in late September, aims to deregulate India's agricultural industry in a move the government says will both provide farmers with more autonomy over choosing prices and make the agricultural sector more efficient.

Under the new policies, farmers will now sell goods and make contracts with independent buyers outside of government-sanctioned marketplaces, which have long served as the primary locations for farmers to do business. Modi and members of his party believe these reforms will help India modernize and improve its

farming industry, which will mean greater freedom and prosperity for farmers.

But the protesting farmers aren't convinced.

Although the government has said it will not drop minimum support prices for essential crops like grain, which the Indian government has set and guaranteed for decades, the farmers are concerned they

will disappear. Without them, the farmers believe they will be at the mercy of large corporations that will pay extremely low prices for essential crops, plunging them into debt and financial ruin.

"Farmers have so much passion because they know that these three laws are like death warrants for them," Abhimanyu Kohar, coordinator of the National Farmer's Alliance, a federation of more than 180 nonpolitical farm organizations across India, told me in an interview. "Our farmers are doing this movement for our future, for our very survival."

The distressed state of farmers in India is cause for concern. A 2018 study by India's National Bank for

30 from the banks of India's sacred Ganges River, Modi sought to reassure farmers that the new laws would



benefit them. "These reforms have not only served to unshackle our farmers but also have given them new rights and opportunities," Modi said. Modi has blamed India's opposition parties, which have been speaking out strongly against the bills, for



Agriculture and Rural Development found that more than half of farmers in India are in debt. More than 20,000 farmers in the country died by suicide from 2018 to 2019, and though there is considerable debate, several studies suggest that farmers' indebtedness has been a major factor. In comments made November

agitating the farmers by spreading rumors.

"I know that decades of falsehood do put apprehensions in the minds of farmers, I want to say this from the bank of Mother Ganga - we are not working with the intention of deceiving. Our intentions are as holy as the water of the river Ganga," Modi said. The farmers, who are

mostly from the nearby Punjab and Haryana regions, began marching to New Delhi by the thousands



in tractors and cars on November 26 to demand the prime minister repeal the laws. They were met by large numbers of police in riot gear, who used tear gas, water canons, and batons to keep the protesters at the border of New Delhi and Haryana state. Protests restarted November 27, but following the clashes, authorities allowed the farmers to enter New Delhi and peacefully assemble at an approved location later that evening.

A delegation of farmers held talks on December 1 with BJP officials, including Minister of Agriculture Narendra Singh Tomar, but the negotiations were unsuccessful.

"The government did not agree to our points and rejected our demands outright," Chanda Singh, a member of the farmers' delegation, told Al Jazeera, referring to the farmers' insistence that the three laws be repealed. "We will continue our protest unless our demands are met," Singh said.

Tomar, however, appeared to have a more favorable view of the talks, telling Indian news agency ANI that the meeting went well. Another round of talks with a greater number of farmers is scheduled for December 3.

Whether those talks will appease the concerns of the farmers, though, remains to be seen. "In Western countries agriculture is a source of business, but in India, agriculture is a source of livelihood," Kohar, the National Farmer's Alliance coordinator, told me. "In India, crops support their living." Some experts say the laws are "a necessary tough call," but farmers aren't convinced.

Agriculture plays a crucial role in the Indian economy, as nearly 60 percent of India's 1.3 billion people depend on farming for their livelihoods. But farming is also incredibly unproductive, as the sector accounts for only about 15 percent of India's GDP.

By allowing farmers to sell to whomever they want, the government hopes to attract private business to agriculture, which will benefit some farmers.

"It's a necessary tough call," said Sadanand Dhume, a resident fellow at the American Enterprise Institute and an expert on South Asia. "This should've been done 20 years ago. It's a small part of a much larger and much more complex solution to a problem."

The problem, Dhume explained, is that there are simply too many farmers in India. He and others have

argued that the country should make a similar transition away from farming to manufacturing, like China did.

But so far, India has not been able to generate the kind of manufacturing growth needed to support millions of farmers in their transition to new work. Manufacturing accounted for only about 17 percent of India's GDP in 2020.

As Dhume said, "If the economy were creating jobs, then there wouldn't be as much anxiety. In India, because job creation has been so weak, the thought of losing the guarantee is unsettling for farmers." Part of the farmers' fear is also due to the urgency of the current moment, when the economic impact of the Covid-19 pandemic has made farmers even more alarmed. The Indian economy shrank 7.5 percent from July to September compared with the same period in 2019. A June survey by the All India Manufacturers Organization found that more than a third of small- and medium-sized businesses were making plans to close, despite receiving aid from the government.

The farmers, who have brought enough supplies with them to last for at least six months, are determined to stay until Modi's government repeals the new farm bills and enshrines the minimum support price into law, among other demands.

"We want everything in writing," Kohar said.

Farm bills: Are India's new reforms a 'death warrant' for farmers?



What exactly do the bills propose?

Taken together, the reforms will loosen rules around sale, pricing and storage of farm produce - rules that have protected India's farmers from the free market for decades.

They also allow private buyers to hoard essential commodities for future sales, which only government-authorised agents could do earlier; and they outline rules for contract farming, where farmers tailor their production to suit a specific buyer's demand.

One of the biggest changes is that farmers will be allowed to sell their produce at a market price directly to private players - agricultural businesses, supermarket chains and online grocers. Most Indian farmers currently sell the majority of their produce at government-controlled wholesale markets or mandis at assured floor prices.

"Will coronavirus lockdown cause food shortages in India?"

"India's water refugees who live in cattle camps" Onionomics: Peeling away the layers of India's food economy

These markets are run by committees made up of farmers, often large land-owners, and traders or "commission agents" who act as middle men for brokering sales, organising storage and transport, or even financing deals.

It's a complex system underpinned by regulations, and a host of personal and business relationships.

The reforms, at least on paper, give farmers the option of selling outside of this so-called "mandi system".

So, what is the issue?

The issue is that it's unclear how this will play out in reality. For one, farmers can already sell to private players in many states but what these bills do is offer a national framework.

But farmers are mainly concerned that this will eventually lead to the end of wholesale markets and assured prices, leaving them with no back-up option. That is, if they are not satisfied with the price offered by a private buyer, they cannot return to the mandi or use it as a bargaining chip during negotiations.

"First, farmers will feel attracted towards these private players, who will offer a better price for the produce. The government mandis will pack up meanwhile and after a few years, these players will start exploiting the farmers. That's what we fear," Multan Singh Rana, a farmer in the northern state of Punjab, told BBC Punjabi.

The government has said the mandi system will continue, and they will not withdraw the Minimum Support Price (MSP) they currently offer. But farmers are suspicious.

"This is a death warrant for small and marginalised farmers. This is aimed at destroying them by handing over agriculture and market to the big corporates. They want to snatch away our land. But we will not let them do this," Sukhdev Singh Kokri, a farmer, told BBC Punjabi.

The protests have been the strongest in Punjab and neighbouring Haryana state, where the mandi system is strong and the productivity is high - so only the government has been able to buy that volume of produce at a set price.

Three contentious bills that will change the way India's farmers do business have roiled the country's parliament and sparked protests that have spilled onto the streets.

The upper house or Rajya Sabha passed two of the bills on Sunday in a charged session. The bills will become laws once the president approves them, which is a formality at this stage.

Opposition parties accused the government of flouting parliamentary procedure by passing the bills hurriedly and not listening to their demand of sending the bills to a parliamentary committee for further deliberations. The row led

to the suspension of eight opposition members, who staged a sit-in outside the parliament through Monday night.

But beyond the political fracas, the bills have also split opinions - while Prime Minister Narendra Modi called the reforms a "watershed moment" for Indian agriculture, opposition parties have termed them "anti-farmer" and likened them to a "death warrant".

Angry and worried farmer groups see them as unfair and exploitative. Pro-reform economists have partly welcomed the move, but say it's a piecemeal approach that is unlikely to do much.

Tens of thousands of farmers swarm India's capital to protest deregulation rules

Tens of thousands of farmers have swarmed India's capital where they intend to camp out for weeks to protest new agricultural laws that they say could destroy their livelihoods. Farmers from the nearby states of Punjab, Haryana and Uttar Pradesh began arriving by tractors and on foot at the outskirts of New Delhi last week, where they blocked roads and set up makeshift camps, according to protest leaders. Some slept on the road or in their tractors, and several places of worship offered protesters food.

Police attempted to block demonstrators from entering the city. They fired tear gas and water cannons Thursday and Friday after protesters pelted police officers with stones and damaged public property, according to Manoj Yadav, a senior police official from Haryana.

The farmers are protesting laws passed in September, which Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi says will give farmers more autonomy to set their own prices

and sell directly to private businesses, such as supermarket chains.

But the move has infuriated India's farmers, who say that the new rules will leave them worse off by making it easier for corporates to exploit agricultural workers who make up more than half of India's 480 million-strong workforce, according to India's most recent Census in 2011.

According to Ashutosh Mishra, the media coordinator of protest organizer All India Kisan Sangharsh Committee, which represents around 200 farming unions, tens of thousands of demonstrators have gathered at each of New Delhi's three borders -- a line of protesters at one of the borders stretches for 30 kilometers (19 miles), he said. Police have put up barriers and dug up roads to prevent protesters from coming into the city center to hold sit-ins. Mishra expects more farmers from around the country to join the protests in the coming days. That's despite New Delhi

being a hotspot for Covid-19 in a country that has already reported more than 9.4 million reported cases, the most in any country bar the United States.

"We are trying to be weary of Covid but we don't have an option -- it is a question of life and death," said Mukut Singh, the president of a farmers union in the northern state of Uttar Pradesh, who is leading thousands in protest in his home state, and says he will join the protesters in Delhi later this week.

"We are the ones who have provided food, milk, vegetables when the whole country was in lockdown -- we were still toiling in the fields," he said. "It is the government who has put us at risk by introducing these laws during Covid."

What the protests are about For decades, the Indian government has offered guaranteed prices to farmers for certain crops, providing long-term certainty that allows them to make investments for the next



crop cycle. Under the previous laws, farmers had to sell their goods at auction at their state's Agricultural Produce Market Committee, where they were guaranteed to get at least the government-agreed minimum price. There were restrictions on who could purchase at auction and prices were capped for essential commodities.

Modi's new laws dismantle the committee structure, allowing farmers to sell their goods to anyone for any price. Farmers have more freedom to do things such as sell direct to buyers and sell to other states.

Modi said increasing market competition would be a good thing as it fulfills farmers' demands for higher income and gives them new rights and opportunities.

"The farmers should get the advantage of a big and comprehensive market which opens our country to global markets," Modi said on Monday, as farmers protested in the capital. He hopes it will attract private investment into the agricultural industry, which has lagged as other parts of the country's economy have modernized.

India's government to meet farmers as thousands protest against farm reforms



Government officials in India are set to meet with farmer representatives on Thursday for the fourth time in a bid to resolve grievances on farm reforms. Tens of thousands of farmers, most of them from northern states of Punjab and Haryana, have taken to the streets in protest against the farm reforms that were enacted into law this year.

Braving the harsh winter and the ongoing coronavirus pandemic, many marched toward New Delhi and camped out on the city's outskirts, Reuters reported. The protesting farmers also claim they have support from all over the country, the news wire said. India's parliament passed

three contentious bills in September.

The three reforms would chip away some of the rules that have protected India's farmers for decades and would subject them to unfettered free-market mechanisms where competition would be high. Agriculture is the primary source of livelihood for about 58% of India's population but accounts for around 15% of GDP.

Three farm reform bills

The first one would allow farmers to sell their produce directly to traders and companies, including supermarkets and online grocers, as well as to retail customers - whoever offers a higher price. The farmers would be able to do so

without being taxed for those sales. Farmers typically bring and sell most of their produce at state government-controlled market places, or mandis, which are operated by marketing boards called the Agricultural Produce Market Committee (APMC).

While they exist to ensure farmers are not exploited by middlemen who might force them to sell their produce at very low prices, experts have suggested that APMCs often work against the interest of less endowed farmers due to layers of intermediaries. Under the new bill, farmers can sell their produce both at the mandis and also directly to buyers from the fields. To be clear, in some states,

farmers can already sell directly to cash and carry retailers.

The second bill allows farmers to enter into contract farming agreements with buyers at pre-determined prices and provide local dispute settlement mechanisms. The third bill reduces the central government's involvement in regulating supply of certain food items, allowing them to do so only under extenuating circumstances like war or famine. It will allow buyers to purchase, store and distribute food items such as like cereals, pulses, onions, potatoes, oils without restriction.

The government said it expects this to help drive up investments and modernization of the food supply chain.

Why farmers are protesting

Farmers have been struggling for years due to low crop prices, rising costs, demonetization and widespread droughts even though there have been generous government subsidies and income tax exemptions. Many farmers have fallen into debt that's led to a rise in farmer suicides in recent years. One of the main concerns from the protesting farmers is that the bills do not mention anything about minimum support prices (MSP) and there is growing worry that India may do away with it altogether,

according to media reports. MSPs are essentially a safety net provided by the government in case prices drop for certain crops, mainly rice and wheat. The government would guarantee a certain price to farmers regardless of market conditions and government agencies would buy some of those crops at that price. The worry is that if MSPs are dropped, large corporations could potentially set prices that would put farmers at a further disadvantage. But the Indian government, including Prime Minister Narendra Modi, has reiterated that MSPs and government procurement would not be eliminated. Protesters are demanding that the government guarantee that in writing.

"Anecdotal evidence shows that free market prices are generally lower than the designated MSPs. Farmers fear that corporatizing procurement would lead to lower prices," Kunal Kundu, India economist at Societe Generale, told CNBC. With many agricultural inputs - such as seeds, fertilizers, and machinery - already controlled by private sector companies, data shows that cost of producing crops is rising at a much faster pace than the increase in their prices, Kundu said. That's reducing the crop sector's value, he added.

Thousands of farmers march to Indian capital defying tear gas

Thousands of farmers have entered the capital New Delhi for a planned protest against new farm laws hours after the police fired several rounds of tear gas and used water cannon to stop the Dilli Chalo (Go to Delhi) march.

Protesting Indian farmers scuffled with police earlier on Friday during the march to the capital, against new laws, which will make it easier for farmers to sell their produce directly to private buyers and enter into a contract with private companies.

But farmers demand the bills, passed by India's parliament in September, be scrapped fearing the laws will leave them vulnerable to big corporates.

A Delhi Police spokesperson confirmed to Al Jazeera the farmers have been given permission to enter the national capital and hold a peaceful protest at the Nirankari Samagam Ground in the Burari area.



"The farmers have been granted permission to enter Delhi. They can protest peacefully in a ground in Burari area" Anil Mittal, Additional PRO (Delhi Police), told Al Jazeera.

However, farmers from several states and trade unions, who wanted to stage protest in the Ramlila ground in the heart of the

city, have yet to comment if they would agree to the new venue. Television footage showed plumes of smoke and some people throwing stones at police as thousands pressed against barricades, waving flags and sticks. Some rode tractors near the barriers.

'Not acceptable'

A farmer leader Jagmohan Singh told Al Jazeera over phone from Haryana border that they have been given permission to come to New Delhi but that he did not agree with the conditions set by the authorities. "The government wants us to come to Delhi, organise a protest rally and return back. Such conditions are not acceptable to us," he said.

Sukhdev Singh, another farm leader, said the new venue - Nirankari Samagam Ground - where they have been given permission to hold their protest, is not acceptable to them as it is too far from the city centre.

"All the major rallies in New Delhi happen either in Ramlila Maidan or at Jantar Mantar. Why can't the government allow the farmers to hold their protest at these two venues [instead of telling] us to go to the city outskirts," Singh told Al Jazeera over phone. "We will not hold our protest rally in the Nirankari Samagam Ground

at any cost." Thousand of farmers who have been travelling by tractors, buses and on foot from the northern state of Punjab towards New Delhi are still on their way. A small group of farmers have reached the national capital and gathered at the Nirankari Samagam Ground, where a large contingent of police force is already present. Gurnam Singh, a farmer from Punjab, told Al Jazeera at the Nirankari Samagam Ground that they are "very unhappy" with the venue. "We will hold our protest either at Ramlila Maidan or Jantar Mantar." "If the government doesn't grant us permission to hold our protest at our desired venues, we will block the roads of the national capital." Meanwhile Indian media reported that India's Agriculture Minister Narendra Singh Tomar has requested the farmers to end their protest against the farm laws and called them for talks next week to resolve the matter.



India farmers press on with protest despite offer to talk

NEW DELHI (News Agencies)- Thousands of farmers in and around the Indian capital on Saturday pressed on with their protest against agricultural legislation they said could devastate crop prices, while the government sought talks with their leaders. Some protesters burned an effigy of Prime Minister Modi and shouted "Down with Modi," as they rallied on New Delhi's border with Haryana state. The protesting farmers were allowed to enter New Delhi late Friday after a day of clashes with police, who used tear gas, water cannons and baton charges to push them back. Television images showed some of them moving into the

capital while thousands still remained at the outskirts of the city. The Press Trust of India news agency said more protesters were heading for New Delhi from northern Punjab state. Many farmers have camped out on highways in Punjab and Haryana states for the last two months to protest the passing of the legislation. They say the laws could cause the government to stop buying grain at guaranteed prices and result in their exploitation by corporations that would buy their crops cheaply. They want the laws scrapped.

The government says the legislation brings about much needed reform agriculture that will allow farmers

the freedom to market their produce and boost production through private investment. Agriculture Minister Narendra Singh Tomar said he has invited representatives of the farmers for talks on Dec. 3. "We have talked before and are still ready for talks," Tomar said late Friday. There was no immediate response from the farmers. The protesters said they would not return to their homes until their demands were met. "We are fighting for our rights. We won't rest until we reach the capital and force the government to abolish these black laws," said Majhinder Singh Dhaliwal, one of the leaders. Opposition parties and some Modi allies have

called the laws anti-farmer and pro-corporation. Farmers have long been seen as the heart and soul of India, where agriculture supports more than half of the country's 1.3 billion people. But farmers have also seen their economic clout diminish over the last three decades. Once accounting for a third of India's gross domestic product, they now produce only 15% of gross domestic product, which is valued at \$2.9 trillion a year. Farmers often complain of being ignored and hold frequent protests to demand better crop prices, more loan waivers and irrigation systems to guarantee water during dry spells.

Protests By Sikh Farmers In India Prompt Demonstration At San Francisco Consulate

SAN FRANCISCO (News Agencies)- Massive civil unrest is happening in the Punjab region of India over changes to the agricultural system there. But it is part of a larger struggle that is reaching across the world to the Bay Area. Local Sikhs gathered at San Francisco's Land's End Wednesday to begin a car caravan to the Indian Consulate. They were protesting three new laws that would open the government-controlled agriculture market to the private sector, welcoming in corporate farming. Currently, 87% of Punjabi income is derived from small farms. "The

afternoon, local protesters blocked the street in front of the Consulate in San Francisco. You should take your flag and leave the land of the free! You have



moment you start taking away farming from a society that's largely farming-based, you will run into an issue and that's why we're seeing such great opposition," said Prabhjot Singh of San Jose. In India, hundreds of thousands of farmers have shut down access to the Punjabi capital and Wednesday

no business here," Bhajan Bhinder of Stockton shouted from a loudspeaker. A consulate official waved off KPIX 5's request for comment, but the farm issue is only the latest in a growing struggle over what the Sikhs say is oppression rooted in religious intolerance. "Well, the world needs to be afraid it could lead to

oppression and suppression," said Bhinder. "It could lead to gross human rights violations. It could lead to the killing of innocents more than it could lead to a war."

In America, the Boston Tea Party was an expression of defiance that led to a war for independence. Whether that's what is happening in India, only time will tell. But those from the area say taking farming away from the people may be a last straw. "And that's not something we can let go of," said Singh, "so, at this point, it's either fight or lay down on your back and let the government run all over you." Talks between the farmers and government ministers have, so far failed. And the farmers have set up massive camps at the edges of the capital city, vowing to stay until the so-called "black laws" are repealed.

'Unwarranted': India slams Canada PM's remarks on farmer protests

(News Agencies)- India accuses Justin Trudeau of interfering in its internal affairs after Canadian Prime Minister commented on the ongoing farmers' protests. New Delhi, India – Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's remarks on the continuing farmers' protests in India has not gone down well with the Hindu nationalist government, which dubbed his comments as "unwarranted". "We have seen some ill-informed comments by Canadian leaders relating to farmers in India. Such comments are unwarranted, especially when pertaining to the internal affairs of a democratic country," India's Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) spokesperson Anurag Srivastava said on Tuesday. "It is also best that diplomatic conversations are not misrepresented for political purposes." Speaking at an online event to mark the 551st birth anniversary of Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikhism, the Canadian leader said that the news coming out of India was "concerning" and his country would "always be there to defend the rights of peaceful protest".

Uttarakhand farmers to join anti-farm laws protests in Delhi, ready for long siege

One of the farmers heading to Delhi said the Central government was playing in the hands of capitalists and its decisions are ruining the agriculture sector.

Farmers from Uttarakhand's US Nagar district are leaving for Delhi with ration and some other essentials to join the protest against the three contentious farm laws. The farmers say they will camp in Delhi till the laws are withdrawn by the Central government and they are ready for laying a long siege on the capital.

"Farmers are heading to Delhi in batches of small groups due to Covid-19 outbreak. Some of them have already arrived in Delhi,

some are camping near the Delhi border with ration and other necessary materials, while others are on the way," said Prem Singh Sahota, district president, Bharat Kisan Union (BKU).

A large batch of farmers from US Nagar had proceeded to Delhi on Saturday after UP police allowed them to move ahead from Rampur district, where they had been stopped. They held a sit-in for 48 hours before police gave them permission to go ahead, said a farmer.

Another batch of farmers carrying ration and other essential supplies in tractor trolleys left for the national capital on Monday. "Government is playing in the hands of capitalists and its decisions are ruining the agriculture sector. Farmers are being forced to leave agriculture since they can't bear the brunt of the newly introduced farm laws," said Malook Singh Khinda, a farmer from Nanakmatta. BKU of the district unit has planned to send 2,500



farmers from US Nagar to Delhi to join the stir. "Around 1,500 farmers have left for Delhi and 300 more farmers were sent to Delhi on Wednesday," Sahota claimed.

US Nagar is considered the grain bowl of Uttarakhand and farmers here are not happy with the farm laws, prompting their march to Delhi to participate in the protests.

Kejriwal, Amarinder Singh slug it out over new farm laws



Addressing a digital press conference, Arvind Kejriwal said all the three farm laws were brought in and implemented by the Central government and that the state governments have no role to play in it.

Delhi chief minister Arvind Kejriwal on Wednesday criticised his Punjab counterpart Captain Amarinder Singh for "falsely" accusing him of passing the farm laws in the national Capital and questioned if he is acting at the behest of the BJP-led Central government.

Addressing a digital press conference, Kejriwal said all the three farm laws were brought in and implemented by the Central government and that the state governments have no role to play in it. He also appealed to the Centre to accept all demands of the farmers and amend the farm laws to include guarantee of MSP.

"Yesterday, the Punjab CM alleged that I passed these black farm laws in Delhi. How can

Captain Singh play such low-level politics in this fragile situation? The day the President signed the black farm laws, they became effective across the entire country from that day itself," he said. The Punjab CM rejected Kejriwal's assertion, and said it was clear that the AAP leader did not even want to try to fight the "draconian legislations". "Why did you not stand against the Centre by passing your own state legislations like we did in Punjab?", Singh asked.

Kejriwal, who is also the national convener of the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) which is in the opposition in Punjab - a state where elections are scheduled in 2022, asked if the Punjab chief minister is acting under pressure from the BJP-led Central government.

"You are speaking BJP's language. Are you forging a friendship with the BJP or is there some kind of pressure on you because the enforcement directorate (ED) has filed a case against your family members

and sent notices to them?" Kejriwal said. The Punjab CM hit back at his Delhi counterpart, accusing him of stooping to low level politics and indulging in brazen double-speak. On Tuesday, Singh hit out at the AAP saying they had exhibited "shocking double standards on the farmers' protests" by "shamelessly implementing the draconian farm law in the middle of the crisis while pretending to be standing with the farmers.

Kejriwal said it is no longer up to the states now to choose whether they want to implement these laws or not. "Had the onus lied on the states then why would farmers from across the country come to Delhi to protest? They would demand withdrawal of these laws from their respective

state governments. No state government can stop these laws," he said. "Captain Singh is aware of these facts and he still levelled these false allegations on me. Ever since the Delhi government denied to grant permission to turn the city's 9 stadiums into temporary jails for the protesting farmers, the BJP-led Central government has been very angry with me," Kejriwal said. "But the Delhi government did not give permission for this. There was a lot of pressure on me to approve the proposal of the Delhi Police to make these temporary jails. But many a times life throws such situations on us when we listen to our conscience without fearing the consequences," Kejriwal said. The Punjab CM trashed the

claim by Kejriwal and said that it the AAP leader, "whose survival depended on the central government", was more worried about angering the central government than about the plight of the farmers. The Punjab CM also lambasted Kejriwal for allegedly misleading the people on the committee formed by the central government last year on agricultural reforms. "Not once were these black laws discussed or even mentioned in the committee," said Amarinder. "It is evident that Kejriwal is only playing to the sentiments of the farmers now because his party has completely lost the political narrative in Punjab, where AAP has its eyes on the 2022 assembly elections," Amarinder said.

BJP IT cell chief's post on farmers' protest tagged as 'manipulated media' by Twitter

Twitter on Wednesday flagged as "manipulated media" a 15-second video clip tweeted out by Bharatiya Janata Party IT cell chief Amit Malviya claiming that an elderly farmer had not been attacked by police as alleged by Congress leader Rahul Gandhi in his own tweet which accompanied a photograph showing the policeman raising his lathi at the farmer.

Malviya's may be the first political tweet to be labelled thus, although HT couldn't independently ascertain this.

Twitter officials could not confirm this either.

Malviya did not respond to repeated messages and calls. Malviya's tweet with the video, juxtaposed with the photo posted by Gandhi and raising questions on the latter's credibility was tagged by the social media company with anyone clicking or tapping on the "manipulated media" tag being taken to tweets by fact checking websites that showed that the farmer had indeed been assaulted (but by a different

policeman and shortly before the farmer passed by the one raising his lathi) and also quoting him (the farmer) to this effect.

"The referenced Tweet was labelled based on our Synthetic and Manipulated Media policy. As explained in the policy, in order to determine if media have been significantly and deceptively altered or fabricated, we may use our own technology or receive reports through partnerships with third parties," a Twitter spokesperson said.

Govt holds separate talks with BKU's Tikait faction

Rakesh Tikait, the spokesperson of the BKU (Tikait faction), said his group was backing the protests by farmers from Punjab and the separate meeting was held to further explore avenues for a solution.



The Union government held separate negotiations on Monday night with the Bharatiya Kisan Union (BKU)'s Tikait faction, which holds sway over western Uttar Pradesh, hoping to build a bridge with a farmers' group well known to some senior government ministers.

Rakesh Tikait, the spokesperson of the BKU (Tikait faction), said his group was backing the protests by farmers from Punjab and the separate meeting was held to further explore avenues

for a solution. Protests by thousands of farmers who say three recent farm-reform laws will hurt their interests simmered for the sixth straight day.

Agriculture minister Narendra Singh Tomar and railways, food and consumer affairs ministers, along with minister of state Son Prakash, held talks with a team of leaders from the Tikait group in the agriculture ministry soon after wrapping up the main discussions, which ended inconclusively, with leaders of 35

farm organisations. The meeting with the Tikait group followed a series of informal discussions between the Tikait group's leaders and defence minister Rajnath Singh, a government official said, requesting anonymity.

"The defence minister has been talking to various stakeholders and farmers' unions in the hope of finding an amicable settlement, including the Tikait group. The government believes in talking to everyone," the

official said. "We are with the farmers of Punjab. I am hopeful about a solution, although it may take time," Tikait said, adding: "Rajnath Singh's family is into farming. He was a successful chief minister of our state and was sensitive to farmers' problem."

The Tikait group has considerable influence over sugarcane and wheat-growing belts of India's largest state, Uttar Pradesh, and is politically influential.

Rakesh Tikait said the meeting with the three ministers focused on the three laws, besides other key problems faced by farmers. "We have (also) demanded easier rules for farm credit under the Kisan Credit Card system and cheaper electricity," he said. Yudhvir Singh, the general secretary of the group, said the government's move to impose steep fines for crop-residue burning, a major cause of pollution, was another anti-farming step that should be withdrawn.

"In the meeting, the ministers told us that we should highlight

specific issues with the farm laws. Our question is how can the state-notified markets be prevented from collapsing because of the new reforms? If the government works on these lines, a solution is possible," he said.

Farmers want the government to revoke three laws approved by Parliament in September. The laws essentially change the way India's farmers do business by creating free markets, as opposed to a network of decades-old, government-controlled agricultural markets.

Farmers say the reforms would make them vulnerable to exploitation by big corporations, erode their bargaining power and weaken the government's procurement system, whereby the government buys staples, such as wheat and rice, at guaranteed prices. The government has said the laws will empower and enrich farmers, freeing them from the clutches of local traders and opening up new opportunities.

Law on MSP may not benefit farm sectors



A new deal to reshape the country's antiquated agriculture sector has hit a dead-end as protests simmer over three new laws that farmers say will hurt their incomes. The reforms allow businesses to freely trade farm produce outside the so-called mandi system controlled by the government, permit private traders to stockpile large quantities of essential commodities for future sales and lay down new rules for contract farming. Farmers fear the reforms could pave the way for the

government to stop buying staples at federally fixed minimum support prices (MSPs) and would leave them at the mercy of private buyers.

The government has insisted it will still buy staples at MSPs, but farmers have demanded a law guaranteeing minimum state-set prices for all major farm produce. The aim is to prohibit sale of any farm produce below the MSP threshold.

MSPs, which began with the Green Revolution, mainly benefit paddy and wheat growers

because the government procures only these two commodities in sufficiently large quantities.

Indian farmers receive lower-than-international prices for their produce because of increasing costs of cultivation, inadequate markets and the government's obsession with keeping food prices low. This has worsened agriculture's terms of trade, measured as a ratio of prices of agri-products to prices of manufactured items. The crisis, therefore, is not one of low production, but of low prices.

"An MSP is an important policy tool that helped achieve food self-sufficiency because it gave farmers assured prices. It is an important price signal. It is an administrative exercise that does not have statutory backing," said Abhijit Sen, a farm economist. While the government announces MSP for 23 major crops, setting them at 1.5 times

the cost of cultivation to account for inflation, analysts say a blanket law mandating that no trader can buy any farm commodity below this threshold price makes little economic sense. The most immediate impact of such a law will be a higher inflation. Higher MSPs prima facie lead to higher overall prices. "Every 1 percentage point increase in MSPs leads to a 15-basis point increase in inflation," said economist Sonal Varma. A basis point is one-hundredth of a percentage point.

Economists say an MSP mechanism that ignores dynamics, such as demand and global prices, creates distortions. If it is not profitable for private traders to buy at federally fixed MSP, when demand is low, then the private sector will simply exit the markets. In such a scenario, the government simply cannot be a monopoly buyer of all produce.

The government already procures staggering quantities of surplus rice and wheat, which have become unmanageable. As of September 2020, the government held 70 million tonnes of rice and wheat in federal stocks, whereas food-security norms require reserves of 41.1 million tonnes as of July and 30.7 million tonnes as of October each year.

If MSP is made mandatory, then India's agricultural exports could become non-competitive because the government's assured prices are way higher than both domestic and international market prices. No trader would want to buy at a higher price and export at a lower rate. So, the assumption behind the new changes is that free competition in agricultural markets will ultimately result in a market-clearing price, at which quantity supplied equals quantity demanded, resulting in equilibrium.

Covid-19: A tale of devastation and disruption

Covid-19 may not be the last pandemic we see. But if we learn the right lessons from it, we will be better prepared going forward

I am overwhelmed by sadness as I write this. We have just lost our colleague at Hindustan, Rajiv Katara, to Covid-19. We know that the pandemic can take our loved ones away from us, but nothing prepares us for this loss when it actually happens. So far, close to 10 million people in India have been infected by the virus. As winter deepens, the destructive capacity of the third wave of Covid-19 seems to be increasing. The medical crisis we face today is not brought on by the coronavirus alone. People are succumbing to other medical conditions too. Many surgeries have been put on hold and people are avoiding hospitals and doctors for treatment of various ailments for fear of contracting Covid-19. Diseases such as diabetes and cardiovascular ailments are killing more people than the pandemic. It is a common tendency to blame the government for all our troubles. But let us not forget that the government does not have a magic wand to wish away our ills. Let us look at Uttar Pradesh. In

March 2020, there was only one laboratory in the state to test for Covid-19. The state had no hospital equipped to manage the disease. But it assembled ventilators, beds and related medicines and trained para-medical staff and doctors as quickly as it could. Other states also did this despite the enormous hurdles in dealing with a virus that we still don't know enough about. Governments had to arrange funds, take care of those out of jobs, large-scale testing had to be carried out, while the sick had to be given medical attention. In such times, it is important for there to be cohesion between the government and society. To fight this pandemic, we have to adopt safe practices. We have to observe the precautions suggested by medical experts, especially during festivals, weddings and other ceremonies. Clearly, we did not do so, which explains the third wave in many places. While it is good news that vaccines will be available early next year, the impact of this insidious virus will stay with us for a long time and impact our lives in many ways. If this round of the

pandemic goes beyond six months, then big offices may become a thing of the past. People will have to work from home or office spaces will be hired for limited durations. The impact on society will be far-reaching. Offices are not just places of work. It is here that we meet our colleagues, exchange ideas, generate collective energy. Now, teamwork will take on a different form and for this, it becomes important to re-order our lives and behaviour. This sense of isolation is why different health challenges are upon us today. Recently, the daughter of one of my colleagues began complaining about eye problems. The doctor diagnosed this as a problem with distance vision brought on by her absence from school. If this cycle of the pandemic continues for much longer, we will see more ailments in people. Small towns and villages have become beacons of hope in these troubled times. Take the example of the Malik couple. Deepak Malik, a former professor at Kashi Hindu Vishwa



Vidyalaya and his Swedish wife Miriya Malik, are now in a village in Nainital district, where I met them recently. They live there in rented accommodation, having moved there from Varanasi. They told me that life has changed after settling there. One has to walk a little more to buy essentials, the air is clean, natural food products are available. All this has effected a huge and positive change in their lives. Miriya, 60, says, "There is no noise here and now we get eight to nine hours of sound sleep." A little while earlier, she was talking to a professor at Sweden's Uppsala University in connection with her work. During this video chat, the professor asked her how the weather was. She replied that it had become colder. Her colleague told her that

the only thing she needed was a nice whiskey and the internet. If these two are readily available, there would be no problem, he said. On a serious note, this conversation is relevant to the situation that we find ourselves in today. The expansion of the internet has opened up alternative avenues of functioning and executing our work. In the coming days, if people working in large offices in big cities are seen opting for small towns and villages, I would not be surprised. While this has its downsides too, at the moment, taking due precautions, we have to adopt new ways of functioning. Covid-19 may not be the last pandemic we see. But if we learn the right lessons from this pandemic, we will be better prepared going forward.

Wolf warrior diplomacy: The Chinese game of Covid-19 cover-up



Inspired by a jingoistic Chinese film, China has adopted "wolf warrior" diplomacy as a tool of state policy to launch a social media warfare on countries critical of its Covid-19 handling. China has used Twitter, which is banned in the country, for its campaign. There was a time when China banked on diplomacy of deceit with its leaders saying one thing and the government doing something different. This is how China got India's Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru confused about Chinese intentions before the 1962 war. Now, China has

adopted a "wolf warrior" diplomacy. China is confrontational and conspiratorial with anybody or any country that attempts to call the Chinese bluff in post-Covid-19 world. This is a new form of warfare fought by China on social media, particularly Twitter, a social media platform that is banned within China. However, Chinese diplomats are allowed to use it. Till last year, China had an almost negligible presence on Twitter, which became a theatre of diplomatic war after the novel coronavirus breakout was reported in

November-December last year, and when the world became suspicious of Chinese attempts of a cover-up.

THE AUSTRALIAN CASE

A recent social media post by one of its "wolf warrior" diplomats, Zhao Lijian to target Australia is a leaf out of China's book of new diplomacy theory. Zhao Lijian earlier this week posted a digitally manipulated image on Twitter apparently showing an Australian soldier threatening to slit the throat of a girl. The caption of the image read: "Shocked by the murder of Afghan civilians & prisoners by Australian soldiers." This came against the backdrop of a report indicting Australian soldiers -- part of the international force in Afghanistan -- for the killing of 39 Afghan civilians and prisoners. The report came out on November 19. The post appeared on November 30. In between, Australia had

dismissed over a dozen soldiers and launched an investigation into 36 cases of alleged war crimes.

When Australia objected to the Twitter "slur" by the official handle of the Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian, China rebuffed the objection. Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison called it "outrageous", "unjustified" and sought an apology from China. The Chinese foreign ministry refused to take down the post and called the Australian anger as "over-reaction".

HOW DID IT BEGIN?

The term "wolf warrior diplomacy" came into vogue during the Covid-19 pandemic. The term drew from a jingoistic Chinese film franchise, "Wolf Warrior". The second film of the series came in 2017 with a tagline, "Though far away, anyone who affronts China will pay". This is exactly what China

has been trying to do during the Covid-19 pandemic to a range of countries -- Australia, the US, Europe, Taiwan or India -- on social media and in bilateral relations.

However, the "wolf warrior" diplomacy has its roots in the "strategy of nationalism" that China adopted in the aftermath of the Tiananmen Square massacre of 1989.

China launched the Patriotic Education Campaign and manufactured a narrative of "Century of Humiliation" aimed at a makeover of the Communist Party of China (CPC) from a revolutionary force to a nationalist expression.

The nationalism campaign adopted an aggressive outlook under Xi Jinping. The Chinese state became more and more assertive as Xi Jinping strengthened his position in China through elimination of his rivals in the name of fighting corruption.

World gets its first Covid-19 vaccine. Does everyone need to get a shot?



The first approval for a Covid-19 vaccine has come -- for a jab developed by Pfizer-BioNTech. The approval has come from the United Kingdom, which will start vaccinating its people from next week. India may still have to wait a little longer to get its first approved vaccine -- either the one being developed by Oxford-AstraZeneca and tested by the Serum Institute of India (SII) or the Russian vaccine Sputnik-V being tested in India by Dr Reddy's Lab.

Now that the Covid-19 vaccine has arrived, in a record time -- bettering the previous best of four years' time taken for an anti-mumps vaccine -- the question being asked is: Does everybody need to be vaccinated?

At the press briefing on Tuesday, ICMR chief Dr Balram Bhargava said, "If we are able to vaccinate a critical mass of people and break the virus transmission, then we may not have to vaccinate the entire population."

Union Health Secretary Rajesh Bhushan said, "The government has never spoken about vaccinating the entire country." This effectively takes care of the political statements given by some political parties about everyone getting the vaccine for free in India.

But does everybody need a Covid-19 vaccine to ward off the coronavirus danger?

VACCINE NOT NEEDED: EX-PFIZER EXPERT

Only a few days ago, scientist Dr Michael Yeadon, the former vice-president of Pfizer pharmaceutical, whose vaccine candidate has become the first vaccine to get approval, said there is no need for any vaccine to bring Covid-19 pandemic to an end.

Writing for Lockdown Sceptics, Yeadon said, "There is absolutely no need for vaccines to extinguish the pandemic. I've never heard such nonsense talked about vaccines."

"You do not vaccinate people who aren't at risk from a disease. You also don't set about planning to vaccinate millions of fit and healthy people with a vaccine that hasn't been extensively tested on human subjects," said Yeadon.

BUT IS THERE A PLAN TO VACCINATE ALL?

However, the World Health Organisation (WHO) and countries such as the US, the UK, Japan, and Canada have already made plans to vaccinate their entire population. They have placed pre-release orders for enough doses of Covid-19 vaccines to cover their entire

populations. The Covax plan of the WHO, the vaccine alliance Gavi, and the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations (CEPI) aims for vaccination of up to 20 per cent of populations in over 90 member-countries. They have planned to do it in phases -- ensuring three per cent vaccination in each country first and then scaling it up to 20 per cent before further doses are given to any member-country. The worst-affected countries have plans for vaccine rationing ready but the question about universal, compulsory vaccination remains unanswered. This is tricky question for governments as universal vaccination means they have to spend a lot of money on procurement, distribution, and administration of the shots to each individual in a time-bound manner.

Not going for universal vaccination may open up the risk of a re-emergence of Covid-19 that early this year forced the world into phases of lockdowns. This cost the world its economic growth. India bore the most

serious brunt as it imposed the severest lockdown.

HOW SUCCESSFUL HAVE BEEN OUR VACCINES?

The problem is vaccination can only happen in phases, spread over many months in a country like India. Another issue is that it not clearly known for how long a person who receives a vaccine will be protected from a fresh novel coronavirus infection.

Historically, vaccines have taken years to develop and the long period gives a somewhat guaranteed protection against the targeted disease. One can gauge the success rate of vaccines in eradicating a disease from the fact that only one disease has been completely eradicated from the world till date -- smallpox -- and it took nearly 200 years for the vaccine to do it.

India has succeeded in eliminating polio through vaccination. However, some reports say India still reported around 50 cases of polio in 2019. In any case, the polio virus lives in the world and is not eradicated. Same is the case with tetanus, measles, mumps and even tuberculosis (TB).

How India is currently faring on Covid-19 scale



The current trend of Covid-19 pandemic in India is comforting on national landscape. But it has some signs of distress in certain pockets at district and state levels. Here is what the current Covid-19 trend in India looks like. A glance at the covid19india.org, a leading online tracker of coronavirus numbers in India, gives a somewhat comforting feeling that the coronavirus pandemic may be tapering down in the country. On eight days in November, India reported less

than 40,000 cases of Covid-19 -- including three days of under-35,000 and one of under-30,000 confirmed cases of novel coronavirus infections.

For three weeks on trot or 21 consecutive days, the active Covid-19 caseload in India stayed below the 5 lakh-mark. According to official figures, there were 4,35,603 active Covid-19 patients in the country at the end of November.

This puts the active caseload at 4.6 per cent or a recovery rate

of 93.94 per cent considering that the Covid-19 case fatality rate stands at 1.45 per cent.

This is significant in the wake of the past caseload growth in India. The total number of lab-tested Covid-19 cases crossed the 10 lakh-mark on July 16. An additional 10 lakh cases were added over the next 22 days (20 lakh by August 7). In another 13 days, India had 30 lakh confirmed Covid-19 cases (August 23) adding 10 lakh more by September 5 (13 days). India went passed a Covid-19 caseload of 50 lakh on September 16 (adding 10 lakh in 11 days), 60 lakh on September 28 (10 lakh in 12 days) before the rate of increase showed a marked decline. The next 10 lakh cases of Covid-19

were added over 13 days (reaching 70 lakh on October 11), 17 days (crossing 80 lakh on October 29), and 22 days (surpassing 90 lakh on November 19). India added 4.59 lakh fresh Covid-19 cases in the final 11 days of November. In September, India added more than double this number to its Covid-19 tally.

India has tested 14.13 crore samples bringing the overall positivity rate to 6.7 per cent. However, a large number of these samples would have come from the same 'positive' persons.

While the overall picture is comforting, there are signs of distress at the micro level. Some states such as Kerala and Delhi have recently seen sharp spikes in Covid-19 spread. A number of states in recent days tightened Covid-19 guidelines following a revision by the Centre.

At district level, there are reports that semi-urban and rural

districts have increased their share in India's Covid-19 tally. In April-end, the urban districts of India had over three-fourth share in the total Covid-19 tally for the country. In November-end, their share was found to be less than 55 per cent and the rural and semi-urban districts' contribution increasing to about 45 per cent.

While a majority of the districts are still reported to have shown decline in the number of fresh Covid-19 cases, some 280 districts have recorded fresh surge in novel coronavirus infections. The spread of novel coronavirus in rural and semi-urban districts is a cause of concern as these areas don't have a public or even health infrastructure to tackle severe cases of Covid-19.

However, the biggest relief for the policymakers is the definite sign of Covid-19 slowing down in Mumbai, Pune, now even Delhi, Bengaluru and Chennai.

What the Indian markets don't tell you

In contrast to the fate of millions of poor people, stock markets have boomed with little tangible benefit

(Insider Bureau) : India is in an economic recession for the first time in its independent history. Since April, large swathes of the nation were completely shut for three months and only partially open there after. A recession and a pall of gloom over the economy were inevitable. The only surprise would have been if India's economy had not suffered a deleterious impact. But, for a tiny sliver of India's elite, it is not gloom but boom times. In the seven-month period between April and October, when businesses were shut and jobs were lost, 274 million rural Indians earned their livelihoods primarily by labouring an entire day to earn a paltry ₹200 under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS). Hundred million more people asked for work under

MGNREGS this year vis-à-vis last year, reflecting the economic impact of the lockdown. In exactly this sombre period, the top 50 companies in India's stock market increased their value by \$200 billion combined. This is seven times more than the increase in the value of these same 50 companies in the same period last year, when the economy was functioning normally. It defies conventional wisdom that when businesses are shut, and sales are faltering, that the market value of companies should increase so sharply. The market value of most of these companies has risen irrationally because of exuberant stock market activity with utter disregard to the state of the underlying economy or the performance of the companies. Foreign investors flush with

money from central banks in their home countries have poured their excess cash into India's stock markets. A few thousand investors gamble in the stock markets on a daily basis which pushes up the value of companies. Just when millions of rural Indians were toiling in the sun for ₹200 rupees, these investors spent \$250bn every day to speculate on the prices of shares, currency, derivatives and other exotic financial instruments in India's stock markets. Levels of speculative trading (measured as delivery percentage) in the stock markets reached an all-time high, with 50% more buying and selling this year compared to the same period last year when there was no economic shutdown. These 50 companies employ nearly two million workers. A vast majority of these



workers did not gain a single rupee from the new wealth added to their companies. Nearly all the gains accrued only to the owners of these companies, their shareholders and people employed in the financial markets sector. Worse, such increase in market wealth did not help to create new jobs in these companies. Instead, some reduced their workforce while many reduced the wages of their employees. There was no tangible benefit to the economy or society from this excessive speculative

stock market activity except enriching a select few and widening the economic and social inequality. Excesses of financialisation and financial markets are a real threat to social stability and harmony, not just in India but in many other countries such as the United States and United Kingdom. In the garb of market efficiency and price discovery, financial markets have turned into a den for gambling and a channel for easy wealth for a select few.

Chanda Kochhar didn't disclose ties with Videocon: ED

The Enforcement Directorate (ED), in an appeal filed before the Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA) tribunal last week, sought to establish that ICICI Bank's former managing director and chief executive officer Chanda Kochhar had close links with the Videocon Group that she did not disclose to the bank.

(Insider Bureau) : The Enforcement Directorate (ED), in an appeal filed before the Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA) tribunal last week, sought to establish that ICICI Bank's former managing director and chief executive officer Chanda Kochhar had close links with the Videocon Group that she did not disclose to the bank. Such a disclosure would have made her ineligible to be on the sanctioning committees approving loans to Videocon, it claimed. The agency is investigating Kochhar's role in sanctioning loans to Videocon in return for the latter's promoter, Venugopal Dhoot, investing in her husband's companies. The case, based on a whistleblower complaint, was responsible for Kochhar's exit from the bank.

ED's latest disclosure came when it challenged the November 6 order of its own Adjudicating Authority (AA) under PMLA, Tushar V Shah, who dismissed the attachment

of properties worth Rs 78 crore belonging to Kochhar and her husband Deepak Kochhar. While asserting that ED had failed to establish these as the proceeds of crime, Shah termed the investment of ₹64 crore in Deepak Kochhar's Nupower Renewables Ltd (NRL) by Venugopal Dhoot's SEPL (Supreme Energy Pvt Ltd) as a business transaction. In its appeal dated November 25, reviewed by HT, ED said Chanda Kochhar "knowingly didn't disclose to the ICICI Bank that she and her husband had a very close association with VIL (Videocon Industries Ltd), its group companies as well as Mr V N Dhoot (Chairman of Videocon) since the year 1994-95."

"She neither disclosed that she was a shareholder in Credential Finance Limited (a company in which Videocon was having substantial interest) nor that she was authorized signatory for Pacific Capital Services Pvt Ltd

(50% shareholder of her husband's Nupower Renewables Ltd), even at the time she was the MD and CEO of ICICI Bank," ED added. The agency also claimed that "funds were transferred from Chanda Kochhar's salary account held with the ICICI Bank to CFL. If she had disclosed these facts to the ICICI Bank, then she would have to recuse herself from the recommending and sanctioning committee dealing with the proposal of Videocon Group of Companies".

According to ED, Videocon had invested Rs 10 crore in this company and Chanda Kochhar held 2,835 equity shares in it in 2000-01.

Coming down heavily on the AA, ED said in its appeal that: "AA has jumped into the shoes of the special court under PMLA, as if it were hearing the final arguments".

The agency has accused the AA of making a "roving and fishing enquiry into the



evidence placed on record and relied upon" by it. "The AA was not required in law to venture into the quality of evidence placed on record by the appellant against the respondent (Kochhars)", the appeal read. Seeking to set aside Shah's November 6 order, ED said the order was passed "without application of mind" and "against the mandate of

the PMLA". The Kochhars' lawyer Vijay Aggarwal said: "ED appeal is even technically wrong as it has been filed by a deputy director and as per law can be filed by only a director. And on merits, they also know that they don't have a case but as one appeal is provided in law so they have availed the remedy knowing fully well that attachment is purely conjectural".

House of Spices, the oldest South Asian Food Company set to Expend in the US

2nd Generation Family Owners Share Company's New Vision FOR THE U.S. Market

(Insider Bureau) : House of Spices is the oldest South Asian food company in the USA and is widely known by its brand "Laxmi". It has evolved over the years as a business leader in the South Asian food space with multiple leading South Asian food brands under its umbrella offering condiments, pantry items, snacks, candy, spices and frozen foods representing all regions of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh.

Born out of the absolute need of a young family to be able to enjoy cuisines from their homeland while being away from home, it was founded in 1972 by Indian Immigrant G.L Soni who longed to enjoy authentic cuisine from India. As a South Asian immigrant couple living in New York, the Sonis, particularly Mrs.

Shobhana Soni, faced challenges daily to find Indian ingredients for home cooking. This inspired Mr. Soni to start importing Indian cooking ingredients and founding the 'LAXMI' brand. Mr. Soni fittingly named it Laxmi in honor of his parents, Mr. Laxmidas and Mrs. Laxmibai. Also, since Goddess Laxmi embodies abundance, the name perfectly fits the company's vision of providing authentic cooking ingredients in abundance to South Asian families living in the USA and helping them stay connected with their cultures through food. Today, 48 years later the next generation of the family carries the torch and enhanced vision into the expanding marketplace. The children of the founder, Neil & Amarपाल Soni have taken over

the company with their sights set on aggressive business expansion, new branding, marketing and distribution, while maintaining the family and company values.

The South Asian Market is the fastest growing population in the U.S. since 2000 with a total population of 6 million and growing – a 81% growth over the last 10 years! Furthermore, the Asian Indians have a combined disposable income of \$88 billion and an estimated annual buying power of \$20 billion and these numbers are growing. The brother and sister duo know that the time is now to leverage this strong growth of the South Asian segment and do so by delivering authentic ethnic South Asian cuisines and ingredients. They strive hard to ensure that every



item with their brand name is delivered with purity, quality and value. The recent rebrand of their logo also demonstrates an effort from the young leaders of the company, to be more inclusive towards the overall South Asian diaspora and representative of the hospitality and abundance that are trademarks of their culture. The new Laxmi logo is contemporary, universal and visually appealing and the icon represents a modernized red and gold Lotus with auspicious royal overtones.

But despite the changes and the new vision of the co-presidents, the signature product line encompassing the 'Laxmi' Brand stays true to its authentic Indian roots providing the community a way to stay connected to their culture and cuisine. With aspirations to take their product line to the mainstream market, House of Spices is poised to bring the Indian grocery store items into our neighborhood big box grocery retailers and give a new spin to cooking with healthy, authentic and fresh Indian ingredients.

Dharampal Gulati, iconic face of MDH spices, dies; tributes pour in



(Insider Bureau) : Mahashay Dharampal Gulati, owner of spices brand MDH, passed away on Thursday. He was 98. Union minister Piyush Goyal paid tribute to Gulati on Twitter. "Extremely saddened by the demise of Mahashay Dharampal Gulati, who spread the fragrance of Indian spices in the whole world. He set an example through his self-reliance. May he attain salvation," Goyal tweeted in Hindi on Thursday morning. Delhi chief minister Arvind Kejriwal also paid his tributes

to the departed soul. "Dharm Pal ji was very inspiring personality. He dedicated his life for the society. God bless his soul." According to MDH website, Gulati was born on March 27, 1923, in Pakistan's Sialkot. He dropped out of school in 1933 before he could complete Class 5.

By 1937, Gulati started assisting his father in his business.

He came to Delhi after the Partition, on September 27, 1947, and started a business of spices.

Sebi seeks clarity on BSE nod to Future, Reliance agreement

(Insider Bureau) : The markets regulator has questioned BSE's alacrity in clearing the share capital reorganization of Future Group firms, as part of a \$3.5 billion acquisition by Reliance Industries Ltd (RIL), despite four unresolved complaints against the deal, including one by Amazon.com Inc. According to a November 27 notification issued by the Securities and Exchange Board of India (Sebi) that sought an explanation from BSE, the country's oldest exchange gave its no-objection certificate to the Future Group companies on November 6. Rival National Stock Exchange hasn't cleared Future Group's scheme of amalgamation. "There are four complaints against Future Group companies and the (RIL) deal, which are registered under Sebi's Scores mechanism. The regulator has sought clarification from the designate exchanges on these unresolved complaints," a person aware of the matter said on condition of anonymity. Investor complaints against publicly traded firms and intermediaries are registered through the Scores online platform. Spokespersons for BSE



and NSE declined to comment on the matter, citing the sensitivity of the issue. Amazon has written two letters to Sebi and the stock exchanges, urging the regulators not to clear the deal since it would disregard the Singapore International Arbitration Centre's (SIAC) interim award, which has blocked Future Group from selling any assets or take any step in this direction until a final verdict is pronounced by the arbitration court. Amazon has said that Future Group has misled public investors through false information and breached corporate governance norms, allegations that have been denied by the Indian firm. Amazon has told Sebi that if the regulator approves the RIL-Future deal, it

will not only mean disrespect for the SIAC but will also be detrimental to the interest of public shareholders and discourage foreign companies from forging alliances with local firms. Future Retail has filed a counter lawsuit against Amazon in the Delhi high court to stop it from blocking the deal. Six Future Group firms-Future Consumer Ltd, Future Enterprises Ltd, Future Market Networks Ltd, Future Lifestyle Fashions Ltd, Future Supply Chain Solutions Ltd and Future Retail-submitted their draft schemes of arrangement on October 7 to BSE, as the Kishore Biyani-led Future Group moved to consummate the 24,713 crore asset sale agreement with RIL.

Mosul movie review:

Russo brothers' brutal action film is a worthy follow-up to Endgame and Extraction

Mosul movie review: It might come across as inadequate American compensation for having invaded an entire country, but the new war film, produced by the Russo brothers, is more than that.

Mosul
Director - Matthew Michael Carnahan

Cast - Suhail Dabbach, Adam Bessa, Is'haq Elias

Mosul, a new war movie co-produced by the Russo brothers, is bookended by two terrific scenes. This isn't to say that the rest of the film is in any way underwhelming, but the sheer confidence with which debutant director Matthew Michael Carnahan handles the opening and closing moments of his movie, set in the twilight of ISIS' hold over the titular Iraqi city, is exciting - especially since he is working in a genre that thrives on tropes.

The immediacy with which we're thrust into the action almost makes it seem as if Netflix's dadum has melded into the sound of gunfire. Two men are cornered behind a wooden desk, fielding assault from all sides. There are dead bodies strewn about. It looks like they're inside what used to be a shop, but it's difficult to tell.

An apocalypse appears to have been unleashed outside. Just as the men - their uniforms suggest that they're cops - are about to run out of ammo, we close in on them. Their faces confirm what we're thinking. It's over. But then, there's a rapid burst of fire outside - quick, clinical - followed by a deathly silence. The men catch their breath, and with hesitant looks at each other, they peek over the desk behind which they've been hiding.

The enemy is dead, taken care of by group of heavily armed soldiers. They're the legendary Nineveh SWAT team. The two cops have heard stories about this elite squad, whispered among the Iraqi people almost like fables about marauders of the past. After a brief interaction in which he lauds their bravery, the commander, Major Jasem, appoints the younger cop as the newest member of the SWAT team. He will be our surrogate in this brutal world.

His name is Kawa, and he has a

lot to learn. For instance, he still believes in making arrests, an idea that Major Jasem puts an immediate end to. There will be no arrests as long as he's in charge. Every last member of ISIS they come across must die - mercilessly, painfully, and preferably, without remorse.

Mosul unfolds across no more than 24 hours, as the Nineveh SWAT team trudges through the war-torn city to carry out a rogue mission. It's structured almost like a video game, with several side quests -- including an 'escort mission' -- peppered throughout the narrative. This is in no way meant as a criticism. It's simply a lean way to tell a story, a technique that the Russos previously employed in Extraction as well.

But unlike that film, Mosul isn't all wall-to-wall action. Carnahan, the veteran screenwriter behind films such as The Kingdom, World War Z and Deepwater Horizon, pauses the pulse-pounding violence for moments of



surreal absurdity. In one scene, Major Jasem exchanges cartons of cigarettes for much-needed ammunition. In another, the SWAT team takes refuge in an abandoned apartment and recharges on reruns of a Kuwaiti soap opera.

Like clockwork, these scenes are punctuated by sudden violence. There's a repetitive quality to the story, which, despite the film's relatively short runtime, begins to feel slightly tedious after a point. And although no character is sacred, they're also difficult to tell apart from one another. Besides Kawa, our surrogate, and Major Jasem, only a couple of other members of the team register.

Incidentally, this is a dead giveaway for who gets to live.

But despite the thin plot, Carnahan manages to instill humanity in these men with nifty screenwriting techniques. As Kawa's innocence erodes before our eyes, Major Jasem's tragic past is revealed, bit by bit. He's a magnetic character, performed idiosyncratically by Suhail Dabbach. Jasem has a habit of picking up trash and binning it, even though Mosul looks like a place Mad Max could comfortably call home. Kudos to production designer Philip Ivey, who also worked on the Lord of the Rings movies, for transforming Morocco into the war-ravaged Mosul.

Tenet movie review:

Christopher Nolan's latest mind-bender is not worth the wait, and definitely not worth risking your life for



Tenet

Director - Christopher Nolan

Cast - John David Washington, Robert Pattinson, Elizabeth Debicki, Dimple Kapadia, Michael Caine, Kenneth Branagh

You should be instantly suspicious of anyone who claims to have understood Tenet after having watched it just once. Heck, you should doubt their every word even if they say they've seen it thrice. Enigmatic to a fault and exhaustingly dense,

Christopher Nolan's latest sci-fi spectacle leaves you with the unshakable feeling that you walked into the screening 15 minutes late.

Like the director's previous smash hits - Inception, and to a lesser degree, Interstellar - Tenet demands repeat viewings, but crucially, doesn't encourage them. The thought of having to sit down and be lectured to - Nolan's preferred form of exposition - doesn't seem all that

compelling right now. Although I can't imagine not giving it another go when the world calms down. The stakes are astronomical - a mysterious new technology poses a threat to all existence; there are murmurs of a Third World War. But here's the kicker -- the tech hasn't been invented yet. It will be in the future, though, and the CIA has caught wind of it. What unfolds is, essentially, Nolan's version of a Cold War espionage thriller - less James Bond, more John le Carré. Incidentally, despite being significantly larger in scope, Tenet is tonally very similar to Tomas Alfredson's Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy - a film that I, despite having watched twice, could not tell you the first thing about. They even share the same cinematographer, Hoyte van Hoytema. It requires an uncommon commitment from the audience. Unlike Inception, or

even Dunkirk - unconventionally structured movies that took you along for the ride - Tenet, on several occasions, leaves you in the dust. And then, to make matters worse, it berates you for not being able to keep up.

As always, Nolan's images - shot on the lethal combination of 70 mm and IMAX film - are impossible to fault. The 747 heist sequence is, as advertised, astonishing. And the promise of watching another impeccable action sequence is often enough to get you through some of the film's more inscrutable moments. That being said, Tenet would have been infinitely more enjoyable had Nolan resisted the urge to explain the mechanics of his world at every turn. While it is understandable for him to treat these minute details with the utmost gravity, considering the many years that he has spent on

the project, Nolan confuses seriousness with sincerity. For him, these ideas are grounded in reality, but for us, they might as well be fantasy. To be constantly told how Tenet's engine works is like having Peter Jackson explain the metallurgy behind the One Ring -- unnecessary.

On too many occasions, the Nolan feels compelled to prove his passion for all the nerdy stuff, and pauses the picture to deliver (frequently muffled) exposition about quantum physics and whatnot. It's like having a Nolan-bro constantly whisper in your ear while watching one of the filmmaker's movies, but this time, Nolan himself is the know-it-all boyfriend. Talk about mind-bending plots. Delivering exposition, for instance, is practically the only thing required of Clémence Poésy, who appears in just once scene.

Diljit Dosanjh slams Kangana Ranaut for her tweet against elderly Sikh woman: 'Shouldn't be so blind, she says anything'

Diljit Dosanjh has joined multiple Punjabi stars as they rebuked actor Kangana Ranaut's latest Twitter fiasco. Kangana had shared a tweet, misidentifying an elderly Sikh woman during the farmers' protest as Bilkis Bano of Shaheen Bagh. She had written that the woman had joined the protest for a meagre price of Rs 100.

While Kangana soon deleted the tweet, the damage was already done. After Prince Narula, Sargun Mehta, Himanshi Khurana and others, Diljit, too, has slammed Kangana as someone who 'says anything'.

Sharing a video interview of the elderly woman, whose name is Mahinder Kaur, Diljit tagged Kangana's Twitter account, showing her the



proof. "Respected MAHINDER KAUR Ji Ah Sunn La Ni With Proof @KanganaTeam Banda Ena V Ni Anna Hona Chaida.. Kush v Boli Turi jandi aa

..(Listen to this proof, @KanganaTeam. One should not be this blind. She keeps says anything)," he wrote in his tweet. In the interview by

BBC, Mahinder and her other friends at the protest said that Kangana should come and work in the fields for a day to know what farmers have to do. "We will

give her Rs 100 in the evening," said a woman in the video. Kangana has been slapped with a legal notice as well. Advocate Harkam Singh, in the legal notice dated November 30, suggested Kangana should have authenticated information before posting it on social media and demanded an apology over her tweets, in which she allegedly misidentified the woman.

"It is to inform you that the said lady is not a fake lady. Her name is Mahinder Kaur and she belongs to Bathinda. She is the wife of farmer Labh Singh Nambardar. She in her life, has always remained connected with fields and filed work and she is the wife of a farmer," the notice said.

Inside Aditya Narayan, Shweta Agarwal wedding reception: Newlyweds take to the dance floor, Bharti Singh, Govinda attend



After a low-key wedding with just family and close friends, Aditya Narayan and Shweta Agarwal were joined by celebrities from TV and Bollywood as they hosted a grand wedding reception. Dressed in a black tuxedo, Aditya looked quite dashing as he was joined by his bride, looking gorgeous in a floor-length red ensemble. She completed her look with heavy diamond jewellery. They were seen welcoming guests along with their parents, singer Udit Narayan and mother Deepa. Among those who attended Aditya and Shweta's wedding

reception included Govinda with wife Sunita and children Tina and Yashvardhan, and comedian Bharti Singh with husband Haarsh Limbachiyaa. Inside videos from the reception showed Aditya and Shweta in the middle of a romantic dance with Aditya kissing her forehead. Aditya also danced to Kuch Kuch Hota Hai's Saajan Ji Ghar Aaye. Udit also danced with his wife on Dilwale Dulhaniya Le Jayenge's Mehndi Laga Ke Rakhna. Both songs were originally sung by the veteran singer. Aditya and Shweta's

wedding took place on December 1. Given the Covid-19 restrictions, it was a small affair with only 50 guests present. The bride and the groom were seen dressed in ivory for their special day. The couple decided to tie the knot after 10 years of dating. They had met on the sets of the film, Shaapit. His father said that he didn't know that they were romantically involved until very recently, when Aditya told him about his intention of marrying her. The couple is planning mini vacations to Shillim, Sula vineyards and Gulmarg as Aditya has to be in Mumbai every week.

Coolie No 1 song Teri Bhabhi: Varun Dhawan is obsessing over a dreamy Sara Ali Khan in film's first song.



The makers of Coolie No 1 have shared the first song from the movie, titled Teri Bhabhi. It shows lead actor Varun Dhawan as coolie Raju, crazy in love with a rich man's daughter, played by Sara Ali Khan.

The video shows Raju and his coolie friends take over a railway station, as they celebrate Raju falling head over heels in love. The colourful song shows Raju and hundreds others dancing as he clutches the girl's photograph to his heart. Soon, dozens of her large cutouts show up on train roofs and she even appears in his imagination, dancing with him in a beautiful lehenga.

The song is composed by Javed - Mohsin and is sung by Javed - Mohsin Ft. Dev Negi and Neha Kakkar. Speaking about the song, Varun recently said, "Bhabhi is one of my favourite track from the album! In fact

there's an interesting story behind how we discovered this song. It was Badshah who had introduced this song to me. It's was very sweet of him. He had come to my house especially to make me hear this particular track. When Dad and I heard the song, we instantly loved it! It fits the David Dhawan School of music perfectly and Javed - Mohsin's energy and the vibe is infectious! That's how we found this track! I think they've done a fabulous job with it!"

The trailer for Coolie No 1 was launched on Sunday. The film is directed by David Dhawan and is a remake of his 1995 hit of the same name, starring Govinda and Karisma Kapoor. It stars Varun as a coolie, pretending to be a rich man only to marry the girl of his dreams. Upon the trailer launch, Sara said she did not wish to mimic Karisma in the movie.



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Biden urges America to mask up for 100 days as coronavirus surges

(SAI Bureau)- President John F. Kennedy urged Americans to ask not what their country could do for them, but what they could do for their country. When he takes the same oath of office next month, Joe Biden will effectively beseech the nation to do exactly the same thing, if

in more prosaic terms, with an appeal for every American to wear a mask for his first, symbolic 100 days in office.

The President-elect revealed the galvanizing, altruistic, first national rallying call of his administration in an exclusive CNN interview on Thursday with Vice President-elect Kamala Harris, previewing a sharp change of direction when he succeeds President Donald Trump.



"Just 100 days to mask, not forever. One hundred days. And I think we'll see a significant reduction," Biden told CNN's Jake Tapper, implicitly acknowledging that the coronavirus could be raging at even more intense levels when he takes office than its current alarming spike. Ever since President Franklin Roosevelt took office in the dark days of the Great Depression in 1933, the first 100 days have marked the apex of a new US

leader's power and often the most prolific period for policy wins. During the interview Thursday, Biden referenced the steep challenges Roosevelt confronted when he was first elected, noting that the current circumstances are "not unlike what happened in 1932." "There was a fundamental change, not only taking place here in the United States, but around the world," Biden told Tapper. "We're in the middle of this fourth industrial revolution," he noted. With all the changes in technology, he said, Americans are wondering, "Will there be a middle class? What will people be doing?"

(Contd on page 29)

Bangladesh Is Everyone's Economic Darling. It Might Not Last.



(SAI Bureau)- Shortly after Bangladesh became independent in 1971, Henry Kissinger, then the U.S. national security advisor, derisively referred to the country as a "basket case." Bangladesh became associated with poverty, and for decades was seen as an economic laggard in South Asia, making woeful progress in alleviating mass poverty or promoting sustained economic growth. Many scholars and analysts feared that the country would remain a ward of the global community, acutely dependent on foreign aid. Some went as far to predict a Malthusian nightmare in the country, with its population outgrowing the availability of food.

(Contd on page 30)

Donald Trump's last push in West Asia



(SAI Bureau)- President Donald Trump has given up on foreign policy except in West Asia. His administration is presumed to have had a role in the assassination of Iran's top nuclear

scientist last week. His son-in-law has flown to the Persian Gulf for one last diplomatic roundabout. Mr Trump's team is tying up the loose ends of what it sees as its great foreign policy moment — getting a slew of Gulf Arab nations to recognise Israel and concretise an anti-Iran coalition.

West Asia's deepest geopolitical fault-line no longer runs between Israelis and Arabs but between Shia Persians and Sunni Arabs. It was the Gulf monarchies which applauded Mr Trump ending the Iran nuclear agreement, initiated the Israel outreach and are now working to ensure all this will be fait accompli for President-elect Joe Biden. Mr Biden's foreign policy supports the Arab-Israeli rapprochement. But it may be frosty towards Saudi Arabia and includes plans to resurrect the Iran nuclear agreement. The last won't be easy. Iran has 12 times more low-

(Contd on page 30)

India makes its move, invites Boris Johnson to be Republic Day chief guest

(SAI Bureau)-UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson is expected to be chief guest at the 2021 Republic Day, and if he accepts an invitation from Prime Minister Narendra Modi it will make him the first British PM since John Major in 1993 to be guest of honour at the event.

Prime Minister Modi formally invited him to be Republic Day chief guest in a November 27 telephone conversation, HT learns. Johnson, on his part, invited PM Modi to the G-7 summit in the UK next year.

New Delhi is tight-lipped on the decision, but diplomats say that it is a well-thought-out strategy by PM Modi to invite his UK counterpart as a hard Brexit looms on the horizon

and London wonders about its special relationship with Washington under



the incoming administration of President-elect Joe Biden.

In a November 27 tweet, PM Modi said that he had an excellent discussion with his friend, Johnson, on an ambitious road-map for India-UK ties in the next decade. "We agreed to work towards a quantum leap in our

cooperation in all areas — trade and investments, defence and security, climate change and fighting Covid-19," PM Modi wrote in the tweet. According to people based in the UK familiar with the details, the conversation between the two PMs was very positive, with Johnson offering a free trade agreement with India and to deepen cooperation on climate change issues. The leaders discussed ways to boost the partnership and put up a strong anti-Covid-19 response.

While the UK is aspiring to become Global Britain from Great Britain, the January 1 Brexit will put serious pressure on London -- 47% of the UK's exports have until now been bound for the European Union.

(Contd on page 30)





