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## *A Political Earthquake Waiting to Happen*

*If the Wuhan Lab-Leak Hypothesis is True, The potential consequences of the origins of the virus are shattering*



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35-40



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# Indian-Origin Sikh Killed In US Rail Yard Shooting Remembered As Hero

**Co-workers at the Valley Transportation Authority (VTA) hailed Taptejdeep Singh, as a hero, saying he left the safety of an office room, where some colleagues were hiding, to help others escape the line of fire.**

(Insider Bureau)-Indian-origin Sikh Taptejdeep Singh, who was among the nine people killed in the latest horrific mass shooting incident in the US, has been hailed as a hero who lived by the values of service and protection of others, his family members said, as they tried to find comfort hearing how he spent his final moments helping his colleagues to safety.

Samuel Cassidy, 57, a maintenance worker of the Valley Transportation Authority (VTA), San Jose, on Wednesday gunned down nine of his co-workers in one of the deadliest shootings in California state in recent years.

Singh, 36, who was a light rail operator at the VTA for nine years, was the first victim to be publicly identified by his family after the

incident.

"Even in these moments of chaos, Taptejdeep was living by the values of Sikhi: living in service and protection of others," Singh's brother Kamran said in a statement issued on behalf of the family on Thursday. "We choose to remember Taptejdeep as the hero he was, both in those final moments and throughout his life of service," USA TODAY reported quoting the statement.

Kamran said that his family was comforted hearing how he spent his final moments trying to keep his co-workers safe.

The father of a 3-year-old son and a 1-year-old daughter, Singh liked to arrange camping trips as well as motorcycle rides with co-

workers.

Born in India and raised in Union City, California, he was killed while he was trying to make sure others were safe.

Co-workers at the light rail yard at the VTA said he left the safety of an office room, where some colleagues were hiding, to help others escape the line of fire.

Sukhvir Singh, another VTA employee, said Singh called him to warn him about the shooter.

"Because of him, so many people were able to go home to their families," Sukhvir said.

"We will never forget how he lived to the highest ideals of Sikhi in a moment of crisis, and my prayers are with his family and the families of all those who lost loved ones in this horrific attack," he was quoted as saying by USA TODAY. The Sikh Coalition, an organisation that works to protect civil rights, has reached out to



offer help to Singh's family, the report said.

Naunihal Singh, the transportation superintendent for light rail operations, said the loss is overwhelming. "I'm angry. I'm sad. I'm at a loss of words. At the same time, I'm trying to find the reasons why," Naunihal was quoted as saying by The Mercury News. Talking about Singh, Naunihal said, "he had a calming effect on the office. I've never seen him get mad." Meanwhile, more than 2,000 people gathered at San Jose City Hall on

Thursday for a vigil to remember the victims of the VTA mass shooting, NBC Bay Area reported. San Jose Mayor Sam Liccardo, city council members and representatives from Santa Clara County and VTA attended the vigil. Karman Singh, at the vigil, said that no one will be able to replace Taptejdeep.

"My nephew and my niece are not going to have a father. No matter how much I love them, how everyone loves them, they are going to ask for their father," he said.

## US Lawmaker Honours Indian-American Engineer Who Helped Create USB Specifications



(Insider Bureau)-A US lawmaker has honoured Indian-American electrical engineer Ravinder Singh Shergill who held several patents related to disk storage and helped create the USB specifications.

Shergill died on April 22 aged 64. Madam Speaker, I ask my colleagues in the United States House of Representatives to join me in honouring the life of Mr Ravinder Singh Shergill. Our thoughts and prayers are with his family and friends during this difficult time, Congressman David Valadao said in his remarks at the House of Representatives earlier this week.

Born on September 12, 1956 in Punjab, Shergill migrated to the US for higher studies at the age of 17. At the age of 17, he immigrated to the United States

and later graduated from UC Berkeley with a Bachelor of Science in Electrical Engineering. He went on to work for National Semiconductor for more than three decades, Valadao said.

As an engineer, Mr Shergill held patents involving disk storage and helped create the USB specifications. As a manager, he admired and respected as a mentor to his colleagues. His story is truly an embodiment of the American Dream, he said. Universal Serial Bus (USB) is an industry standard that establishes specifications for cables and connectors and protocols for connection, communication and power supply between computers, peripherals and other computers.



**Josh**  
India WebTV

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ਗੱਲ ਸਮਾਜ ਦੀ  
ਗੱਲ ਸਾਂਝੇ ਸਾਰੇਕਾਰਾਂ ਦੀ  
ਆਓ ਕਰੀਏ

**ਗੱਲਬਾਤ**

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Deputy News Editor  
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# Joe Biden Nominates Indian-American Arun Venkataraman To A Key Administration Post

*Arun Venkataraman is the nominee for Director-General of the United States and Foreign Commercial Service and Assistant Secretary for Global Markets, Department of Commerce, the White House said on Wednesday.*

(Insider Bureau)-US President Joe Biden has announced his intent to nominate Indian-American trade expert Arun Venkataraman to a key position in his administration related to foreign commercial service.

Arun Venkataraman is the nominee for Director-General of the United States and Foreign Commercial Service and Assistant Secretary for Global Markets, Department of Commerce, the White House said on Wednesday.

With over 20 years of experience in advising companies, international organisations, and the US government on

international trade issues, Arun Venkataraman is currently the Counselor to the Secretary of Commerce, advising the department on trade and other international economic matters. Before joining the Biden-Harris administration, he was a senior director at Visa, leading global government engagement strategy on a range of international policy issues including digital economy, trade, tax, and sanctions.

Arun Venkataraman previously served as the trade and investment policy advisor at Steptoe & Johnson LLP, where he counselled multinational firms and other organisations on e-

commerce, intellectual property rights, and US and foreign trade policies. As the first-ever Director of Policy at the Department of Commerce's International Trade Administration under President Barack Obama, Arun Venkataraman helped shape the US government's responses to critical challenges faced by firms in the country and in markets around the world, including China and India, the White House said. While at the Office of the US Trade Representative (USTR), he led the development and implementation of the US-India trade policy as the Director for India, for which he received the agency's Kelly Award for



outstanding performance and extraordinary leadership.

Arun Venkataraman also served as the associate general counsel, representing the United States in litigation before the World Trade Organization (WTO) and in negotiations on international trade agreements. Before joining the USTR, Arun Venkataraman was a legal officer at the WTO, advising the

organisation on a wide range of issues raised in appeals of trade disputes between countries.

He began his career as a law clerk for Judge Jane A Restani at the US Court of International Trade. He holds a JD from the Columbia Law School, a Master of Arts in Law and Diplomacy from the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, and a BA from Tufts University.

## Indian Boxers To Have Three-Week Training Camp Abroad Before Tokyo Olympics



(Insider Bureau)-India's nine Olympic-bound boxers will travel abroad for a three-week training stint after getting a few days' break following a record-shattering medal haul by the country's pugilists at the just-concluded Asian Boxing Championships in Dubai. Speaking to PTI, Indian men's boxing's High Performance Director Santiago Nieva said the boxers will reach Tokyo for the Games, five to seven days before the start of the event from July 23. "We will go abroad for training. The discussions are on and the place will be finalised in the next few days. It will be a three-week camp. We will come back to India to fine tune a few things, and then head to Tokyo five-seven days before the Games," Nieva said laying down the plan for the coming days. The complete modalities of the planned trip will be revealed after the venue is finalised. The Indian

boxing team has travelled quite a bit in the past few months for tournaments and training, including a lengthy trip to Europe. The training at home has been sporadic because of the threat posed by COVID-19. In fact, in April, national coach CA Kuttappa had tested positive for COVID-19 forcing him into quarantine for 10 days. Indian boxers fetched their best ever medal haul of 15 at the event in Dubai, two more than their previous best performance. The medals clinched this time included two gold, five silver and eight bronze medals.

The only gold-winner among the Olympic-bound was Pooja Rani (75kg), while MC Mary Kom (51kg) and Amit Panghal (52kg) fetched silver medals.

The lone male boxer to fetch a gold was Sanjeet (91kg), who is not a part of the Olympic group. Vikas Krishan (69kg), Simranjit Kaur (60kg) and Lovlina

Borgohain (69kg) were among the Olympic-bound bronze-medallists.

The others to have made the cut for Tokyo are Manish Kaushik (63kg), Ashish Chaudhary (75kg) and Satish Kumar (+91kg). Of these, Ashish lost in the quarterfinals in Dubai and Manish and Satish could not travel due to illness.

"Overall I am satisfied with the performance and I say this not just looking at medal haul. Amit was in terrific form, Vikas was just unlucky to get injured in the semifinals and Ashish also gave a good performance even though he didn't win a medal," Nieva said.

"Of course there are small issues to be addressed, more specific to individuals and we will do that in the few weeks remaining before the Games. I can say we are 80 per cent ready, we will sort the remaining 20 per cent," he added. The small issues that Nieva referred to included close range boxing and body punches.

"There is certainly vast improvement and it will continue before we are absolutely ready for the Games," he said.

On to individual performances and Nieva felt Panghal was incredibly good throughout despite missing out on a second successive gold. The diminutive Haryana-boxer lost an edge-of-the-seat final to old foe

Shakhobidin Zoirov of Uzbekistan in what was a repeat of the 2019 world championship final, which had also ended in Zoirov's favour. The Indian won the two of the three rounds but Zoirov had just the right combination of scores from individual judges to scrape through 3-2.

"I think this is at par with his best performances. He was unstoppable and looked really

good. We all thought he won that final," Nieva said.

And then there was Sanjeet (91kg), who upstaged Olympic silver-medallist and tournament legend Vassiliy Levit in the finals. Kazakhstan's Levit was looking good for his fourth gold medal at the event but was stopped by the tournament-debutant Indian.

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**Geeta Saxena**  
Show Host (Prime Time News)

[joshindiatv@gmail.com](mailto:joshindiatv@gmail.com)



# Indian Student Gets 10-Year UAE Golden Visa

(Insider Bureau)-An Indian student has received the UAE's coveted 10-year Golden Visa, which is mostly reserved for prominent global personalities, for her merit and excellent academic credentials, according to a media report. Tasneem Aslam from Kerala received the Golden Visa in the exceptional student category and is



allowed to stay in the country till 2031, Khaleej Times reported.

The UAE government in 2019 implemented a new system for long-term residence visas, enabling foreigners to live, work and study in the UAE without the need of a national sponsor.

These golden visas are issued for five or 10 years and will be renewed automatically.

"This is one of the best moments in my life. I feel privileged to achieve this and I am thankful to Almighty Allah. My parents' support has been enormous, and Insha Allah I hope to sponsor them in near future," Tasneem told Khaleej Times.

Tasneem studied Islamic Sharia from Al Qasimia University in Sharjah and topped her class, which consisted of pupils from 72 nationalities, with a grade point average (GPA) of 3.94 on 4.

Typically, the 10-year golden visa is targeted at wealthy individuals keen to offer the UAE significant investment in exchange for an opportunity to reside within the country.

Besides entrepreneurs, individuals with specialised talent like doctors,

researchers, scientists and artists can also apply for the visa.

Exceptional high school and university students are eligible for a 5-year residency visa in the UAE. Recently, Bollywood actor Sanjay Dutt also received the Golden Visa.

## Two Sikh Teens Say They Were Targeted for Religion at Long Island Mall



(Insider Bureau)- Members of the Sikh community on Long Island are pushing for criminal charges after two teenage boys said they were harassed and attacked for their religion.

Yuvraj Bindra, 13, says he and his friend were at Walt Whitman Shops in South Huntington on May 29 when another group of teens started verbally assaulting them, believing that the two are Muslims. Bindra recalled one of

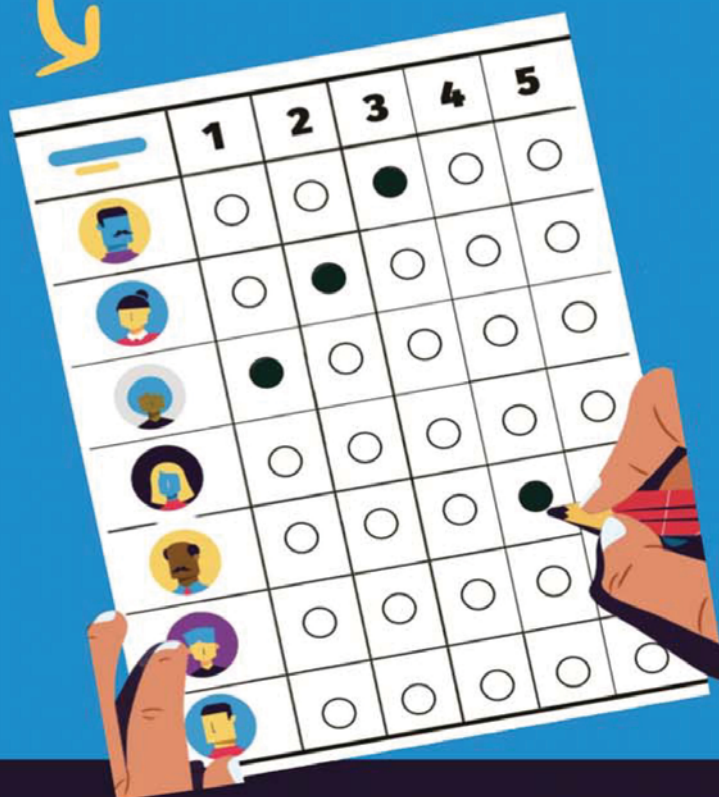
the attackers saying, "Hey, Mohammed, come here. I'll knock that ball off your head."

Then the confrontation turned physical. One of the teens punched his friend, Chaz, in the face while others recorded the whole incident on their phone.

The teen who was punched didn't suffer serious injuries and the incident is being investigated as an Aggravated Harassment as a Hate Crime, according to Suffolk County police.

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# Mehul Choksi in Dominica: CBI team led by woman officer to bring him back if deported

**Fugitive diamantaire Mehul Choksi, who was arrested in Dominica, will be brought back to India by a team led by CBI officer Sharda Raut.**

(News Agencies)- Sharda Raut, the investigating officer in Punjab National Bank (PNB) fraud case, will be bringing back Mehul Choksi from Dominica if he is deported to India. Sharda Raut, who is in Dominica with 6 other officials, including another CBI officer, is heading the operation to bring back Mehul Choksi.

Sources have said, if the Dominican court orders the deportation of Mehul Choksi, he will be brought to New Delhi in a private jet by the team of Indian officials and will be placed under arrest by Sharda Raut upon

landing.

India Today TV has learnt that the Indian officials have had several meetings with the Dominican authorities to ensure that India's case is represented strongly when it comes up for hearing on Wednesday.

India Today TV has learnt that the Enforcement Directorate's affidavit will be filed before the Dominican Court on Wednesday evening with the details of Mehul Choksi's criminal activities, explaining how he is an Indian citizen and on what grounds he should be deported to India.

Sources have told India Today

TV that through the Dominican prosecutors, the ED and CBI will try to convince the court that the man in their custody is a wanted accused in India since January 2018 and based on the red notice by Interpol, he should be deported to India immediately.

Mehul Choksi, who was awarded Antiguan citizenship in November 2017, never completed the process to surrender Indian citizenship and as of today, he remains an Indian national. Sources have said that the central financial probe agency is in touch with the officials, including the CBI



officers who are in Dominica, and concrete evidence against Mehul Choksi has been shared with them. The agency officials are also trying to ensure that Mehul Choksi's case in Dominica does not get stuck in legalities else it will be a long wait for India. Mehul Choksi, who disappeared mysteriously on May 23 from

Antigua, was arrested by the Dominican police for entering their country illegally.

Mehul Choksi has alleged that he was abducted from Antigua, possibly by Indian and Antiguan officials, beaten up and then taken to Dominica where as part of the conspiracy, he was arrested by the police.

## 594 doctors have died in Covid second wave so far, most of them in Delhi: IMA

**The Indian Medical Association said 594 doctors have died in the second wave of Covid-19 in India. Most deaths have occurred in Delhi (107), followed by Bihar (96) and Uttar Pradesh (67).**

(News Agencies)-At least 594 doctors have died in the second wave of coronavirus infections in the country so far, with Delhi accounting for 107 such deaths, the Indian Medical Association (IMA) said on Tuesday.

State-wise data put out by IMA shows that nearly every second doctor who died in the second Covid-19 wave died either in Delhi, Bihar or Uttar Pradesh. These three states together account for

nearly 45 per cent of the doctors who died in the second wave. Overall, the IMA said nearly 1,300 doctors have died on the line of duty fighting Covid-19 ever since the pandemic began last year. Meanwhile, hitting out at Baba Ramdev, the IMA in a strongly worded open letter to citizens said he has "irreparably" damaged the government's efforts to contain the Covid-19 pandemic. It said Baba Ramdev has created confusion among

people about the Covid-19 protocol and vaccines, and termed it an "anti-national" action. The doctors' body alleged that Baba Ramdev thought it fit to launch his tirade against national the Covid-19 treatment protocols and the vaccination programme to look for an opportunity to "market" his products.

He has "irreparably damaged the Indian government's efforts to contain the pandemic", the IMA said in the letter signed by the



body's current president and 14 former presidents. "People creating confusion during an epidemic regarding national treatment protocols and the national vaccination programme are traitors and anti-nationals.

They are anti-people and anti-humanity. They deserve no mercy," it said.

The doctors' body reiterated its demand of prosecuting Baba Ramdev for sedition and under the Disaster Management Act.

## Ensure Adar Poonawalla's safety upon his return to India, Bombay HC tells Maharashtra govt



**Bombay High Court on Tuesday asked the Maharashtra government to provide security for SII CEO, Adar Poonawalla who recently went to London, and assure him of his safety upon his return to India.**

a great service to the nation and the state government's highest functionaries must look into the issue of his security.

It said the state's top officials must personally speak to Poonawalla, who recently went to London, and assure him of his safety upon his return to India.

The bench was hearing a petition filed by lawyer Datta Mane, seeking Z-plus security for Poonawalla.

The Union government has already granted 'Y' category security to the Pune-based

industrialists.

The petitioner, through his counsel Pradip Havnur, told the HC that as per news reports, Poonawalla had been living in fear due to constant pressure from politicians and some others demanding that he provide more supplies of the Covishield vaccine to their states.

Mane's plea said Poonawalla had left for London due to such threats. Notably, Poonawalla had said in a recent interview to The Times that he has been receiving threats and pressure from

'powerful people' seeking vaccine doses on priority.

On Tuesday, the Maharashtra government's counsel, Deepak Thakare, told the HC that the state had provided Y-category security to Poonawalla, as per which, some CRPF personnel and two gunmen from the state police would remain available for his security round-the-clock.

He further said the state was taking stock of the situation and would consider providing Z-plus security to Poonawalla upon his return to the country.

(News Agencies)-The Bombay High Court on Tuesday said the Maharashtra government must assure the Serum Institute of India's (SII) CEO, Adar Poonawalla, of the requisite security in the wake of alleged

threats to him over the supply of the Covishield vaccine manufactured by his company. A vacation bench of Justices SS Shinde and Abhay Ahuja said by manufacturing the anti-Covid-19 vaccine, Poonawalla was doing



# Annual data sharing by China on Brahmaputra, Sutlej rivers begins

**Amid strained relations between the two nations, China has started sharing hydrological data on Brahmaputra and Sutlej rivers, an annual exercise, with India.**

(News Agencies)-China has started sharing hydrological data on Brahmaputra and Sutlej rivers, an annual exercise of giving information on these two water bodies to India, sources said on Tuesday.

The sharing of data by China on Sutlej and Brahmaputra comes amid strained relations between the two neighbours.

In 2017, China had stopped sharing the data citing that the hydrological gathering sites were washed away due to floods. It also

coincided with the 73-day Doklam stand-off between the two neighbours that took place during the peak monsoon period. It began sharing data again from 2018. India and China have signed an agreement under which Beijing shares hydrological data with New Delhi. Under the agreement, for the Brahmaputra river, the data is shared by China from May 15. In the case of Sutlej, the data is shared from June 1.

The data is also shared twice

daily until October 15.

China started sharing hydrological data for Brahmaputra and Sutlej from 2002 and 2005 respectively. The data is important in flood forecasting done by the Central Water Commission.

The information is being shared from three hydrological stations -- Nugesha, Yangcun and Nuxia, lying on the mainstream of the Brahmaputra, also known as Yarlung Zangbo in China, officials at the Jal Shakti Ministry said.



For Sutlej, known as Langqen Tibet and flows into Arunachal Pradesh and Assam and later drains into the Bay of Bengal through Bangladesh.

## Visuals of dogs biting at half-burnt bodies at Uttarkashi crematorium shock locals

**Visuals of dogs biting at half-burnt bodies at a cremation ground in Uttarkashi have gone viral. Locals have accused the district authorities of being callous.**

(News Agencies)-Disturbing videos showing dogs pulling at half-burnt bodies at a cremation ground on the banks of Bhagirathi river in Uttarkashi have gone viral sparking reaction from locals, who criticised the district authorities for their "callousness".

"The attention of municipal authorities and the district administration was drawn to some half-burnt bodies lying in Kedarghat recently. But it seems

the matter went unheeded," a local said terming it the "height of their indifference".

"How can they be so callous to something which puts humanity to shame," he said.

Even people dying of Covid-19 are being cremated at Kedarghat and the bodies could be that of those infected with the virus, he said.

With the water level of Bhagirathi rising, several bodies not cremated properly have been

swept down the river, but those still lying at the ghat are being pulled at by stray dogs.

When contacted, Bhatwari SDM Devendra Negi said the footage is a week-old and several arrangements have been made at Kedarghat for proper disposal of bodies after it surfaced.

"The visuals are a week-old. The municipal authorities are ensuring regular cleaning of the cremation ground and proper disposal of bodies now. However,



several news channels and portals are still showing old visuals which should not be done," Negi said.

The grisly videos have disturbed

people in Uttarkashi, which is a religious place with two major Himalayan temples of Gangotri and Yamunotri located in the district.

## 'Truth can never be defeated': Navjot Sidhu meets Congress panel amid rift with Amarinder Singh



**This open confrontation between two senior leaders of the Congress in Punjab has not gone down well with the central leaders in Delhi, especially with the Assembly elections due next year.**

(News Agencies)-At odds with Punjab Chief Minister Captain Amarinder Singh, Navjot Singh Sidhu on Tuesday met the three-member Congress panel, formed by Sonia Gandhi, to resolve the differences in the party's state leadership.

After the meeting, Sidhu said,

"I've come here on being called by the high command. I've come here to convey the message of the Punjabi people. My stand was that the democratic force in Punjab should rest with the people."

"I spoke whatever the truth was. Truth can never be defeated.

Punjab can never be defeated. We'll have to make Punjab win. Every anti-Punjab force will be defeated," he added.

Navjot Singh Sidhu's meeting with the panel took place after it had met 25 rebel Congress MLAs from Punjab on Monday to understand the reason behind the feud between Sidhu and Captain Amarinder Singh.

Sidhu has been critical of Amarinder Singh since Punjab and Haryana High Court last month quashed a probe into the Kotkapura firing case, which took place during a protest against the desecration of a religious text in Faridpur district. He had

attacked the CM earlier as well over the alleged delay in justice in the case.

Calling it "total indiscipline", Amarinder Singh, too, had reciprocated and accused Sidhu of nurturing a wish to join the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP). He warned that indiscipline won't be tolerated at any cost. In the last week of April, he went on to challenge Sidhu - who had left BJP to join Congress in 2017 - to contest the election against him. Intensifying the war of words, Sidhu, the Amritsar East MLA, on May 21 tweeted, "Prove one meeting that I have had with another party's leader. I have

never asked anyone for any post till date. All I seek is Punjab's prosperity. Was invited and offered Cabinet berths many times but I did not accept. Now, our esteemed high command has intervened, will wait."

This open confrontation between two senior leaders of the Congress in Punjab has not gone down well with the central leaders in Delhi, especially with the Assembly elections due next year. Reportedly, the Punjab government's alleged failure to fulfill election promises has also caused infighting among the Punjab Congress leaders.



# Why Mamata Banerjee fought with Centre for Alapan Bandyopadhyay

**After the Centre directed Alapan Bandyopadhyay to report in New Delhi on May 31, West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee refused to release him and shot off a letter to Prime Minister Modi.**

(News Agencies)-West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee seems to have won the battle with the Narendra Modi government of the Centre over senior bureaucrat Alapan Bandyopadhyay. Mamata Banerjee did not release Alapan Bandyopadhyay, who requested retirement from the Indian Administrative Service (IAS), and created a new position for his continuation in the West Bengal government. All of this happened against the direction of the Narendra Modi government. However, the last sentence on the Mamata versus Modi over Alapan Bandyopadhyay is yet to be written. The Department of Personnel and Training (DoPT) - which governs central government officers including those belonging to the IAS - has issued a show-cause notice to Alapan

Bandyopadhyay. The DoPT functions under the Ministry of Personnel and Public Grievances, a portfolio under the charge of Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

## HOW IT HAPPENED

On May 24, the Mamata Banerjee government sought an extension of three months for Alapan Bandyopadhyay, then chief secretary of West Bengal, in view of the prevailing Covid-19 situation. The Centre agreed. The Appointments Committee of the Cabinet (ACC), which includes Union Home Minister Amit Shah, granted the extension.

Four days later, PM Modi was in West Bengal to survey the damage caused by Cyclone Yaas. PM Modi was to hold a review meeting over Cyclone Yaas. Mamata Banerjee was

supposed to attend along with Alapan Bandyopadhyay.

Mamata Banerjee's friend-turned-foe Suwendu Adhikari was present in the meeting which Mamata Banerjee and Alapan Bandyopadhyay skipped. They instead met PM Modi separately to hand over a Yaas resettlement proposal with a demand of Rs 20,000 crore.

The same day - March 28, the Centre directed Alapan Bandyopadhyay to report to New Delhi. He did not as Mamata Banerjee refused to release him and shot off a letter to PM Modi.

The Centre next wrote to the Mamata Banerjee government asking to relieve Alapan Bandyopadhyay. His extension was rescinded. The Mamata Banerjee government did not pay heed to the Centre's directive. The law is open for interpretation as



to who prevails if an IAS officer is posted with a state government. Alapan Bandyopadhyay requested retirement. Mamata Banerjee accepted and created the post of special advisor to the West Bengal chief minister with three-year tenure.

## BUT WHY?

Depending upon how one perceives, Alapan Bandyopadhyay is seen as "a pliant officer" or "a sharp bureaucrat with extreme flexibility". Known to be a very articulate officer with supreme command over Bengali and English, Alapan Bandyopadhyay

began his career as a journalist with the Anandbazar Patrika.

As a 1987-batch IAS officer of West Bengal cadre, Alapan Bandyopadhyay earned a reputation for himself as a bureaucrat who serves his political master in implementing government's policies. By the time, Mamata Banerjee brought an end to the Left Front government in West Bengal in 2011, Alapan Bandyopadhyay was considered one of the officers trusted the most by then Chief Minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee.

## Dominican court to hear fugitive businessman Mehul Choksi's plea today



**A Dominican court is scheduled to hear Mehul Choksi's plea on Wednesday (June 2) over his extradition to India. India Today has exclusively accessed details of Indian authorities are aiming to prove in the Dominican court that Choksi is still an Indian citizen.**

A court in Dominica is scheduled to hear Mehul Choksi's case on Wednesday over his extradition to India. Ahead of the hearing, the Indian authorities said they had gathered documents including his Aadhaar, Permanent Account Number (PAN) and ration card to prove that the fugitive businessman never gave up his Indian citizenship.

These details have been exclusively accessed by India Today. Indian authorities are aiming to prove in the Dominican court that Mehul Choksi is still a citizen of India. According to the officials, fugitive diamondaire Mehul Choksi acquired the

citizenship of Antigua but never completed the formalities and paperwork to surrender his Indian citizenship.

As he never completed paperwork to leave Indian citizenship, the records show that he is still an Indian national, the officials said. The documents will be submitted before the Dominican court.

## COURT HEARING Today

The hearing in Choksi's case has been scheduled for 9 am (6:30 pm IST) on June 2.

The Enforcement Directorate (ED) will also file an application before the Dominican court. A top government official told India Today that the ED would submit

details of the crime committed by Mehul Choksi and on what grounds he should be deported to India. According to sources, the ED's application will make a strong case for India and the officials are in touch with the Indian authorities who are in Dominica, where Mehul

Choksi was arrested last month. The ED has shared concrete evidence with them against Choksi. The Indian officials, according to sources, are aware of the developments and have met the Dominican officials so that a representation from the

Indian side can be made on Wednesday when the matter comes up for hearing. Mehul Choksi was arrested on May 26 in Dominica for "illegally" entering the island nation from Antigua and Barbuda, where he had been living since January 2018.

## India-Australia defence ministers discuss future cooperation on Covid-19 challenges

(News Agencies)-Defence Minister Rajnath Singh, in a telephonic conversation with his Australian counterpart, Peter Dutton, reviewed the defence cooperation between the two countries against the backdrop of the current situation. The two ministers acknowledged the momentum that defence cooperation between India and Australia has achieved following the up-gradation of the partnership to a comprehensive strategic partnership in June 2020. After the

conversation, Rajnath Singh said in a tweet; "Spoke to Australian Minister for Defence, Mr Peter Dutton about the measures taken by both countries to fight against the Covid-19 pandemic." It is heartening to note that the Australian Armed forces have wholeheartedly supported India in its fight against COVID-19," he added. Last year, Australia joined India, Japan and the US in the naval exercise bringing the Quad nations together for military drills. Both ministers expressed

satisfaction at the growing defence ties between the two countries and reviewed the progress on various bilateral defence cooperation initiatives. The ministers expressed commitment to further elevate engagements between the armed forces. During the dialogue, they also expressed their intent to convene the 2+2 ministerial dialogue at the earliest, the Defence Ministry said. Rajnath Singh also thanked Australia for their assistance to India in the fight against Covid-19.



# Nestle's 'unhealthy' food portfolio controversy: All you need to know

**The world's largest packaged food and beverages company Nestle has found itself in a tough spot after an internal document suggested that 60 per cent of its mainstream product portfolio is "unhealthy". Here is all you need to know.**

(News Agencies)-Nestle, the world's largest packaged food and beverages company, has been facing criticism after an internal presentation indicated that a majority of its mainstream food and drinks portfolio is unhealthy.

The company is now in damage control mode and said that it will work on updating its nutrition and health strategy.

## NESTLE'S 'UNHEALTHY' FOOD PORTFOLIO

An internal document accessed by the Financial Times newspaper described a large portion of Nestle's food and drinks as unhealthy. The document was an internal presentation

circulated among the company's top executives early in 2021.

It indicated that more than 60 per cent of Nestle's mainstream food and drinks portfolio could not be considered healthy under a "recognised definition of health". The company also revealed in the internal document that some of its categories will "never be healthy".

"Some of our categories and products will never be 'healthy' no matter how much we renovate," said the Nestle internal presentation.

The document further highlighted that the assessment applied to about half of Nestle's overall portfolio as categories like

medical nutrition, pet food, coffee and infant formula were excluded from the analysis.

Out of the food and beverage assessed, 37 per cent achieved a rating over 3.5 under Australia's health star rating system. The system scores food out of five stars and is used in research by international groups such as the Access to Nutrition Foundation.

In the internal document, Nestle described the 3.5-star threshold as a "recognised definition of health". According to the document, about 70 per cent of Nestle's food products and 96 per cent of beverages - excluding pure coffee - failed to meet the threshold. In addition, 99 per cent of Nestle's confectionery and ice cream portfolio also failed to meet the threshold rating.

Only the water and daily products of the company scored better,



with 82 per cent of waters and 60 per cent of dairy meeting the 3.5-star threshold.

Nestle acknowledged in the document that the company's food portfolio still underperforms against external definitions of health.

"We have made significant improvements to our products...[but] our portfolio still underperforms against external definitions of health in a landscape where regulatory pressure and consumer demands are skyrocketing," the internal presentation said.

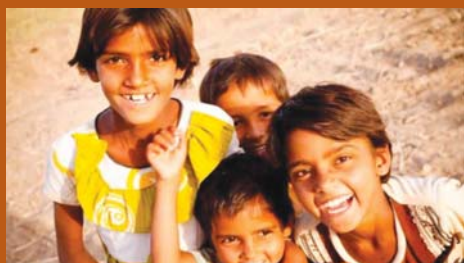
As per the presentation, some of the company's products such as DiGiorno three meat croissant crust pizza include about 40 per cent of a person's recommended daily sodium intake while others like hot pockets pepperoni pizza contain 48 per cent.

Another Nestle product, the orange-flavoured San Pellegrino drink, get an 'E' rating, which is the worst mark available under a different scoring system, Nutria-Score. The drink has more than 7.1 gram of sugar per 100 ml.

## Covid-19 leaves hundreds orphaned. How you can help and what you should know about adoption

(News Agencies)-Mamta and Nanjundegowda spent years waiting to be blessed with a child. The couple, from Mandya district in Karnataka, had spent almost a decade trying for a child. In May this year, the couple's prayers were finally answered and they were blessed with a baby girl. The happiness was short-lived. Covid-19, the viral disease that has caused a worldwide pandemic, took away the parents of the baby girl before she could

These are just two of several hundreds of cases of Covid-19 orphaning children in the country. On June 1, the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR) -- a statutory body -- told the Supreme Court that more 9,300 children in the country had lost parents or were abandoned during the Covid-19 pandemic. These include more than 1,700 children who lost both their parents and have been orphaned. The newborn in Karnataka and the twins in Madhya Pradesh are lucky to have relatives to look after them. But there is rising concern about orphaned children who have nowhere to go.



even be named. The baby's father died of Covid-19 five days before she was born. The mother passed away five days after delivery. The baby girl herself caught the infection but recovered after treatment.

In Madhya Pradesh, five-year-old twin sisters Roohi and Maahi are still unaware that their parents are no more. The twin sisters lost their mother and father within a week. They now live with their maternal grandparents and often ask about their 'maa and papa' but are unaware that they won't be coming back to them.

Who will look after these orphaned children? Have they become the "nowhere children"? What does the future hold in store for these vulnerable kids? Can anyone help them get their childhood back?

## THREAT OF CHILD TRAFFICKING INCREASES IN SUCH SCENARIOS

The plight of these recently orphaned children has led to increased chatter around 'adoption'. But this comes with the threat of child trafficking, often in the form of social media messages calling for direct adoption of children.

**Josh**  
India WebTV



The South Asian  
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**Susmita Ghosh**

Bureau Chief, India  
7044077233

[/www.youtube.com/c/JoshIndiaTV](http://www.youtube.com/c/JoshIndiaTV)





# The pandemic, a mirror for Indian society

Since May 10, numerous graphic images from India - bloated and partly burnt corpses of "suspected Covid victims" washing up on the banks of the Ganga - had started making headlines in the national and international media. Barely a week later, Dainik Bhaskar broke a horrifying "ground report", revealing over 2,000 dead bodies on the banks of the Ganga, spread across several districts of India's largest state (by population), Uttar Pradesh. Reporters confirmed the apocalypse that the authorities had been loudly denying since April 2021, when the country began to witness a massive surge in deaths amidst the raging second wave of Covid. As of May 30, India remains amongst the world's worst coronavirus-hit countries - 27,892,629 confirmed cases, and 325,985 deaths (actual figures could be much higher) - surpassed only by the United States. Pandemics are known to hold up a mirror to the societies that they ravage. What truth does Covid tell us about India? It is needless to emphasise that the government has mishandled the crisis; or that the country is paying a heavy price for keeping public healthcare a low priority - the annual budget expenditure on which has remained abysmally low (1.29 per cent of GDP in 2019-20).

India's Covid catastrophe also reveals something sinister that has largely evaded our attention - the age-old socio-economic inequalities, which continue to plague its society. It is these structural inequalities that create and perpetuate vulnerabilities by relegating millions of people into an abyss of misery during crises such as Covid.

In March 2020, when Covid made its presence felt, the Indian government responded by imposing an abrupt nationwide shutdown - one amongst the world's strictest - that soon became a tragedy for millions of migrant workers living precariously in cities. A large number of these internal migrants belong to two historically marginalised groups - Adivasis and Dalits who constitute 8.6 per cent and 16.6 per cent of India's population, respectively.

After the lockdown, the migrant workers were trapped in alien cities. For want of food, they set out on foot for their distant villages; enduring immense hardships, violence, and humiliation, they covered hundreds or thousands of miles. Several perished midway due to exhaustion, hunger, and accidents. Eventually, around 11 million returned to their home states; while India chronicled its biggest internal migration since 1947.

**Contd on page 33**

# Attention moves to other top fugitives after Mehul Choksi's arrest

**By Susmita Ghosh**

Attention returned on the pending extradition processes against many of the absconders, following the arrest of fugitive diamond businessman, Mehul Choksi, in the Caribbean island nation, Dominica. Erstwhile owner of Gitanjali Gems, Mehul Choksi is a declared fugitive of the Punjab National Bank fraud case, cheated Indian public, committing a scam of almost two billion US dollars. Originally Indian, Choksi has acquired Antiguan citizenship to avoid the law in India.

Extradition is barely a successful government endeavour going by India's experience. Efforts were on to hand over 72 fugitives to India from different countries, according to the government's reply to the Rajya Sabha in 2020.

Let's have a look at some of the top fugitives with their latest status.

Recognised for launching the Indian Premier League (IPL), Lalit Modi is wanted for supposedly cheating the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) by INR 753 crore.

In 2010, shortly before the Enforcement Directorate (ED) was to file a case, mentioning his life threat, Lalit Modi fled

India. The Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) filed a police case against him in Chennai in 2010.

The police investigation did not progress since seven years, building the ground for the Interpol to discard the Central Bureau of Investigation's (CBI) appeal to issue a Red Corner Notice (RCN). India filed an extradition request more than a decade after he fled. He was reported last to be living in London.

Nirav Modi fled India in 2017 after the PNB scam was uncovered. India approached the UK for his arrest in 2018. The legal obstacles were cleared after Nirav Modi lost a case in the UK court in April, 2021. But he has filed fresh appeals in the court against his extradition to India.

Mehul Choksi, Nirav Modi's uncle and co-accused in the PNB scam case, has been successful till date in escaping Indian agencies. But his arrest in Dominica recently could mean that his fortune has come to an end.

Still being a Rajya Sabha Member of Parliament (MP), businessman, Vijay Mallya fled India to UK in 2016, wanted for alleged banking fraud in India.

**(Contd on page 32)**

# Funeral pyres should not be the symbol of India's Covid crisis

As far as many viewers in the West are concerned, India's pandemic crisis is encapsulated by one enduring image: flaming funeral pyres. On an almost-daily basis this disheartening tableau can be seen in outlets ranging from the New York Times, CNN, the Washington Post and BBC. These outlets typically preface their coverage with "trigger" warnings that some might find the content upsetting. While the concern for reader sensitivities is commendable, many Indians wish that they were not shown at all. Their frustration can be gleaned from outbursts on social media and print platforms, where some Indians complain about a Western media bias. One recent tweet warns of "Anglo elites" who are "plotting and working to undermine India." "The BBC never," it alleges, "made a single video like this for COVID deaths in the UK". As an economist, I was initially skeptical of this narrative. It seemed grounded in confirmation bias, misinformation and xenophobia. To me, these visuals conveyed the monumental scale of the crisis in India. Official government data, which is increasingly unreliable, obscures that reality. Getting better data from official sources is difficult (the recent World Press Freedom index places India at a rank of 142 out of 180 countries, below Afghanistan, South Sudan and Myanmar). So newsrooms that are framing stories with these images of mass immolation might just be doing their job. Recently, however, I started looking at the international coverage of India's Covid crisis more carefully. The number of images of burning bodies quickly started to feel excessive. There are far fewer images of

living, breathing citizens such as doctors, scientists, public health experts, or pharmaceutical company executives working to combat Covid. Similarly absent were images of civil society actors like the women's self-help groups that are the focus of my own research. The Western fixation on Indian dead bodies is not new. The Hindu funeral pyre has been the focus of "lurid orientalism" for hundreds of years. Novels from the era of British colonial rule, travelogues and paintings depict Europeans' revulsion for this specific ritual. These works almost never feature the perspective of those who participate in these intensely private moments. For many Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains and others, cremation is believed to release the immortal soul from the physical body, enabling it to continue on its journey. Interestingly, for all of their outrage, Westerners in eras past quietly appropriated many of the practices of the "heathens" for themselves. On the issue of cremation, David Arnold, a British historian, argues that there was a two-way exchange of ideas between East and West. When criticized by 19th-century colonial elites, Hindus launched a highly effective defense of this practice. By the late 1800s, this campaign, together with the growing evidence about the public health risk of burials, induced British administrators to endorse cremations in India. The impact of this interaction is evident even today. The website of The Cremation Society of the UK acknowledges that the practice has become more popular over the past 100 years, and "is now accepted by over 56% of the population." The Old and New Testament are cited.



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**Editor in Chief & Publisher :**

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**Editor (Political Affairs-India) :**

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**Special Correspondents:**

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**Chief Photographer : Vijay Shah**

**Editorial Intern: Roubin Singh Thind**

**Web Coordinator : Harpreet Singh**

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**REGD & MAILING OFFICE :**

**P.O Box 7005 Hicksville New York 11801**

**Phone: 917 612 3158**

**editor@thesouthasianinsider.com, thesouthasianinsider@gmail.com**

**www.thesouthasianinsider.com**

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# Misuse Of Sedition Law: Prosecute Officials Responsible; Accountability A Must



*For the last few years, Wangkhem has been in and out of jails, labeled as someone very dangerous for the nation by influential persons who have slapped him with sections of the draconian sedition law.*

Spare a thought for Kishore Chandra Wangkhem, possibly the most powerful symbol of one who has suffered the most for the rampant and continuing misuse of our colonial-era sedition law. By all accounts, this journalist from Manipur fell foul of some who are very powerful in the north-eastern state and is paying a heavy price. For the last few years, Wangkhem has been in and out of jails, labelled as someone very dangerous for the nation by influential persons who have slapped him with sections of the draconian sedition law. Consider the following: Wangkhem is first arrested in November 2018 for Facebook posts that criticised Manipur chief minister N Biren

Singh. Wangkhem's differences with Singh were essentially political, though his social media posts contained some unparliamentary language. He was promptly arrested and thrown in jail, until the Manipur High Court came down hard on the state and ordered his release in April 2019. But Wangkhem's joy at being reunited with his wife and children was short-lived. In September 2020, he criticised Manipur's titular king after he was elected to Rajya Sabha as a BJP nominee, and that meant another spell in jail under sedition charges till December. He was back in jail once more in May 2021 after he posted on Facebook in the wake of the state BJP chief's death that "cow dung and cow urine didn't

work". Wangkhem and another activist arrested along with him were initially let out on bail by a local court but the state government arrested both again, this time under the National Security Act (NSA). The point to be noted is that Wangkhem is incarcerated with impunity by officials who fear virtually no consequences for misusing a law that clearly lays down that unless accompanied by incitement or call to violence, mere criticism of a government cannot be labelled as sedition. Ironically though, Manipur officials signing Wangkhem's repeated detentions - obviously under instructions of the state's politicians - have had no reason to be chastised. When the High Court the first time set Wangkhem free, it criticised the state government. But no officials were named or penalised. So, the officials have had no reason to mend their recalcitrant ways. This is precisely where the problem rests with the sedition law, a subject of renewed debate

since two senior judges of the Supreme Court earlier this week observed that it was time "we define the limit of sedition". The observation came as the judges put on hold action by the Andhra Pradesh government against two television channels for alleged sedition. That politicians in power in the state were angry with the television channels for their temerity to telecast speeches of a dissident MP was understandable. But criticism of the government cannot be sedition, and politicians couldn't have succeeded in cracking down on the channels unless some spineless state officials colluded. As in almost every trumped up sedition case, it is clear that officials - including a police DIG who finally affixed his signature to book the channels under sedition - were seeking to curry favours with their political masters by carrying out their wishes. Limiting the scope of sedition is welcome and it is likely that the top court will do so without any further delay. Among

everything else, a petition challenging the validity of the sedition law is pending before the court. And one of the petitioners happens to be none other than Kishore Chandra Wangkhem. But the likes of Wangkhem will only breathe easy when the fear of consequences is injected into the officials without whose sycophantic complicity the politicians could not have abused the sedition law so brazenly. Take for example the official who possibly signed to charge Wangkhem the first time. The High Court strongly criticised the measure, but it has not helped Wangkhem in any measure. He continues to be repeatedly harassed while the official must be still holding an important post and acting imperiously. Such examples of blatant overreach by officials are dime a dozen. Activist Akhil Gogoi led protests against CAA in Assam. He was an inconvenient voice that the government wished to shut down, and Gogoi found himself in jail charged with sedition.

## China's Communist Party vs. the world -- we must fight back before it's too late

As an FBI Counterintelligence Special Agent and federal prosecutor, every single crime that I ever solved was accomplished through one method more than any other: Following the money. Want a transparent view of the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) whole-of-government "soft influence" campaign to take over the world? Follow the money. A large chunk of the CCP's financing comes from intellectual property and trade secrets that they steal from us, literally, on a daily basis.

As FBI Director Wray has stated: "It's the people of the United States who are the victims of what amounts to Chinese theft on a scale so massive that it represents one of the largest transfers of wealth in human history." It is estimated that the CCP's theft of American intellectual property currently costs us between \$225 billion and \$600 billion annually. And

that's only what we're aware of. Another large chunk of the CCP's financing comes from U.S. businesses and U.S. individuals willingly giving it to them. Unfortunately, countless American and other international companies have gone along with the CCP's foreign direct investment and joint venture requirements and have signed over their intellectual property, technology, and future profits to access the Chinese market. The CCP has used these U.S. resources to steal our military secrets in a deliberate effort to replicate some of the United States' most critical weapons systems. The CCP's "debt-trap diplomacy" is also acquiring critical infrastructure in other countries through their predatory "Belt and Road" initiative, by building hundreds of billions of dollars in railroads, highways, ports, and shipping lanes, and then taking over critical assets when the borrowing country can (predictably) no

longer afford to repay for the infrastructure.

The CCP's intentions here are clear: to undermine America both domestically and internationally. The PRC is seeking to destabilize U.S. currency through the development of new payment system networks in their attempt to end the world's reliance on the U.S. dollar.

Moreover, the CCP has identified the "Five Spheres" of American influence: Academia, Professional Sports, Hollywood, Media and Big Tech platforms. The CCP knows that if they can control these Five Spheres, they can change and influence American thinking from within. The CCP malignly influences our academic institutions through Confucius Institutes and actively infiltrating our University STEM programs to learn of American academia's cutting-edge STEM development. The CCP malignly influences our professional sports as evidenced through the NBA's capitulation to



the PRC on grave human rights abuses. The CCP malignly influences our entertainment industry through Hollywood censorship of films and actively changing any content that is displeasing to the CCP. The CCP malignly influences our media outlets through direct and indirect payments to American newspapers to publish pro-Beijing articles and columns. The CCP malignly influences our communications platforms through both disinformation

campaigns designed to spread Communist Party propaganda while fomenting domestic division. And, lest we forget, the CCP uses these resources to bio-engineer a highly contagious, highly deadly virus which, after an accidental leak followed by a criminal cover-up, leads to the death of over 3.5 million souls, costs our global economy over \$30 trillion dollars, and causes permanent psychological and emotional damage to our children.



# The battle in Bengal persists

**The dispute between the Centre and the West Bengal government - with the former recalling the state chief secretary, Alapan Bandyopadhyay, with immediate effect and the state challenging the decision - is an outcome of four features**

The dispute between the Centre and the West Bengal government - with the former recalling the state chief secretary, Alapan Bandyopadhyay, with immediate effect and the state challenging the decision - is an outcome of four features. The first is political. The Trinamool Congress (TMC) and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) have just emerged from a bitter electoral battle. The BJP's shock at the loss, and its decision to go on the offensive from day one, has translated into the pursuit of corruption cases against TMC leaders and an over-interventionist governor. The TMC's complicity in post-poll violence and chief minister (CM) Mamata Banerjee's assessment that she could be the leader of an anti-BJP front has seen the TMC double down. There is both trust deficit and political competition at play. The second



element is the politics of natural disaster management. It was Ms Banerjee's absence from a meeting called by Prime Minister (PM) Narendra Modi on cyclone Yaas and her perceived lack of courtesy which triggered the new conflict. The CM said she met and took permission from the PM to leave, and has instead

attacked the Centre for politicising the cyclone, by inviting leader of opposition (and her *bête noire*) Suvendu Adhikari to the meeting. The allegations have their roots in 2020 - the BJP made the issue of corruption in post-Amphan relief a key element of its campaign and believes it may have another

opportunity to corner the government. The TMC is on its guard; it wants greater central funds, but also wants to insulate relief efforts from any BJP imprint. The third, critical, reason is the erosion of institutional integrity. The story of the politicisation of India's bureaucracy is well established.

But a sudden decision to recall the highest-ranking bureaucrat of the state sends a wrong message to the civil service that it must not defy political red lines imposed by the Centre. The Centre's decision to summon the chief secretary, and CM's decision to appoint Mr Bandyopadhyay as her chief adviser (he retired on May 31, though a three-month extension was on the table) is another pointer to the erosion of institutional norms. And finally, this controversy is a reflection of the fracture in the federal system. Both the Centre and state must respect each other's authority and institutional procedures, and insulate governance during a time of crisis where the state is dealing with both a pandemic and the aftermath of a cyclone from day-to-day political battles.

# In Delhi, 11 unpredictable months

**With weather records broken every month in this period, there is need for urgent scientific research**

On Tuesday, Delhi's minimum temperature was at 17.9 degrees Celsius (°C), the lowest minimum temperature ever recorded in June in the city. As this newspaper reported last week, even before the June record, the Capital had broken weather-related records every month for the last ten months. In August, it recorded 236.5mm rainfall, the highest for the month since 2013. September was the warmest month in almost two decades. In October, Delhi broke a 58-year-old record, clocking a mean minimum temperature of 17.2 degrees Celsius. November's mean minimum temperature dropped to 10.2 degrees Celsius, a level last seen in 1949. December witnessed eight cold wave days, the highest since 1965. January recorded the highest number of



cold wave days since 2008 (seven), and also broke the record for the highest rainfall for the month in 21 years (56.6mm). February was the second warmest in 120 years, with the mean maximum temperature touching 27.9 degrees Celsius. March recorded the hottest day in 76 years, with the mercury levels touching 40.1 degrees Celsius. The lowest minimum

temperature in April in at least a decade was recorded on April 4, at 11.7 degrees Celsius. In May, Delhi broke the record for the highest single-day rainfall for the month ever, with 119.3mm of precipitation on May 19-20. Met officials and scientists have said that these extreme weather recordings are the immediate result of temporary

atmospheric events, including the western disturbance, known to cause extreme weather events such as floods, flash floods, landslides, dust storms, hail storms and cold waves. The moot question, however, is whether these new records can be linked to the climate crisis. There are two views on it. The first school of thought among scientists views these changes

as an "anomaly" and not representative of a "pattern change"; the second view sees the astonishing changes, month after month, as visible signs of the climate crisis. However, even those who subscribe to the first view agree that freak weather events could have been "supported" by global warming because it increased the moisture-holding capacity of wind, leading to intense rainfall. Both groups, however, agree on one point: There is no doubt that wind flow, average temperature, humidity pattern, ocean temperature, among other atmospheric metrics, have changed drastically. It is important to scientifically investigate the link between the freak weather events of the last 11 months and the climate crisis to prepare better.





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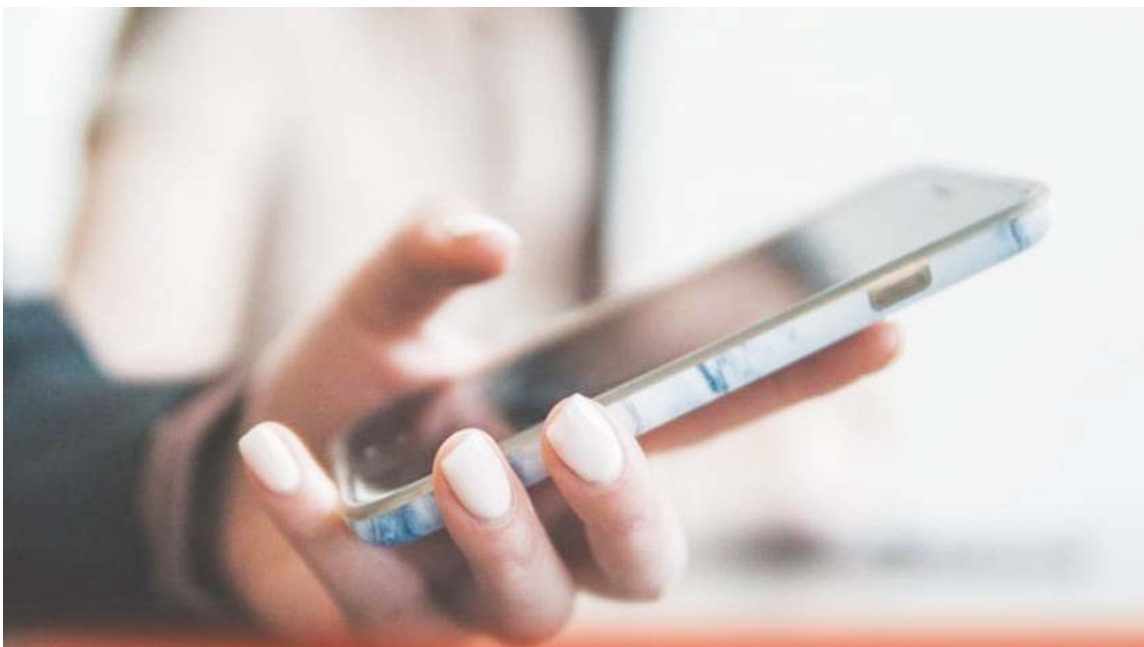
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## Why New Social Media Rules Are Needed To Protect You And Me

As the new Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics code come into force to curtail fake news and limit messages that lead to law and order issues, the regulation itself has become the victim of fake news around it. The most pernicious of such fake news being peddled is that the government is now going to have access to all messages and is going to check all messages. There is also a message doing the rounds on Whatsapp that states that the Whatsapp messages will now have three tick marks, with the third tick showing that the government has read it, and if the colour of the third tick is red, it would imply that the government has taken offense to it. This couldn't be any further from the truth. It is a different matter that I would admire if the government becomes that technologically sophisticated that it can read billions of messages in real-time, but the matter of concern is that such incorrect positions are being stated in television debates and being streamed into people's televisions and smartphones, creating a narrative that can potentially take away the protective shield of the new regulation.

Since there are multiple aspects to the regulation, this article will focus only on the aspect where the regulation makes it mandatory for messaging platforms such as Whatsapp, to reveal the first originator of a message. There have been tomes written about this piece of legislation, and many

misstatements disseminated around. To begin with, the regulation does not mean that the government will now read all our messages. It cannot do so. Nor does it mean that we will lose our privacy because our messages are now public. The messages are not to be made public unless it is part of the due course of law. The messages cannot be read by anyone other than the intended recipient, as long as the platform maintains end-to-end encryption.

What does the due course of law mean and why has the government framed such a regulation? Take the two-year-old case of people getting lynched in many parts of India because of videos of child-lifting being circulated. One of the more circulated videos was based on a social awareness message video in Karachi, which was trying to make people aware of rampant kidnappings in Karachi. This video was modified to show child-lifting happening in specific areas. Who did such modification to the video? Who spread it? Why was it spread? Or take the case of videos spread in Bengaluru, the IT capital of India, against residents who came from North-eastern states. It led to panic in India's IT capital and froze it for days. Who spread these videos? Were these videos spread with a benign intention or were these testing of weaponization of social media? How do we expect our government and law and order agencies to react? Can they take any effective steps unless they know who was the

first person to spread the video? Would such a step lead to the identification of the criminal who spread the video and leads to violation of his or her privacy? Of course, it will lead to the identification of the criminal, and then, it will lead to the violation of the privacy of that person. How else will the law and order agencies find and punish the criminal? Do we hang a person without knowing the identity of a person? No, we need to know who is the person and let the law takes its due course. And of course, the criminal's privacy will get violated. Are we debating that a criminal's privacy should not get violated and we should not be able to catch them?

The next question that comes up is are we violating everyone else's privacy on a messaging platform? The regulation clearly states that only the identity of the first originator of the message is required to be revealed. How would it violate anyone else's privacy? We have heard representation from Whatsapp that it would lead to breaking of their end-to-end encryption to implement such a regulatory requirement and that information of every person who reads a message and forwards it, will need to be tagged, violating everyone's privacy. Besides the fact that such concerns of privacy coming from Whatsapp does sound laughable, given that Whatsapp is arm-twisting Indians to agree to their new privacy agreement that snatches away privacy from Indian users, from a plain logical perspective, such arguments

***Incorrect interpretations are being made of the new regulations around social media. It is important to have the regulation to protect ourselves from the negative side of social media, for social media to flourish.***

are untenable. One need not be an encryption expert to see through why Whatsapp's argument is not tenable. Whatsapp has not put such a fallacious argument in Brazil, where the government has asked for the same requirement - traceability of messages.

To understand this issue better, take the example of another US digital giant, Amazon. Amazon takes a product, packs it, puts the recipient's name and address, and sends it. The package then goes from the main warehouse to sub-agents and then to the local distribution agency and eventually reaches its intended destination. Do we get to know who are the intermediaries in this process who handled the package? No, we don't. Their privacy stays intact. Does everyone get to know what is inside the package? No. The package is wrapped up. It only has the destination address. Amazon takes up the responsibility of ensuring that there is nothing harmful in the package like a bomb, or harmful chemicals. And if ever there is anything harmful found in the package eventually, it is Amazon that is responsible. Does that make it difficult for Amazon to do business in India? No, that is how they do business anywhere. Do we get to know who is the first originator of the package? Yes, it is on the label. An encrypted message works pretty much the same way as an Amazon package. The only requirement that the new regulation is adding, is that each message must have a label of who first sent it. Does that mean everyone can now read that message? No. The message stays inside a "package" that no one can open. They can only see who the originator of the message is. Only the intended recipient can open the message. Does it violate the privacy of the originator of the message? No, it does not as the only

information that is known to people other than the intended recipients is that the originator has sent a message, but the contents of that message are not known. It is equivalent to saying a person is using Whatsapp and sending messages. That does not tantamount to privacy violation.

Now the question arises, what if the originator of the message did not want the message to be further forwarded to more people, but it was forwarded without the consent of the originator of the message. Such concerns can easily be addressed by providing an option to the originator of the message that the message should not be allowed to be further forwarded.

However, we have seen a war of "reports" erupting between two very respected professors of Computer Science, Dr. Kamakoti of IIT Madras and Dr. Prabhakaran of IIT Mumbai. Dr. Prabhakaran's report has been taken up by many as the gold standard to label the said regulation as unimplementable. As someone who has been teaching at IIT and who has done his Ph.D. in the area of privacy middleware, I can step in with some authority in this area.

In his report, Dr. Prabhakaran notes that in its existing form, the proposal suggested by Dr. Kamakoti is vulnerable to falsification of originator information by people with malicious intent, and such people can frame an innocent person for sending an illegal message. This cannot be the basis to not have regulation. It is for the investigating officers to find if a person has been framed or if the person sent the message, just as it happens in any other investigation. The report itself is very sparse with hardly any technical reasons attributed for making the said claim, other than saying what if someone reverses engineers Whatsapp and frames another person.



# How Narendra Modi has moved away from Atal Bihari Vajpayee

***As confrontation between the centre-state becomes more frequent it is time to rethink the balance of power, writes Priyanka Chaturvedi.***

The tragic paradox of the electoral route to authoritarianism is that democracy's assassins use the very institutions of democracy -- gradually, subtly, and even legally -- to kill it"

-- Steven Levitsky

As the Modi-led BJP government completes seven years of being in absolute power, it is worth remembering how a former chief minister, before he went on to become the prime minister, was a vociferous supporter of India's federal structure and had used that very argument to keep the Goods and Services Tax (GST) regime on hold. After a historic mandate twice over, he is today being held responsible for weakening that very federal structure. The West Bengal face-off is the most recent case in point.

The state vs Centre relationship has become more discordant as the BJP tries to use power, stealth and money to dislodge governments at will, use the Governors to achieve its goals -- we saw that in Maharashtra and more recently in West Bengal. The excessive use of central agencies also has led to the states revoking the blanket approval given to the CBI to be able to conduct an investigation. Maharashtra saw the BJP use the CBI, ED, IT, NIA and NCB to try and weaken the state government. However, the party failed. Unfortunately, even the

Election Commission of India (ECI) came under much criticism during elections held in various states recently. Before the assembly elections and after the BJP's lose in the West Bengal elections, we saw the Centre-state face-off at its peak. The recent recall of the chief secretary of West Bengal is unprecedented in India's administrative history as per a former special secretary in the Cabinet Secretariat. He called it not just unprecedented but also a vindictive move in his quote to a newspaper.

The four pillars of democracy -- the executive, the legislature, the judiciary, and the media -- are supposed to function independent of each other but are now appearing to be subservient to an all-powerful central executive. Indian Constitution calls India a Union of States; this term categorically defines India as a federation of states though it has given the central government a more superior role in comparison to the states. This has led to every loophole in the Constitution being used to reassert the Centre's authority over the states since the past seven years and has resulted in many acrimonious exchanges between the Centre and the states, especially those led by non-BJP parties. The era of multi-party democracy started to become popular when Congress hegemony

started to wane in various states and the party split into various regional political units. The influential state leaders felt their state's interests were being undermined and their own role reduced as all decisions concerning them came from an increasingly centralised leadership. It is said that those who do not learn from history are condemned to repeat it and now a similar centralisation of power is being seen today in the BJP. All that it opposed and accused Congress of is being followed, if not bettered, by them -- by contesting state elections on the national agenda, winning states on the back of the prime minister's charisma, and deciding chief ministers from Delhi or dislodging non-BJP governments citing constitutional norms. Congress is accused of Emergency but subversion of all constitutional authorities is India's undeclared emergency in LK Advani's words. The first signs of a weakening democracy come when decisions are taken unilaterally without seeking support or a creating a robust feedback mechanism with the Opposition. Denying the Leader of Opposition post was an indication of that. It not just went against long-held parliamentary traditions but also effectively denied the Opposition a role in important committees that would ensure



government accountability. Whether it was the U-turn on GST, the Land Boundary Agreement with Bangladesh, demonetisation, implementing the CAA, and, most recently, ignoring that agriculture was a state subject to pass the Farm Bills despite massive protests. The BJP has totally ignored the Opposition, which is an equally important part of any parliamentary democracy and has even repeatedly mocked them. Any expectations of accountability or transparency are shrugged off, any question asked is laughed off. This reeks of an autocratic approach to governance that holds in contempt anyone who criticises the government and is equated to criticism of the country. The advent of unchecked social media platforms that are used as tools to spread fake news and manipulated narratives has further created schisms in the federal structure and undermined our democratic principles. While there is an absolute need to rein in these platforms, we need to bring accountability rather than control that the central government through its new rules has done.

The party that benefited the most out of these platforms that helped build its narrative today finds itself being exposed by the very same medium. Ever since the first Covid case was reported in India, the Epidemic Act was put in place. Hence, treatment protocols, medication, vaccination became the primary responsibility of the Centre despite health being a state subject. However, the country was witness such instances: when it came to taking credit, the central government was at the forefront. And, when it was time for brickbats, the finger was pointed at the state governments. The response by the Cabinet ministers to any constructive feedback by the opposition was responded to politically -- whether it was the shortage of oxygen, vaccination, ICU beds, or ventilators. As confrontation between the centre-state becomes more frequent it is time to rethink the balance of power. The autonomy of states and national integration should coexist, the balance of centralisation and decentralisation has to prevail.

## The State and the child: Care for the most vulnerable



***The ministry of women and child development could consider engaging with the states to work out a suitable kinship care programme. Foster care is another option worth exploring further***

The government recently announced long-term financial support through the PM Cares Fund for children left orphaned due to Covid-19 or for those who have lost one parent. This is

welcome as is the Supreme Court directive on Tuesday to the Centre to provide details of the schemes it has announced for the over 1,742 orphans and 7,464 children left with only one parent. The

adoption process in India is lengthy and tedious and these children need immediate help as they are in an extremely vulnerable state. Many child experts believe that the best option for such children is kinship support. Many relatives are willing to take care of these children and the State should aim to support them at least financially before exploring other options. This would give the children some sort of continuity,

care and stability at a time when they are traumatised by the loss of their parents. Single parents who do not have adequate resources must receive State support to take care of their children. The ministry of women and child development could consider engaging with the states to work out a suitable kinship care programme. This would require child protection units right from the district level to monitor orphans in the care of their

relatives. Foster care is another option worth exploring further. It is permitted under the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act 2015 and the Integrated Child Protection Scheme 2009. This will provide immediate relief, but foster care is considered a halfway house before adoption and the State must closely monitor the physical and mental well-being of the child at regular intervals.



# Address inequity and demand

**Fiscal year 2020-21 ended on a slightly better note than expected**

Fiscal year 2020-21 ended on a slightly better note than expected. The Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth in the quarter ending March 2021 increased to 1.6%. Tailwinds from the last quarter have moderated annual GDP contraction to 7.3%, lower than the earlier projection of 8%. All of this would have been good news and laid the foundations for recovery in 2021-22, if the second wave of Covid-19 infections had not derailed economic activity. And that is why the economic impact of the second wave, which peaked on May 9, will be key to assessing future prospects. Take some high-frequency indicators. The Manufacturing Purchasing Managers' Index (PMI) did not go below the critical threshold of 50 - values above 50 signify expansion in economic activity - in April and May. This is reassuring news. The Nomura India Business Resumption



Index (NIBRI) seems to have bottomed out after a sharp fall. It recovered to 63.6 in the week ending May 30. NIBRI reached 99.3 in the week ending February 23, but then fell continuously in all weeks except one to reach 60.3 in the week ending May 23. This indicates

loss of economic momentum (followed by, hopefully, some stabilisation). But the index of eight core sector industries suffered a month-on-month contraction of 15% in April. This is bad news. Clearly, the outlook is neither completely positive nor completely negative. But with

most states still under lockdown, and the shock of the second wave increasing risk aversion, both among governments and individuals, the economic headwinds of the second wave may be more prolonged and increase the likelihood of 2021-22 GDP growth being lower than

expected. What should the policy response be? The first priority is to minimise, if not prevent, the likelihood of a third wave. Vaccinations and vigilance are the only way to do this. However, there is another aspect which requires urgent attention. India's post-pandemic recovery has bypassed the non-rich. Inequality and poverty have increased. Contact-intensive services have been badly hit by the second wave. Important sectors such as trade and hospitality remained in contraction zone even in the March quarter. Corporate profits have surged with companies cutting down on material and labour costs. All this will suppress mass incomes and, therefore, demand. This needs to change if India wants to preserve its long-term growth potential. Markets will not take care of this task. The government must step in.

# Review the sedition law, protect rights

**As India heads towards 75 years of Independence next year, it is only appropriate that SC has weighed in to distinguish between sedition and the democratic right of citizens to express dissent without being labelled enemies of the State.**

The Supreme Court (SC)'s observation of the need to define what is or is not sedition will help minimise the misuse of the colonial-era provision to punish dissent. The apex court made this observation while restraining the Andhra Pradesh government from taking adverse action against two Telugu news channels, which have been booked under Section 124A of the Indian Penal Code (IPC) for allegedly promoting disaffection against the state government. The court's dissatisfaction with this provision was also clear in April when it sought a response from the Centre on a plea challenging the constitutional validity of the law. Though the word sedition was dropped from the Constitution in 1949,



Section 124A of IPC defines its scope as the intent or tendency to disturb law and

order or words which seem to incite violence. The SC's position should invite

unqualified support. The State must safeguard its security and sovereignty, but it must also

protect the fundamental rights of its citizens. Flimsy sedition charges are often invoked to intimidate and silence those who dissent.

According to the National Crime Records Bureau, only 3% of the 93 cases filed in 2019 ended in convictions, suggesting that there was not enough evidence to uphold the charges. India has a legal architecture to deal with those trying to incite violence or threaten the integrity of the State. As India heads towards 75 years of Independence next year, it is only appropriate that SC has weighed in to distinguish between sedition and the democratic right of citizens to express dissent without being labelled enemies of the State.



# Everyone is now serious about UFOs. But they reveal more about earthling politics



The truth probably isn't out there, but something is. Next month, the Pentagon will deliver to Congress a long-awaited report on its research into what the military calls unidentified aerial phenomena but the rest of the world calls UFOs. Ever since the New York Times reported the existence of a \$22m Pentagon program dedicated to studying reported sightings of UFOs by military personnel - along with startling videos of the phenomenon - a steady stream of leaks have followed. Senators from Harry Reid to Marco Rubio have weighed in, demanding the issue be taken seriously. Now even Barack Obama has said

that for years the government has been seeing flying objects that "we can't explain".

A society's reaction to things it can't explain always tell us more about the society than about the thing itself. And so far, the reaction has been remarkably muted. Perhaps the simplest explanation for the relative shrug with which these latest revelations have been met is that many Americans already believe the most radical explanation for them. According to one poll, two-thirds of Americans believe there is intelligent life on other planets, 56% believe that we have already made contact with them or will within 100 years, and over half

believe UFOs might be alien spacecraft. Polls have shown similar results - albeit with high sensitivity to how the question is phrased - for decades.

Despite the enormous metaphysical and spiritual consequences which would flow from them, few people organize their lives around these beliefs. Those dedicated "ufologists" who do so are widely mocked. As America's response to the coronavirus has shown, many people have trouble reckoning with the moral implications of the existence of other human beings, much less other sentient species. The topics which absorb the country's political and media elites are much more immediate and visceral. If the shapes in the sky have a position on abortion, gun rights or Mitch McConnell, they haven't yet made them known. Until they do, their relevance to the news cycle will remain limited.

Some commentators, though, have already dared to go where (almost) no commentator has gone before, and in doing so they are revealing of our political

moment. The liberal writer Ezra Klein, for instance, has hoped for a unifying moment, the kind which happens in science fiction when first contact with an alien species is followed by humanity putting aside its differences. But, like American society, science fiction has been changing in ways which show how stifling and artificial such moments can be. Science fiction has always been a sort of magical mirror in which we see what we want our own species to be, or conversely fear that it will become. A genre which used to consist largely of strong white men standing united against alien hordes is also home to authors such as Becky Chambers, Ann Leckie and Octavia Butler, whose fiction highlights the variety of human identity and relationships - sexual, gendered, class-based and racial. These different perspectives reveal how politically and culturally divisive a real first contact would be. Observers would rifle through the evidence (What is the alien's family and economic structure? Do they believe in God?) to find validation

for their own values, and as a cudgel to use against those of others. The fracturing of modern identity and the understanding that consensus often hides oppression makes unifying moments hard to imagine in even the most extreme of circumstances, liberal hopes notwithstanding. On the right, Christian writers and thinkers have made a subtle claim for the superiority of their own worldview in interpreting the phenomenon. Some Christians argue that nothing in their faith precludes the existence of alien beings, and that Christianity may even welcome such beings on to the path to redemption. But more revealing of views on the right is Tucker Carlson's recent intervention in the debate, in which he blasted the Pentagon for taking diversity issues more seriously than the threat of UFOs. This reminds us that sections of American Christianity - especially white evangelical Protestantism - are often as much about identitarian nationalism as they are about religious faith.

# Jeff Bezos thinks our cultural heritage is just 'intellectual property'

This week, Amazon acquired the hallowed movie studio MGM for a sum of \$8.45bn, second in size to the company's \$13.4bn purchase of Whole Foods in 2017. The day before, the attorney general of Washington DC sued Amazon over antitrust concerns in the retail market; it joins attorneys general from California, New York, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania and Washington state who have also raised similar concerns. Chief executive Jeff Bezos, who is stepping down from the position in July, said in a statement: "MGM has a vast, deep catalogue of much beloved intellectual property. We can reimagine and develop that IP for the 21st century." It's chilling, and unsurprising, that Bezos - a man who makes almost \$3,000 a second; who makes a couple million dollars every 15 minutes; who, given that the sun is a little over 3bn miles away from Pluto, could travel there and back over 25 times and be paid \$1 for each mile - sees a trove of cinematic

history as IP to be exploited rather than an important, increasingly vulnerable facet of culture. Really, it's a flippant and, by this point, almost stereotypical feature of writing about Bezos to try and make practical sense of his wealth. More difficult is trying to rationalize how that wealth has distorted his understanding of art and its role in society. The purchase of MGM has so far mostly been written about in the context of the fate of the studio's most notable productions: *Gone With The Wind*, *The Wizard of Oz* and the James Bond franchise, among other. This week, *Variety* published an article that was broken down into sections regarding various films and TV shows and what could become of them. Do some fall under the Amazon Prime umbrella? Do others belong to separate property holders due to previous contracts? Such speculation about the ownership of various movies and shows reduces everything down to numbers and titles, emphasizing the fact that

these properties are indeed products. Not everything MGM owns is so culturally significant as to warrant pearl-clutching paranoia about its preservation. That's not the point. And anyone concerned about how this deal tests antitrust laws when it comes to Amazon's size and potential for monopoly will be disappointed given how small a portion of the film market MGM occupies. But that line of thought is also misleading. What's consequential is the dilution of both quality and vitality for the cinematic form. The "streaming wars", as a concept, has taken over the public's perception of how the entertainment industry approaches the production of its movies and shows: commodities to be traded and hoarded in order to capture subscriptions. Bloomberg framed the MGM deal in terms of hours. "Amazon's studios produce a few hundred hours worth of television shows and movies a year. MGM adds a back catalog of 25,000 hours that Amazon could divvy up



between its Prime Video offering, or its free-to-stream, ad-supported IMDB TV." Every major studio has developed or is developing its own platform, which has supposedly put pressure on Amazon to expand its streaming options. The result is a selection of subscriptions dizzying and frustrating for any potential audience that wishes to easily access any number of films. What gets lost in both the micro and macro conversations about streaming is why the preservation and celebration of cinema, as well as any other threatened art form, not only matters, but why its new life online is so tenuous. As more

and more companies bar their "content" behind fluctuating monthly fees, the collective ownership of cinema deteriorates. Physical media like DVDs and CDs, integral artifacts when it comes to the idiosyncratic and long-lived ways that movies are passed on and made precious, are quickly being phased out. Instead, audiences must settle for inferior image reproduction, dead pixels and distracting screen buttons. The theatrical experience, seemingly always on the brink of obliteration, has been overtaken by flashy gimmicks hopefully engineered to get people to arrive and stay.



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# White Sand, Roasted Fish, Tender Coconut: Why India's Beautiful Island Wants To Be Left Alone



*Ismath Hussain, the first novelist from Lakshadweep, writes an island diary for 'Outlook' in the backdrop of the row over the new draft notification.*

Kavaratti, the capital of Lakshadweep, where I am presently living in, is around 58 km away from Kilthan island, where my ancestral home is situated. It takes three hours' sail by speedboat to reach Kavaratti from Kilthan. It was in June 2020 I landed in Kavaratti in connection with my job. All islands in Lakshadweep have a mystic aroma in air. You can see in the lives of island people myths, beliefs and meditative habits that are in the sufie tradition. For the same reason, islands in Lakshadweep normally have a slow pace. In Kavaratti, I started living with my friend Asif Ali Shah Masood at his home. His family, who belongs to the sufi tradition, hosted me until I arranged a

house for rent. When an islander moves from one island to another, he considers living in hotels as undignified when he has friends and families to host him. Every day, Asif and I would go and sit on the beach. A group of friends who love cinema and literature would be there. We would discuss about making a film on the history and heritage of the island. The discussion would go on late in the night as the sea waves would gently touch our feet. We had a name for our beach gang- Biluthaman (white sand). Some nights, I would go and sleep on the beach. The discussions in the beach gang had an impact on me and Asif. There is no cinema hall in the island. But, in my childhood,

the islands would have film screenings using projectors. Every year, Independence Day and Republic Day would see three-day celebrations in Lakshadweep with film screenings and theatre performances. Amini island had theatre groups comprising female artists. 'Dweep' (island), shot at Minicoy, was the first film that was shot in Lakshadweep. It was directed by Ramu Kariat, the director of 'Chemmeen' (Prone), the first Malayalam film to have won the President's gold medal. Recently, Prithviraj's 'Anarkali' and Geetu Mohandas's 'Moothon' were shot in Lakshadweep, giving a wider view of the island. The films shot in Lakshadweep were not really portraying the life of the island. They all narrated the story of the people from the mainland only portraying the island for its scenic beauty. Recently, there have been many groups of short film makers emerging in Lakshadweep. From our discussions, our Biluthaman

gang finally decided to make a short film on the history of Lakshadweep's independence. We set out in search of the island's history. In fact, the history came in search of us. We had several interesting findings with historical evidence--- how the islanders banished Prankies (the Portuguese) through tactful means after they conquered Kadamath (Cardamom) and Amini islands; how the islanders ended the rule of the cruel Arakkal Muslim dynasty by taking their soldiers, hands and legs tied, to Tipu's palace; about the islanders who went to Kerala to meet Gandhiji during his visit there, the imprisonment of those who came to Kavaratti carrying Indian flags after learning that INA had conquered Port Blair, about the lives of freedom fighters such as Chakkayakkeel Khalid, Pandiyalappura Alimalmi, Kouramkakkada Cheriya Koya and so on, about Erikunnath Ali Musliyar, who had led the Malabar Rebellion, of running a

dars (religious school) in Kavaartti for eight years and working as a khali (head priest) in the island. It was after returning from Lakshadweep that Ali Musliyar had become part of the Malabar rebellion in Kerala. I had patriotic goosebumps. I wrote the story and the screenplay. Asif and I decided to do the direction together. Cinematography was taken up by a friend from Kadamath island called Shihab. Editing was taken up by my son Yusuf Hussain and Imam Immi. Asif agreed to do a major character. Our long effort to find an actor to play the role of Ali Musliyar didn't yield any result. Finally, I took up that role. That was our first short film- 'Kaanti'. The story of island's patriotism was whole heartedly accepted by the audience. At the premiere, tears rolled down my eyes while watching the climax scene. When I turned back, Asif was also wiping his eyes. From December 8, a new set of rules by the Lakshadweep administration started clouding over.

## Rahul Gandhi A 'Pappu', A 'Vulture' Or The Voice Of Sanity?

*Soon after Rahul Gandhi's press conference question Covid data, BJP leader Prakash Javadekar accused him of 'stoking fears'. By Friday evening, 'Pappu' was once again trending on Twitter.*

For a party that takes pride in its visceral hatred for Rahul Gandhi, the BJP makes the Wayanad MP appear like a paragon of versatile contradictions. As per the BJP's toolkit, the 50-year-old former Congress chief can be a Pappu (half-wit) or a conniving conspiracist just as he can, at once, be a lobbyist for Big Pharma, a Prophet of Doom and a Vulture. These are just a few epithets that sundry BJP leaders have lavished on Gandhi through the 17 years of his political career. There are plenty more that keep coming each time the Nehru-Gandhi scion says or does something. It shouldn't have surprised anyone then that no sooner had Gandhi wrapped up

his press conference, on Friday, the brickbats from the saffron gallery came flying his way, even though there was, in all honesty, nothing the Congress leader really said that was different from what he has been saying for well over a year now. Gandhi's press conference, on Friday, was largely a regurgitation of his views on the Narendra Modi government's evident mishandling of the Covid pandemic. Gandhi spoke about the dire need for a vaccination strategy that ensures jabs for a majority of India's population within the shortest possible time as against the presently chaotic inoculation drive that has achieved a pitiable result of

vaccinating just over three per cent of our teeming millions while leaving countless citizens struggling to even register for the jab. He spoke about the risks of allowing "space for the virus to mutate, spread and keep coming back in third, fourth and fifth waves" wreaking more havoc than it already has. He insisted that "temporary solutions" like lockdowns, social distancing, wearing masks, etc. "will not stop the virus but only postpone the infection". He alleged that the official data on Covid infections and fatality rate "is an exponential lie" and government - at the Centre and in the states, including the few ruled by the Congress - "need to be honest" while disclosing data "even if it



frightens people because hiding facts will do more harm". And yes, he held the Prime Minister singularly responsible for the hara-kiri that has been let loose across the country ever since Covid's second wave began spreading like a wildfire. Predictably, the BJP and its army of followers on social media platforms like Twitter - yeah, the same

microblogging site that BJP apparatchiks have accused of propagating an alleged Congress-backed toolkit that defames India - hit back at Gandhi. Union minister Prakash Javadekar promptly jumped to defend the government, declaring that India will complete its Covid inoculation drive by December this year.





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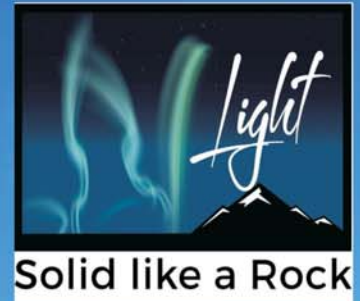
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# COVID passport could be just the beginning

If you're a middle-aged American, you can probably still dimly remember back to what things used to be like in this country, say, 13 or 14 months ago. Way back then, before the revolution, pretty much everybody agreed that segregation was the worst thing this country ever did. Forcing certain categories of citizens into separate, lesser accommodations, barring them from public places, treating them like lepers or untouchables - that was completely immoral and wrong, we were told that a lot and most of us strongly agreed. It was wrong.

So imagine our confusion today looking out across the country now. The very same people who just the other day told us that segregation was wrong are now enforcing segregation.

Should we be surprised? Probably not, but we still are.

The New York Times informed us that unless you can prove you've taken the injection the Democratic Party demands you

take, you are no longer permitted in bars, comedy clubs, or even some dance competitions in the state of New York. You're too dirty to appear in public. You're not welcome near normal people. Want to watch the NBA playoffs in person? You'd better be vaccinated. Otherwise, the New York Knicks will bar you from Madison Square Garden. You can still go see a baseball game if you want to but be warned that you'll be sitting in your own roped-off section, marinating in shame, with the other disobedient bad people. Medical Jim Crow has come to America. If we still had water fountains, the unvaccinated would have separate ones.

But wait, you ask. Is this logical? Does it make sense? Why would people who've had the vaccine fear being near people who haven't had the vaccine? Aren't the vaccinated protected? Isn't that the whole point of getting the shot? Sure. Maybe from a health perspective that's technically true, if you want to be precise about it. But this clearly isn't about health or

science. It's bigger than that. It's about good and evil. It's about discovering who's a decent person, and who, by contrast, deserves to be punished for sin. It's about finding out who has obeyed. Thankfully, once again, technology is once again coming to the rescue.

REPORTER: It's called the Immunaband. The Denver Physician (inventor of the band, Dr. Tashof Bernton) says it's the first of its kind on the market. It costs \$19.99 and it's simple to use. After buying it, you send a copy of your vaccination card and they'll load it to their encrypted server. If someone wants to verify your vaccine record, all they have to do is take a picture of the QR code on their phone and it'll take them to that website.

It's easy. It's got a QR code. Just send a copy of your vaccination card. Just show your papers, and you can participate in the life of your country. In New York, the state is doing this itself, by issuing something called the "Excelsior Pass."



The Excelsior Pass entitles you to all the rights and freedoms you imagined you were born with, but that turns out to be entirely contingent on whether you do exactly what Andrew Cuomo says to do immediately. Officials in New York have assured us the Excelsior Pass is totally safe - every bit as safe as a state-licensed nursing home - and it's totally confidential. Your personal health information cannot be hacked by anyone - apart of course from hackers, people who actually try to hack it. Last month, a man called Albert Fox Cahn broke into the Excelsior Pass in

just eleven minutes. But other than that, you're completely fine. So more than a million people have downloaded the Excelsior pass so far. A victory for public health. But it does make you wonder: is this the end, or is it the beginning? Whys should it end here? The coronavirus is transmissible, and it can be dangerous. But it's hardly the only illness that fits that description, there are many. If politicians can segregate potential COVID carriers from the rest of the population, why can't they do the same to people with HIV or tuberculosis or Hepatitis C?

## The social media wars: Why Indian govt, Twitter continue to be at loggerheads



The Narendra Modi government and social media giant Twitter are at loggerheads again. The latest confrontation took place 24 hours before Twitter and other social media platforms-most prominently Instagram, WhatsApp, Telegram and Signal-missed the deadline to comply with the Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, 2021. The Centre had released these guidelines on February 25 and asked the platforms to fall in line by May 25. None of these intermediaries, apart from Indian

micro-blogging site Koo, have complied so far.

However, the latest confrontation between the Centre and Twitter is not over the non-compliance issue, but a controversial "toolkit" at the centre of a political slugfest between the ruling BJP and the Congress. On May 18, a Twitter account, Team Bharat, tweeted screenshots of an alleged "#CongressToolKit" and claimed that it exposed the Congress's agenda to malign Modi's image. Within the next few hours, several BJP leaders-including BJP national president J.P.

Nadda, general secretary B.L. Santhosh, Union ministers Harsh Vardhan and Smriti Irani and national spokesperson Sambit Patra-had tweeted about the toolkit. The Congress not only called the toolkit fake, but also registered FIRs against BJP leaders in Delhi, Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh. Meanwhile, Twitter labelled the tweets of Patra, Santhosh and some others as "manipulated media".

In February 2020, to fight the menace of fake news ahead of the US presidential election, Twitter had announced it would label "significantly and deceptively altered or fabricated" content as "manipulated media". Twitter claims that it uses its own technology or third parties to determine if a content is manipulated. While in the US, some tweets in June 2020 by then president Donald Trump got flagged as manipulated, in India, the first such notification appeared in December 2020-on a tweet by Amit Malviya, head of the BJP IT cell. Angered by Twitter's move vis-à-vis the toolkit tweets of BJP leaders, the Union

government sent an informal note to the micro-blogging site asking it to remove the manipulated media tag as the matter was being investigated by a law enforcement agency. The Delhi Police, which comes under the Union home ministry, has been probing the case following a complaint by Congress leaders Rajeev Gowda and Rohan Gupta. But, more importantly, the note reminded Twitter that the act of content moderation would put a question mark on its status as an internet "intermediary". Section 79 of the Information Technology Act, 2000, provides "safe harbour" to intermediaries such as Twitter and Facebook, which host user-generated content, and exempts them from liability for the actions of users if they otherwise adhere to government guidelines. After receiving no response from Twitter, a Delhi Police team reached the Delhi and Gurgaon offices of Twitter on May 24 to serve a notice to their officials, asking them to join the probe since they seemed to have some

information "based on which they classified the toolkit as manipulated media". Opposition leaders termed this action as a pressure tactic. INDIA TODAY reached out to Twitter but received a one-line response from its head of policy communications, Pallavi Walia: "We do not have any comment to share."

Legal experts say that the government's request is actually in contravention of its new guidelines, which state that social media platforms are mandated to do due diligence on the content published. "There is no legal basis to such a request," says Supreme Court advocate and cyber law expert Pavan Duggal. "Twitter has flagged the electronic content-the toolkit-as manipulated. There is no law which says manipulated electronic content is illegal. What is illegal is the use of this content for illegal purposes. Twitter has just flagged the content while the Delhi Police is probing the criminal aspect of its misuse."



## Can safety be assured in Bangladesh's garment industry?



(News Agencies)-The 2013 Rana Plaza collapse in Bangladesh highlighted a dark side of the global fashion industry: workers in the developing world making clothes in dangerous conditions to be sold in wealthier nations.

Just weeks after 1,100 people died in the disaster, international fashion brands signed a legally binding accord to improve factory conditions across Bangladesh.

As the agreement was about to expire, unions and manufacturers

agreed to extend it for three months.

But what happens if they fail to negotiate a replacement? And who will protect the people who make many of our clothes?

Presenter: Mohammed Jamjoom

Guests:

Nazma Akter - President, Somnilito Garments Sramik Federation Ben Vanpeperstraete - Senior Legal Adviser at the European Center for Constitutional and Human Rights Alke Boessiger - Deputy General Secretary, UNI Global Union

## Bangladesh arrests suspect believed to have killed 70 tigers

(News Agencies)-Bangladeshi police have arrested a suspected wildlife poacher believed to have killed at least 70 endangered Bengal tigers in more than two decades, police said.

Local police chief Saidur Rahman on Tuesday said Habib Talukder - nicknamed Tiger Habib for his hunting skills - lived near the vast Sundarbans mangrove forest and would flee whenever officers raided the area. The 50-year-old suspect was sent to jail pending trial after he was arrested on Saturday at his home in southern Bagerhat district, Rahman said. The mangrove forest region straddling India and Bangladesh, home to one of the world's largest populations of Bengal tigers, was Talukder's hunting ground. The cats' pelts, bones and even the flesh would be bought by black market traders who would sell them in China and elsewhere. Talukder started out collecting honey from wild bees in the forest and became a local legend for his exploits hunting the



big cats and avoiding arrest. "We equally respect him and are scared of him," said local honey hunter Abdus Salam. "He's a dangerous man who could fight alone with mama (tiger) inside the forest." Wanted in a number of cases filed under the wildlife conservation law, Talukder had been on the run for a long time, Rahman said. He might have links with gangs operating in the Sundarbans for poaching wild animals, the officer said. Talukder, who frequently ventured into the forest despite a ban on him, is formally charged for the hunting of three tigers and five deer, forest official Joynal Abadin said. But Talukder told local people that he had hunted as many

as 70 big cats since he had first killed a tiger in his mid-20s, Abadin said, referring to local residents. We could not verify his claim yet," he said. Bengal tigers are unique among big cats in being able to live and hunt in the brackish water of the mangrove forests. They are adept swimmers.

After a crackdown on poaching and banditry, a 2019 study by Bangladesh's forest department found a total of 114 Bengal tigers in its part of Sundarbans, a UNESCO heritage site.

Their population had registered a record low of 106 in 2015 from 440 in 2004, according to previous surveys.

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The first signs of global warming are now clearly visible. We urgently need to limit greenhouse gas emissions. Nothing and no-one will be spared from climate change. This warning is therefore to all people, all countries and, in particular, to the Belgian Council of Ministers who, on the weekend of March 20 and 21, will have to decide what action to take regarding essential measures linked to the Kyoto Protocol.





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# Fears of environmental disaster as oil-laden ship sinks off Sri Lanka



depth of about 21m (69ft), and the forward section is settling down slowly".

The Sri Lankan navy said the bow of the ship was still above the waterline.

"Even if the bow also hits the sea bed, still there will be a section of the upper deck and bridge sticking out of the water," spokesman Indika de Silva told AFP news agency.

"There is no oil leak from the ship yet, but arrangements are in place to deal with a possible spill which is the worst-case scenario," he added.

Sri Lanka's marine protection agency said it was preparing booms, oil dispersants, booms and skimmers.

Environmentalist Dr Ajantha Perera told the BBC that the sinking posed "the worst environmental scenario".

"With all the dangerous goods, the nitric acid and all these other things, and the oil in the ship, if it's sinking it will basically destroy the whole bottom of the sea," she said.

The coastal stretch near the city of Negombo - home to some of the country's most pristine beaches - has already seen oil and debris pollution for days.

On Wednesday, the fisheries ministry said emergency measures were in place to protect the Negombo lagoon and surrounding areas and all fishing from Panadura to Negombo had been suspended.

Joshua Anthony, head of the regional fishing union, warned that the sinking could be "a death blow" for the industry.

"We can't go to the sea, which means we can't make a living," he said.

"Burning ship coats 'tourist paradise' beach in oil

Sri Lankan officials believe the fire was caused by a nitric acid leak which the crew had been aware of since 11 May. The ship was carrying 25 tonnes of the highly corrosive acid, which can be used in the manufacture of fertilisers and explosives.

The ship's owners confirmed

the crew had been aware of the leak, but said they were denied permission by both Qatar and India to leave the ship there before the fire broke out.

The fact that Sri Lanka allowed the vessel to enter its waters after it was rejected by two other nations has led to widespread public anger.

Officials have lodged a police complaint against the captain of the ship, who was rescued along with other crew members last week.

Sri Lanka police on Tuesday said they questioned the captain and the engineer of the ship for more than 14 hours.

A court has issued an order preventing the captain, chief engineer and the additional engineer from leaving the country.

The 186m-long (610ft) vessel left the Indian port of Hazira on 15 May carrying 1,486 containers. As well as the nitric acid, the cargo included several other chemicals and cosmetics.

(News Agencies)-A chemical-laden cargo ship is sinking off the coast of Sri Lanka, sparking fears of an environmental disaster.

The Singapore-registered X-Press Pearl had been on fire for almost two weeks before the blaze was put out this week.

Hundreds of tonnes of oil from fuel tanks could leak into the sea, devastating nearby marine life.

The Sri Lankan and Indian navies had worked jointly over the past days in an attempt to put out the fire and prevent the

ship from breaking up and sinking.

But rough seas and monsoonal winds hampered the operation, just outside the port of Colombo.

On Wednesday, salvage experts tried to tow the wreck into deeper water to minimise the pollution risk to the coastline. But the back section hit the seabed and the operation was abandoned.

The ship's operators, X-Press Feeders, said on Thursday that the "aft portion is sitting on the seabed at a

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## African Union suspends Mali after military coup and threatens sanctions

(News Agencies)- The African Union has suspended Mali's membership in response to last week's military coup and threatened sanctions if a civilian-led government is not restored, it said in a statement on Tuesday.

The African Union called for "an unimpeded, transparent and swift return to the civilian-led transition ... failing which, the Council will not hesitate to impose targeted sanctions," the AU's Peace and Security Council said.



The military arrested interim President Bah Ndaw and Prime Minister Moctar Ouane last week and pressured them to resign, derailing a transition to democratic elections after another military coup last August ousted the previous administration.

Former vice president Assimi Goita, a colonel who led the August coup and last week's revolt, was declared president on Friday.

Mali's neighbors and international powers fear the latest revolt will jeopardize a commitment to hold a presidential election in

February, and undermine a regional fight against Islamist militants, some of which are based in Mali's desert north.

West African regional bloc ECOWAS suspended Mali on Sunday.

The African Union suspended Mali after last August's coup but reinstated the country a few weeks later after the heads of the new civilian-led transitional government were announced.

## Belarusian activist stabs his throat during a court hearing in Minsk

(News Agencies)- A Belarusian activist stabbed his own throat during a court hearing in Minsk on Tuesday, according to local human rights watchdog Viasna 96.

According to the organization, Steffan Latypov, who is facing allegations of organizing protests and resisting arrest, stabbed himself in the neck during the hearing because of alleged threats from authorities against his family if he didn't plead guilty. The 41-year-old faces an additional charge for fraud which he also denies.

"Father, after meeting with you, GUBOPiK [Belarusian Interior Ministry's Main Directorate for Combating Organized Crime and Corruption] came to me and warned that if I didn't admit my guilt, then I would be thrown in a cell with hardened criminals and criminal cases would be launched against my relatives and neighbors," Latypov said according to Viasna 96 before

cutting himself.

The Belarusian Interior Ministry could not be reached by CNN for a comment.

After being treated in hospital, Latypov was later moved to a detention center in Minsk, the activist's parents told CNN on Wednesday.

Belarusian opposition leader



Svetlana Tikhonovskaya tweeted on Tuesday about Latypov's case and called for an end to the country's "state of terror."

"He was threatened with the persecution of his family if he didn't admit himself guilty. This is the result of state terror, repressions, torture in Belarus. We must stop it immediately!" Tikhonovskaya herself fled Belarus in August last year following the country's disputed

presidential elections. Alexander Lukashenko, the country's long-time leader who has been described as Europe's "last dictator," claimed to have won over 80% of the vote.

The election sparked a new wave of mass protests in Belarus, with thousands of people arrested.

The US and EU declared the vote fraudulent and imposed sanctions on Belarusian officials over the fraud and the brutal crackdown that followed.

Latypov was detained on September 15, 2020 after he asked for

identification from police who were overseeing the painting-over of a political mural in a courtyard in Minsk, according to Viasna 96.

Viasna 96 also said Latypov underwent surgery on Tuesday after he cut himself and did not suffer from damage to vital organs. Latypov is just one of many activists, journalist and protesters facing charges in Belarus.

## Czech police ask for Prime Minister to be charged with fraud

Czech police have asked for Prime Minister Andrej Babis to be charged with fraud, following an investigation into alleged misuse of European Union subsidies, according to a statement released on Monday.

The criminal unit of the Economic Crime Department of the Prague Police has concluded its investigation into the case -- known as "Stork's Nest" -- the statement said.

A spokesperson for the Prague Public Prosecutor's Office said Monday that the office had received the motion to indict two people as well as the investigative file for the case, which it said contained 34,000 pages.

"The Public Prosecutor will now review the files and decide whether to proceed with the indictment, dismiss the charges or find a different solution," Aleš Cimbala said in the statement.

The Czech government's press office did not respond to CNN's request for comment. In



MICHAL CIZEK/AFAP/GETTY IMAGES

a statement to CTK, the Czech state news agency, Babis dismissed the investigation as politically motivated and said "nothing illegal has ever happened."

Babis has faced public anger -- including some of the biggest protests since the 1989 revolution -- over the allegations regarding his financial affairs and other issues.

The case is named after the Stork's Nest leisure complex that is at the heart of the alleged subsidy fraud. Part farm, part conference center with a hotel and sports facilities, the Stork's Nest resort received EU funding intended for small and medium businesses between 2007 and 2013, according to its current owner, a company called IMOBA, which is part of Babis'

agricultural business empire Agrofert. The investigation focuses on the ownership of the complex, trying to establish whether it was eligible for the funding. The property had, in the past, been a part of Agrofert before being spun off into a separate company. It later became part of the Agrofert holding again, public records show. The EU's antifraud office

OLAF has said in the past that its investigation found "irregularities" in subsidy payments for the property, according to a 2018 statement by the Czech Finance Ministry.

Police first asked for Babis to be charged in the case in 2019, but the case was dropped by the prosecutor. That decision was later overturned by the country's Prosecutor General Pavel Zeman who said the move to drop the case was premature.

As the owner of Agrofert, Babis was one of the richest business tycoons in the Czech Republic. In 2017, he placed the business into a trust, as required by law in order to remain in his post as finance minister. He became prime minister later that year.

Separate from the Stork's Nest investigation, an audit by the European Commission has found that Babis breached conflict of interest rules over his control of trust funds linked to Agrofert.



# National Enquirer owner pays \$187,500 for aiding Trump campaign in hush money deal

**The media firm settled with the FEC over its role in paying Karen McDougal to give up the rights to her story about a relationship with the 2016 candidate.**

(News Agencies)- The firm that owns the National Enquirer has agreed to pay \$187,500 to the Federal Election Commission to settle complaints that it unlawfully aided Donald Trump's presidential campaign in 2016 by suppressing the story of an actress who said she had a sexual relationship with Trump. The FEC concluded that American Media Inc., now known as A360 Media LLC, made an illegal corporate contribution to Trump's campaign by paying Karen McDougal \$150,000 to give up the rights to her story about Trump. AMI and its former chief, David Pecker, initially argued through attorneys that they acted as journalists in making the deal with McDougal. However, in 2018 the firm and Pecker entered into a non-prosecution agreement with federal prosecutors in New York, stipulating that the arrangement was intended to influence the 2016 presidential election. The FEC concluded that contradicted the earlier claims that the Enquirer was simply acting as a news outlet. "The available information supports the conclusion that AMI's payment constituted an in-kind contribution to Trump and the Trump Committee," an FEC legal analysis concluded. "AMI and Pecker appear to have violated the Act by making and consenting to

making a corporate contribution in the form of a payment from AMI to McDougal. As explained below, the record indicates that there is reason to believe that this violation was knowing and willful." The FEC also concluded that AMI and Pecker coordinated with the Trump campaign, because they had contact with Trump lawyer Michael Cohen, who assured the company that its expenses related to McDougal would be reimbursed. Cohen pleaded guilty in 2018 to orchestrating illegal campaign contributions in connection with the arrangement. Trump has denied he had a relationship with McDougal.



One of the watchdog groups that filed complaints about the deal, Common Cause, said the FEC resolution with Pecker and AMI highlighted the fact that Trump has never been held culpable for the payoff to McDougal and a similar payment to the adult-film actress Stormy Daniels. "Michael Cohen went to prison for these violations. AMI has been fined. But the former president has not yet been held accountable," said Paul Ryan,

Common Cause's vice president for policy and litigation. "The Department of Justice has until August to prosecute Trump for orchestrating this illegal campaign finance scheme." The FEC considered action against Trump, his campaign and the Trump Organization, but the panel's Republican appointees blocked such moves, saying that "pursuing these matters further was not the best use of agency resources."

## Is it finally the end for Benjamin Netanyahu, the great survivor of Israeli politics?



(News Agencies)- A quarter of a century ago, Israelis were stunned when Benjamin Netanyahu narrowly beat Shimon Peres to become Israel's youngest-ever Prime Minister. On Sunday, the anniversary of that first win in 1996, Netanyahu addressed the country as he faced the possibility of the end of his political career after his former lieutenant, Naftali Bennett, announced he would work with opposition leader Yair

Lapid to form a new government. Blasting Bennett, leader of the small right-wing party Yamina, for committing what he called the "fraud of the century," Netanyahu portrayed him as a power hungry politician who "only cares about himself." It was a statement that some Israeli political watchers found to be more than ironic considering Netanyahu's past political maneuvers.

The announcement came after Bennett had already once announced he was working with Lapid, only to backtrack two days into Israel's latest conflict with Hamas-led militants in Gaza. But a few days after the ceasefire was announced,

Bennett was back at the negotiating table with Lapid. Bennett and Lapid, who heads the centrist party Yesh Atid, will try to form a coalition with at least eight political parties that run the political spectrum; from the left wing Meretz, to Bennett's right wing Yamina party. They will also likely need the outside support of a small Islamist party called United Arab List in order to be able to have a governing majority in Israel's parliament, the Knesset.

The new coalition will not see eye-to-eye on many of the most pressing issues facing Israel, especially on Israeli relations with Palestinians. But

in his speech Sunday, Bennett said he's willing to sit with parties with opposing ideological views as his in order to prevent Israel from going through a fifth round of elections in just over two years.

It is widely believed that as part of the deal, Bennett will serve first as prime minister, followed by Lapid.

Now Lapid needs to formally sign coalition agreements with the various parties before presenting his new government to Israeli President Reuven Rivlin. Then the Knesset needs to vote and approve the new government before it can be formally sworn in.

## Massive sinkhole threatens house in central Mexico



(News Agencies)-A huge threatening to swallow a nearby sinkhole some 60 meters in diameter has appeared in farmers' fields in central Mexico, María Zacatepec, Puebla state,

and is around 20 meters deep, said state governor Miguel Barbosa Huerta at a press conference Monday. Barbosa said the family that lives close to the sinkhole has been evacuated. No one has been injured so far, but the governor warned local residents to stay away from the area. The sinkhole measured five meters in diameter when it first appeared then grew quickly in just a few hours, according to Beatriz Manrique, environmental secretary for the Mexico region. "We think that it might be a

combination of two factors: the softening of the field, the whole area was being cultivated, as well as the extraction of groundwater, which softens the subsoil," said Manrique. Officials from public bodies including the national water commission will now carry out an investigation into what happened. This process includes soil studies, and could take up to 30 days.

The sinkhole first appeared on Saturday and is filled with water that is constantly moving around, reports CNN affiliate Televisa.

Sinkholes occur when ground can no longer support the land surface above it, according to the United States Geological Survey (USGS).

This can happen for a number of reasons, including the erosion of rock beneath the land surface as groundwater passes through it, leaving a void which the surface collapses into. In January 2021, a huge sinkhole swallowed several cars and forced the evacuation of a Covid-19 ward after opening up in the parking lot of a hospital in southern Italy.



# US meatpacking plants get back on stream after crippling cyber-attack



Security Agency, Christopher Krebs, warned on Wednesday morning that "everyone is in play" and vulnerable to the kind of international criminal hacking gangs causing havoc with attacks on US local government systems, a major US gas pipeline and now a giant meat processor that supplies millions of American consumers.

"I think the takeaway is that if you are a corporate executive or a local government head and you thought that you would be spared, guess what? They went after your gas, they went after your hotdogs, no one is out of bounds here. Everyone is in play in every single corporation," Krebs told NBC's Today show.

He advised US corporate executives and local and state leaders "to convene their cybersecurity teams today" to figure out how they will respond and recover if targeted in a ransomware attack, where internet criminal gangs shut down an entity's cyber system until a financial penalty is paid. It is unclear how often and how much money is handed over in ransom. Behind the attack could be REvil,

media reports suggest, a flourishing, aggressive group of primarily Russian native speakers based in a former Soviet state and enjoys protection by Russian intelligence or the Russian government, according to CNBC. JBS said in a statement: "On Sunday, May 30, JBS USA determined that it was the target of an organised cybersecurity attack, affecting some of the servers supporting its North American and Australian IT systems. The company took immediate action, suspending all affected systems, notifying authorities and activating the company's global network of IT professionals and third-party experts to resolve the situation. "The company's backup servers were not affected, and it is actively working with an incident response firm to restore its systems as soon as possible."The company is not aware of any evidence at this time that any customer, supplier or employee data has been compromised or misused as a result of the situation. Resolution of the incident will take time, which may delay certain transactions with customers and

suppliers."In the beef plants most severely affected, the outage had an immediate impact on operations. Without digital record-keeping, JBS has been unable to process carcasses slaughtered on Friday, and has been attempting to move to pen-and-paper documentation while the meat remains in the chiller. According to the industry site Beef Central, many of the "stranded" carcasses are from valuable Wagyu cows destined for restaurant tables, but even the three-day shutdown will have an impact on consumer supplies in the US. There has been little effect on the price in wholesale markets, however, where a kilo of beef is up only 1% since Friday. The JBS attack is the second major ransomware attack to disrupt US supply chains in as many months. In May, an attack on the Colonial Pipeline disrupted oil supplies up the US east coast. That same month, an attack on the Irish healthcare system caused "catastrophic" damage, until the hackers dropped their demand for payment and decrypted computers free of charge.

Meat-processing factories in the US run by the world's largest company in that field are coming back on stream on Wednesday after a ransomware attack - as experts warned all corporate and local government leaders to be on the alert.

A cyber-attack on the meat processor JBS had forced it to halt all US operations while it scrambled to restore functionality. The attack, like other recent hacks, is believed to have originated in Russia.

JBS, which supplies more than a fifth of all beef in America, said all of its US beef plants were pushed offline on Sunday. The ransomware attack on the

Brazilian-headquartered company's networks also disrupted other operations across the US, as well as the company's businesses in other countries, including Australia, but less severely.

The White House spokeswoman Karine Jean-Pierre said on Tuesday the attackers were most likely a criminal organisation based in Russia. "The White House is engaging directly with the Russian government on this matter and delivering the message that responsible states do not harbour ransomware criminals," she added. And the former director of the US Cybersecurity and Infrastructure

## 'Waiting to happen': the California region where masks are taboo - and cases are rising

Rural northern California is seeing a troubling rise in Covid-19 cases and hospitalizations, an alarming trend that comes as residents and businesses continue to protest against safety measures and vaccinations - with one Mendocino cafe threatening to charge customers \$5 for wearing a mask. While the region makes up a small proportion of the state's population, the growth in its caseload has been considerable, and comes at a time when the state overall is enjoying some of the lowest rates of Covid in the country. After largely avoiding the worst of the pandemic, a block of far northern California counties now leads the state with nearly 40 cases per 100,000 residents over the past week, according to statistics maintained by the Los Angeles Times. Tehama county ranked the highest in the LA Times case ratings with 139 cases per 100,000 residents. Meanwhile 10 of the 21 total Covid deaths in nearby Siskiyou county have occurred since the beginning of May. The region has long been one of the most forceful in its pushback against measures such as masks, business restrictions and vaccine mandates - and the protests have only continued to gain steam. A cafe in the town of Mendocino made headlines after announcing it will charge customers a \$5 fee if they order while wearing a mask. It also threatened to charge \$5 to anyone "caught bragging about your vaccine". "It's about time the proponents of these ineffective government measures start paying for the collateral damage they have collectively caused," the cafe owner

Chris Castleman told NBC News. He also offered a 50% discount to customers who threw their masks in the trash. George Rutherford, a professor of epidemiology at the University of California, San Francisco, said the current situation feels inevitable. "I was waiting for this to happen," he said, adding that the outbreaks mirror



trends occurring in southern and eastern Oregon, just north of California's border. "It shows you where vaccination is lagging and transmission is taking place." Kerri Schuette, the program manager of Shasta county's public health department, said her county had seen jumps in cases and hospitalizations since mid-May, but new cases have come down a bit since last week. "We are hopeful that this last jump won't lead to more deaths," she said. "But our hospitalizations have increased, so that is concerning." About 43% of Californians statewide have been vaccinated, but

residents in the north have been slower to adopt. In Tehama, Del Norte and Lassen counties, vaccination rates are among the worst in the state with only about a quarter of the population having received their full doses, according to data provided by the New York Times. "We are working to address vaccine hesitancy," said Schuette of Shasta's 30% vaccination rate. At the same time, she said residents were rapidly abandoning the precautions urged by health officials. "Our adherence to masking and social distancing measures has dramatically dropped," she said. "And it was never great to begin with." The region has been a hotbed of protest against the closures and restrictions implemented by the state's governor, Gavin Newsom, which were some of the earliest and most stringent in the US. The backlash has had political consequences - currently three supervisors in Shasta county are being threatened with recalls for supporting Covid safety measures, and the county's meetings are regularly mobbed with protesters calling for an end to business restrictions and mask-wearing. California law still requires masks to be worn in all indoor spaces outside the home, including businesses. The state expects a change in rules will come with the governor's promised reopening of the state on 15 June. Rutherford noted that the population in these northern counties was too small to have a major effect on the state's numbers, but worried that transmission could stubbornly linger in these areas.



# Alaska: Biden to suspend Trump Arctic drilling leases

(News Agencies)-US President Joe Biden's administration will suspend oil and gas leases in Alaska's Arctic National Wildlife Refuge pending an environmental review.

The move reverses former President Donald Trump's decision to sell oil leases in the refuge to expand fossil fuel and mineral development.

The giant Alaskan wilderness is home to many important species, including polar bears, caribou and wolves.

Arctic tribal leaders have welcomed the move but Republicans are opposed.

"Why 2021 could be turning point for tackling climate change

"The wildlife at risk from

drilling plan in Arctic refuge

" Trump opens wilderness up for oil drilling

Covering some 19 million acres (78,000 sq km), the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR) is often described as America's last great wilderness.

How did we get here?

The push for exploration in the park has been the subject of a decades-long dispute. The oil-rich region is a critically important location for many species and is considered sacred by the indigenous Gwich'in people. One side argues that drilling for oil could bring in significant amounts of money and provide jobs for people in Alaska, while the other has raised concerns over environmental and climate

threats. Days before his presidential term ended in January, Mr Trump went ahead with the first sale of oil leases in the region's coastal plain as part of his push to develop more domestic fossil fuel production. But the sale received little interest from the oil and gas industry. Companies said they were focusing their spending on

renewable energy, amid a huge

slump in oil prices. Several large US banks said they would not fund exploration in the area.

In total, 11 tracts were auctioned off, covering just over 550,000 acres, according to the Washington Post newspaper. The sale raised less than \$15m (£11m) - far less than the government had hoped.

Most went to the Alaska Industrial Development and Export Authority, a state agency. While estimates suggest around 11 billion barrels of oil lie under the refuge, it has no roads or other infrastructure, making it a very expensive place to drill. During his campaign Mr Biden pledged to protect the habitat. Once in office, he directed the Interior



Department to review the leases. In a statement on Tuesday, the department said it had "identified defects in the underlying record of decision supporting the leases, including the lack of analysis of a reasonable range of alternatives", required under environmental law.

White House National Climate Advisor Gina McCarthy said Mr Biden "believes America's national treasures are cultural and economic cornerstones of our country". "He is grateful for the prompt action by the Department of the Interior to suspend all leasing pending a review of decisions made in the last administration's final days that could have changed the character of this special place forever," she added.

## South China Sea dispute: Malaysia accuses China of breaching airspace



(News Agencies)- Malaysia says it is to summon China's ambassador after 16 Chinese military aircraft flew over disputed waters off its eastern state of Sarawak.

Fighter jets were scrambled to

intercept the transport planes on Monday after detecting "suspicious" activity over the South China Sea.

Malaysia's foreign ministry described the manoeuvre as a "serious threat to national

sovereignty".

China, however, said its aircraft had abided by international law. Malaysia, the Philippines, Brunei, Taiwan and Vietnam all contest China's claim to almost all of the South China Sea. The row has rumbled on for decades but tensions have increased in recent years.

Beijing continues to claim an area known as the "nine-dash line" and has backed its claim with island-building and patrols, expanding its military presence while maintaining that its intentions are peaceful.

According to the Malaysian air force, the Chinese aircraft were "flying in tactical formation" at up to 27,000 ft (8.2km) and came

within 60 nautical miles (110km) of Sarawak, a Malaysian state on the island of Borneo. Attempts to contact them went unheeded, a statement said.

Malaysian fighter jets were then scrambled from the Labuan Air Base to carry out "visual identification".

Foreign Minister Hishammuddin Hussein said the planes had entered the country's "maritime zone" and that a complaint would be lodged with Beijing.

He said the Chinese ambassador was being summoned to explain the "breach of the Malaysian airspace and sovereignty".

"Malaysia's stand is clear - having friendly diplomatic relations with any countries does not mean that

we will compromise on our national security," he said in a statement.

A statement from the Chinese embassy in Kuala Lumpur played down the incident, saying Chinese military aircraft enjoyed "the freedom of overflight in the relevant airspace".

"During this training, the Chinese military aircraft strictly abided by the relevant international law and did not enter the territorial airspace of any other country," a spokesman said.

"China and Malaysia are friendly neighbours, and China is willing to continue bilateral friendly consultations with Malaysia to jointly maintain regional peace and stability."

## China's three-child policy is all about economics. Here's what you need to know

(News Agencies)China wants its citizens to produce more babies but the response from the public has been lukewarm. China has registered declining childbirth in recent years despite a sustained government campaign.

A reversal of the current birth trend is central to China's economic plans. With that in mind, the Chinese government has now announced a three-child policy permitting a couple to have three children.

Curiously, China has a different population policy in Xinjiang, the Chinese province with the highest concentration of Muslims. Reports say Xinjiang has recorded a sharp decline in the

fertility rate since 2017, when China imposed strict birth control measures in the province.

China introduced a one-child policy in 1979. Back then, China's huge population was considered to be the biggest impediment for the country's economic growth. The policy was fiercely enforced, and violators were fined, ousted from jobs, and forced to undergo abortions and sterilisation.

The population control strategy worked well for China as it used the existing workforce to build and run factories. Over the next 20 years, China turned into a global manufacturing hub. Cheaper labour became China's

core economic strength. THE FLAW

However, by 2000, China realised that it was heading towards a situation where its workforce (read: young, able-bodied people) would reduce considerably while the population of senior citizens would become unviable.

Currently, with 26.4 crore above the age of 60, China has nearly 19 per cent elderly in its 1.41 billion-population. It estimates that by 2025, one in every five persons in China will be above 60 years.

While the fertility rate in China declined sharply after it imposed its one-child policy, improvement in healthcare facilities saw life-



expectancy increase from under-68 in 1979-80 to near-78 in 2020. This means China is bound to have more people requiring social-economic care.

But there is a problem. Its fertility rate stands at 1.3 - much below the replacement level of 2.1.

Acknowledging this problem, China in 2000 relaxed its one-child policy.

THE CHANGE

In 2000, China allowed a couple to have a second child, if both were the only children of their respective parents.





## *Buckingham Palace banned ethnic minorities from office roles, papers reveal*

### Exemptions from the law

In the 1960s government ministers sought to introduce laws that would make it illegal to refuse to employ an individual on the grounds of their race or ethnicity.

The Queen has remained personally exempted from those equality laws for more than four decades. The exemption has made it impossible for women or people from ethnic minorities working for her household to complain to the courts if they believe they have been discriminated against.

In a statement, Buckingham Palace did not dispute that the Queen had been exempted from the laws, adding that it had a separate process for hearing complaints related to discrimination. The palace did not respond when asked what this process consists of.

The exemption from the law was brought into force in the 1970s, when politicians implemented a series of racial and sexual equality laws to eradicate discrimination.

The official documents reveal how government officials in the 1970s coordinated with Elizabeth Windsor's advisers on the wording of the laws.

The documents are likely to refocus attention on the royal family's historical and current relationship with race.

Much of the family's history is inextricably linked with the British empire, which subjugated people around the world. Some members of the royal family have also been criticised for their racist

comments.

In March the Duchess of Sussex, the family's first mixed-race member, said she had had suicidal thoughts during her time in the royal family, and alleged that a member of the family had expressed concern about her child's skin colour.

The allegation compelled her brother-in-law, Prince William, to declare that the royal family was "very much not" racist.

Queen's consent

Some of the documents uncovered by the Guardian relate to the use of Queen's consent, an obscure parliamentary mechanism through which the monarch grants parliament permission to debate laws that affect her and her private interests. Buckingham Palace says the process is a mere formality, despite compelling evidence that the Queen has repeatedly used the power to secretly lobby ministers to amend legislation she does not like.

The newly discovered documents reveal how the Queen's consent procedure was used to secretly influence the formation of the draft race relations legislation.

In 1968, the then home secretary, James Callaghan, and civil servants at the Home Office appear to have believed that they should not request Queen's consent for parliament to debate the race relations bill until her advisers were satisfied it could not be enforced against her in the courts.

At the time, Callaghan wanted to expand the UK's racial discrimination laws, which only

prohibited discrimination in public places, so that they also prevented racism in employment or services such as housing.

A key proposal of the bill was the Race Relations Board, which would act as an ombudsman for discrimination complaints and could bring court proceedings against individuals or companies that maintained racist practices. 'Not the practice to appoint coloured immigrants'

In February 1968, a Home Office civil servant, TG Weiler, summarised the progress of discussions with Lord Tryon, the keeper of the privy purse, who was responsible for managing the Queen's finances, and other courtiers.

Tryon, he wrote, had informed them Buckingham Palace was prepared to comply with the proposed law, but only if it enjoyed similar exemptions to those provided to the diplomatic service, which could reject job applicants who had been resident in the UK for less than five years.

According to Weiler, Tryon considered staff in the Queen's household to fall into one of three types of roles: "(a) senior posts, which were not filled by advertising or by any overt system of appointment and which would presumably be accepted as outside the scope of the bill; (b) clerical and other office posts, to which it was not, in fact, the practice to appoint coloured immigrants or foreigners; and (c) ordinary domestic posts for which coloured applicants were freely considered, but which would in any event be covered by the

proposed general exemption for domestic employment."

"They were particularly concerned," Weiler wrote, "that if the proposed legislation applied to the Queen's household it would for the first time make it legally possible to criticise the household. Many people do so already, but this has to be accepted and is on a different footing from a statutory provision."

By March, Buckingham Palace was satisfied with the proposed law. A Home Office official noted that the courtiers "agreed that the way was now open for the secretary of state to seek the Queen's consent to place her interest at the disposal of parliament for the purpose of the bill."

The phrasing of the documents is highly significant, because it suggests that Callaghan and the Home Office officials believed it might not be possible to obtain the Queen's consent for parliament to debate the racial equality law unless the monarch was assured of her exemption. As a result of this exemption, the Race Relations Board that was given the task of investigating racial discrimination would send any complaints from the Queen's staff to the home secretary rather than the courts.

In the 1970s, the government brought in three laws to counter racial and sexual discrimination in the workplace. Complainants in general were empowered to take their cases directly to the courts.

But staff in the royal household

were specifically prevented from doing so, although the wording of the ban was sufficiently vague that the public might not have realised the monarch's staff had been exempted. A civil servant noted that the exemption in the 1975 Sex Discrimination Act had been "acceptable to the palace, largely because it did not explicitly single out persons employed by Her Majesty in her personal capacity for special exception" while still removing them from its scope. The exemption was extended to the present day when in 2010 the Equality Act replaced the 1976 Race Relations Act, the 1975 Sex Discrimination Act and the 1970 Equal Pay Act. For many years, critics have regularly pointed out that the royal household employed few black, Asian or minority-ethnic people. In 1990 the journalist Andrew Morton reported in the Sunday Times that "a black face has never graced the executive echelons of royal service - the household and officials" and "even among clerical and domestic staff, there is only a handful of recruits from ethnic minorities". The following year, the royal researcher Philip Hall published a book, Royal Fortune, in which he cited a source close to the Queen confirming that there were no non-white courtiers in the palace's most senior ranks. In 1997 the Palace admitted to the Independent that it was not carrying out an officially recommended policy of monitoring staff numbers to ensure equal opportunities.



# Microwave weapons that could cause Havana Syndrome exist, experts say

There is no evidence that the research was taken beyond the prototype phase, and a report on that stage has been removed from a US navy website. Scientists with knowledge of the project said that ethical considerations preventing human experimentation contributed to the project being shelved - but they

said such consideration had not hindered US adversaries, including Russia, and possibly China.

"The state of that science has for the most part been, if not abandoned, pretty much left fallow in the United States - but it has not been fallow elsewhere," said James Giordano, professor of neurology and ethics at Georgetown University Medical Center.

Giordano, who is also senior fellow in biotechnology, biosecurity and ethics at the US Naval War College, was brought in as adviser by the government in late 2016 after about two dozen US diplomats began falling sick in Havana. He later took part in an assessment for US Special Forces Command on which countries were developing the technology and what they had achieved.

It became clear that some of the work that was conducted in the former Soviet Union was taken up again by Russia and its satellite proxies," Giordano said, adding that China had also developed directed energy devices to test the structure of various materials, with technology which could be adapted to weapons. A second major wave of brain injuries among US diplomats and intelligence officers took place in China in 2018.

Giordano is restricted from giving details on which country had developed what kind of device but he said the new weapons used microwave frequencies, able to disrupt brain function without any burning sensation.

"This was important - and rather frightening - to us, because it represented a state of advancement and sophistication of these types of instruments that heretofore had not been thought to be accomplished," he said.

If a US adversary has

succeeded in miniaturising the directed energy technology needed to inflict tissue damage from a distance, it makes such weapons a more plausible explanation for Havana Syndrome.

More than 130 US officials, from the state department, CIA and national security council (NSC), have suffered from symptoms, including dizziness, loss of balance, nausea and headaches, first identified in Cuba. The impact on some of the victims has been debilitating and long-lasting.

Some of the most recent incidents have involved NSC officials experiencing crippling symptoms in broad daylight in Washington. The state department, CIA and Pentagon have all launched investigations, but have yet to come to conclusions. A National Academy of Sciences report in December, found that the Havana Syndrome injuries were most likely caused by "directed pulsed radio frequency energy". Sceptics of the microwave weapon theory have pointed to decades of US efforts to build such a device during the cold war and since, without any confirmed success. They have also argued that a weapon capable of inflicting brain injury from a distance would be too unwieldy to use in urban areas. However, James Lin, the leading US authority on the biological impact of microwave energy, said a large apparatus would not be needed to focus energy on a small area, heating it a minute amount and causing "a thermoelastic pressure wave" that travels through the brain, causing damage to soft tissue. The pressure wave would initially be experienced by the target as sound. Many of the US diplomats, spies, soldiers and officials whose symptoms are being studied as part of the



Havana Syndrome investigation reported hearing strange sounds at the onset of the attacks.

"You can certainly put together a system in a couple of big suitcases that will allow you to put it in a van or an SUV," Lin, professor emeritus in the electrical and computer engineering department at the University of Illinois, said. "It's not something that you need to have enormous amounts of space or equipment to do it."

The microwave weapon project for the US Marine Corps, first reported in Wired, was first developed by a company called WaveBand

Corporation. Codenamed Medusa - a contrived acronym for Mob Excess Deterrent Using Silent Audio - the weapon used the same technology as that suggested by Professor Lin, the "microwave audio effect", which created rapid microwave pulses that slightly heated soft tissue in the brain, causing a shockwave inside the skull. WaveBand was given \$100,000 for the prototype, which according to the specifications of the contract would "be portable, require low power, have a controllable radius of coverage, be able to switch from crowd to individual coverage, cause a temporarily incapacitating effect, have a low probability of fatality or permanent injury, cause no damage to property, and have a low probability of affecting friendly personnel".

A navy document in 2004 (which has since been removed from the Navy Small Business Innovation Research site) said the hardware had been designed and built. "Power measurements were taken and the required pulse parameters confirmed," it said. The document added: "Experimental evidence of MAE

[microwave auditory effect] was observed."

WaveBand's former president and CEO, Lev Sadovnik, said he was limited in what he was allowed to say about the project, but said the immediate effects of MAE were disorientation and the impression of hearing sounds.

Sadovnik said that a device capable of causing Havana Syndrome symptoms could be relatively portable.

"It's quite conceivable that you can hide it in a car, or in a van but it would not work over a long distance," he said. "You can do it through a wall, say, if you are in the next room in a hotel."

Sadovnik said the Medusa prototype was not powerful enough to cause lasting harm, nor would that be allowed. But he said Russia was more advanced in understanding the human impact of microwave weapons - partly because it did not face the same ethical constraints.

"We have here very strict limitations, of course, on human tests and animal testing," he said. "The Russians do not adhere to these standards."

Giordano said that different political and ethical norms in Russia and China, create "unique opportunities to advance bioscientific and technological development in ways that would be untenable in the United States and programs of our Nato allies".

Although many US officials and victims believe that Russia is

behind the attacks, there is so far no compelling evidence that Moscow is responsible. In some cases, Russian military intelligence (GRU) vehicles are reported to have been close to the scene of an apparent attack. But it would not be unusual for the GRU to tail US officials.

The Russians certainly had a long history of using microwave technology against US diplomatic missions. The embassy in Moscow was found to be bathed in microwave radiation in the 1960s and early 1970s, though the intention behind it was never clear. That episode erupted into a scandal when it emerged the US government had withheld the fact from its own diplomats.

At the same time, the US was spending huge amounts trying to develop its own directed energy weapons, both laser- and microwave-based. Mark Zaid, a lawyer representing some of the Havana Syndrome victims, has a CIA briefing slide appearing to date from the 1960s or 1970s which shows a building being hit by microwaves from a nextdoor structure. Zaid said the slide was among the personal effects left by a deceased agency officer. "The military loves death rays. Everybody loves death rays - and lasers had some of the characteristics of death rays so people kind of got excited about that," recalled Cheryl Rofer, who worked on laser and auditory weapon research in the 1970s at Los Alamos National Laboratory in New Mexico.

## Attention moves to other top fugitives after Mehul Choksi's arrest

India has won all the court cases for the extradition of Vijay Mallya, while living in the UK. But an official consent from the UK government is still anticipated.

In connection with a banking fraud to the tune of INR 15,600 crore, businessman, Nitin Sandesara, his wife and brother-in-law, all are wanted in India. Involved in a scam, on Sterling Biotech Group, a firm promoted by Sandesaras, they fled India to Nigeria in 2017. In February 2021, they filed an affidavit in the Supreme Court appealing Nigeria and Albania rejected the extradition request by India in 2019. In 2020, they were declared fugitives in India. Jatin Mehta, a diamond

businessman is wanted for a bank fraud case. Fled India in 2013 to the Caribbean island St Kitts with family, he shuffled between St Kitts and the UK. However, reported in 2020 that he has settled and floated new firms in Southeast European country, Montenegro.

Sanjay Bhandari, who fled India in 2016 is yet another prominent fugitive, wanted in India in a money laundering cases. Based in the UK, he had resisted extradition to India in a London court. He had activated a political noise in India over his suspected links to Congress leader Priyanka Gandhi Vadra's husband Robert Vadra, who had denied any business connections with the suspects.





## Second Covid Wave Has Wreaked Havoc On The Livelihoods Of The Rural Poor

with demand being subdued, livelihoods will continue to suffer. However, it is noteworthy that the situation was already dire. While many might seem to have bounced back after the first wave, a large number didn't (of the 100 million jobs lost in April - May 2020, 15 million remained out of work) and even those that did, had 17 per cent lower income (per capita incomes of Rs 4,979 per month instead of Rs 5,989). Given this precarious situation, our interaction with NGOs indicates that the sentiments have changed this time - families don't even have the resources for rent - and many are heading back to rural India, once again. Further, since non-agricultural work is likely to decrease even more and demand for jobs is increasing, wage rates may fall, and the rural poor simply won't have enough to sustain their families. There are three aspects to consider when thinking about supporting the rural poor. Basic sustenance that will allow them to manage in the immediate term; near-term livelihood support to ensure continuation of their livelihoods and long-term improvement that will lead to sustainable income levels in the future. On the basic sustenance front, the government needs to significantly increase PDS allocation, boost the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) and cash transfers schemes. Cash transfer tools like Jan Dhan accounts might not reach all of those affected (420 million accounts of which 48 per cent are active), but they will definitely reach many of the poor and will also increase spending and boost demand. Once we get past basic sustenance, we must then turn the focus on helping those who have exhausted their savings to get back on their feet. For small and marginal farmers, this would mean money for seeds and fertilizers for the Kharif season followed by funds for pesticide and nutrition. A larger Pradhan Mantri Kisan SAMman Nidhi (PM-KISAN) with a greater amount front loaded would be a solution. The reason these families are sinking further into poverty is because the earnings from their livelihoods has not been enough. We must leverage near and medium-term support to build long term sustainability. For agriculture, market linkages present a key opportunity. Even a 10 per cent increase in prices is a 30 plus per cent increase in income. Further, a number of private sector companies are starting to reach small farmers, and they must be encouraged. Innovative solutions by private companies that offer the farmer a chance to bypass traditional traders to get more value, should also be given support to succeed.

## The pandemic, a mirror for Indian society

By the end of December 2020, Covid had subsided, which lulled India into a false sense of security. But a raging second wave arrived in mid-March 2021, instantly bringing India to its knees. The critical medical facilities crumbled, and the citizens of the world's second-most populous country were left to their dreadful fate.

While several heart-wrenching visuals from cities (such as Delhi) grabbed the media's attention and provoked wide indignation; the populace facing a lethal virus in rural India failed to get similar coverage and support.

Thousands of these "other" Indians met a tragic end. Their deaths neither became news, nor statistics. Families - too poor to afford the burgeoning costs of dignified cremation/burial - secretly immersed the corpses of their loved ones in the Ganga; or buried them in shallow sandy graves on the banks. One wonders how many dead in rural India are yet to be discovered - buried during the second wave in deep forests, hills, or on the rivers' banks.

In the past weeks, the new Covid cases in India have declined. But the virus is

fast gaining ground in rural India - over 60 per cent cases were recently reported from rural (35 per cent) and semi-rural (30 per cent) regions - where around 65 per cent of the country's population lives with inadequate healthcare facilities.

The rural areas are badly trailing urban India in immunisation. Given the current vaccine shortage and lack of a dependable healthcare system, one wonders how millions of rural people will come to terms with a disaster of such magnitude, which is further exacerbated by the rural-urban disparities.

India's 54.9 per cent of rural population falls in the two lowest quintiles of the wealth index, while 74.4 per cent of the urban population falls in the two highest quintiles. The states/Union territories also have glaring wealth disparities - Delhi has 62.8 per cent of its population in the highest wealth quintile (second highest in India), whereas states such as Bihar (51.2 per cent) and Jharkhand (46.1 per cent) have the highest percentages of the population in the lowest quintile.

Such regional and wealth disparities have put an excessive burden of the pandemic

on the vulnerable, especially those inhabiting rural areas and the poorest states. Covid particularly threatens India's 705 Adivasi communities (75 particularly vulnerable groups) - the poorest and the most marginalised section - that suffers from "extremely poor physical health."

Around 90 per cent of Adivasis inhabit rural areas, and 40.6 per cent of their total population is below the poverty line, as against 20.5 per cent of the non-Adivasi. The majority of the Adivasis (70.7 per cent) fall in the two lowest wealth quintiles (45.2 per cent in the lowest), followed by Dalits (50.1 per cent).

The Adivasis have "very limited access to healthcare services". A recent report of the expert committee on tribal health reveals that they share a greater burden of sickness and mortality, and have poorer health indicators - lower life expectancy, 65 per cent of Adivasi women (age 15-49 years) suffer from anaemia, 25 per cent pregnant/lactating women and 29 per cent to 32 per cent children get inadequate protein and calories, 50 per cent malaria deaths in India occur among Adivasis, and around 75 per cent

of Adivasi adults suffer from hypertension. India's historical wealth inequality, which has increased alarmingly since the 1990s, has led to disparities in access to basic amenities and opportunities that undermine the well-being of marginalised millions.

Amid the raging pandemic, India is having its moment of reckoning. A democratic country that had "solemnly resolved" to constitute itself into a socialist republic, let its top 1 per cent of people corner 51.53 per cent of the national wealth; while the bottom 60 per cent were left with a bare minimum, 4.8 per cent.

The pandemic tells the truth about India loud and clear: While measures such as evidence-based policymaking and robust public healthcare system are crucial for the suppression of Covid (and other future epidemics), the country will achieve little success without resolving its age-old socio-economic inequalities that have given a fertile breeding ground to the coronavirus by leaving millions highly vulnerable.



# India Has To Be Bigger Than The Ego Of One Leader

(SAI Bureau)- Prime Minister Modi has completed seven years in office. Whether history will judge him harshly or kindly, only the future will tell. As of now, it seems he is facing the toughest challenge of his career. The last few months have robbed him of the aura that he carried. His government is busy in serious damage control, trying to salvage the image and prestige of the government. Now the entire Hindutva Family has been asked to pitch in. No wonder the second-in-command in RSS, Dattatreya Hosabale, is running from pillar to post, trying to infuse some confidence in the entire organisation which was found majorly wanting during the second wave of Corona. Over the years as Prime Minister, Modi has very assiduously built his image as that of an elder statesman who is a cut above the rest and wishes to make India great

again. He presented as that once-in-a-lifetime politician who does not hesitate to take tough decisions. Demonetisation and the abrogation of Article 370 have been showcased as proof of this even demonetisation ruined a flourishing economy and the decision on Kashmir has had major foreign policy repercussions. The Chinese transgression in Ladakh has also been linked with the abrogation of Article 370. But the government has not once acknowledged that both these decisions may not have been sound.

There was resentment over the Modi Government's enactment of Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and three new farm laws. Anti-CAA protesters and farmers hit the streets, but the government and the BJP welcomed them with tags of anti-nationals and traitors, and accused them of working at the

behest of foreign powers to tarnish the image of India and of Modi. Now, too, image management is the priority when Covid-19 has created mayhem in every family, every individual is scared to death, people are losing their loved ones due to a lack of oxygen, hospital beds and medicines, thousands of unknown dead bodies are floating in the Ganges. The burden of all this has been shifted to state governments; opposition leaders and parties are being blamed for the monumental mismanagement.

To define the government's behaviour as arrogant and narcissistic is too simplistic an argument. To err is human. But in crisis after crisis, to portray oneself as not having made a single misstep, suggesting invincibility and perfect judgement, despite evidence to the contrary, requires deeper psychoanalysis. Modi is not the

first Indian leader who is immensely popular with the masses. He is not the only one who has attained cult status among his followers. Jawaharlal Nehru and Indira Gandhi, especially after the 1971 war, were more popular than Modi. Rajiv Gandhi, V P Singh, Atal Bihari Vajpayee were hugely popular too. But none of these leaders projected themselves as infallible. They had the humility to accept others' feedback and suggestions; opposition leaders and critics were not treated like enemies.

In the context of his immense popularity and magnetic connect with the people, Nehru whose memory the present government wants to erase permanently, wrote an article under the pseudonym Chanakya, which was published in 1937. He wrote, "A little twist and Jawaharlal might turn into a dictator sweeping aside the

paraphernalia of a slow-moving democracy." He further wrote, "He (Nehru) must think that he is indispensable, and no man must be allowed to think so." The same Nehru, upon becoming Prime Minister, had in his cabinet his harshest critics and opponents like the Hindu Mahasabha's Shyama Prasad Mukherji and Babasaheb Ambedkar. Within the Congress party, he had major differences with Sardar Patel, Rajendra Prasad and many other stalwarts, but he always tried to build consensus. He wrote letters to Chief Ministers to convince them about his views.

Today, the same is unthinkable. In the last seven years, no cabinet member, or representative of the BJP, RSS and its affiliate organisations has had the courage to claim differences with the Prime Minister.

## Is JBS cyberattack a dry run?

and other infrastructure, water-treatment plants, small businesses, Washington D.C.'s Metropolitan Police Department and even hospitals. With easily accessible hacking tools and hard-to-trace financing amid the rise of cryptocurrency, cybercrime is soaring around the world, experts say. Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas said as much last month, adding that ransomware attacks cost victims a combined \$350 million last year. As hackers grow bolder in the scale of their attacks, could their attempts to disrupt, damage and steal be considered a "dry run" for a potentially more devastating future attack? FOX Business spoke with a number of experts Wednesday to find out. It's possible, according to some of them - but it could be too soon to say, and there's not enough evidence. That is an interesting mindset - slightly paranoiac," said Laura Hoffner, chief of staff at Concentric, a Washington-based security and risk management firm. "I think it would actually more so be cyber-actors are catching on to how lucrative this business is." A real dry run, if proven to be sponsored by a foreign government, would be an act of

war, she said. But hacking groups can hold a system hostage and demand payment in cryptocurrency, causing some chaos in the process but not necessarily wanting to cause widespread calamity. Still, Hoffner said cybercriminals were becoming increasingly willing to exploit soft targets. "It used to be, a Red Cross hospital, you don't attack that," she said. "But we saw in the last year the attacks on schools, attacks on hospitals, and now these large-impact attacks such as the pipeline, such as the meat industry - impacting the average citizen indirectly and directly."

Former Virginia Rep. Denver Riggleman, who also served in both military and private intelligence, said it's important to publicly demonstrate serious repercussions for hackers, regardless of whether they operate on behalf of a government, criminal entity or terror group. "It doesn't matter if you're shot on accident or shot on purpose, you're still getting shot," he said. "Whether they're building some type of cyberattack plan against us or whether it's criminal elements that are seeing how weak we are in our response,

it both adds up to the same thing: And that's that we have a weak cyberdefense national strategy." Last month, after the Colonial Pipeline attack left swaths of the Southeast short on gas, Riggleman called for disproportionate retaliation to ransomware attacks. "We need to pick the first country that f--- with us in a cyber way and bring them to their knees," he said two weeks ago. On May 12, President Biden signed an executive order outlining new cybersecurity goals. The hacks haven't stopped, and the former National Security Agency intelligence officer

renewed his call for a hawkish response. "Can you imagine if food, communications and power were taken out all at once in our country for four days?" Riggleman said. "It would be chaos. It would be an absolute zombie apocalypse out there." Hoffner, speaking in a separate interview, argued against a militarized response, arguing in favor of collaboration between the public and private sectors. "Similar to how you're dealing with COVID, whatever you do nationally, it's going to be adopted internationally," she said. "And this is an international problem. So there

needs to be a lot of collaboration with this." Even if it's not a dry-run attack in the eyes of the perpetrator, Riggleman said, the governments sheltering international hacking groups could be using them to garner similar information. "The issue is that you have Russian criminal, Russian cybercriminal gangs, executing these attacks," Riggleman said. "My guess is they're communicating with the Russian government, and they're building I would say... They're building some type of probably internal document or some type of concept of operations on how to get our critical infrastructure."

## The Fed will start winding down a program that saved the economy

corporate bonds is an important signal of confidence in the investment-grade corporate market that their presence is no longer needed at this time." The program "proved vital in restoring market functioning last year, supporting the availability of credit for large employers, and bolstering employment through the Covid-19 pandemic," the Fed said. The Fed currently holds \$13.7 billion worth of corporate

assets, including more than \$5 billion of corporate bonds and another \$8.5 billion worth of exchange-traded funds. That's a huge amount of money to unwind, so the Fed said it would sell off those assets over time to keep markets functioning properly and to reduce any resulting shock to the system. "Portfolio sales will be gradual and orderly, and will aim to minimize the potential for any adverse impact on market

functioning," the Fed said. The corporate assets are in addition to another \$7 trillion worth of government debt that the Fed said it will continue to purchase to keep the economic recovery humming. In an April press conference, Federal Reserve Chairman Jerome Powell said it wasn't time to even "start thinking about thinking about" tapering the purchases of Treasury bonds.



# If the Wuhan lab-leak hypothesis is true, expect a political earthquake



*There was a time when the Covid pandemic seemed to confirm so many of our assumptions. It cast down the people we regarded as villains. It raised up those we thought were heroes. It prospered people who could shift easily to working from home even as it problematized the lives of those Trump voters living in the old economy.*

Like all plagues, Covid often felt like the hand of God on earth, scourging the people for their sins against higher learning and visibly sorting the righteous from the unmasked wicked. "Respect science," admonished our yard signs. And lo!, Covid came and forced us to do so, elevating our scientists to the highest seats of social authority, from where they banned assembly, commerce, and all the rest.

We cast blame so innocently in those days. We scolded at will. We knew who was right and we shook our heads to behold those in the wrong playing in their swimming pools and on the beach. It made perfect sense to us that Donald Trump, a politician we despised, could not grasp the situation, that he suggested people inject bleach, and that he was personally responsible for more than one super-spreading event. Reality itself punished leaders like him who refused to bow to expertise. The prestige news media even figured out a way to blame the worst death tolls on a system of organized ignorance they called "populism."

But these days the consensus doesn't consense quite as well as it used to. Now the media is filled with disturbing stories suggesting that Covid might have come - not from "populism" at all, but from a laboratory screw-up in Wuhan, China. You can feel the moral convulsions beginning as the question sets in: What if science itself is in some way culpable for all this? I am no expert on epidemics. Like everyone else I know, I spent the pandemic doing as I was told. A few months ago I even tried to talk a Fox News viewer out of believing in the lab-leak theory of Covid's origins. The reason I did that is because the newspapers I read and the TV shows I watched had assured me on many occasions that the lab-leak theory wasn't true, that it was a racist conspiracy theory, that only deluded Trumpists believed it, that it got infinite pants-on-fire ratings from the fact-checkers, and because (despite all my cynicism) I am the sort who has always trusted the mainstream news media.

My own complacency on the matter was dynamited by the

lab-leak essay that ran in the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists earlier this month; a few weeks later everyone from Doctor Fauci to President Biden is acknowledging that the lab-accident hypothesis might have some merit. We don't know the real answer yet, and we probably will never know, but this is the moment to anticipate what such a finding might ultimately mean. What if this crazy story turns out to be true?

The answer is that this is the kind of thing that could obliterate the faith of millions. The last global disaster, the financial crisis of 2008, smashed people's trust in the institutions of capitalism, in the myths of free trade and the New Economy, and eventually in the elites who ran both American political parties.

In the years since (and for complicated reasons), liberal leaders have labored to remake themselves into defenders of professional rectitude and established legitimacy in nearly every field. In reaction to the fool Trump, liberalism made a sort of cult out of science,

expertise, the university system, executive-branch "norms," the "intelligence community," the State Department, NGOs, the legacy news media, and the hierarchy of credentialed achievement in general.

Now here we are in the waning days of Disastrous Global Crisis #2. Covid is of course worse by many orders of magnitude than the mortgage meltdown - it has killed millions and ruined lives and disrupted the world economy far more extensively. Should it turn out that scientists and experts and NGOs, etc. are villains rather than heroes of this story, we may very well see the expert-worshipping values of modern liberalism go up in a fireball of public anger.

Consider the details of the story as we have learned them in the last few weeks:

Lab leaks happen. They aren't the result of conspiracies: "a lab accident is an accident," as Nathan Robinson points out; they happen all the time, in this country and in others, and people die from them.

There is evidence that the lab

in question, which studies bat coronaviruses, may have been conducting what is called "gain of function" research, a dangerous innovation in which diseases are deliberately made more virulent. By the way, right-wingers didn't dream up "gain of function": all the cool virologists have been doing it (in this country and in others) even as the squares have been warning against it for years.

There are strong hints that some of the bat-virus research at the Wuhan lab was funded in part by the American national-medical establishment - which is to say, the lab-leak hypothesis doesn't implicate China alone.

There seem to have been astonishing conflicts of interest among the people assigned to get to the bottom of it all, and (as we know from Enron and the housing bubble) conflicts of interest are always what trip up the well-credentialed professionals whom liberals insist we must all heed, honor, and obey.

The news media, in its zealous policing of the boundaries of the permissible, insisted that



Russagate was ever so true but that the lab-leak hypothesis was false false false, and woe unto anyone who dared disagree. Reporters gulped down whatever line was most flattering to the experts they were quoting and then insisted that it was 100% right and absolutely incontrovertible - that anything else was only unhinged Trumpist folly, that democracy dies when unbelievers get to speak, and so on.

The social media monopolies actually censored posts about the lab-leak hypothesis. Of course they did! Because we're at war with misinformation, you know, and people need to be

brought back to the true and correct faith - as agreed upon by experts.

"Let us pray, now, for science," intoned a New York Times columnist back at the beginning of the Covid pandemic. The title of his article laid down the foundational faith of Trump-era liberalism: "Coronavirus is What You Get When You Ignore Science."

Ten months later, at the end of a scary article about the history of "gain of function" research and its possible role in the still ongoing Covid pandemic, Nicholson Baker wrote as follows: "This may be the great scientific meta-experiment of the

21st century. Could a world full of scientists do all kinds of reckless recombinant things with viral diseases for many years and successfully avoid a serious outbreak? The hypothesis was that, yes, it was doable. The risk was worth taking. There would be no pandemic."

Except there was. If it does indeed turn out that the lab-leak hypothesis is the right explanation for how it began - that the common people of the world have been forced into a real-life lab experiment, at tremendous cost - there is a moral earthquake on the way.

Because if the hypothesis is

right, it will soon start to dawn on people that our mistake was not insufficient reverence for scientists, or inadequate respect for expertise, or not enough censorship on Facebook. It was a failure to think critically about all of the above, to understand that there is no such thing as absolute expertise. Think of all the disasters of recent years: economic neoliberalism, destructive trade policies, the Iraq War, the housing bubble, banks that are "too big to fail," mortgage-backed securities, the Hillary Clinton campaign of 2016 - all of these disasters brought to you by the total, self-assured unanimity of the highly educated

people who are supposed to know what they're doing, plus the total complacency of the highly educated people who are supposed to be supervising them.

Then again, maybe I am wrong to roll out all this speculation. Maybe the lab-leak hypothesis will be convincingly disproven. I certainly hope it is.

But even if it inches closer to being confirmed, we can guess what the next turn of the narrative will be. It was a "perfect storm," the experts will say. Who coulda known? And besides (they will say), the origins of the pandemic don't matter any more. Go back to sleep.

## The best way to get to the bottom of the Covid-19 lab leak theory

On Wednesday, President Joe Biden called for an inquiry by US intelligence agencies into the true origins of Covid-19. If this probe reveals new information, it could offer insight into the validity of the hotly-debated theory that SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes Covid-19, leaked from the Wuhan Institute of Virology in China. The scientific research facility was known to have been conducting research on coronaviruses. The "lab leak" explanation, which was panned and dismissed by a number of analysts, gained new life after the Wall Street Journal reported on a previously undisclosed US intelligence report revealing that three researchers from the Wuhan lab became so sick with Covid-19-like symptoms in November 2019 -- before official reports of the first outbreak -- that they had to seek hospital care.

The true origins of Covid-19 remain a mystery -- one complicated by the recent escalation of geopolitical tensions between the US and China. To be sure, Biden took an important step when he asked the US intelligence community to produce additional information, avenues of exploration and "specific questions for China" about the origins of Covid-19. But this, alone, is not enough if we want to uncover the truth.

The Biden administration should itself -- separate and apart from the World Health Organization -- lead a multilateral effort to investigate the origins of the virus. We should share our intelligence with other countries that are seeking answers, pool our



collective knowledge about the origins of the virus and, together, place pressure on China to allow for access to the facilities and data that would help answer the remaining questions about the origins of Covid-19.

The lab leak theory has been judged by at least one US intelligence agency as the more likely explanation for Covid-19's origins, while two agencies think the virus was more likely spread to humans from an infected animal. Biden noted that the existing intelligence assessments were of sufficiently low confidence that neither the lab leak theory nor the one that the virus emerged from natural causes could be ruled out. Earlier this month, eighteen scientists from major research universities around the world wrote a letter in a major scientific journal arguing that "hypotheses about both natural and laboratory spillovers"

had to be seriously assessed and investigated in a transparent and independent manner.

An investigation into the true origins of the virus is essential not only for scientific reasons, but also because policymakers around the world need this knowledge to better prepare themselves for future pandemics. The World Health Organization is a multilateral body designed to promote public health around the globe and would be a natural candidate to lead an investigation into the origins of the virus. But the WHO and its current director-general, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, have a history of being too closely tied to China. Ghebreyesus was supported by China's government when he sought leadership of the WHO and was quick to effusively praise Beijing's early actions on the coronavirus when still little was known about it, how broadly it

would spread and how deadly it would be. Third-party assessments of the WHO's performance at the start of the pandemic have faulted the group for being too willing to placate China and, by extension, not quick enough to sound the alarm on the pandemic and its global impact.

It should be no surprise, then, that the WHO's own investigation into the origins of Covid-19 concluded that a lab leak was probably not the cause of the pandemic and that infection from natural sources was more likely. But investigators were only permitted to examine research conducted by Chinese state scientists and did not have full access to the data or facilities that would have allowed them to assess whether the virus that causes Covid-19 may have been present before cases of the disease were first confirmed in China in December 2019.

American leaders have expressed their own doubts about both the transparency and independence of the investigation, intimating that China stood in the way of a full accounting. National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan, for example, noted "deep concerns about the way in which the early findings of the COVID-19 investigation were communicated and questions about the process used to reach them."

Beijing, for its part, considers the case closed and has argued that the attention should be turned to other countries for the role they may have played in the early days of the pandemic. In fact, China's government has vigorously

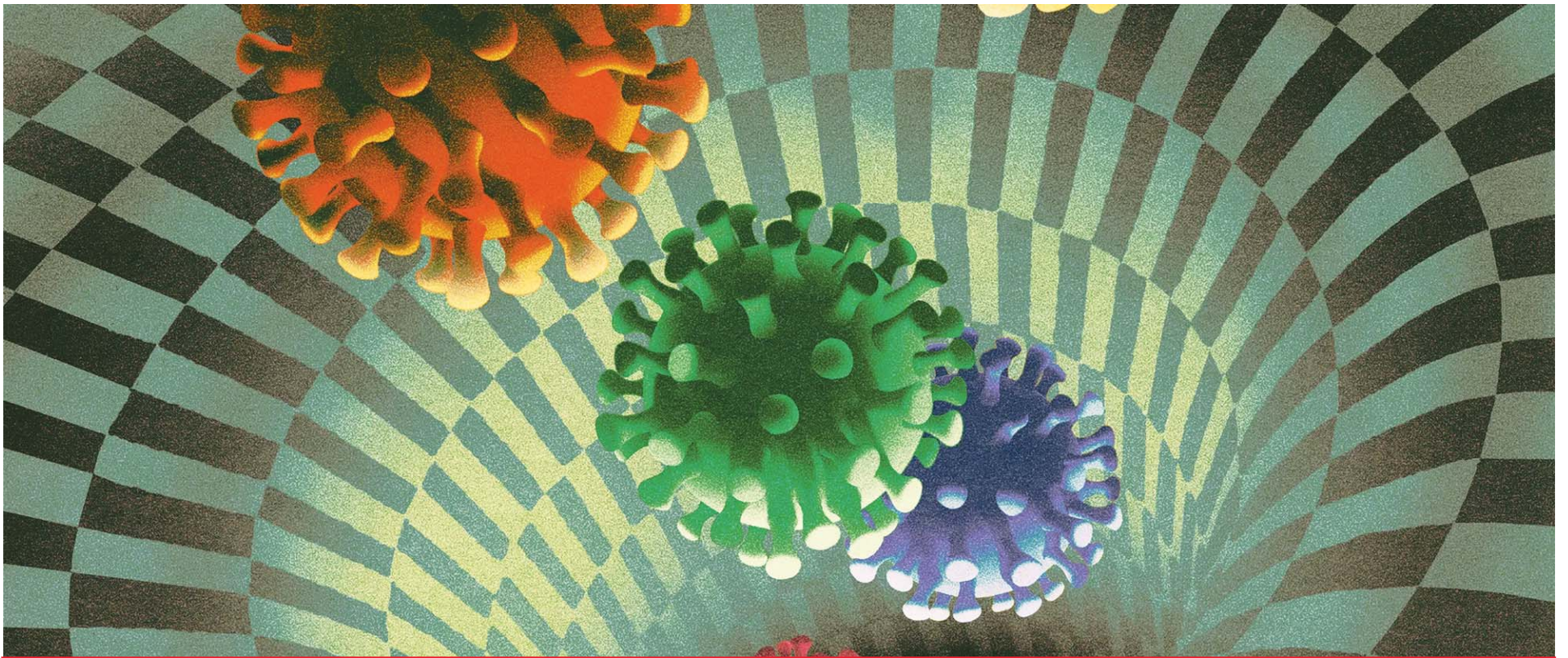
denied the lab leak theory, calling it "a conspiracy created by US intelligence agencies."

In late March, the US joined with 13 other countries in calling on the WHO to conduct a "transparent and independent analysis and evaluation" of the pandemic, "free from interference and undue influence." More specifically, the Biden administration is calling on the WHO to complete a second phase of its investigation in a way that allows "international experts the independence to fully assess the source of the virus and the early days of the outbreak."

Unfortunately, the Biden administration remains far too deferential to the WHO and places too much faith in the organization's ability to manage an investigation that will be any more thorough or, more importantly, independent of the influence of China's government. While China may continue to stonewall an outside investigation, a US-led multilateral investigation can nonetheless get closer to the answers we seek about what happened during the early days of the pandemic. Perhaps most importantly, this effort can directly address the lab leak theory -- something that Beijing has little interest in even exploring.

Biden has been eager to redouble our engagement and work together with America's friends and allies around the world. Getting to the root cause of a pandemic that has already killed nearly 3.5 million people globally presents a golden opportunity to do just that.





# The Lab-Leak Theory: Inside the Fight to Uncover COVID-19's Origins

Throughout 2020, the notion that the novel coronavirus leaked from a lab was off-limits. Those who dared to push for transparency say toxic politics and hidden agendas kept us in the dark.

## I. A Group Called DRASTIC

Gilles Demaneuf is a data scientist with the Bank of New Zealand in Auckland. He was diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome ten years ago, and believes it gives him a professional advantage. "I'm very good at finding patterns in data, when other people see nothing," he says.

Early last spring, as cities worldwide were shutting down to halt the spread of COVID-19, Demaneuf, 52, began reading up on the origins of SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes the disease. The prevailing theory was that it had jumped from bats to some other species before making the leap to humans at a market in China, where some of the earliest cases appeared in late 2019. The Huanan wholesale market, in the city of Wuhan, is a complex of markets selling seafood, meat, fruit, and vegetables. A handful of vendors sold live wild animals—a possible source of the virus.

That wasn't the only theory, though. Wuhan is also home to China's foremost coronavirus research laboratory, housing one of the world's largest collections of bat samples and bat-virus

strains. The Wuhan Institute of Virology's lead coronavirus researcher, Shi Zhengli, was among the first to identify horseshoe bats as the natural reservoirs for SARS-CoV, the virus that sparked an outbreak in 2002, killing 774 people and sickening more than 8,000 globally. After SARS, bats became a major subject of study for virologists around the world, and Shi became known in China as "Bat Woman" for her fearless exploration of their caves to collect samples. More recently, Shi and her colleagues at the WIV have performed high-profile experiments that made pathogens more infectious. Such research, known as "gain-of-function," has generated heated controversy among virologists. To some people, it seemed natural to ask whether the virus causing the global pandemic had somehow leaked from one of the WIV's labs—a possibility Shi has strenuously denied.

On February 19, 2020, *The Lancet*, among the most respected and influential medical journals in the world, published a statement that roundly rejected the lab-leak hypothesis, effectively casting it as a xenophobic cousin to climate change denialism and anti-vaxxism. Signed by 27 scientists, the statement expressed "solidarity with all scientists and health professionals in China" and

asserted: "We stand together to strongly condemn conspiracy theories suggesting that COVID-19 does not have a natural origin." The *Lancet* statement effectively ended the debate over COVID-19's origins before it began. To Gilles Demaneuf, following along from the sidelines, it was as if it had been "nailed to the church doors," establishing the natural origin theory as orthodoxy. "Everyone had to follow it. Everyone was intimidated. That set the tone."

The statement struck Demaneuf as "totally nonscientific." To him, it seemed to contain no evidence or information. And so he decided to begin his own inquiry in a "proper" way, with no idea of what he would find.

Demaneuf began searching for patterns in the available data, and it wasn't long before he spotted one. China's laboratories were said to be airtight, with safety practices equivalent to those in the U.S. and other developed countries. But Demaneuf soon discovered that there had been four incidents of SARS-related lab breaches since 2004, two occurring at a top laboratory in Beijing. Due to overcrowding there, a live SARS virus that had been improperly deactivated, had been moved to a refrigerator in a corridor. A graduate student then examined it in the electron microscope room and sparked an outbreak.

Demaneuf published his findings in a Medium post, titled "The Good, the Bad and the Ugly: a review of SARS Lab Escapes." By then, he had begun working with another armchair investigator, Rodolphe de Maistre. A laboratory project director based in Paris who had previously studied and worked in China, de Maistre was busy debunking the notion that the Wuhan Institute of Virology was a "laboratory" at all. In fact, the WIV housed numerous laboratories that worked on coronaviruses. Only one of them has the highest biosafety protocol: BSL-4, in which researchers must wear full-body pressurized suits with independent oxygen. Others are designated BSL-3 and even BSL-2, roughly as secure as an American dentist's office.

Having connected online, Demaneuf and de Maistre began assembling a comprehensive list of research laboratories in China. As they posted their findings on Twitter, they were soon joined by others around the world. Some were cutting-edge scientists at prestigious research institutes. Others were science enthusiasts. Together, they formed a group called DRASTIC, short for Decentralized Radical Autonomous Search Team Investigating COVID-19. Their stated objective was to solve the riddle of COVID-19's origin. With

disreputable wing nuts on one side of them and scornful experts on the other, the DRASTIC researchers often felt as if they were on their own in the wilderness, working on the world's most urgent mystery. They weren't alone. But investigators inside the U.S. government asking similar questions were operating in an environment that was as politicized and hostile to open inquiry as any Twitter echo chamber. When Trump himself floated the lab-leak hypothesis last April, his divisiveness and lack of credibility made things more, not less, challenging for those seeking the truth.

"The DRASTIC people are doing better research than the U.S. government," says David Asher, a former senior investigator under contract to the State Department. The question is: Why?

## II. "A Can of Worms"

Since December 1, 2019, the SARS-CoV-2 virus that causes COVID-19 has infected more than 170 million people around the world and killed more than 3.5 million. To this day, we don't know how or why this novel coronavirus suddenly appeared in the human population. Answering that question is more than an academic pursuit: Without knowing where it came from, we can't be sure we're taking the right steps to prevent a recurrence.

And yet, in the wake of the *Lancet*



as many of us think they should have been is a hugely important one."

### III. "Smelled Like a Cover-Up"

On December 9, 2020, roughly a dozen State Department employees from four different bureaus gathered in a conference room in Foggy Bottom to discuss an upcoming fact-finding mission to Wuhan organized in part by the World Health Organization. The group agreed on the need to press China to allow a thorough, credible, and transparent investigation, with unfettered access to markets, hospitals, and government laboratories. The conversation then turned to the more sensitive question: What should the U.S. government say publicly about the Wuhan Institute of Virology?

A small group within the State Department's Arms Control, Verification, and Compliance bureau had been studying the Institute for months. The group had recently acquired classified intelligence suggesting that three WIV researchers conducting gain-of-function experiments on coronavirus samples had fallen ill in the autumn of 2019, before the COVID-19 outbreak was known to have started.

As officials at the meeting discussed what they could share with the public, they were advised by Christopher Park, the director of the State Department's Biological Policy Staff in the Bureau of International Security and Nonproliferation, not to say anything that would point to the U.S. government's own role in gain-of-function research, according to documentation of the meeting obtained by Vanity Fair.

Only two other labs in the world, in Texas and North Carolina, were doing similar research. "It's not a dozen cities," Dr. Richard Ebright said. "It's three places."

Some of the attendees were "absolutely floored," said an official familiar with the proceedings. That someone in the U.S. government could "make an argument that is so nakedly against transparency, in light of the unfolding catastrophe, was...shocking and disturbing." Park, who in 2017 had been involved in lifting a U.S. government moratorium on funding for gain-of-function research, was not the only official to warn the State Department investigators against digging in sensitive places. As the group probed the lab-leak scenario, among other possibilities, its

members were repeatedly advised not to open a "Pandora's box," said four former State Department officials interviewed by Vanity Fair. The admonitions "smelled like a cover-up," said Thomas DiNanno, "and I wasn't going to be part of it."

Reached for comment, Chris Park told Vanity Fair, "I am skeptical that people genuinely felt they were being discouraged from presenting facts." He added that he was simply arguing that it "is making an enormous and unjustifiable leap...to suggest that research of that kind [meant]



that something untoward is going on." It was pure panic," said former deputy national security adviser Matthew Pottinger. "They were getting flooded with queries. Someone made the unfortunate decision to say, 'We basically know nothing, so let's put out the statement.'"

Then, the bomb-thrower-in-chief weighed in. At a press briefing just hours later, Trump contradicted his own intelligence officials and claimed that he had seen classified information indicating that the virus had come from the Wuhan Institute of Virology. Asked what the evidence was, he said, "I can't tell you that. I'm not allowed to tell you that."

Trump's premature statement poisoned the waters for anyone seeking an honest answer to the question of where COVID-19 came from. According to Pottinger, there was an "antibody response" within the government, in which any discussion of a possible lab origin was linked to destructive nativist posturing. The revulsion extended to the international science community, whose "maddening silence" frustrated Miles Yu. He recalled, "Anyone who dares speak out would be ostracized."

### V. "Too Risky to Pursue"

The idea of a lab leak first came to NSC officials not from hawkish Trumpists but from Chinese social media users, who began sharing their suspicions as early as January 2020. Then, in February, a research paper coauthored by two Chinese scientists, based at separate Wuhan universities, appeared online as a preprint. It tackled a fundamental question: How did a novel bat coronavirus get to a major metropolis of 11 million people in central China, in the dead of winter when most bats were hibernating, and turn a market where bats weren't sold into the epicenter of an outbreak?

The paper offered an answer: "We screened the area around the seafood market and identified two laboratories conducting research on bat coronavirus." The first was the Wuhan Center for Disease Control and Prevention, which sat just 280 meters from

the Huanan market and had been known to collect hundreds of bat samples. The second, the researchers wrote, was the Wuhan Institute of Virology.

The paper came to a staggeringly blunt conclusion about COVID-19: "the killer coronavirus probably originated from a laboratory in Wuhan.... Regulations may be taken to relocate these laboratories far away from city center and other densely populated places." Almost as soon as the paper appeared on the internet, it disappeared, but not before U.S. government officials took note. By then, Matthew Pottinger had approved a COVID-19 origins team, run by the NSC directorate that oversaw issues related to weapons of mass destruction. A longtime Asia expert and former journalist, Pottinger purposefully kept the team small, because there were so many people within the government "wholly discounting the possibility of a lab leak, who were predisposed that it was impossible," said Pottinger. In addition, many leading experts had either received or approved funding for gain-of-function research. Their "conflicted" status, said Pottinger, "played a profound role

in muddying the waters and contaminating the shot at having an impartial inquiry."

As they combed open sources as well as classified information, the team's members soon stumbled on a 2015 research paper by Shi Zhengli and the University of North Carolina epidemiologist Ralph Baric proving that the spike protein of a novel coronavirus could infect human cells. Using mice as subjects, they inserted the protein from a Chinese rufous horseshoe bat into the molecular structure of the SARS virus from 2002, creating a new, infectious pathogen.

This gain-of-function experiment was so fraught that the authors flagged the danger themselves, writing, "scientific review panels may deem similar studies...too risky to pursue." In fact, the study was intended to raise an alarm and warn the world of "a potential risk of SARS-CoV re-emergence from viruses currently circulating in bat populations." The paper's acknowledgments cited funding from the U.S. National Institutes of Health and from a nonprofit called EcoHealth Alliance, which had parceled out grant money from the U.S. Agency for International Development. EcoHealth Alliance is run by Peter Daszak, the zoologist who helped organize the Lancet statement.

That a genetically engineered virus might have escaped from the WIV was one alarming scenario. But it was also possible that a research trip to collect bat samples could have led to infection in the field, or back at the lab.

The NSC investigators found ready evidence that China's labs were not as safe as advertised. Shi Zhengli herself had publicly acknowledged that, until the pandemic, all of her team's coronavirus research—some involving live SARS-like viruses—had been conducted in less secure BSL-3 and even BSL-2 laboratories.

In 2018, a delegation of American diplomats visited the WIV for the opening of its BSL-4 laboratory, a major event. In an unclassified cable, as a Washington Post columnist reported, they wrote that a shortage of highly trained technicians and clear protocols threatened the facility's safe operations. The issues had not stopped the WIV's leadership from declaring the lab "ready for research on class-four pathogens (P4), among which are the most

virulent viruses that pose a high risk of aerosolized person-to-person transmission."

On February 14, 2020, to the surprise of NSC officials, President Xi Jinping of China announced a plan to fast-track a new biosecurity law to tighten safety procedures throughout the country's laboratories. Was this a response to confidential information? "In the early weeks of the pandemic, it didn't seem crazy to wonder if this thing came out of a lab," Pottinger reflected. Apparently, it didn't seem crazy to Shi Zhengli either. A Scientific American article first published in March 2020, for which she was interviewed, described how her lab had been the first to sequence the virus in those terrible first weeks. It also recounted how:

[S]he frantically went through her own lab's records from the past few years to check for any mishandling of experimental materials, especially during disposal. Shi breathed a sigh of relief when the results came back: none of the sequences matched those of the viruses her team had sampled from bat caves. "That really took a load off my mind," she says. "I had not slept a wink for days."

As the NSC tracked these disparate clues, U.S. government virologists advising them flagged one study first submitted in April 2020. Eleven of its 23 coauthors worked for the Academy of Military Medical Sciences, the Chinese army's medical research institute. Using the gene-editing technology known as CRISPR, the researchers had engineered mice with humanized lungs, then studied their susceptibility to SARS-CoV-2. As the NSC officials worked backward from the date of publication to establish a timeline for the study, it became clear that the mice had been engineered sometime in the summer of 2019, before the pandemic even started. The NSC officials were left wondering: Had the Chinese military been running viruses through humanized mouse models, to see which might be infectious to humans?

Believing they had uncovered important evidence in favor of the lab-leak hypothesis, the NSC investigators began reaching out to other agencies. That's when the hammer came down. "We were dismissed," said Anthony Ruggiero, the NSC's senior director for counterproliferation and biodefense. "The response



was very negative."

#### VI. Sticklers for Accuracy

By the summer of 2020, Gilles Demaneuf was spending up to four hours a day researching the origins of COVID-19, joining Zoom meetings before dawn with European collaborators and not sleeping much. He began to receive anonymous calls and notice strange activity on his computer, which he attributed to Chinese government surveillance. "We are being monitored for sure," he says. He moved his work to the encrypted platforms Signal and ProtonMail.

As they posted their findings, the DRASTIC researchers attracted new allies. Among the most prominent was Jamie Metzl, who launched a blog on April 16 that became a go-to site for government researchers and journalists examining the lab-leak hypothesis. A former executive vice president of the Asia Society, Metzl sits on the World Health Organization's advisory committee on human genome editing and served in the Clinton administration as the NSC's director for multilateral affairs. In his first post on the subject, he made clear that he had no definitive proof and believed that Chinese researchers at the WIV had the "best intentions." Metzl also noted, "In no way do I seek to support or align myself with any activities that may be considered unfair, dishonest, nationalistic, racist, bigoted, or biased in any way."

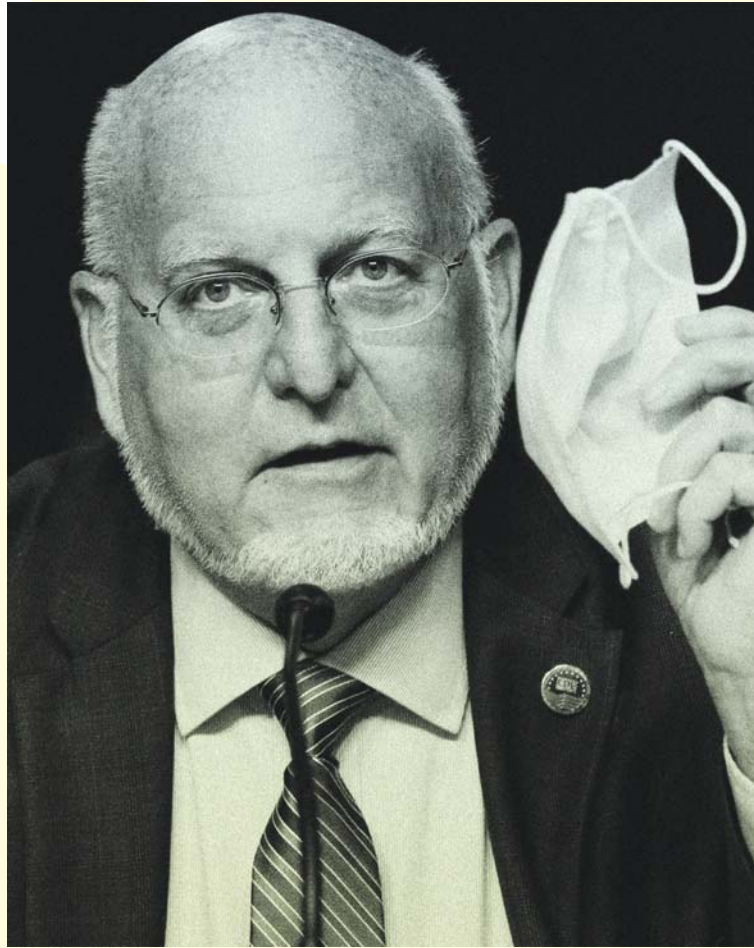
On December 11, 2020, Demaneuf—a stickler for accuracy—reached out to Metzl to alert him to a mistake on his blog. The 2004 SARS lab escape in Beijing, Demaneuf pointed out, had led to 11 infections, not four. Demaneuf was "impressed" by Metzl's immediate willingness to correct the information. "From that time, we started working together."

"If the pandemic started as part of a lab leak, it had the potential to do to virology what Three Mile Island and Chernobyl did to nuclear science."

Metzl, in turn, was in touch with the Paris Group, a collective of more than 30 skeptical scientific experts who met by Zoom once a month for hours-long meetings to hash out emerging clues. Before joining the Paris Group, Dr. Filippa Lentzos, a biosecurity expert at King's College London, had pushed back online against wild conspiracies. No, COVID-19 was not a bioweapon used by the Chinese to infect American athletes at the Military World

Games in Wuhan in October 2019. But the more she researched, the more concerned she became that not every possibility was being explored. On May 1, 2020, she published a careful assessment in the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists describing just how a pathogen could have escaped the Wuhan

Infrastructure, a website that houses papers from 2,000 Chinese journals, and running the results through Google Translate. One day last May, he fished up a thesis from 2013 written by a master's student in Kunming, China. The thesis opened an extraordinary window into a bat-filled mine shaft in Yunnan



Institute of Virology. She noted that a September 2019 paper in an academic journal by the director of the WIV's BSL-4 laboratory, Yuan Zhiming, had outlined safety deficiencies in China's labs. "Maintenance cost is generally neglected," he had written. "Some BSL-3 laboratories run on extremely minimal operational costs or in some cases none at all."

Alina Chan, a young molecular biologist and postdoctoral fellow at the Broad Institute of MIT and Harvard University, found that early sequences of the virus showed very little evidence of mutation. Had the virus jumped from animals to humans, one would expect to see numerous adaptations, as was true in the 2002 SARS outbreak. To Chan, it appeared that SARS-CoV-2 was already "pre-adapted to human transmission," she wrote in a preprint paper in May 2020. But perhaps the most startling find was made by an anonymous DRASTIC researcher, known on Twitter as @TheSeeker268. The Seeker, as it turns out, is a young former science teacher from Eastern India. He had begun plugging keywords into the China National Knowledge

province and raised sharp questions about what Shi Zhengli had failed to mention in the course of making her denials.

#### VII. The Mojiang Miners

In 2012, six miners in the lush mountains of Mojiang county in southern Yunnan province were assigned an unenviable task: to shovel out a thick carpet of bat feces from the floor of a mine shaft. After weeks of dredging up bat guano, the miners became gravely ill and were sent to the First Affiliated Hospital at the Kunming Medical University in Yunnan's capital. Their symptoms of cough, fever, and labored breathing rang alarm bells in a country that had suffered through a viral SARS outbreak a decade earlier.

The hospital called in a pulmonologist, Zhong Nanshan, who had played a prominent role in treating SARS patients and would go on to lead an expert panel for China's National Health Commission on COVID-19. Zhong, according to the 2013 master's thesis, immediately suspected a viral infection. He recommended a throat culture and an antibody test, but he also asked what kind of bat had produced the guano. The answer:

the rufous horseshoe bat, the same species implicated in the first SARS outbreak.

Within months, three of the six miners were dead. The eldest, who was 63, died first. "The disease was acute and fierce," the thesis noted. It concluded: "the bat that caused the six patients to fall ill was the Chinese rufous horseshoe bat." Blood samples were sent to the Wuhan Institute of Virology, which found that they were positive for SARS antibodies, a later Chinese dissertation documented.

But there was a mystery at the heart of the diagnosis. Bat coronaviruses were not known to harm humans. What was so different about the strains from inside the cave? To find out, teams of researchers from across China and beyond traveled to the abandoned mine shaft to collect viral samples from bats, musk shrews, and rats.

In an October 2013 Nature study, Shi Zhengli reported a key discovery: that certain bat viruses could potentially infect humans without first jumping to an intermediate animal. By isolating a live SARS-like bat coronavirus for the first time, her team had found that it could enter human cells through a protein called the ACE2 receptor.

In subsequent studies in 2014 and 2016, Shi and her colleagues continued studying samples of bat viruses collected from the mine shaft, hoping to figure out which one had infected the miners. The bats were bristling with multiple coronaviruses. But there was only one whose genome closely resembled SARS. The researchers named it RaBtCoV/4991.

On February 3, 2020, with the COVID-19 outbreak already spreading beyond China, Shi Zhengli and several colleagues published a paper noting that the SARS-CoV-2 virus's genetic code was almost 80% identical to that of SARS-CoV, which caused the 2002 outbreak. But they also reported that it was 96.2% identical to a coronavirus sequence in their possession called RaTG13, which was previously detected in "Yunnan province." They concluded that RaTG13 was the closest known relative to SARS-CoV-2.

In the following months, as researchers around the world hunted for any known bat virus that might be a progenitor of

SARS-CoV-2, Shi Zhengli offered shifting and sometimes contradictory accounts of where RaTG13 had come from and when it was fully sequenced. Searching a publicly available library of genetic sequences, several teams, including a group of DRASTIC researchers, soon realized that RaTG13 appeared identical to RaBtCoV/4991—the virus from the cave where the miners fell ill in 2012 with what looked like COVID-19.

In July, as questions mounted, Shi Zhengli told Science magazine that her lab had renamed the sample for clarity. But to skeptics, the renaming exercise looked like an effort to hide the sample's connection to the Mojiang mine.

Their questions multiplied the following month when Shi, Daszak, and their colleagues published an account of 630 novel coronaviruses they had sampled between 2010 and 2015. Combing through the supplementary data, DRASTIC researchers were stunned to find eight more viruses from the Mojiang mine that were closely related to RaTG13 but had not been flagged in the account. Alina Chan of the Broad Institute said it was "mind-boggling" that these crucial puzzle pieces had been buried without comment.

In October 2020, as questions about the Mojiang mine shaft intensified, a team of journalists from the BBC tried to access the mine itself. They were tailed by plainclothes police officers and found the road conveniently blocked by a broken-down truck. Shi, by now facing growing scrutiny from the international press corps, told the BBC: "I've just downloaded the Kunming Hospital University's student's master's thesis and read it.... The conclusion is neither based on evidence nor logic. But it's used by conspiracy theorists to doubt me. If you were me, what would you do?"

#### VIII. The Gain-of-Function Debate

On January 3, 2020, Dr. Robert Redfield, director of the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, got a phone call from his counterpart Dr. George Fu Gao, head of the Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention. Gao described the appearance of a mysterious new pneumonia, apparently limited to people exposed at a market in Wuhan. Redfield immediately offered to send a team of specialists to help investigate. But when Redfield saw the



breakdown of early cases, some of which were family clusters, the market explanation made less sense. Had multiple family members gotten sick via contact with the same animal? Gao assured him there was no human-to-human transmission, says Redfield, who nevertheless urged him to test more widely in the community. That effort prompted a tearful return call. Many cases had nothing to do with the market, Gao admitted. The virus appeared to be jumping from person to person, a far scarier scenario.

Redfield immediately thought of the Wuhan Institute of Virology. A team could rule it out as a source of the outbreak in just a few weeks, by testing researchers there for antibodies. Redfield formally reiterated his offer to send specialists, but Chinese officials didn't respond to his overture.

Redfield, a virologist by training, was suspicious of the WIV in part because he'd been steeped in the yearslong battle over gain-of-function research. The debate engulfed the virology community in 2011, after Ron Fouchier, a researcher at the Erasmus Medical Center in Rotterdam, announced that he had genetically altered the H5N1 avian influenza strain to make it transmissible among ferrets, who are genetically closer to humans than mice. Fouchier calmly declared that he'd produced "probably one of the most dangerous viruses you could make."

In the ensuing uproar, scientists battled over the risks and benefits of such research. Those in favor claimed it could help prevent pandemics, by highlighting potential risks and accelerating vaccine development. Critics argued that creating pathogens that didn't exist in nature ran the risk of unleashing them.

In October 2014, the Obama administration imposed a moratorium on new funding for gain-of-function research projects that could make influenza, MERS, or SARS viruses more virulent or transmissible. But a footnote to the statement announcing the moratorium carved out an exception for cases deemed "urgently necessary to protect the public health or national security."

In the first year of the Trump administration, the moratorium was lifted and replaced with a review system called the HHS

P3CO Framework (for Potential Pandemic Pathogen Care and Oversight). It put the onus for ensuring the safety of any such research on the federal department or agency funding it. This left the review process shrouded in secrecy. "The names of reviewers are not released, and the details of the experiments to be considered are largely secret," said the Harvard epidemiologist Dr. Marc Lipsitch, whose advocacy against gain-of-function research helped prompt the moratorium. (An NIH spokesperson told Vanity Fair that "information about individual unfunded applications is not public to preserve confidentiality and protect sensitive information, preliminary data, and intellectual property.")

Inside the NIH, which funded such research, the P3CO framework was largely met with shrugs and eye rolls, said a longtime agency official: "If you ban gain-of-function research, you ban all of virology." He added, "Ever since the moratorium, everyone's gone wink-wink and just done gain-of-function research anyway."

British-born Peter Daszak, 55, is the president of EcoHealth Alliance, a New York City-based nonprofit with the laudable goal of preventing the outbreak of emerging diseases by safeguarding ecosystems. In May 2014, five months before the moratorium on gain-of-function research was announced, EcoHealth secured a NIAID grant of roughly \$3.7 million, which it allocated in part to various entities engaged in collecting bat samples, building models, and performing gain-of-function experiments to see which animal viruses were able to jump to humans. The grant was not halted under the moratorium or the P3CO framework.

By 2018, EcoHealth Alliance was pulling in up to \$15 million a year in grant money from an array of federal agencies, including the Defense Department, the Department of Homeland Security, and the U.S. Agency for International Development, according to 990 tax exemption forms it filed with the New York State Attorney General's Charities Bureau. Shi Zhengli herself listed U.S. government grant support of more than \$1.2 million on her curriculum vitae: \$665,000 from the NIH between 2014 and 2019; and \$559,500 over the same period from USAID. At least some of those funds were routed through EcoHealth

Alliance.

EcoHealth Alliance's practice of divvying up large government grants into smaller sub-grants for individual labs and institutions gave it enormous sway within the field of virology. The sums at stake allow it to "purchase a lot of omertà" from the labs it supports, said Richard Ebright of Rutgers. (In response to detailed questions, an EcoHealth Alliance spokesperson said on behalf of the organization and Daszak, "We have no comment.")

As the pandemic raged, the collaboration between EcoHealth

Minutes ran a segment focused on the Trump administration's shortsighted politicization of science.

Daszak appeared to be the victim of a political hit job, orchestrated to blame China, Dr. Fauci, and scientists in general for the pandemic, while distracting from the Trump administration's bungled response. "He's basically a wonderful, decent human being" and an "old-fashioned altruist," said the NIH official. "To see this happening to him, it really kills me."

In July, the NIH attempted to



Alliance and the WIV wound up in the crosshairs of the Trump administration. At a White House COVID-19 press briefing on April 17, 2020, a reporter from the conspiratorial right-wing media outlet Newsmax asked Trump a factually inaccurate question about a \$3.7 million NIH grant to a level-four lab in China. "Why would the U.S. give a grant like that to China?" the reporter asked.

Trump responded, "We will end that grant very quickly," adding, "Who was president then, I wonder."

A week later, an NIH official notified Daszak in writing that his grant had been terminated. The order had come from the White House, Dr. Anthony Fauci later testified before a congressional committee. The decision fueled a firestorm: 81 Nobel Laureates in science denounced the decision in an open letter to Trump health officials, and 60

backtrack. It reinstated the grant but suspended its research activities until EcoHealth Alliance fulfilled seven conditions, some of which went beyond the nonprofit's purview and seemed to stray into tinfoil-hat territory. They included: providing information on the "apparent disappearance" of a Wuhan Institute of Virology researcher, who was rumored on social media to be patient zero, and explaining diminished cell phone traffic and roadblocks around the WIV in October 2019.

But conspiracy-minded conservatives weren't the only ones looking askance at Daszak. Ebright likened Daszak's model of research-bringing samples from a remote area to an urban one, then sequencing and growing viruses and attempting to genetically modify them to make them more virulent-to "looking for a gas leak with a lighted match." Moreover, Ebright believed that

Daszak's research had failed in its stated purpose of predicting and preventing pandemics through its global collaborations. It soon emerged, based on emails obtained by a Freedom of Information group called U.S. Right to Know, that Daszak had not only signed but organized the influential Lancet statement, with the intention of concealing his role and creating the impression of scientific unanimity.

Under the subject line, "No need for you to sign the 'Statement' Ralph!," he wrote to two scientists, including UNC's Dr. Ralph Baric, who had collaborated with Shi Zhengli on the gain-of-function study that created a coronavirus capable of infecting human cells: "you, me and him should not sign this statement, so it has some distance from us and therefore doesn't work in a counterproductive way." Daszak added, "We'll then put it out in a way that doesn't link it back to our collaboration so we maximize an independent voice."

Baric agreed, writing back, "Otherwise it looks self-serving and we lose impact."

Baric did not sign the statement. In the end, Daszak did. At least six other signers had either worked at, or had been funded by, EcoHealth Alliance. The statement ended with a declaration of objectivity: "We declare no competing interests." Daszak mobilized so quickly for a reason, said Jamie Metzl: "If zoonosis was the origin, it was a validation...of his life work.... But if the pandemic started as part of a lab leak, it had the potential to do to virology what Three Mile Island and Chernobyl did to nuclear science." It could mire the field indefinitely in moratoriums and funding restrictions.

#### IX. Dueling Memos

By the summer of 2020, the State Department's COVID-19 origins investigation had gone cold. Officials in the Bureau of Arms Control, Verification, and Compliance went back to their normal work: surveilling the world for biological threats. "We weren't looking for Wuhan," said Thomas DiNanno. That fall, the State Department team got a tip from a foreign source: Key information was likely sitting in the U.S. intelligence community's own files, unanalyzed. In November, that lead turned up classified information that was "absolutely arresting and shocking," said a former State Department official.



# The age of fear: How Covid has impacted our mental health



**Covid's deadly second wave has sparked off a 'fearodemic'. People are afraid of dying, of losing their loved ones, of being alone, of losing their jobs-anxieties that add a new dimension of mental-health issues to the ongoing crisis**

(News Agencies)-Dr Harish Shetty, a renowned psychiatrist in Mumbai, is all too familiar with the mental fallout of a disaster. In his 33-year-long career, he has helped survivors of the 1993 Latur earthquake in Maharashtra, the 1998 Kandra cyclone in Gujarat and the 2002 Gujarat riots process their individual and collective grief: the loss of home, the loss of loved ones, the loss of life as you knew it. Covid-19, however, is an "invisible enemy". "The fear of a visible enemy can be delineated, imagined, circumscribed in the mind," he explains. "Here, because of the invisibility of the perpetrator, the fear is multiplied a millionfold. There, the impact of

the disaster was at one go; here, it is endless." Shetty, in fact, has coined a new term to sum up our collective state of mind: 'fearodemic'.

Anxiety has hit a peak in a nation where, as per a 2019 report published by the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) and the Public Health Foundation of India (PHFI), some 197.3 million people live with mental disorders. It has only been exacerbated by Covid's deadlier second wave, which has claimed 114,860 lives in just a month between April 25 and May 25, compared with the seven months it took to reach 114,682 deaths in the previous wave.

First, there is the fear of the disease itself. All through April, the

only thing 27-year-old Vaibhav (name changed) could hear was the continuous wail of ambulance sirens in Delhi. Without realising it, he even began keeping count of how many he would hear in a day. Then, one day, he started feeling breathless himself. His chest felt tight, his pulse started racing, his blood pressure shot up. Vaibhav was convinced he had Covid. Next, he started worrying about his father, a heart patient. Would he pass on the infection to him? If his father took a turn for the worse, would he find a hospital bed, oxygen or medicines for him? Would he die? Before he knew it, Vaibhav was in the middle of a full-blown panic attack. Covid-19 remains an unpredictable disease, even 14 months after it was first declared a pandemic. That has created an atmosphere of uncertainty, which, says consultant psychiatrist Dr Soumitra Pathare, director of the Centre for Mental Health Law and Policy (CMHLP) in Pune, has become the root cause of Covid-

induced anxiety. And so people are stockpiling oxygen concentrators and cylinders, and hoarding medicines, in the fear that they or their family members may not get timely medical intervention. Or constantly tracking news for Covid updates. They are afraid to step out lest they contract the infection. Others are repeatedly calling their doctors to seek advice on symptoms, medication and tests. Those like Kritika (name changed), 50, a housewife in Hisar, Haryana, worry if the infection will recur. Having recovered from Covid, Kritika is overthinking post-recovery health problems. "What if corona comes back and harms my family? I cannot take my mind off the subject." Paranoia is causing people to write out wills, or ensure there are nominees for bank accounts and insurance policies. **FEAR OF DYING**

The National Institute of Mental Health and Neurosciences (NIMHANS) in Bengaluru identifies "anxiety about death and

dying in unnatural circumstances without access to family and friends" as one of the primary psychological issues to emerge in this pandemic. The visuals of mass graves and burning pyres and news of shortages of hospital beds, oxygen and medicines on social and traditional media are continuously feeding a growing reservoir of dread. "Your entire environment today is traumatic," says Dr Samir Parikh, a psychiatrist who is the director of the department of mental health and behavioural sciences at Fortis Healthcare in Delhi. "It is the most basic form of existential anxiety, the fear for one's life." That fear has become more palpable in the second wave, where a new variant of Covid is believed to be manifesting in a far more infectious and deadly form of the disease. People who have had Covid once are getting it again, those who have recovered from the disease are dying of cardiac arrests or strokes a few weeks later.

## White America has an ingrained fear of blackness. It's time to let go of that fear

It has been a year since George Floyd last drew breath. It has been a year since the multiple videos of his death spread worldwide; since passionate demonstrations swept cities and towns; since personnel carriers filled with soldiers crawled through American streets; since "saying" his or her name became a ubiquitous incantation, an infinitely unspooling litany of death. In the year since, Derek Chauvin, the police officer whose coldly dispassionate gaze riveted our own, was convicted on all counts. It was hard to unsee. And we saw.

Moreover, the witnesses against him included the chief of police; the instructor in techniques of restraint at the academy where Chauvin had trained; the police dispatcher who was watching remotely and thought her screen was frozen because he stayed on top of Floyd for so long; the emergency medical technician who had to reach around Chauvin's knee to take a pulse

(there was none) because Chauvin refused to move even after the ambulance had arrived; Floyd's weeping (white) girlfriend who testified to his gentle, generous and prayerful nature; the sheer number of bystanders who "called the police on the police"; the crying children; the shopkeepers; the passing martial arts professional who shouted at Chauvin repeatedly, telling him that that he was killing Floyd. I began my own career as a prosecutor and I have never seen a stronger case. There simply was no question. And yet ... there was. Indeed, there was such great collective apprehension about whether Chauvin actually would be convicted that thousands of troops were called to the streets of Minneapolis before the verdict was read. That apprehension was a testament to how rare it is that police are convicted of even egregious misbehavior. Indeed, if Chauvin hadn't been convicted, the biggest issue would not have been the much-discussed potential for riots, the larger emergency would

have been whether there exists any legally enforceable limit at all to police's exercise of deadly force.

A year on, any optimism I harbor is built on our aversion of that existential crisis. And yet I continue to worry because there are other cases. I worry because there is such a strong acculturated sense about who is presumed innocent or not in racial encounters, about who may be categorized as inherently "angry" or "threatening". (Part of Chauvin's unsuccessful defense rested on trying to depict the protesting onlookers as distractingly "angry", "threatening" and unruly.) At this vexed moment, it is a truism that Americans of different races, ethnicities and religions are tense, wary of one another; but it is white fear of blackness that has the longest history, that is most intractable, and that still underwrites majoritarian tendencies to forgive even lethal police misconduct, and to rationalize punitive forms of segregation in housing, education



and employment. In the domain of criminal procedure, that generalized fear is an evidentiary problem. Not just police officers, but self-appointed citizen vigilantes are often not prosecuted or charged at all when they allege mere free-floating decontextualized fear. If such cases actually proceed to trial - again, the Chauvin trial was a rarity - the deployment of wildly unreasonable subjective fear is often sufficient to justify killing innocent, unarmed people. I feared for my life. Who are you to judge? These are the two forces that we must bring into contention as a widespread pattern of response. "I feared ..." as a

subjective standard of self-exoneration. And then the follow-up banishment of any juridical review of that fear: "Who are you to judge?" This pair of immunizing assertions is built into the very structure of recent so-called "stand your ground laws" that expand self-defense as licensing shooting to kill, unqualified by any duty to retreat, in public places even where there are other non-violent options. Although such laws are race-neutral in language, dominant American assumptions about who can claim a sidewalk or public street as ground that is "yours" is a highly raced proposition.



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# We are told America is living through a 'racial reckoning'. Is it really?



Hate has no place in America." So tweeted Joe Biden last week while announcing that he would sign new legislation to address the rising tide of racist hate crimes against people of Asian descent in the United States.

Biden's claim is, of course, a fantasy - or, perhaps more charitably, an aspiration. Whatever it is, it is certainly not a statement of fact. Hate has plenty of places in America; it has had a comfortable home in the marrow of the nation's bones for longer than "America" has even existed. Indeed, the United States wouldn't exist as we know it today - perhaps would not exist at all - were it not for the hate-fueled (and greed-fueled) violent

logics and machineries of chattel slavery and settler colonialism, which drove the nation's economy and shaped its government and borders. Hate molded the United States' early institutions and was written into its founding documents.

Hate continues to structure both public and private institutions to this day, even if often under the veneer of colorblindness that renders the hate invisible to those who don't want to have to see it. And, of course, hate routinely governs the everyday experiences and fears of people of color as they move about this country; the latest hate crimes legislation signed into law on Thursday wouldn't be necessary if that wasn't true.

Again and again for a long and

punishing year, since Derek Chauvin murdered George Floyd and the world broke open in protest and rebellion, we have been told that the United States is experiencing a "racial reckoning". I confess that I have never quite known what is supposed to be meant by this. Or maybe it would be more accurate to say that I don't know if the people who believe it to be true know what it means. Would not a reckoning require an honest and sustained stocktaking of the country's racist past and racist present? Is that not the very least that it should mean? And would reckoning not, in order to prove meaningful, be a process that includes measures that might remedy the harms caused by racial hatred - systemic and particularized - in the past and present, in pursuit of an actually just future? I am confused by people talking about our ongoing "racial reckoning" because what I am describing above has quite certainly not happened. Indeed, the evidence is actually everywhere in abundance that white Americans especially,

generally speaking, have not been willing to even begin to reckon with hate and racism in any sustained way. To take one example: public polling has consistently shown that most white Americans have never supported the Movement for Black Lives; the percentage of those that did briefly crept above the 40% threshold after the murder of George Floyd, but support waned quickly and is more or less back to the status quo. Meanwhile, polling in March showed that support for and trust in police had risen substantially over the past year, in an inverse pattern to support for and trust in Black Lives Matter. Moreover, Republicans' active refusal to engage in this supposed reckoning has become a dominant through line in our national politics over the past year. Their bleating and hysterical political opposition to the teaching of critical race theory (or really anything about race at all, it seems) in American schools is quite literally nothing more than a refusal to reckon with the ways that racism structures American institutions and society. Their disingenuous

comparison and conflation of antiracist protests last year with the treasonous government coup on 6 January stoked by noted white nationalist Donald Trump represents still another manifestation. And, of course, nearly a year after the first legislative measures to address the racial terror of American policing were introduced to Congress in Floyd's name - measures that, at best, would only mildly dull the deadly edge of police terrorism - nothing has actually become law. Or consider too the ways legislators responded to the recent hate crime legislation that Biden signed last Thursday, which, when it went through the House, was opposed by nearly one-third of House Republicans. Among those opposed to trying to prevent racist hate crimes was Tom Tiffany, whose Wisconsin district several hours north of where I live includes the city of Wausau, which catapulted to infamy earlier last week when the New York Times published a story about the local government's refusal to deal with racism there.

## Why astronauts are printing organs in space



Andrew Morgan has seen some of the worst things that can happen to the human body. As a battlefield doctor with the US Army, he's treated young soldiers whose bodies had been torn and broken in explosions. "I've seen the loss of limbs and some devastating injuries as the result of blasts," he says. Witnessing the slow healing and recovery process first-hand got Morgan thinking - what if new tissue or even entire organs could be simply printed off to replace injured body parts?

"The ability to transplant tissues made from the injured person's own cells would be hugely beneficial," he says.

That's why Morgan conducted a series of unusual experiments over several months last year - in outer space. You see, Morgan is also a Nasa astronaut. In April 2020 he returned from a 272-day stay on the International Space Station (ISS). While he orbited 248 miles (400km) above the Earth's surface, Morgan created living tissue, cell by cell, using a 3D printer and something

called bio-ink.

"It's not unlike changing a printer cartridge at home," says Morgan of the equipment he used. "You put in the ink cartridge, allow the culture to develop and then remove the tissue cassette for analysis."

So far, so simple. But there is a reason why Morgan and his fellow astronaut Christina Koch were doing these experiments while in orbit.

"When you're 3D-printing a tissue culture on the ground, there's a tendency for them to collapse in the presence of gravity," he says. "The tissues require some sort of [temporary, organic] scaffold to hold everything in place, especially with cavities like the chambers of a heart. But you don't have those effects in a micro-gravity environment, which is why these experiments have been so valuable." The micro-gravity environment of the ISS was ideal for testing the Bio Fabrication Facility, which was launched into orbit in 2019 and is due for an

upgrade in 2021. Developed by US companies Techshot and NScript, it is designed to print human cells into organ-shaped tissues. Initially Morgan was using it to test prints of cardiac-like tissue of increasing thicknesses. Ultimately, however, the team behind the technology hopes to refine the equipment so they can print entire human organs in space, which can be used in transplants.

Printing human organs is not quite as science fiction as it sounds. A number of biotechnology companies are working on different approaches, which aim to use a patient's own cells make new tissue. In most cases they re-programme the cells by following a Nobel Prize-winning process developed a decade ago to turn them into stem cells, which are then theoretically capable of developing into any part of the human anatomy. Given the right nutrients and encouragement, these can then be induced into

the cell type of choice. By suspending stem cells in a hydrogel that can be built into a scaffold to stop the growing structure collapsing in on itself, the desired cell type can then be printed layer by layer into living, functioning tissue.

"We've already produced tissue that has successfully been transplanted back onto animals - skin transplants, for example," explains Itedale Redwan, the scientific officer for Cellink, the first company to commercialise bio-ink. "Recently we've worked on laser-assisted printing to allow printing at the very small level of capillaries, or blood and waste transplant vessels. Being able to print at this level will be essential, but the big step will be putting such tissue into humans." Redwan estimates it could be 10-15 years before fully functioning tissues and organs printed in this way will be transplanted into humans. Scientists have already shown it is possible to print basic tissues and even mini-organs.



# The real reason employers can't hire enough workers

As life in the United States tiptoes back toward something resembling Before Times, many employers are facing an unexpected problem: they can't hire the workers they need. Despite unemployment numbers in the millions, some 8.1 million job vacancies remain. This problem is concentrated among America's low-wage workforce, hitting restaurants, warehouses, manufacturers and the service industry. Many Republicans see these numbers and conclude the problem is unemployment payments that are, in their estimation, doled out to lazy people unwilling to work. Two dozen Republican-governed states have refused the federally funded \$300 weekly unemployment supplement, and 36 states now require that anyone receiving unemployment benefits prove that they've looked for work unsuccessfully. Not content with red state refusal alone, Senate Republicans are trying to cut off the \$300 benefit for the whole country. "We should not be in the business of creating lucrative government dependency that makes it more beneficial to stay unemployed rather than return to work," Sen. Roger Marshall of Kansas, who is leading the Senate charge to cut off the benefit, wrote in the Kansas City Business Journal.

In Michigan, the seven Republicans in their Congressional delegation are demanding an end to the federal supplement, contending in a letter to Democratic Gov. Gretchen Whitmer that: "Unfortunately, these benefits remain so robust that employees are more incentivized to stay home and collect unemployment than to go back to work."

In reality, researchers have found that the unemployment benefit's impact on the labor shortage is fairly small. Think about it this way, write Nicolas Petrosky-Nadeu and Robert G. Valletta of the Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco: "(in) each month in early 2021, about seven out of 28 unemployed individuals receive job offers that they would normally accept, but one of the seven decides to decline the offer due to the availability of the extra \$300 per week in UI payments." That hasn't stopped conservative groups from blaming the labor



shortage on basic support for workers. The Chamber of Commerce released a statement saying that "the \$300 benefit results in approximately one in four recipients taking home more in unemployment than they earned working." And that's a big part of the problem: It's not that unemployment benefits are too high -- \$300 a week barely covers the rent for the average family in most US states. It's that pay is far too low.

This should be a wake-up call for a country that has spent decades mistreating, neglecting and radically underpaying its workers. Consider: The US has not raised the federal minimum wage in more than a decade, and \$7.25 an hour was a paltry sum even then. If today's minimum wage were commensurate with productivity increases over the last 50 years, it would be \$22 an hour. Workers' purchasing power has been stagnant for 40 years, and even though workers are more productive than ever, their compensation has barely budged since the 1970s. Even more egregious is the minimum wage for tipped workers, which is an insulting \$2.13 an hour, a number that hasn't gone up in 30 years. Progressive advocates are pushing for a \$15 hourly minimum wage, a more than reasonable ask, although woefully inadequate: a \$15 wage would still not cover the basic living expenses and necessities of a family of four in much of the country.

As it stands, some of the country's largest employers of low-wage workers are seeing their companies' paltry pay subsidized by the federal government.

McDonalds and Wal-Mart, for example, pay their employees so badly that they are among the top employers of Americans who rely on Medicaid for healthcare and food stamps for basic sustenance, according to a study last year by the Government Accountability Office. When 70% of recipients of federal aid work full-time, according to the study, and are still so poor they qualify for help from the government, something has gone very, very wrong. It's clear that employers are being given free rein to exploit their workers, while the government picks up the tab. Some employers say that they simply cannot afford to pay a living wage. But that failure should fall on the business, not on would-be employees. Businesses have been badly hurt by the pandemic, and while they've received some governmental support, it's been wildly inadequate. But even outside of pandemic times, workers were struggling, while too many businesses felt entitled to a steady supply of poorly-paid workers, often assigning them unpredictable and exhausting schedules that came along with inconsistent income. That is not a good or sustainable business model, and it's not one we should return to.

But it's likely not just too little pay keeping would-be workers from surging into the workforce -- there is also fear of illness (Covid still isn't over), lack of affordable childcare and a general recalibration of priorities and goals after a once-in-a-century pandemic. That recalibration is happening at every level, as white-collar employees push for greater

workplace flexibility and their employers navigate how to structure the return to the office. The big difference is that when the typically better-educated and better-paid office workers revolt against inflexible workplaces and bosses who make what they believe to be unreasonable and potentially physically dangerous demands, we generally applaud them -- and increasingly, their employers are taking note and working to create workplace policies that give employees at least some of what they want (especially if what they want is remote work, which can mean employers get even more of their employees' time for less money). But when lower-paid wage workers revolt against meager wages, jobs that put them on the front line of potential Covid infection and workplaces that are often rife with harassment, abuse and disrespect, they're often treated like ingrates leeching off the government dime.

Covid brought to the fore -- and exacerbated -- just how unequal our country is. Despite shutdowns wreaking havoc on the economy, well-compensated and disproportionately college-educated workers were much more likely to have kept their jobs or seen their employment recover than workers with a high school education or less working in lower-paid fields; they even managed to save significant amounts of money, which many of them have been pouring into down payments on new homes. There's also a stunning racial gap in both Covid infections and deaths and Covid-related unemployment. All of the statistics we heard about women

being pushed out of the workforce when schools and childcare facilities shut down? Those women were disproportionately Black mothers, single mothers and mothers without a college degree.

A pandemic that upended so many of our lives and killed more than half a million Americans was bound to make a lot of us reconsider how we were living before. Our country may treat wage workers as disposable automatons, but if the past year has taught us anything, it should be how much we need the folks who deliver our food, stock our grocery store shelves, care for our children and tend to our ill and aging. After a year of being deemed "essential," many of these same folks are no doubt wondering why they aren't treated as such: why they aren't paid enough to afford food and rent, why they have to tolerate sexual harassment on the job, why they're given so little of the autonomy and responsibility that all workers need to feel valued and satisfied. It's about money, yes. But it's also about a desire to be treated like a human being.

The solutions are not that complicated. A \$15 federal minimum wage is the baseline; really, we should triple it, and do away with the tipped minimum wage entirely. High-quality universal childcare should be at the top of the government's To Do list to ensure that no parent has to choose between work and their children's care. Next on that list should be paid sick and vacation days, paid parental leave and laws mandating predictable work schedules. And workplaces simply need to be more humane, with employers and bosses treating their employees like trustworthy adults, not potentially naughty children in need of constant control and hyper-surveillance. This is a difficult time for many businesses, especially the restaurants, bars, shops and small businesses that were hit hard by Covid shutdowns and regulations. I imagine most Americans would say that it's these businesses that keep our communities vibrant, and we desperately want them to recover. They absolutely deserve support from both customers and the government in getting back on their feet.



# US marks 100th anniversary of Tulsa Race Massacre

## Here's what Biden will need Congress to do about the racial wealth gap

President Biden on Tuesday laid out his most comprehensive plan yet for shrinking the nation's longstanding racial wealth gap, the latest step in his promise to infuse more equity in government policies and in the rebuilding of the economy after the coronavirus pandemic.

Some measures - including changes to deal with housing discrimination and directing federal support to small businesses - he can take on his own, but many of his proposals require congressional approval that could be very tough to secure.

That includes pouring tens of billions of dollars into communities of color to improve transportation infrastructure, develop more neighborhood amenities, build and rehabilitate affordable housing and support small businesses. All of these proposals are contained in Biden's massive infrastructure package, called the American Jobs Act.

That package has run into trouble in Congress, with members of both parties concerned about its roughly \$2 trillion size - as well as about the corporate tax increases that would be used to pay for it. The White House is currently negotiating with a group of Republicans in hopes of finding agreement on a smaller package - with the latest GOP proposal coming in at \$928 billion.

The massive wealth divide between Black and White families is currently in the spotlight because of the 100th anniversary of the Tulsa Race Massacre, one of the worst acts of racial violence in US cities. The typical non-Hispanic White family had a net worth of \$188,200 in 2019, while the typical non-Hispanic Black family's wealth was \$24,100, according to the most recent Federal Reserve Bank data.

There are many reasons for the gap, including a big difference in home ownership -- a key vehicle to building wealth. About 74% of Whites owned homes in the first quarter of 2021 versus 45% of Blacks, according to the US Census Bureau.

" Create a \$10 billion Community Revitalization Fund:



The fund would target economically under-served areas and support community-led civic infrastructure projects that develop neighborhood amenities, revitalize vacant land and buildings, spark new local economic activity, provide services, promote civic engagement and build community wealth.

" Invest in transportation infrastructure: The President wants to establish grants totaling \$15 billion that would target neighborhoods where people have been cut off from jobs, schools and businesses because of previous transportation investments. The funding would support planning, removing or retrofitting infrastructure that creates barriers to communities.

" Increase affordable housing: Biden is calling for the creation of a Neighborhood Homes Tax Credit to attract private investment in the development and rehabilitation of affordable housing for low- and moderate-income buyers and owners.

" Expand housing choices: The President is asking lawmakers to establish a \$5 billion grant program for jurisdictions that take concrete steps to eliminate land-use and zoning barriers to producing affordable housing and that expand housing choices for people with low or moderate incomes.

" Invest \$31 billion to

support minority-owned small businesses: Biden wants to provide \$30 billion to the Small Business Administration to increase access to capital for the smallest companies, develop new loan products to support small manufacturers and businesses that invest in clean energy and launch a Small Business Investment Corporation to make early stage equity investments, placing a priority on small firms owned by socially and economically disadvantaged individuals. It would also establish a \$1 billion grant program through the Minority Business Development Agency aimed at helping minority-owned manufacturers access private capital. These are the executive actions Biden will take to address racial inequality President Biden announced today new steps his administration will take to reduce the racial wealth gap. Here are key things to know about the actions: Combating housing discrimination. The President is charging Secretary of Housing and Urban Development Marcia Fudge with leading a first-of-its-kind interagency initiative to address inequity in home appraisals. The effort will include carrying out potential enforcement under fair housing laws, regulatory action, and the development of standards and guidance in partnership with industry and state and local governments.

To allow the more vigorous

enforcement of the Fair Housing Act, the agency also will publish two rules aimed at combating practices that contribute to systemic inequality. The rules would reinstate the agency's discriminatory effects standard and the requirement that municipalities that receive agency funding show that the money's use does not further discrimination.

These efforts are aimed at reversing efforts by the Trump administration to weaken Fair Housing Act protections and stem from an executive memorandum Biden issued in January that focused on redressing the federal government's history of discriminatory housing policies. The moves are a "welcome step" and go part of the way to addressing structural divides in the housing market that have developed over decades, said Michael Neal, senior research associate at the Urban Institute. He would also like to see downpayment assistance, particularly for the historically disadvantaged. Directing federal contracts to small businesses. In addition, Biden wants more federal purchasing to be made from small, disadvantaged businesses, many of them minority-owned - though it could take years to have an impact. His goal is to increase the share of contracts going to them by 50% by 2026. The President can direct federal agencies to conduct

outreach to smaller businesses and reduce barriers that exist for them to compete in federal contracts. It's unclear whether he will need Congress to pass legislation that changes some of the rules.

Biden has already set in motion a process to alter federal purchasing rules when he signed an executive order in January. It set a 180-day deadline to change how domestic content is defined and measured for qualifying products as well as increase the required threshold in an effort to boost American manufacturing. Biden also hired the first Made in America Director, Celeste Drake, to help implement the federal procurement process and focus on reaching small businesses and minority entrepreneurs.

What else Biden could do: Several policy experts say canceling student debt would help close the racial wealth gap because Black Americans are more likely to take on student debt and then struggle to repay it. More than 200 advocacy groups, including the Center for Responsible Lending and the American Federation of Teachers union, called on Biden to use his executive powers to cancel student debt on day one of his administration. Dozens of Democratic lawmakers, including Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer and Massachusetts Sen. Elizabeth Warren, also called on Biden to take action and cancel \$50,000 per borrower. The move would be unprecedented, but a memo from lawyers at Harvard's Legal Services Center and its Project on Predatory Student Lending says the Department of Education has the power to do so. Biden has resisted the pressure so far but has said he would support a move by Congress to cancel \$10,000 per borrower. It's unlikely that legislation would pass the Senate where Democrats have a razor thin majority. Taking executive action does not appear to be off the table, though. Biden directed Education Secretary Miguel Cardona to write a memo on the president's legal authorities to cancel debt, White House Chief of Staff Ron Klain said in an interview with Politico in April.



# South Africa's language spoken in 45' clicks



On the outskirts of Upington, in South Africa's Northern Cape, there lives a queen. The queen is elderly and when she dies it may not just be she who is gone, but an entire realm.

Katrina Esau is 88. Her community crowned her Queen of the Western N?n?e (?Khomani) San in 2015. A year earlier, then-president Jacob Zuma presented her with the National Order of the Baobab in Silver.

For the previous eight decades, Esau had gone largely unnoticed. Her people, the San - of whom the Western N?n?e (?Khomani) are one group of many - are good at that. Their survival depended on it: first for the countless centuries that they had South Africa to themselves, living deftly on the land as hunter gatherers. And then, with the arrival of other groups, to evade the scrutiny of those who meant them harm. Esau was born on the farm where her parents worked. The farm's Afrikaner owner obnoxiously renamed the young queen "Geelmeid". "Meid" means "maidservant" while "geel" (yellow) is a crass reference to skin tone. Today, some still know her - lovingly - as Ouma (Grandma) Geelmeid. But often it's Queen Katrina.

The farm owner also forbade Esau from speaking her mother tongue, N|uu; a language with roots to humanity's very origins. Instead, the newly minted Afrikaans language (a mere 300 or so years old) would be Esau's camouflage for almost her entire life.

Cut off on the isolated farm, speaking Afrikaans, Esau began "burying" the language that she had "sucked from [her] mother's breast". This act of burial was just one funeral of many: the

language, a descendant of those spoken by the first humans, had already been dealt its death blow a decade or so earlier.

The year 1931 saw the opening of the Kalahari Gemsbok National Park (now incorporated into the Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park). The terrain here is semi-desert, with two dry riverbeds, the Nossob and Auob, that flow once in a blue moon. Yet for the ?Khomani, the last community of people to speak Esau's language, the landscape was

18,000.

N|uu, meanwhile, has just two: Esau and her brother Simon Sauls.

We don't know when the N|uu language developed - it is too ancient to age precisely - but certainly its roots could not be deeper. Yet if it becomes one of the 600 to 800 languages likely to disappear in the near future, it's not just its antiquity that we should mourn. N|uu's richness and beauty are also astonishing: English has 44 distinct speech

between an incredible 45 clicks; to hear the language spoken fluently is to experience a linguistic fireworks display.

The star of the N|uu click repertoire is the phenomenally rare bilabial "kiss click", which sounds uncannily like an air smooch and features in just two of the world's 7,000 or so other languages. (One of them is Taa, which has 111 click phonemes.) As Esau's years have advanced, her urgency to sow new seeds of N|uu has increased. In the early

storybook in N|uu, Afrikaans and English was published in May.

But the beauty of N|uu should not be used to paint an unduly romantic picture of Esau's people - the San. Michael Daiber is manager of the !Khwatla heritage centre, an hour's drive north of Cape Town, which calls itself the "embassy" of the San. He says the centre, which also offers accommodation, is an antidote to the "sunsets and silhouettes and smiling people" image of the San. "Establishments used to promote that naked hunter-gatherer Bushman image," Daiber explained. "All that 'the last surviving', 'unique encounter', 'come and see it while it's still here' language. The leaders who founded !Khwatla back in 1996 were saying, 'This is not our story. Our land has been taken away from us. We have had a really tough history.'"

"Where San live, it looks like unoccupied land," added Joram /Uiseb, a San of the Namibian Hai||om group, who is heritage co-ordinator at !Khwatla. "Land is life. Only take from nature what you really need." For the San, land was about stewardship not ownership, and South Africa was easily wrested from them.

"In the 1980s, I was told there were no Bushmen left," Daiber said. "And here 40 years later I've had a career working only with San people. How do you measure it and who decides?"

The "it" he's referring to is San identity. Even "San" itself is an exonym for South Africa's original inhabitants. It was introduced by the Khoikhoi, a people who arrived from modern-day Botswana. The term "Bushman", meanwhile, is a translation of "Boesman", which is what the Dutch - who settled the region from the mid-17th Century - called the hunter gatherers.



home. The park's opening saw the ?Khomani families evicted and scattered, smashing the one remaining circuit board of the language. ?Khomani children would henceforth be born into a world of Afrikaans.

Along with !Xun (spoken in Namibia), ?Amkoe and Taa (both spoken in Botswana), N|uu is one of our last linguistic links to the earliest humans: the hunter gatherers of southern and eastern Africa. All four languages are endangered: ?Amkoe has 1,000 or so speakers; Taa 3,000 speakers; and !Xun 14,000 to

sounds (phonemes), for instance, while N|uu has 114.

Then there are its clicks. The bar in "N|uu" represents a click consonant - specifically a dental click, articulated with the tongue tip sucking quickly away from the upper teeth. A century ago, at least 100 indigenous click languages were likely spoken in the southern and eastern regions of Africa. To those unfamiliar with clicks, it can seem as if a click-language speaker's mouth has morphed into a percussion instrument. Consider that N|uu makes meaningful distinction

2000s, she started teaching the language to her community from a schoolroom built in her front yard in Rosedale, a township near Upington, using song, dance and play. Her pupils, who range in age from three to 19, are the only students of N|uu in the world. In recent years, others have bolstered Esau's efforts. A team of linguists has helped create an orthography and educational materials for N|uu, meaning that her granddaughter Claudia Snyman can teach the written language (Esau can't read). Tortoise and Ostrich, a children's



# Google sees new trick in renewed North Korea cyber attacks

Google is seeing fresh threats from a North Korean government cyber group.

This comes after Google's Threat Analysis Group in January documented a hacking campaign targeting cyber security researchers.

The hackers' modus operandi is to build credibility by targeting legitimate researchers, according to Google.

As described by Google in January, the actors set up a research blog and multiple Twitter profiles to interact with researchers and used the profiles to post links to their blog and post videos of "their claimed exploits."

"Exploit" refers to code that takes advantage of a software or security flaw.

The blog contained analysis of publicly disclosed cyber vulnerabilities and included "guest" posts from "unwitting legitimate security researchers," in order to "build additional credibility with other security researchers," Google said.



After reaching out to targeted researchers, the cyber actors offered to collaborate on cybersecurity research, then provided a Microsoft program, Visual Studio Project, that contained malicious code, Google said.

Google also observed several cases where targeted researchers unwittingly installed malware after visiting a blog.

"Shortly thereafter, a malicious service was installed on the researcher's system," according to Google.

Even sophisticated researchers can fall for ploys by cyber criminals, Brian Martin, vice president of vulnerability Intelligence at Risk Based Security, told Fox News.

"While security people are the first to scream 'don't click those

links,' they are the first to click specific links if the lure of information is there," Martin said. On March 17, the same actors set up a new website with associated social media profiles for a fake company called "SecuriElite," according to Google's most recent blog post on the threat.

The website purports to represent an offensive security

company based in Turkey that offers pentests (simulated cyberattacks), software security assessments and exploits. Offensive security is a more aggressive, proactive approach to protecting computer systems as opposed to traditional defensive security.

This ruse continues "the trend of posing as fellow security researchers," Google said.

"Foreign adversaries remain persistent with ever-evolving techniques to steal valuable information - either for its intrinsic value or to launch additional attacks," Matt Ashburn, Head of Strategic Initiatives at Authentic8, told Fox News.

"Thankfully, the private sector rapidly uncovered this operation, coordinated with trust and safety teams to prevent risk, and published the research to warn others," Ashburn said.

In addition to Twitter, the cyber actors have used social media such as LinkedIn, Telegram, Discord, Keybase as well as email, Google said.

# Black economy: Profiteering in the pandemic

**Shortages and bottlenecks in the delivery of critical drugs and medical supplies have left desperate families of Covid patients exposed to a rapacious black market**

On the night of April 26, Aseem Bhatia, a 53-year-old entrepreneur in New Delhi, anxiously awaited the Remdesivir injections required for his 41-year-old Covid-positive sister. Her oxygen saturation levels had dropped below 80 and the doctor had advised that Remdesivir be administered in the next few hours. Bhatia's team, which had fanned out to drug stores across the city, returned past midnight at 2 am with two doses of the injection (three vials) purchased for Rs 80,000 from a 'supplier' they found standing outside a mall in Rohini. But, to his utter shock, Bhatia soon realised that the vials were fake, with even the drug's name on them misspelt. "We needed Remdesivir desperately that night. We had checked with every possible chemist and even visited offices of the drug controller-not a single official was available

onsite," recalls Bhatia, who also paid several times the MRP for several other Covid drugs. Bhatia's sister was admitted to a hospital the next morning where she underwent plasma therapy. She is back home now after what she describes as a "walk through hell".

The rampaging Covid pandemic exposed the sheer inadequacies in our preparedness and strategy. Hospitals were overwhelmed, crematoriums and burial sites ran out of space, Covid testing struggled to meet the demand and the vaccination drive is still at the risk of going off-track. Worse, gaping holes in vital supplies, such as of Covid drugs like Remdesivir and Tocilizumab, oxygen cylinders and oxygen concentrators, have stoked a thriving black market where thousands are forced to pay exorbitant prices for vital medicines and equipment.

The scale of the crisis has been vivid on social media-desperate hospital administrations in Delhi and other metros taking to Twitter to flag oxygen shortages and harried citizens following leads on Facebook and WhatsApp in their search for plasma, Covid medicines and oxygen cylinders. Medical oxygen that typically costs a few thousand rupees for a 5-10 litre cylinder has sold for as much as Rs 30,000-60,000 to many desperate families. The shortage of oxygen cylinders bumped up the hitherto lean trade in imported oxygen concentrators in cities. With demand far outstripping their availability, black marketeers stepped in. **MAKING A KILLING**

On April 29, the Delhi police seized 170 oxygen concentrators from a group that was allegedly selling them at inflated prices-as high as Rs 1



lakh. A case was registered under provisions of the Indian Penal Code and the Epidemic Diseases Act, 1897, and four people were arrested. Police raids also reached the doorstep of prominent businessmen. On May 7, the Delhi police said they had seized over 500 oxygen concentrators from three city restaurants owned by entrepreneur Navneet Kalra. The police say Kalra was involved in hoarding and black marketing of these devices that have proved to be life-savers for many Covid patients.

Kalra, whose plea for interim protection from arrest had been rejected by two

courts, was arrested on May 16 from Gurugram. Earlier, a metropolitan court in Delhi had made scathing remarks against investigating officials in the case. "You can't just arrest people because we want to appease the high court. You promulgated the order on May 7 that one cannot sell over MRP. This FIR is of May 5. On that date, there was no crime. There were no regulations," the court said. "To hide your failure, you are showing that we are arresting people. You're creating a terror of punishment. That's not the government's job. When there is no law, you create the law first."



## Excessive social media use reduces sleep among children

The research was conducted among the Canadian students aged between 11-20 years which revealed a dose-response relation between the over-use of social media.



## Are you rich?

*It's likely that you'll prefer short affairs over long-term relationships*

Being wealthy may cause people to prefer having flings or short term relationships, a study has found.

Researchers studied the relationship preferences of 151 heterosexual male and female volunteers (75 men and 76 women) by asking them to look at pictures of 50 potential partners, and to indicate whether they would prefer a long or short-term relationship with each.

Then, they were shown a series of images of luxury items related to wealth, including fast cars, jewellery, mansions, and money. Finally, the participants revisited the images of their potential partners, and sorted them by their preferred relationship type again.

After viewing the wealth images, both male and female participants selected more partners for a short-term relationship compared to the original result - an increase of about 16%. "Evolutionary psychologists believe that whether someone prefers a short-term relationship over a long-term one depends partly on their circumstances, such as how difficult it might be to raise children as a single parent," said Andrew G Thomas, from Swansea University in the UK.

"When those circumstances change, we expect people to change their preferences accordingly. What we have done with our research is demonstrate this change in behaviour, for the first time, within an experimental setting," said Thomas, who led

the research.

After participants were given cues that the environment had lots of resources, they became more likely to select individuals for a short-term relationship. "We think this happened because humans have evolved the capacity to read the environment and adjust the types of relationships they prefer accordingly," Thomas said.

For example, in environments which have lots of resources, it would have been easier for ancestral mothers to raise children without the father's help. This made short-term mating a viable option for both sexes during times of resource abundance.

"We believe modern humans also make these decisions," Thomas said. The researchers also found that participants changed their relationship preferences after being shown a slideshow of dangerous animals, and videos of people interacting with infants.

"When the participants were given cues that the environment contained young children, they were more likely to select individuals for a long-term relationship," said Thomas. "Dangerous environments seemed to cause both men and women to choose more long-term partners, though some women chose more short-term partners instead," he said.

According to a recent study published in a journal named Acta Paediatrica, the excessive use of social media can lead to reduced sleeping hours among children. The research was conducted among the Canadian students aged between 11-20 years which revealed a dose-response relation between the over-use of social media and the shorter sleep duration among the students.

There were in total 5242 participants in the study out of which 63.6% slept less than recommended and 73.4% students reported that they used social media for at least an hour per day. "The impact social media can have on sleep patterns is a topic of great interest given the well-known adverse effects of sleep deprivation on health," said senior author Dr. Jean-Philippe Chaput, of the Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario Research Institute. He further added that electronic screen devices are pervasive in today's society and they are just starting to understand their risks and benefits.

## Questions a person should ask a partner before getting married



Before marrying a person, most of us discuss a lot of things related to money, future and family. But very few musters the courage to ask anything related to sex life. Maybe, the still associated taboo related to sex hinders people from speaking about that aspect of married life, but we need to accept the fact that problems in the bedroom can shake the foundation of a conjugal life. Hence, it is very important to be on the same page sexually (not just emotionally) with your life partner. Here are six sex-related questions you should ask your partner before taking the plunge... Do we really need to explain why it is important to get an idea of your partner's sexual health? Ask your partner if he or she had any sexually transmitted diseases (STD) in the past, and share your own history as well. Surprisingly, some people may not even have a clue if they are suffering from any STDs. Hence, it is a great idea to get a medical test done by both partners before tying the knot. Not all have compatible sex drives and if the difference is too great, it may sometimes create problems in a relationship. Ask your partner a

simple question: How important is the role of sexual compatibility in a marriage? This simple question will help both you approach a topic, which many are uncomfortable talking about. Having this conversation will definitely help you understand each other better.

For some, the past sexual experience of a partner may not matter but a few might still

be apprehensive about it. It's always a good idea to clear these doubts so that you can start your married life without any baggage from the past. You can always ask your partner if he or she wants to know about your past. In case, you too want to have an idea about your partner's past, let him or her know this. Most of us have some sexual fantasies that we would love

to indulge in some day. Some might even have kinky fetishes which might not be agreeable to another? It's a good idea to have an idea about a partner's sexual preferences and fantasies. However, don't judge a person based on his or her sexual preferences, but take your relationship to the next level only when you are comfortable to be part of such fantasies or fetishes.

## Did you catch your partner lying?

While love just happens, it takes time to 'build' trust. Would not it be a wonderful world if we could trust people easily? Or, better still, once the trust is built, if it can never be broken? Between these 'ifs' and 'buts', we have to admit that trust is as fragile as a dream. So, when we catch the person we love most lying to us, our world comes to a halt. We may cry or keep mum, but the struggle to accept this fact is beyond anyone's imagination. So how should you deal with such a situation? Here are a few thoughts that you might like to ponder upon: Sometimes we fight to accept the fact that someone we love can lie to us. So, many people take the easy way to deal with it by feigning ignorance. But that's a big mistake. Acceptance is the first hurdle, after crossing which you will come across the next big

hurdle—confrontation. Once you are ready to confront the person, how should you approach the issue? Never use an accusatory tone. Instead of focusing on why your partner lied to you, you should tell the person how the lie had affected you and the relationship.

Doing so would encourage your partner to participate in a constructive conversation because when a couple starts playing the blame game, the guilty will only take a defensive stance. Be patient, listen and then speak. Although it's difficult to ask direct questions, but the road to discovery, be it anything, is never easy. Don't beat around the bush. Take a deep breath and ask whatever is troubling your mind. But be prepared that the answers could be very different from what you might be expecting.



# How A Grassroots Conservationist Turned A Naga Village Into A Biodiversity Peace Corridor



The Covid-19 pandemic has intensified campaigns around climate change globally. Scientists are harping on speedy and strong climate action to change the temperature trajectory. While some have said neglect of our natural habitats may have prompted the pandemic, others believe climate change has heightened the possibility of disasters striking during the pandemic and their disproportionate impact on those displaced. Lost in this chorus are grassroots conservationists who are mobilising indigenous communities for various sustainable-living endeavours. Though these grassroots change-makers span the country, there are few who've tapped into the spiritual core of their community-driven practices to combat climate change.

Nuklu Phom from the Phom indigenous community in Nagaland stands out as one. A former church worker from the Yaongyimchen village in Nagaland, 48-year-old Phom learnt from his grandfather early that humanity must reconcile with various threats from the environment. He learnt about nature as a sentient spirit that "would give as much as it received from humans."

Raised in a Baptist family, Phom remembers leafing through the pages of the Bible for references to nature. He learnt how his forefathers were deeply attached to nature and superstitions that preserved their natural habitats, besides the tragic consequences of unwise tampering with "Mother Nature."

But when Phom went on to pursue his Master's in theological

studies from Kerala little did he know he would, in a few years, create a biodiversity peace corridor in Nagaland. His efforts



at conservation over the last 15 years have not only restored the ecosystem in his ancestral village, but have also paved the way for a more holistic understanding of the environment. Recently, the conservationist received the Whitley Award for Nature from the United Kingdom that rewards exceptional environmental heroes from the Global South. Phom plans to bring hundreds of communities together to create clusters of community reserves. He wants them manned entirely by the indigenous people to reduce conflicts between man and nature, and use their expertise to combat climate change in the Eastern Himalayas. Earlier, his team received the Nagaland governor's gold medal and the India Biodiversity Award in 2018. "These awards are just a stepping stone to strengthen community-driven initiatives," says Phom. "It's time we moved to sustainable and non-

extractable practices to save our natural habitats."

Phom's first memory of climate change goes back to his days

with his grandfather. He would roam the forests and mountains with him to notice that rivers were shrinking, water bodies were drying up, old crops were being sprayed with pesticides, and the quantum of production was going down everywhere.

"Climate change was happening right in our backyard and I could not remain a silent spectator," he says.

Immersed in both theology and

environmental consciousness, Phom was invited to be the executive secretary of the Baptist association in the Longleng district of Nagaland in 2008. Overseeing over 50 churches, he went about sensitizing worshippers on various environmental concerns. Soon, he realized that without a conservation model, it would be impossible to sustain the interest of village elders and student leaders who were acting as eco warriors.

So, in 2008, Phom mobilized various communities in the region to ban hunting and to declare a patch of forest around their village a community biodiversity conservation area. As a religious leader, he read verses from the Bible to educate the locals about re-wilding practices and a more spiritually-conscious approach to nature.

Phom says religion to him has always been "faith in action." As a spiritual leader he has carved out a distinctive space to think, ideate, and rally indigenous communities for eco-sensitive solutions to climate

change. His efforts have borne fruit.

In the community reserve around his village, long-distance migratory birds such as the falcon have started returning; several wild species have been regenerated and hunting has stopped altogether.

"Last year, about 1.6 million migratory birds came to our biodiversity corridor," says Phom. "The idea is to really listen to our forests, our trees, and to use their help to create a safe haven for wildlife."

The pandemic has, however, disrupted some of Phom's plans. He believes virtual meetings over in-person and door-to-door outreach efforts don't have the same impact. With internet patchy in many areas around his village, it's also hard to come up with new ideas on sustainable practices and alternative livelihoods.

With religious centres shutting down, it's also hard to reach a larger following. Phom says believers are relying more on informal modes of worship making it difficult to drive home grassroots environmental concerns.

Yet, the conservationist sees Covid-19 as an opportunity to inspire communities to band together. He sees how they've realized that the oxygen crisis would not have been so critical if nature was seen more as an ally.

"The air we breathe here is nature's gift bestowed on us through community-inspired deeds," says Phom. "If we stop taking it for granted, it will give us back ten-fold."





# Kangana Ranaut says Covid-19 gives a 'fake sense of recovery'



Actor Kangana Ranaut has shared her journey of recovery from coronavirus with her fans in her latest video that she shared on Instagram. Kangana contracted the virus early last month and later tested negative for it. Kangana said in the new video, "I am here to talk about my experience of recovery from coronavirus. I experienced shocking things during this time. I have always seen that when you are ill, once you start recovering, it is a perpetual journey forward. But, in the case of coronavirus, it is a fake recovery. Just a day after I tested negative, I felt I could do

everything - workout and shoot schedules - as earlier. However, when I stepped out and started doing these things, I relapsed, I was not really well. I was again bed-ridden." She also revealed that she had had a bad case of jaundice and even broke a leg once. Kangana added that she also felt feverish when she faced the relapse. "It was not just once but I faced the relapse at least four or five times. It will be 14 days tomorrow since I tested negative for coronavirus." She then requested people to take care of themselves and ensure they rest enough during the recovery period.

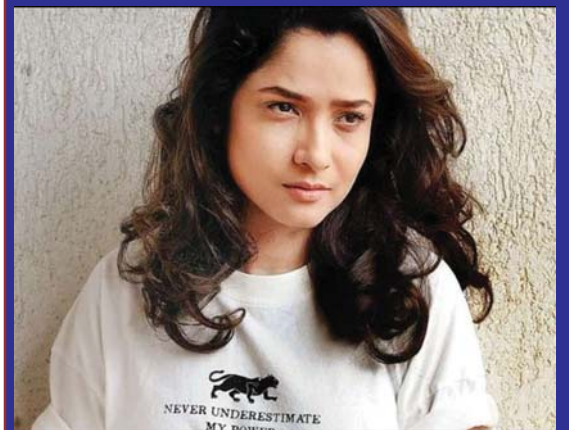
## Yami Gautam ties the knot with Uri director Aditya Dhar in 'intimate wedding'



Actor Yami Gautam has tied the knot with her Uri: The Surgical Strike director Aditya Dhar. The actor took to social media on Friday to make the announcement. She shared a picture of her and Aditya at their wedding ceremony, and quoted the poet Rumi in her caption. She wrote, "In your light, I learn to love - Rumi. With the blessings of our family, we have tied the knot in an intimate wedding ceremony today. Being very

private people, we celebrated this joyous occasion with our immediate family." She continued, "As we embark on the journey of love and friendship, we seek all your blessings and good wishes. Love, Yami and Aditya." The couple's friends and colleagues wished them well in the comments section. Actor Sobhita Dhulipala wrote, "This is so heartening. Many many congratulations!" Vaani Kapoor commented, "Congratulations," and added a heart emoji. Actor Dia Mirza, who recently tied the knot herself, wrote, "Congratulations Yami and Aditya. Lots of love and best wishes to a wonderful journey ahead!" Aditya made his directorial debut with the blockbuster Uri, which starred Vicky Kaushal in the lead role. "Aditya's passion about the film is infectious and the amount of extensive research he has done is amazing. I am really thrilled to be part of this film," Yami had said in a statement at the time. The filmmaker is currently working on his follow-up, The Immortal Ashwatthama, also starring Vicky. Yami, meanwhile, made her debut opposite Ayushmann Khurrana in Vicky Donor. She has also appeared in films such as Kaabil and Bala. She was last seen in Ginny Weds Sunny.

## Ankita Lokhande goes on a social media break



Ankita Lokhande, who recently celebrated the 12th anniversary of TV show Pavitra Rishta, has decided to take a break from social media. She posted a goodbye emoji as her caption and the note in her post read, "It's not a goodbye, it's a see you later."

On June 1, Ankita had also posted a story on her social media account and wrote 'June' with a broken heart emoji. Given her decision came a few days before Sushant Singh Rajput's death anniversary, fans started connecting her break to the same.

While a few fans supported her absence from social media, calling it a 'much needed break', others slammed her for taking a break around Sushant's first death anniversary. One user wrote, "Ankita knows that SSR death anniversary is round the corner, bahut publicity pa liya SSR ke naame pe! So let's go underground and come back later. #hypocrite @lokhandeankita." Meanwhile, a few fans also remembered how Sushant had shared his last post on the same day, June 3 last year.

## Tiger Shroff's mom Ayesha defends him after police files FIR

Tiger Shroff and Disha Patani were booked for flouting Covid-19 lockdown rules in Mumbai on Wednesday. According to the police, the actors were found roaming in Bandra without any reason. Confirming the news, a police officer said, "The case was registered under Section 188 (disobeying the order of public servant) of the Indian Penal Code (IPC). No arrest was made because it is a bailable section." Reacting on reports

of the FIR, Tiger's mom Ayesha commented on one of the posts and wrote, "You got your facts wrong, my dear. They were heading home..." She further wrote, "No one is interested in roaming at a time like this. For your information, it is permitted to go out for essentials." She also said that no one writes about the free meals her son is providing to frontline workers. "That's because he himself doesn't talk about it! So don't judge till

you know," said Ayesha. Meanwhile, the Mumbai police, known for their creative Twitter posts, took a dig on the two actors and tweeted, "In the ongoing 'War' against the virus, going 'Malang' on the streets of Bandra cost dearly to two actors who have been booked under sections 188, 34 IPC by Bandra PStn. We request all Mumbaikars to avoid unnecessary 'Heropanti' which can compromise on safety against #COVID19?."





## Christina Hendricks: 'We were critically acclaimed - and everyone wanted to ask me about my bra'

Christina Hendricks appears on our video call with the most dramatic backdrop. Art deco gold peacocks bedeck a black wall, making her look, as she has so often in her career, a bit too good to be human. Perfectly poised, perfectly framed, perfectly lit, she is more like a dreamy vision of what humans look like. "I, erm, like your wall," I say, pointlessly. She flashes a smile, as if to say: "Obviously." We are here primarily to discuss the comedy-drama series *Good Girls*, the fourth season of which will resume in the US this month after a midseason break. The elevator pitch would be *Breaking Bad* for girls: three suburban women, each hovering on the edge of

bankruptcy, unite to embark on a life of cack-handed crime, only to discover they are good at it. The ensemble - Hendricks, Mae Whitman, who plays her sister, and Retta, their friend - works strikingly well, their pacey comic rapport instilling a sense of perpetual motion. You just can't imagine *Good Girls* ending. Every time a plot line seems to be reaching its climax, something worse - and funnier - happens. "It's funny you say that, because originally, when I read the pilot script, I thought: 'I love this, but I can't imagine this being more than one episode,'" says Hendricks. "It felt like it finished itself." She is unsentimental about

it. Hendricks wasn't looking for a new show - "I was happy doing films, taking my time" - but went into it with her eyes open. It is a network drama, for NBC - it is shown on Netflix in the UK - so producers are always aware that "it's going into every house in the US on a Thursday or a Sunday and a family is watching it. They're much more careful about numbers and advertisers and people being offended or not getting it. A cable show is much more: 'We trust this creator - they're a visionary.'" It has a conventional tone - however dark the material, it is handled very lightly.



## Jodie Foster gets honorary Palme d'Or from Cannes film festival

Jodie Foster is to be awarded an honorary Palme d'Or by the Cannes film festival.

Foster, who has won two Oscars for best actress (for *The Accused* and *The Silence of the Lambs*), will also be the festival's guest of honour at its opening ceremony on 6 July. She first attended Cannes as a 13-year-old in 1976 as a cast member of *Taxi Driver*, which went on to win the Palme d'Or. Her third film as director, *The Beaver*, was screened out of competition at the festival in 2011, as was her 2016 thriller *Money Monster*.

Foster said: "Cannes is a festival to which I owe so much, it has completely changed my life. Although I had directed before, my first time on the Croisette was a defining moment for me. Showcasing one of my films here has always been a dream ... Cannes is a festival by auteur film-makers who honour artists."



Festival president Pierre Lescure said: "Jodie

Foster has provided us with an amazing gift by coming to celebrate the return of the festival on the Croisette."

Cannes general delegate Thierry Frémaux added: "Jodie never ceases to reinvent herself. She questions with her piercing gaze, learns from others, and is willing to step back from her beliefs in order to forge new morals."

Lescure and Frémaux are due to announce the festival's lineup on 3 June after a series of delays to the event caused by the Covid pandemic. It is scheduled to go ahead in July, but new travel regulations brought in by the French government may prevent delegates from the UK from attending.

## Kate Winslet says she refused offer to edit sex scene showing 'bulgy belly'

Kate Winslet has said she refused a director's offer to edit a sex scene in which she showed a "bulgy bit of belly" for her latest television series.

The actor claimed Craig Zobel, the director of her new HBO series *Mare of Easttown*, had offered to show her body in a more flattering light.

Winslet, who plays detective and a grandmother Mare Sheehan in a Pennsylvania town in the programme, the finale of which was broadcast in the UK on Monday, said she had refused and told Zobel: "Don't you dare."

She also said she twice sent back the promotional poster for the drama because she felt it had been altered too much.

"I'm like: 'Guys, I know how many lines I have by the side of my eye, please put them all back,'" Winslet, 45, told the *New York Times*. "I said to my husband [Edward Abel Smith]: 'Am I OK with that? Is it all right that I'm playing a middle-aged woman who is a grandmother who does really make a habit of having one-night stands?' He's like: 'Kate, it's great.'" The actor added: "Listen, I hope that in playing Mare as a middle-aged woman - I will be 46



in October - I guess that's why people have connected with this

character in the way that they have done because there are clearly no filters." She's a fully functioning, flawed woman with a body and a face that moves in a way that is synonymous with her age and her life and where she comes from. I think we're starved of that a bit." Winslet said, however, that she may not be "comfortable" with doing another nude scene "It's not even really an age thing, actually," she said. "There comes a point where people are going to go: 'Oh, here she goes again.'" In an interview with the *Guardian* in February, Winslet said she had been forced

to respond to derogatory comments about her weight from a young age. "In my 20s, people would talk about my weight a lot. And I would be called to comment on my physical self. Well, then I got this label of being ballsy and outspoken. No, I was just defending myself." The actor said she had revisited some newspaper articles written about her in the late 1990s from when she was 19 "and it was almost laughable how shocking, how critical, how straight-up cruel tabloid journalists were to me".



## Buckingham Palace banned ethnic minorities from office roles, papers reveal

(SAI Bureau)- The Queen's courtiers banned "coloured immigrants or foreigners" from serving in clerical roles in the royal household until at least the late 1960s, according to newly discovered documents that will reignite the debate over the British royal family and race. The documents also shed light on how Buckingham Palace negotiated controversial clauses - that remain in place to this day - exempting the Queen and her household from laws that prevent race and sex discrimination.

The papers were discovered at the National Archives as part of the Guardian's ongoing investigation into the royal family's use of an arcane parliamentary



procedure, known as Queen's consent, to secretly influence the content of British laws. They reveal how in 1968, the Queen's chief financial manager informed civil servants that "it was not, in fact, the practice to appoint coloured immigrants or foreigners" to clerical roles in the royal household, although they were permitted to work as domestic servants.

It is unclear when the practice ended. Buckingham Palace refused to answer questions about the ban and when it was revoked. It said its records showed people from ethnic minority backgrounds being employed in the 1990s. It added that before that decade, it did not keep records on the racial backgrounds of employees.

(Contd on page 34)

## Microwave weapons that could cause Havana Syndrome exist, experts say



(SAI Bureau)- Portable microwave weapons capable of causing the mysterious spate of "Havana Syndrome" brain injuries in US diplomats and spies have been developed by several countries in recent years, according to leading American experts in the field. A US company also made the prototype of such a weapon for the marine corps in 2004. The weapon, codenamed Medusa, was intended to be small enough to fit in a car, and cause a "temporarily incapacitating effect" but "with a low probability of fatality or permanent injury".

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## Is JBS cyberattack a dry run?



(SAI Bureau)- A Russia-based hacker group victimized JBS Foods, the world's largest meat producer, in a ransomware hack this week, according to the FBI. Other hackers, based in Russia and elsewhere, struck the Colonial Pipeline

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## Second Covid Wave Has Wreaked Havoc On The Livelihoods Of The Rural Poor

(SAI Bureau)- We all the virus, the issue of rural livelihoods remember the time migrant labourers traversed hundreds of kilometers by foot, in a desperate attempt to reach home amid the peak of the first Covid wave. And while the second Covid wave might not have brought back those heart-wrenching visuals to our TV

screens, migrant labourers continue to face the difficulties they faced earlier. With the focus currently fixed on providing medical oxygen and hospital beds to those infected by



wave, riding on the back of a brutal first one, is wreaking havoc on Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) and the informal sector. In many cases, they have eaten into

(Contd on page 31)

## The Fed will start winding down a program that saved the economy

(SAI Bureau)- The Federal Reserve announced Wednesday that it will begin winding down a program that purchased tens of billions of dollars of corporate assets to shore up the economy during the pandemic. In a statement, the central bank said the facility was crucial to businesses during the depth of the recession. But as the economy rapidly recovers, the time to start winding it down has begun. "Shock and awe is no longer needed for the time being," said Nicholas Elfer, co-head, of research at Breckinridge Capital Advisors. "The Fed's decision to begin winding down its portfolio of

(Contd on page 31)

## India Has To Be Bigger Than The Ego Of One Leader



(Contd on page 33)