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# Study Reveals How Masks Disrupt Facial Perception

A new study suggests that it may be difficult to recognize familiar faces when people wear surgical masks to help them protect against Covid-19.

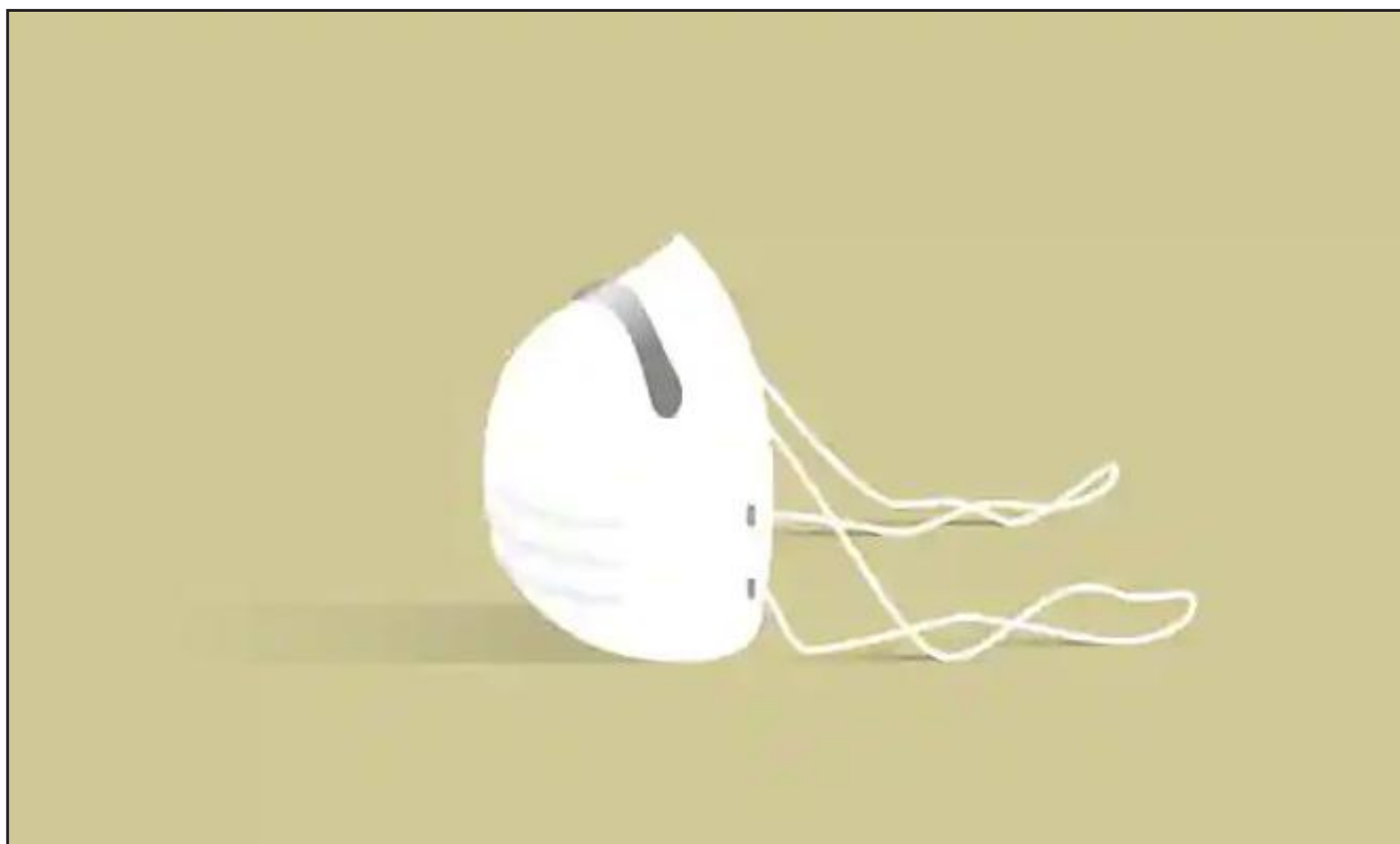
According to the findings published in the journal Scientific Reports, during the pandemic, the identification of people wearing masks has often presented a unique challenge. This new study led by researchers from Ben-Gurion University of the Negev (BGU) in Israel and York University in Canada reveals the impact of this predicament and its potentially significant repercussions.

"For those of you who don't always recognize a friend or acquaintance wearing a mask, you are not alone," according to the researchers Prof. Tzvi Ganel, head of the Laboratory for Visual Perception and Action at the BGU Department of Psychology, and Prof. Erez Freud, who earned his Ph.D. at BGU and is now a faculty member at York University in Toronto, Ontario.

"Faces are among the most informative and significant visual stimuli in human perception and play a unique role in communicative, social daily interactions," the researchers note. "The unprecedented effort to minimize Covid-19 transmission has created a new dimension in facial recognition due to mask-wearing."

To examine the effects of wearing masks, Prof. Ganel and Prof. Freud used a modified version of the Cambridge Face Memory Test, the standard for assessing facial perception, which included masked and unmasked faces. The study was conducted online with a large group of nearly 500 people.

The researchers found that the



success rate of identifying someone wearing a mask was reduced by 15%. "This could lead to many errors in correctly recognizing people we know, or alternatively, accidentally recognizing faces of unfamiliar people as people we know," says Prof. Galia Avidan who is a member of the BGU Department of Psychology and the Department of Cognitive and Brain Sciences, and an expert on facial recognition and perception.

"Face masks could be even more

challenging to people whose face recognition skills are not ideal to begin with and cause greater impairment."

The research team also found that masks specifically interfered with extracting a holistic impression of faces and led to feature-by-feature processing which is a less accurate and more time-consuming strategy.

"Instead of looking at the entire face, we're now forced to look at eyes, nose, cheeks, and other vis-

ible elements separately to construct an entire facial face percept - which we used to do instantly," the researchers say.

These changes in performance, with the alteration along with the processing style of faces, could have significant effects on activities of daily living, including social interactions, as well as other situations involving personal interactions, such as education.

"Given that mask-wearing has rapidly become an important norm in

countries around the globe, future research should explore the social and psychological implications of wearing masks on human behaviour," Ganel says. "The magnitude of the effect of masks that we report in the current study is probably an underestimation of the actual degree in performance dropdown for masked faces."

- Agencies

**Faces are among the most informative and significant visual stimuli in human perception and play a unique role in communicative, social daily interactions**

## New Wearable Device Detects Hand Gesture You Intend To Make

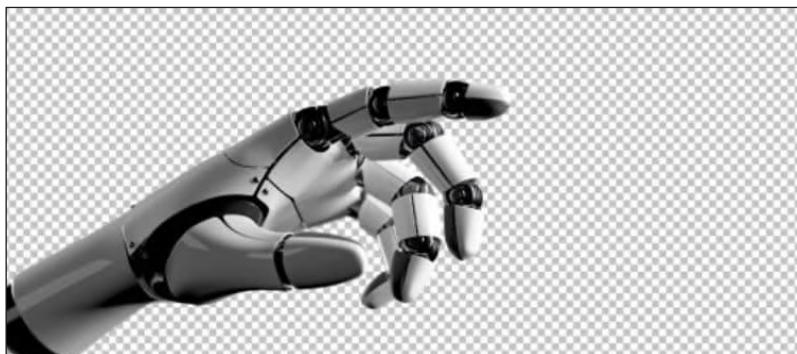
Imagine typing on a computer without a keyboard, playing a video game without a controller or driving a car without a wheel. A team of scientists has developed a new device that can recognise hand gestures based on electrical signals detected in the forearm.

The system, which couples wearable biosensors with artificial intelligence (AI), could one day be used to control prosthetics or to interact with almost any type of electronic device, said engineers from the University of California, Berkeley.

"Prosthetics are one important application of this technology, but besides that, it also offers a very intuitive way of communicating with computers," said Ali Moin, who helped design the device as a doctoral student in UC Berkeley's Department of Electrical Engineering and Computer Sciences.

Reading hand gestures is one way of improving human-computer interaction.

"And, while there are other ways



of doing that, by, for instance, using cameras and computer vision, this is a good solution that also maintains an individual's privacy," Moin said in a new paper appeared in the journal Nature Electronics.

To create the hand gesture recognition system, the team collaborated with Ana Arias, a professor of electrical engineering at UC Berkeley, to design a flexible armband that can read the electrical signals at 64 different points on the forearm.

The electrical signals are then fed into an electrical chip, which is programmed with an AI algorithm capable of associating these signal patterns in the forearm with specific hand gestures.

The team succeeded in teaching the algorithm to recognise 21 individual hand gestures, including a thumbs-up, a fist, a flat hand, holding up individual fingers and counting numbers.

Like other AI software, the algo-

rithm has to first "learn" how electrical signals in the arm correspond with individual hand gestures.

To do this, each user has to wear the cuff while making the hand gestures one by one.

"In gesture recognition, your signals are going to change over time, and that can affect the performance of your model," said Moin.

"We were able to greatly improve the classification accuracy by updating the model on the device."

Another advantage of the new device is that all of the computing occurs locally on the chip: No personal data are transmitted to a nearby computer or device.

Not only does this speed up the computing time, but it also ensures that personal biological data remain private.

While the device is not ready to be a commercial product yet, it could likely get there with a few tweaks, said Jan Rabaey, senior author of the paper.

-Agencies

### Public Notice

My Father's Name has been wrongly written in school records as Parvaz Ahmad Wani while his correct name is Muhammad Ashraf Dar which needs immediate correction. If anybody having any objection in this regard he/she may file his/her objection in the office of the Good Word School For Science Foundation within a period of seven days from the date of publication of this notice after that no objection shall be entertained.

Ifra Jaan  
D/o Muhammad Ashraf Dar  
R/o Nowpora Kalan Sopore

### OFFICE OF THE ASSISTANT REGIONAL TRANSPORT OFFICER ANANTNAG

No.101/4319/MVD/ANG

Date:-28/12/2020

#### NOTICE

Whereas joint application has been received by this office from Mr. Mohd Yousuf Bhat S/O Mohd Akram Bhat R/O Sayriq Anantnag (Party No.1st) as Transferor, (Seller) Owner of the Vehicle 110 Bearing Regd. No. JK 03G-9813 (Commercial/

Non-Commercial) covering under R/P No. Nil. and Mr. Mohd Shafi Khan S/O Habibullah Khan R/O Latan Anantnag (Party No.2nd) as Transferee (Purchaser) requesting for transfer of R/C & R/P of the above noted Vehicle from party No 1st and 2nd. And Cancellation of hire purchase agreement with Mahindra and Mahindra. Before the case is disposed off on its merit, anybody have any objection regarding the proposed transfer Amy file his objection within (7) days from the publication of this notice to the office of the undersigned. No any representation / objection shall be entertained after stipulated period.

MJA

Assistant Regional  
Transport Officer Anantnag

### OFFICE OF THE ASSISTANT REGIONAL TRANSPORT OFFICER ANANTNAG

No.101/4324/MVD/ANG

Date:-28/12/2020

#### NOTICE

Whereas joint application has been received by this office from Mr. Mohd Arif Ganie S/O Mohd Maqbool Ganie R/O Aru Pahalgam Anantnag (Party No.1st) as Transferor, (Seller) Owner of the Vehicle Taveera Bearing Regd. No. JK 03C-7699 (Commercial/ Non-Commercial) covering under R/P No. Nil. and Mr. Kashif Ashraf Mir S/O Mohd Ashraf Mir R/O Saller Anantnag (Party No.2nd) as Transferee (Purchaser) requesting for transfer of R/C & R/P of the above noted Vehicle from party No 1st and 2nd. And Cancellation of hire purchase agreement with JK Bank Pahalgam. Before the case is disposed off on its merit, anybody have any objection regarding the proposed transfer Amy file his objection within (7) days from the publication of this notice to the office of the undersigned. No any representation / objection shall be entertained after stipulated period.

MJA

Assistant Regional  
Transport Officer Anantnag

### OFFICE OF THE ASSISTANT REGIONAL TRANSPORT OFFICER ANANTNAG

#### NOTICE

Whereas joint application has been received by this office from Mr. Mohd Hussain Bhat S/O Gull Mohd Bhat R/O Harduturu Anantnag (Party No.1st) as Transferor, (Seller) Owner of the Vehicle Maruti 800 Bearing Regd. No. JK 03D-6823 (Commercial/ Non-Commercial) covering under R/P No. Nil. and Mr. Shabir Ahmad Malik S/O Gh Mohd Malik R/O Doonipawa Anantnag (Party No.2nd) as Transferee (Purchaser) requesting for transfer of R/C & R/P of the above noted Vehicle from party No 1st and 2nd. And Cancellation of hire purchase agreement with MMFSI Anantnag. Before the case is disposed off on its merit, anybody have any objection regarding the proposed transfer Amy file his objection within (7) days from the publication of this notice to the office of the undersigned. No any representation / objection shall be entertained after stipulated period.

MJA

Assistant Regional Transport Officer Anantnag



### CENTRAL UNIVERSITY OF KASHMIR GREEN CAMPUS, GANDERBAL-191131

#### EXPRESSION OF INTEREST (EOI) FOR PROVIDING CAFETERIA SERVICES

(NIT No. 05 of 2020)

For and on behalf of the Vice-Chancellor, Central University of Kashmir, online tenders through e-Tendering mode are invited from registered Restaurant owners/Caterers for providing Cafeteria Services at various Campuses of the University at Ganderbal on outsource basis. The detailed specifications are given in the e-tender document.

Tender Schedule/Critical Dates

1	Bid submission start date	28/12/2020 (10:00 AM)
2	Bid submission end date	06/01/2021 (04:00 PM)
3	Date for submission of original DDs of Rs 500/- (Non-refundable) as e-Tender processing fee & EMD of Rs 10,000/-	07/01/2021 (04:00 PM)
4	Date & Time of opening of bids	09/01/2021 (11:00 AM)

The detailed Bid/Tender document consisting of Qualifying information, eligibility criteria, specifications, set of Terms & Conditions of the Contract & other relevant information is available on the University website: [www.cukashmir.ac.in](http://www.cukashmir.ac.in) & on CPP Portal ([www.eprocure.gov.in](http://www.eprocure.gov.in)). The e-tenders/ Bids are to be submitted at CPP Portal ([www.eprocure.gov.in](http://www.eprocure.gov.in)) only. However, the University is at liberty to call hard copies of the technical bids if needed

No: Est - 05 of 2020  
Date: 24.12.2020

Sd/-  
Registrar

### Office Of The Assistant Regional Transport Officer Budgam Kashmir

#### NOTICE

Whereas an application has been received from one. Shri: Ab Aziz Rather S/o: Ab Qadoos Rather R/o: Dalwan Chhari Sharief Budgam owner of vehicle bearing Registration No: JK04E-7654 for cancellation of hire purchase agreement with M/S J&K Bank B/U Chhari-sharief.

Now therefore it is notified for the information of the general public that objections if any to the proposed cancellation of hire purchase Agreement shall be filed in writing in the office of the Assistant Regional Transport office ARTO Budgam within a period of 12 days from the date of publication of this notice in the daily newspaper.

No. ARTO/ BUDGAM.2021  
Dated 28/12/2020

Assistant Regional Transport officer  
Budgam Kashmir

MCB



### ISLAMIC UNIVERSITY OF SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY AWANTIPORA, KASHMIR.

Tele: 01933-247954/247955

Website: [www.islamicuniversity.edu.in](http://www.islamicuniversity.edu.in)

#### CONDOLENCE

The whole fraternity of Islamic University of Science and Technology (IUST) deeply condoles the sad demise of Mrs. Hassina Wani (Former Principal, Alamdaar Memorial College of Nursing and Medical Technology, IUST).

Vice Chancellor, Deans, Registrar, Finance Officer, Islamic University Faculty Association (IUFA), Islamic University Non-Teaching Employees Association (IUNTEA), other Staff Members and Students of the University expressed their heartfelt condolences and prayed Almighty Allah for giving eternal peace to the departed soul and courage to the bereaved family to bear this irreparable loss.

Issued Through, Public Relations





J&K Employee's coordination committee (JKECC) stage protest at Press colony Srinagar, demanding release of pending wages of ICDS Supervisors & streamline of salaries, allege gender discrimination.KO Photo Abid Bhat

# Police Arrests Accused In Bemina Sexual Assault Case

Observer News Service

**SRINAGAR:** Budgam police Monday arrested a Hyderabad resident and registered a case against him in connection with kidnapping & brutal sexual assault on a 23-year-old girl in Bemina, Budgam.

According to police after the abduction of a 23-year-old girl in Narkara Budgam on December 22, there has been a wave of public anger against the accused.

In this regard, Budgam police arrested one Irzaan Kaunsar son of Kaunsar Ahmad Khan, resident of Gulberg Colony Hyderpora.

Based on a complaint received by Police Station Budgam a 23 year old girl (name withheld) in her complaint had accused that Arzan Ahmad Khan gave her lift in a car, but did not stop at her destination and instead took her to some unknown place where he allegedly sexually assaulted her. Police said that the case in this regard has been registered under



FIR No. 465/20 US 366,376 IPC .

Police also confirmed that the accused has been arrested.

Meanwhile residents have expressed outrage at the incident and demanded stern punishment to the involved person.

Religious leaders and civil society in Budgam have called on the police to take the case to its

logical conclusion and serve the exemplary punishment to the guilty so that it would serve as a deterrent for such crimes.

The residents alleged that the accused was trying to influence the case by utilising his contacts back home. They sought intervention of higher officials to ensure transparency in the case.

**RELIGIOUS LEADERS AND CIVIL SOCIETY IN BUDGAM HAVE** called on the police to take the case to its logical conclusion and serve the exemplary punishment to the guilty so that it would serve as a deterrent for such crimes.

## NIT Srinagar Signs MoU With IIT Delhi To Collaborate On Academic Activities



**New Delhi :** A Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) has been signed between the National Institute of Technology (NIT) in Srinagar and the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT), Delhi to collaborate on different academic activities.

The scope of collaboration on academic and research activities in the MoU includes Academic and Research collaboration in the areas of mutual interest, exchange of students and faculty, exchange of academic information, scholarly information, materials and publications, and admission of NIT Srinagar students for direct PhD entry at IIT Delhi.

For research collaboration, proposals for collaborative research work under this Memo-

randum will be submitted with the prior approval of the Head of each institution or his/her nominee.

"Each institution will nominate one of its members as its representative in-charge of the cooperative programme. Individual programme of work under this Memorandum will be jointly planned and conducted by the nominees of both parties," read the MoU.

"Neither National Institute of Technology Srinagar nor Indian Institute of Technology Delhi will be held responsible for any liability to the party, and neither party shall be required to purchase any insurance against loss or damage to any property due to activities to which this agreement relates," it said.

## DC Sgr Visits Harwan, Administers Oath To Pregnant Woman

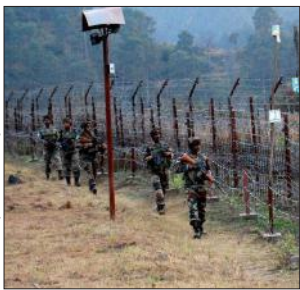
**SRINAGAR:** Deputy Commissioner Srinagar Dr Shahid Iqbal Choudhary Monday visited the house of a winning District Development Council (DDC) candidate at Harwan to administer oath to her as she wasn't able to attend the official oath ceremony held at Tagore hall.

Choudhary visited Harwan area in Srinagar outskirts to administer oath to DDC candidate, an expecting mother, who won the elections. "A DDC candidate Rizwana Akther, who won DDC polls recently but



couldn't attend today's oath ceremony, was administered oath as she is expecting," an official said.

## Poonch Teen Crosses LoC, Family Says 'Inadvertently'



**POONCH:** A 17-year-old boy has "inadvertently" crossed to the other side of Kashmir in Poonch district and his family issued an appeal on Monday to Pakistani authori-

ties to release him. Family of the teenager who studies in tenth standard said Mohammad Shabir of Mandhar's Kaaiyan village crossed the LoC.

The family said that a missing report has been filed in police Station Poonch. "We request authorities to release our son," Mohammad Bashir, father of the teenager said.

SSP Poonch Ramesh Angral said that the matter has been taken up with the higher authorities.(GNS)

## Man Booked For Forging Signatures Of Omar Abdullah Had Issued Regularisation Orders Of Daily Wagers

Observer News Service

**SRINAGAR:** The Crime Branch Kashmir on Monday produced a Challan against a trade union leader for forging the signatures of Omar Abdullah, former Chief Minister of J&K on a fake letter pad. The accused had issued fake orders for the regularisation of daily wagers of the Rural Development Department .

According to the Anti Corruption Bureau (ACB) a challan was produced in case FIR No. 32/2014 U/S 420,468,471 RPC against accused Gulam Mohammad Wani son of Mohammad Ahsan Wani resident of Anzwala Anantnag, self styled president of the Daily Wagers Union Jammu and Kashmir, before the Court of Forest Magistrate Srinagar.

"Consequent upon a complaint received from Chief Minister's Secretariat of the erstwhile state of J&K, regarding the use of fake and forged letter pad of the then Chief Minister, Omar



Image for representation

Abdullah for regularization of the daily wage workers of Rural Development Department J&K. The above mentioned accused had forged the signatures of the then Chief Minister Shri Omar Abdullah," it said.

"The accused Gulam Mohammad also forged the signatures of the then Director Rural Development Department Jammu/Kashmir whereby he had prepared / forwarded the list of Daily Wage Workers to senior formations for their regularization, who otherwise were not existing on the rolls of Department," it added.

## CUK's SoE Holds Painting Competition

**GANDERBAL:** School of Education (SoE), Central University of Kashmir (CUK) has established 14 free winter coaching camps across J&K in collaboration with several educational institutions.

CUK students of B.Ed 3rd semester are providing free education to the students of 6th to 10 standard in these camps.

These camps are providing free coaching, guidance and counselling, mentoring and are also conducting co-curricular activities. One such camp established in collaboration with Iqbal Public High School Soura organised a painting competition among the 6th, 7th and 8th class students.

Dean and Head School of Education, Dr. Syed Zahoor Ahmad Geelani, and some other teacher educators and research scholars supervised the competition. The 1st, 2nd and 3rd prizes were bagged by Arbina from 8th class Seema from 6th class and Sabahat from 7th class respectively.



The competition was organised by the pupil teachers under the leadership of Ms Barkat Handoo.

Dr. Syed Zahoor Ahmed Geelani also interacted with the students and emphasized the importance of hard work, enthusiasm, dignity, prosperity and time value. He praised the participants and B.Ed. Trainees for their dedication and motivation.

### DIAL-EMMA

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- QAZIGUND: 01951-296153

### HIGHWAY STATUS

- Sgr-Jammu highway - (Open)
- Mughal Road - (Closed)
- Srinagar- Leh- (Open)

## This Day in History

- 1170 - Thomas Becket, Archbishop of Canterbury is assassinated inside Canterbury Cathedral by followers of King Henry II; subsequently martyred.
- 1503 - Battle of Garigliano: Spanish army under General Cordoba defeats French forces
- 1539 - St Jacob's Church burns after being hit by lightning
- 1541 = Isabella of Poland and King Ferdinand of Austria sign Treaty of Gyalu
- 1558 = Charles V, King of Spain and Holy Roman Emperor, buried in El Escorial, San Lorenzo de El Escorial, Spain
- 1653 - Dutch painter Jan Vermeer becomes a member of the Guild of Saint Luke for painters in Delft
- 1705 - Prosper Jolyot's "Idoménée," premieres in Paris
- 1708 - Great Alliance occupies Gent.
- 1778 - British troops occupy Savannah, Georgia.
- 1786 - French Revolution: The Assembly of Notables is convoked
- 1806 - Thomas Dibdin's pantomime "Harlequin and Mother Goose" starring Joseph Grimaldi, in his most famous clown performance, opens at the Covent Garden Theatre, London
- 1812 - The USS Constitution under the command of Captain William Bainbridge, captures the HMS Java off the coast of Brazil after a three hour battle.
- 1837 - Steam-powered threshing machine patented, Winthrop, Maine.
- 1860 - The first British seagoing iron-clad warship, HMS Warrior is launched.
- 1862 - Battle of Chicasaw Bayou: confederate armies defeat General William T. Sherman.
- 1862 - Bowling ball invented.
- 1891 - Edison patents "transmission of signals electrically" (radio).
- 1900 - General Viljoen surprise attack British garrison to Helvetia
- 1903 - French Equatorial Africa separates into Gabon, Chad and Ubangi-Shari
- 1908 - Patent granted for a 4-wheel automobile brake, Clintonville, Wisconsin
- 1911 - Proclamation restores "Dei Gratia" from Canada's coins
- 1911 - Sun Yat-sen becomes the first President of the Republic of China.
- 1911 - Mongolia gains independence from the Qing dynasty
- 1920 - The Netherlands and Venezuela recover diplomatic relations1920 - The Netherlands/ Venezuela recover diplomatic relations.

## From KO Archives

## India, Pak May Go To War In 15 Years

AGENCIES

**WASHINGTON:** India and Pakistan are the two nations most likely to go to war during next 15 years that will be deadly be-cause of the lethality of their arms, the CIA has predicted in a report "Global Trends 2015", released on eve of transition of Bush administration. The report, which may be the part of international agencies propaganda just to destabilise the region, further says India and Pakistan will amass larger nuclear and missile arsenals, with India emerging as the unrivaled regional power with a large military-including naval and nuclear capabilities.

"In increasingly tumultuous Pakistan government control will by 2015 be limited to the Punjabi heartland and the commercial capital, Karachi the report predicts," claims the report. "Further domestic decline would benefit Islamic political activists, who may significantly increase their role in national politics" the report predicts while pointing out that nascent democratic reforms will produce little change in the face of opposition from an entrenched political elite and Islamic parties. China, India to be new military powers: China and India will be the world's new military powers, based on sheer numbers, growing economic might and technological capabilities. The report offers the most specific insight ever provided an incoming administration about the forces shaping global change. CIA Director George J. Tenet Monday said the "Global Trends 2015" is being released to launch a "strategic dialogue within the government to deal with both the challenges and the opportunities ahead.

According to the report internal problems in South Asia will exacerbate regional instability. In India, more than half a billion people will live in dire poverty, as the gap between rich and poor widens and sparks domestic strife. Gaps between India and Paki-stan: The widening strategic and economic gaps between India and Pakistan -and the dynamic interplay between their mutual hostility and the instability in Central Asia-will define the South Asia region in 2015. The widening India-Pakistan gap-destabilizing in its own right-will be accompanied by deep political, economic, and social disparities within both states. Pakistan will be more dependent on international financial assistance. Other

South Asian states-Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal-will be drawn closer to and more dependent on India and its economy. Afghanistan will likely remain weak and a destabilizing force in the region and the world. Wary of China, India will look increasingly to the West, but its need for oil and desire to balance Arab ties to Pakistan will lead to strengthened ties to Persian Gulf states as well. "Global Trends 2015," the result of an intensive yearlong study involving all branches of the intelligence community as well as many of America's top thinkers, offers sobering predictions about the "drivers," or major forces, that will determine the world of 2015 and beyond. The report was prepared by the National Intelligence Council, the most influential analytical arm of the US intelligence community. The council also produces classified "estimates" on dangers for all branches of the government.

(KASHMIR OBSERVER, 29 DECEMBER, 2000)



# Despite Hi-Tech Advances, Many Europeans Wary Of Taking Covid Shot

The European Union has secured contracts with a range of drugmakers including Pfizer and BioNTech, Moderna and AstraZeneca, for a total of more than two billion doses and has set a goal for all adults to be inoculated next year.



Photo: Representational

## AGENCIES

**WARSAW/ SOFIA:** Europe rolled out a huge COVID-19 vaccination drive on Sunday to try to rein in the coronavirus pandemic but many Europeans are sceptical about the speed at which the vaccines have been tested and approved and reluctant to have the shot.

The European Union has secured contracts with a range of drugmakers including Pfizer and BioNTech, Moderna and AstraZeneca, for a total of more than two billion doses and has set a goal for all adults to be inoculated next year.

But surveys have pointed to high levels of hesitancy towards inoculation in countries from

France to Poland, with many used to vaccines taking decades to develop, not just months.

"I don't think there's a vaccine in history that has been tested so quickly," Ireneusz Sikorski, 41, said as he stepped out of a church in central Warsaw with his two children.

"I am not saying vaccination shouldn't be taking place. But I am not going to test an unverified vaccine on my children, or on myself."

Surveys in Poland, where distrust in public institutions runs deep, have shown fewer than 40% of people planning to get vaccinated, for now. On Sunday, only half the medical staff in a Warsaw hospital where the

country's first shot was administered had signed up.

In Spain, one of Europe's hardest-hit countries, German, a 28-year-old singer and music composer originally from Tenerife, also plans to wait for now.

"No one close to me has had it (COVID-19). I'm obviously not saying it doesn't exist because lots of people have died of it, but for now I wouldn't have it (the vaccine)."

A Christian Orthodox bishop in Bulgaria, where 45% of people have said they would not get a shot and 40% plan to wait to see if any negative side effects appear, compared COVID-19 to polio.

"Myself, I am vaccinated against everything I can be," Bishop Tihon told reporters after getting his shot, standing alongside the health minister in Sofia.

He spoke about anxiety over polio before vaccination became available in the 1950s and 1960s. "We were all trembling in fear of catching polio. And then we were overjoyed," he said. "Now, we have to convince people. It's a pity."

## GREAT LEAP FORWARD

The widespread hesitancy does not appear to take into account the scientific developments in recent decades.

## Saudi Arabia extends entry ban amid coronavirus variant fears

## AGENCIES

Saudi Arabia's interior ministry on Monday extended a ban on entry to the kingdom by air, land and sea for another week amid concerns over a fast-spreading variant of the new coronavirus, the state news agency SPA reported.

Saudi Arabia shut its borders on Monday Dec 21 and suspended international commercial flights on a rolling weekly basis although foreign flights already in the country were allowed to leave.

The ministry said it is evaluating the situation while allowing non-citizens to leave the kingdom and allowing entry for exceptional cases, SPA reported. The measures do not affect the movement of goods. Pakistan International Airlines (PIA) had also halted all its flights scheduled to Saudi Arabia since Dec 21. PIA spokesman Abdullah Khan had said all affected passengers would be accommodated at the earliest upon flight restoration.

PIA is resuming commercial flights to Saudi Arabia on Monday (today) to bring back stranded Pakistanis after Saudi Arabia's General Authority of Civil Aviation allowed non-Saudis to leave the kingdom and permitted foreign airlines to operate flights for the purpose.

# Days after calling it 'disgrace', Donald Trump signs US COVID-19 relief bill

The signing comes after unemployment benefits expired for millions of Americans on Saturday as the bill went unsigned.

## AGENCIES

**US President Donald Trump on Sunday (local time) signed the USD 2.3 trillion coronavirus relief package, days after he expressed displeasure with the spending outlined in the bill.**

According to The Hill, Trump signed off the package from his golf club in the West Palm Beach.

"I will sign the Omnibus and Covid package with a strong message that makes clear to Congress that wasteful items need to be removed," Trump said in a statement upon signing the legislation.

"I will send back to Congress a redlined version, item by item, accompanied by the formal rescission request to Congress insisting that those funds be removed from the bill," he added.

The President had in past expressed dismay with the USD 2.3 trillion package that Congress passed Monday, which includes USD 900 billion in coronavirus relief and USD 1.4 trillion to fund the government until October, conflating the two bills and saying the spending goals were misguided.

The signing comes after unemployment benefits expired for millions of Americans on Saturday as the bill went unsigned.

Trump has visited his golf club in Florida each day since arriving

in the state on Wednesday and has made no public appearances.

In the statement, Trump lauded himself for this work with Congress in the passing of CARES Act earlier this year, saying his action helped in preventing the great depression.

Senate have agreed to focus strongly on the very substantial voter fraud which took place in the November 3 Presidential election. The Senate will start the process for a vote that increases checks to USD 2,000, repeals Section 230, and starts an inves-



"Under my leadership, Project Warp Speed has been a tremendous success, my Administration and I developed a vaccine many years ahead of wildest expectations, and we are distributing these vaccines, and others soon coming, to millions of people," he said.

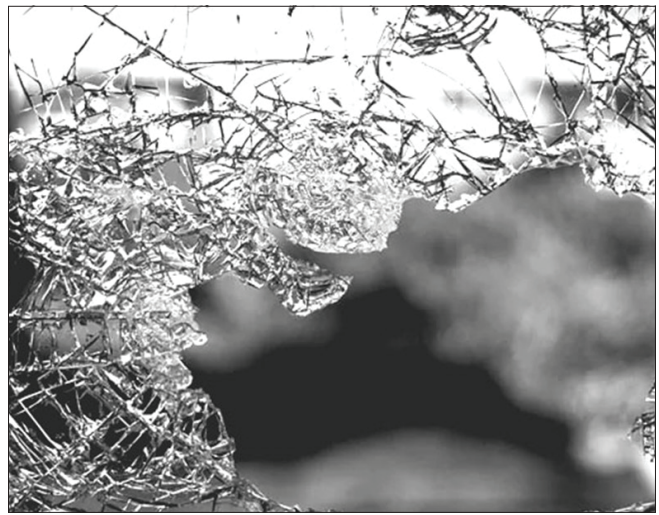
The House will vote on Monday on legislation that would change the USD 600 in the coronavirus relief-government funding package to USD 2,000, an amount supported by Trump and Democratic leaders.

"Likewise, the House and

tigation into voter fraud," Trump said in his statement.

The House will vote on Monday on legislation that would change the USD 600 in the coronavirus relief-government funding package to USD 2,000, an amount supported by Trump and Democratic leaders.

According to The Hill, the bill includes special terms for restaurants and hotels to access larger loans from the Paycheck Protection Programme, a move praised by the National Restaurant Association."



## 4 Pak Army Officials Killed In Helicopter Crash In Gilgit-Baltistan

## AGENCIES

Four Pakistan Army personnel were killed when a military helicopter crashed during a casualty evacuation due to technical reasons in Gilgit-Baltistan, the army said on Sunday. The chopper crashed in Minimarg area of Astore district on Saturday evening, the army said in a statement. It was transporting the body of a soldier to the military hospital in Skardu. The pilot, co-pilot and two soldiers were killed in the accident, the statement said, adding that the crash occurred due to technical reasons. Gilgit-Baltistan Information Minister Fatullah Khan has expressed deep sorrow over the tragedy.

## Trump Signs Tibet Bill To Pre-Empt Chinese Move In Dalai Lama Succession

## AGENCIES

**WASHINGTON:** US President Donald Trump has signed into law a bill that calls for establishing a US consulate in Tibet and building an international coalition to ensure that the next Dalai Lama is appointed solely by the Tibetan Buddhist community without China's interference.

The Tibetan Policy and Support Act of 2020 modifies and re-authorises various programmes and provisions related to Tibet.

signed the act on Sunday as part of the massive USD 2.3 trillion package for the year-end bill to provide long-delayed coronavirus relief and fund the federal government. The US Senate last week unanimously passed the bill despite China's protest.

It authorises assistance to non-governmental organisations in support of Tibetan communities in Tibet; places restrictions on new Chinese consulates in the United States until a US consulate has been established in Lhasa, Tibet.

The law now authorises the Office of the US Special Coordinator for Tibetan Issues

and expands the office's duties to include additional tasks, such as pursuing international coalitions to ensure that the next Dalai Lama is appointed solely by the Tibetan Buddhist faith community.

It also directs the Secretary of State not to open a new Chinese consulate in the US unless China allows the opening of an American consulate in Lhasa.

It is the policy of the US to take all appropriate measures to hold accountable senior officials of the Chinese Government or the Chinese Communist Party who directly interfere with the identification and installation of the future 15th Dalai Lama of Tibetan Buddhism, the successor to the 14th Dalai Lama.

Beijing views the 14th Dalai Lama as a "separatist" working to split Tibet from China.

Some of the prominent measures approved by the US Congress include imposing sanctions on Chinese officials, including travel restrictions.

Noting that the 14th Dalai Lama advocates the Middle Way Approach, which seeks genuine autonomy for the six million

Tibetans in Tibet, the new law says that the Dalai Lama has overseen a process of democratisation within the Tibetan polity and devolved his political responsibilities to the elected 23 representatives of the Tibetan people in exile in 2011.

The Tibetan Policy and Support Act of 2020 approves USD 1 million per annum for the Special US Coordinator on Tibet, USD 675,000 towards scholarship provisions, USD 575,000 for scholar exchange initiatives, USD8 million for the Tibetan Autonomous Region and Communities in China, USD 6 million for Tibetans living in India, USD3 million for Tibetan governance.

Expressing concern over the exploitation of natural resources of Tibet, in particular water, the new law seeks to pursue collaborative efforts with Chinese and international scientific institutions, to monitor the environment on the Tibetan Plateau, including glacial retreat, temperature rise, and carbon levels, to promote a greater understanding of the effects on permafrost, the river flows, grasslands and desertification and the monsoon cycle.

# Forced Into Quarantine, Hundreds Of UK Tourists Sneak Out Of Swiss Resort



## AGENCIES

**Around 200 of the 420 or so affected British tourists in the luxury Alpine ski station quit under the cover of darkness, the SonntagsZeitung newspaper reported.**

Hundreds of British tourists forced into quarantine in the Swiss ski resort of Verbier fled in the night rather than seeing their holidays go downhill, the local municipality said Sunday.

Around 200 of the 420 or so affected British tourists in the luxury Alpine ski station quit under the cover of darkness, the SonntagsZeitung newspaper reported.

Switzerland's ski resorts were set to boom with snow-seeking British tourists -- but a flight ban due to the new

Covid-19 variant raging in England put those plans on ice.

The drastic ruling by the Swiss government also included a 10-day retroactive quarantine for anyone who arrived from Britain since December 14, following the discovery of a new variant of the coronavirus which experts fear spreads more quickly.

Some of the British tourists affected in Verbier left immediately, while others stuck it out for a bit before quitting.

"Many of them stayed in quarantine for a day before they set off unnoticed under the cover of darkness," Jean-Marc Sandoz, spokesman for the wider Bagnes municipality, told SZ. He called the whole situation "the worst week our community has ever experienced".

British tourists normally make up 21

percent of the Verbier clientele, and most start pouring in just after Christmas.

Voted Switzerland's best ski resort for the past two years, Verbier markets itself as offering "adrenaline-packed thrills, simple pleasures and a chic lifestyle".

The Verbier Tourist Office has been holding daily crisis cell meetings to try to deal with the ever-changing coronavirus picture.

## - Breakfast untouched -

"It was when they saw the meal trays remained untouched that the hoteliers noticed that the customers had gone," Sandoz told ATS news agency. He said that according to a Saturday survey of the ski resort's hotels, fewer than 10 people would still be in quarantine.

The rest would either have left or their quarantine time would have expired.

"We can't blame them. In most cases, quarantine was untenable. Imagine four people staying in a hotel room of 20 square metres," Sandoz said.

He said the tourists left feeling "a little angry with Switzerland" and with the sense of having been "trapped".

Fights between Switzerland and the two countries were halted on Monday, but the first outbound flights from Zurich to Britain resumed on Thursday.

Two cases of the new British coronavirus variant have been detected in Switzerland and one in neighbouring Liechtenstein, the Swiss health ministry said Sunday. Two cases of the new South African variant of SARS-CoV-2, the virus which causes Covid-19, have also been detected, the ministry said.

# Citizen journalist jailed for 4 years over Wuhan virus reporting

## AGENCIES

**Zhang Zhan is one of a number of people facing trial for exposing the initial chaos of Wuhan's COVID-19 response.**

A Chinese citizen journalist held since May for her livestream reporting from Wuhan as the COVID-19 outbreak unfolded was sentenced to four years in prison on Monday, almost a year after details of an "unknown viral pneumonia" surfaced in the central China city.

Zhang Zhan, a former lawyer, was accused of "picking quarrels and provoking trouble" for her reporting in the chaotic initial stages of the outbreak.

Her live reports and essays were widely shared on social media platforms in February, grabbing the attention of authorities, who have punished eight virus whistle-blowers so far as they try to stamp out criticism of the government's response to the outbreak.

"Zhang Zhan looked devastated when the sentence was announced," Ren Quanniu, one of Zhang's defence lawyers, told reporters confirming the four year jail term outside Shanghai Pudong New District People's Court on Monday morning.

Her mother sobbed loudly as the verdict was read, Ren added.

Beijing has congratulated itself for "extraordinary" success in controlling the virus inside its borders, with an economy on the rebound while

much of the rest of the world suffers through painful lockdowns and surging caseloads a year since the first cases of the then unknown virus emerged in Wuhan.

Controlling the information flow has been crucial in allowing China's



communist authorities to reframe the narrative in their favour.

About a dozen supporters and diplomats gathered outside Shanghai Pudong New District People's Court on Monday morning, but police pushed journalists and observers away from the entrance as the defendant and her lawyer arrived.

Zhang, who is 37, began a hunger strike in June, according to her lawyers, and has been force-fed via a nasal tube as concerns grow about her health. "She said when I visited her (last week): 'If they give me a heavy sentence then I will refuse food until the very end'... She thinks she will die in prison," Ren said. "It's an extreme method of protesting against this society and this environment."

"Every day a torment" China's communist authorities have a history of putting dissidents

on trial between Christmas and New Year to minimise Western scrutiny.

The trial comes just weeks before an international team of World Health Organization experts is expected to arrive in China to investigate the origins of the pandemic.

Another lawyer said Zhang's health was in decline and she suffered from headaches, dizziness and stomach pain. "Restrained 24 hours a day, she needs assistance going to the bathroom," Zhang Keke, who visited her on Christmas Day, wrote in a note circulated on social media.

"She feels psychologically exhausted, like every day is a torment."

Zhang wrote in a February essay that the government "didn't give people enough information, then simply locked down the city".

Human rights groups have also drawn attention to Zhang's case.

Authorities "want to use her case as an example to scare off other dissidents from raising questions about the pandemic situation in Wuhan earlier this year," said Leo Lan, research and advocacy consultant at the Chinese Human Rights Defenders NGO.

Zhang, who has maintained her innocence, is the first of a group of four citizen journalists detained by authorities earlier this year after reporting from Wuhan to face trial.

Previous attempts by the AFP news agency to contact the other three -- Chen Qiushi, Fang Bin and Li Zehua -- were unsuccessful.



## SCBA Expresses Shock Over Search At Delhi Lawyer's Premises, Assault Of Another In UP

**NEW DELHI:** The Supreme Court Bar Association (SCBA) on Monday expressed shock and deep concern on "the arbitrary, illegal and brazen exercise of brute power by the police" against lawyers, including the search conducted at the premises of an advocate representing some of the accused in the north-east Delhi riots cases.

The SCBA also condemned the assault on a lawyer in the Etah district, Uttar Pradesh, by the local police.

The SCBA expressed "serious concern on the reprehensible conduct of the police in both these cases and calls upon all concerned authorities to take serious punitive action against all concerned for their atrocious conduct which denigrates and violates the mandate of the Rule of law". Regarding search at advocate Mehmood Pracha's office premises, the SCBA said that such actions were "intimidatory and designed to abuse the due process by coercing an advocate to succumb to police threats and methods unheard of in legal annals".

"Such a search/seizure is in the teeth of the specific provisions of law which recognise the client lawyer relationship and protects all correspondence between the advocate and his client," SCBA said in a statement.

Encroachment on the rights of an advocate by the police violates the rights of the accused to a fair trial guaranteed under Article 21, and the protection against self-incrimination guaranteed under Article 20 (3) of the Constitution of India, jeopardising the rights of the client to a free trial, it said. "The seizures of confidential information which is protected by lawyer-client privilege, in a search conducted by the very police authorities who are prosecuting the lawyer's clients, will prejudicially affect the rights and guarantees of the accused," it said.

"It is illegal and contravenes all canons of protection available to a



client and his lawyers," said Rohit Pandey, acting secretary of SCBA.

The statement further said that advocates are entrusted with confidential and privileged communications by their clients and are protected and privileged.

"Such privilege is protected under law and is the sine qua non for the effective realization of the right to fair trial, the right to access of justice, right against incriminating oneself which constitute essential rights guaranteed under Article 20 and 21 of the Constitution of India," the statement said.

"These sacrosanct protections of confidentiality guaranteed under the constitution and the laws, work as the fundamental bedrock of our justice system," it said.

It further said that the grant of a warrant by the Magistracy to search a lawyer's office in a routine mechanical manner, particularly in respect of a lawyer's communication and correspondences, was antithetical to rule of law and constitutes a disturbing violation of this privilege directly affecting the administration of justice. "This Association strongly condemns the actions of the Delhi Police in its attempt to seize an advocate's personal computer and other personal digital devices by taking subterfuge under orders of a Court. "Such an arbitrary exercise to access an Advocate's personal digital devices is a grave and egregious violation of privacy of any citizen and that of a member of the Bar who is engaged to act for his client," it said.



## Farmers' Stir: Govt Invites 40 Unions For Next Round Of Talks On December 30

**NEW DELHI:** The government on Monday invited 40 protesting farmer unions for the next round of talks on December 30 on all relevant issues to find a "logical solution" to the current impasse over the three new farm laws.

Meanwhile, Punjab farmer leaders are meeting to deliberate on Central government's letter, in a Kisan Andolan office at Kundli.

The government's invite followed a proposal made by unions last week to hold the

talks on December 29.

In a letter to the unions, Agriculture Secretary Sanjay Aggarwal has invited them for holding talks at 2 pm on December 30 at Vigyan Bhavan in the national capital.

So far, five rounds of formal talks held between the Centre and 40 protesting farmer unions remained inconclusive.

Taking note of the unions' offer to resume talks, Aggarwal said, "The government is also

committed to finding a logical solution on all relevant issues with a clear intention and an open mind."

It's been over a month now that thousands of farmers, especially from Punjab, Haryana and parts of Uttar Pradesh, are camping at Delhi borders seeking repeal of the three farm laws. They have threatened to intensify their stir in the coming days if their demands are not fulfilled. — PTI

## Govt Itself Is Misguided About Farm Laws: Farmer Leader

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA

**T**ill now, the government was calling the farmers who were against the new agricultural law misguided, but now a farmer leader has said that the government itself is misguided about the agricultural reforms.

Farmer leader Joginder Singh said that the government wants to change the fate of the farmers by implementing the model of agrarian reform which has failed in other countries.

Joginder Singh is the President of the Bharatiya Kisan Union (Ekta-Ugrahan), an organisation of Punjab. He said that the government itself is misguided about agrarian reform because this model has failed in America.

Defence Minister Rajnath Singh had accused the opposition of misleading the farmers and said that when (then Prime Minister) Narasimha Rao started economic reforms in 1991, it took four-five years for positive results to come. He said that if we cannot wait four-five years to see the good results of the agricultural reforms implemented by the Narendra Modi government, then we can wait at least for two years.

To a question asked on the Defence Minister's statement, Joginder Singh said that the Mandi law was abolished in Bihar in 2006 itself and today everyone knows the condition



of the farmers of Bihar. He said, therefore, there is no need to wait much to see the results of the new law, rather we already have examples.

The protest of farmers on the borders of Delhi against the new agricultural laws implemented by the central government continues on the 33rd day on Monday. Leaders of agitating farmer organisations are demanding repeal of the Farmers Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Act 2020, Farmers (Empowerment and Protection) Price Assurance and Agricultural Services Agreement Act 2020 and Essential Commodities (Amendment) Act 2020.

These were introduced in September after the passage of three Agri Bills introduced in the Monsoon Session of Parliament in both Houses. However, earlier through an ordinance, these laws came into force from June 5.

The next round of talks is proposed on December 29 to resolve the deadlock between the government and farmer organisations regarding these three laws. This is the first among the four issues in the agenda for this dialogue by the farmers organisations, which has been sent to the government.

In addition, they want to negotiate with the government on the procedure and provisions to provide a legal guarantee for procurement on a profitable MSP suggested by the National Farmers Commission. The other two issues proposed for the next round of negotiations include the Commission Ordinance for Air Quality Management in the National Capital Region and adjoining areas, amendments in 2020 that are necessary to exclude farmers from the penal provisions of the ordinance and changes in the draft of the Electricity Amendment Bill 2020.

## Sena's Sanjay Raut's Wife Summoned In PMC Bank Money Laundering Case



PRESS TRUST OF INDIA

**Pune:** The Enforcement Directorate has summoned Varsha Raut, wife of Shiv Sena MP Sanjay Raut, for questioning in the PMC Bank money laundering case on December 29, officials said on Sunday.

Varsha Raut has been asked to appear before the federal agency in Mumbai. This is the third summons issued to her after she skipped the earlier two on health grounds, they said.

The summons for questioning has been issued to her under the provisions of the Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA).

The ED wants to question Varsha Raut with regard to "receipt" of some funds that were allegedly siphoned from the bank, official sources claimed.

The ED had filed a PMLA case to probe the alleged loan fraud in the Punjab and Maharashtra Co-operative (PMC) Bank in October last year against the Housing Development Infra-

structure Ltd (HDIL), its promoters Rakesh Kumar Wadhawan and his son Sarang Wadhawan, its former chairman Waryam Singh and ex-managing director Joy Thomas.

The agency took cognisance of a Mumbai Police Economic Offences Wing FIR against them for allegedly causing "wrongful loss, prima facie to the tune of 4,355 crore to PMC Bank, and corresponding gains to themselves".

The Shiv Sena, which is part of Maharashtra's ruling alliance Maha Vikas Aghadi (MVA) along with the NCP and the Congress, had earlier alleged that central probe agencies have been targeting them unfairly.

Former BJP leader Eknath Khadse, who recently joined Sharad Pawar's Nationalist Congress Party (NCP), has also been summoned by the ED for questioning on December 30 in Mumbai in connection with a money laundering case linked to a land deal in Pune's Bhosri area.

## Court Directs To Preserve Footage Of Raid Against Delhi Riots Lawyer

Agencies

**NEW DELHI:** A Court here on Sunday directed Delhi Police to preserve the entire video footage of the search conducted in lawyer Mehmood Pracha's house in connection with a case related to North-East Delhi violence.

Duty Metropolitan Magistrate Udhav Kumar Jain said that the entire video footage of the search be preserved with the seal of this court and be placed before the concerned court for orders accordingly.

The court said that at this stage, only directions for preserving the video footage is deemed necessary and the concerned court can take a call on supplying the video footage to Mr Pracha at an appropriate stage.

The court listed the matter for January 5, 2021.

The Investigating Officer has appeared before the court with seized case property.

Mr Pracha has submitted before this court that a search was conducted at his office on December 24 and according to the provisions of Section 165 CrPC, the agency should have intimated forthwith the search and the seized articles to the concerned Magistrate.

However, Mr Pracha submitted that the same has not been done and therefore, he has filed an application under section 165(5) CrPC and submitted that the entire search was videographed as per court order dated December



22. He submitted that he is entitled to a copy of video footage.

In the last hearing, the court asked the Investigating Officer of the case to remain present in the court along with entire video footage of any search conducted by him of office premise of the applicant Mr Pracha.

Mr Pracha has also told the court that Delhi Police official has threatened him that they will make a false case against him.

Delhi police had alleged that Mr Pracha forged documents and instigated a man to depose falsely in connection with a case related to the violence in north-east Delhi in February this year.

Mr Pracha has been representing various accused and complainants in the violence in north-east Delhi.

Various cases were registered over the north-east Delhi violence, in which at least 53 people were killed and several others were injured.

## Kanpur Post Office Releases Stamps Of Criminals Chhota Rajan, Munna Bajrangji; Probe Ordered



Agencies

**KANPUR (UTTAR PRADESH):** In a surprising turn of events, a post office in Kanpur here released the stamps of criminals Chhota Rajan and Munna Bajrangji. The Chief Post Master has clarified that the employees should have been careful in verifying the pictures.

"Postal department provides the facility to get 'My Stamp'

made, by submitting a form along with ID. Our employees should have been careful in verifying pics," said Himanshu Mishra, Chief Post Master, Kanpur.

"The procedure of My Stamp is very easy and anyone can get it done. Even the customers need to be responsible and not indulge in anything like this," he added. The Chief Post Master said that further investigation will be done into this matter.

### NEWS MAKERS

## Britain To Restrict Promotion Of Unhealthy Food From April 2022

Agencies

**LONDON:** Britain will ban "buy one get one free" promotions for food high in fat, sugar or salt and free refills of sugary soft drinks in restaurants from April 2022, the government said on Monday, its latest step in its plan to tackle obesity and improve public health.

The government says obesity is one of Britain's biggest long-term public health problems with almost two-thirds of adults in England overweight and one in three children leaving primary school overweight or obese.



The measures will also restrict where in a store promotions on such products can be advertised, and unhealthy promotions will not be allowed at checkouts, shop entrances or at the ends of aisles.

"We are restricting promotions and introduc-

ing a range of measures to make sure the healthy choice is the easy choice. Creating an environment which helps everyone eat healthier foods more regularly is crucial to improving the health of the nation," public health minister Jo Churchill said.

Britain first proposed restricting "buy one get one free" deals on junk food in July, and also announced measures such as banning TV and online adverts for junk food before 9.00 p.m.

Last month the government went further and proposed a total ban on online advertising of unhealthy food.

Being overweight has been shown to increase the risk of serious illness or death from COVID-19 - a fact highlighted by Prime Minister Boris Johnson who has publicly talked about his own need to lose weight since being hospitalised with the disease.

## 'Arun Jaitley Worked Tirelessly For India's Progress': Modi Remembers Late Leader

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Monday paid tributes to his former cabinet colleague and late BJP leader Arun Jaitley on his birth anniversary, and said his warm personality, intellect, legal acumen and wit are missed by all those he closely interacted with.

Other BJP leaders also remembered the former finance minister who for many years remained the most articulate party voice on a gamut of issues and was considered one of its sharpest political minds. Born in 1952, Jaitley died



in August last year. "Remembering my friend, Arun Jaitley ji on his birth anniversary. His warm personality, intel-

lect, legal acumen and wit are missed by all those he closely interacted with. He worked tirelessly for India's progress," Modi tweeted.

In his tributes, Home Minister Amit Shah said Jaitley was an outstanding parliamentarian whose knowledge and insights had very few parallels.

"He made a lasting contribution to Indian polity and served the nation with great passion & devotion. My heartfelt tributes," he said.

BJP president J.P. Nadda said Jaitley will be remembered as an articulate orator and capable strategist.

Defence Minister Rajnath Singh said Jaitley's contribution to India's public life and his role in strengthening the party will always be remembered.



K O V I E W

## Towards Justice

The police has accused an army officer and two associates of planting weapons on the bodies of three labourers who were killed by Army in September at Amshipora, Shopian and passed off as militants. Captain Bhoopendra Singh who is now in military detention, has been charged with murder, conspiracy and other offences. Similarly the two civilian “sources”, who were with him at the time, are in police custody.

A police statement issued late on Sunday said the officer and two others “planted illegally acquired weapons and material on their dead bodies after stripping them of their identities and tagged them as hardcore terrorists in possession of war-like stores.”

This is a rare case in which police has directly blamed the Army for the killing of civilians in an encounter. To be fair to Army, even it has blamed its own personnel in this incident. Earlier the Army had claimed to have killed three unidentified militants in the said encounter. But once their pictures were published in newspapers and circulated on social media, three families in Rajouri claimed they were their children and insisted they had had no terror links. According to the families, the trio had gone to Shopian to work as labourers. The Army was quick to order a high-level Court of Inquiry (CoI) into the encounter.

But nobody in Kashmir, even in their wildest imagination, believed that the Army would indict its own soldiers. This is why when it happened, it came as a pleasant surprise to people. Army has chosen to voluntarily dispense justice in a case where its personnel have in the words of Army itself “exceeded” the powers vested under the AFSPA. The Army has already confirmed that the three youth killed in an encounter at Amshipora were civilians from Rajouri in Jammu. The finding followed an internal probe into the incident.

As the Amshipora case has once again showed, what matters is the accountability of the personnel responsible for gross excesses, not the revocation of the AFSPA per se. Best the way out is the willingness among the security agencies to act fairly and speedily in case of rights violations. This is the only pragmatic solution under the circumstances. One can also ask what is stopping the centre from making necessary modifications in the law that makes the security personnel who commit human rights violations accountable for their actions. Such actions cannot be left entirely to the discretion of the Army. There has to be an inbuilt legal mechanism to punish the erring personnel irrespective of the institutional discretion of the security forces.

O T H E R O P I N I O N

## Spot the winner

The Union minister of law and justice has described the results of the District Development Council elections in the Union territory of Jammu and Kashmir as a ‘historic’ triumph for the Bharatiya Janata Party. The BJP, at first glance, seems to have performed well. It has emerged as the single largest party winning over 70 seats, sweeping southern Jammu and even pocketing three seats in the Valley. But the minister, as is the wont of this dispensation, has spotted the wrong winner. For it is the People’s Alliance for Gupkar Declaration — its constituents include the National Conference, the Peoples Democratic Party, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) and others — that has emerged as the real winner. The PAGD, which is seeking to restore Jammu and Kashmir’s statehood that the BJP took away, is in a position to dominate not only the district boards in Kashmir but — this is significant — quite a few in Jammu if the Congress decides to lend a helping hand. The alliance has made a mark in north Jammu, and a closer look would reveal that some of its smaller members — the CPI(M) and the Jammu and Kashmir People’s Conference are examples — have had the best strike rates among the contestants. Contrastingly, the BJP, which has ceded some strongholds in Jammu and polled a little over three per cent of votes in Kashmir, clocked a strike rate of 32.6 per cent although it fought the highest number of seats. The election results have not been disputed, but this should not deflect attention from the formidable hurdles that the PAGD had to confront. There was the all-too-familiar vilification: the Union home minister described the alliance as a ‘gang’, insinuating its sympathy for separatists; PAGD candidates were also prevented from campaigning freely on specious grounds. The people have now replied unambiguously against this orchestrated intimidation.

Local elections are usually benign affairs. But what made the DDC elections singular was that this was the first election that took place since the controversial abrogation of Article 370. There is thus reason to view the outcome as an expression of the people’s opinions on the Centre’s interventions. The message should be chastening for the BJP. However, another concern seems to have escaped public scrutiny. With the creation of an additional layer of governance — the DDCs are not statutory bodies since their genesis lies in an executive fiat — what would be the prospect of the state assembly, if there is one, in the future? Parallel institutions need not be a sign of the triumph of democracy in Jammu and Kashmir.

Telegraph India



Kashmir Observer

Another Take  
on DDC Polls

As the details of DDC polls emerge, there is one aspect that has gone completely unnoticed. The implications of these polls on India. It is clear that like many other new measures, Jammu and Kashmir is a laboratory to test a new project which will alter the very foundations of India all politics across states. The concept to elect DDC through direct vote isn’t done anywhere else. It was tried in J&K first.

These DDC polls have actually turned Panchayats (which are elected through a direct vote) irrelevant and are going to be a replacement of the assemblies too. It is not being done anywhere else yet, all states have DDCs elected by Block committees and panchs and not through direct vote. Once the two layers above Panchayats are elected by panchs, it keeps them relevant to the whole process. In fact, that process had made Panchayat system three tier. Now an elected DDC is going to make Panchayat polls redundant and completely powerless. There are 14 elected members in a district who will choose a chairperson and there isn’t any clarity what role Panchayats are going to play. The Panchayat system is no longer connected. With DDC elected through a direct vote, the lower two layers are no longer important. DDC makes panchs irrelevant, so is it going to turn elected assemblies unnecessary.

It also is aimed to depoliticise state level politics. BJP is moving towards a presidential form of government which will

not be a federal structure / every state sooner or later will have DDC without any body or forum above them. This way you will have district assemblies at state level and a strong centre and there will be only bureaucracy that will connect these district bodies with the Centre. This means there will be no assemblies/ no CMs but only Lt Governors. This will depoliticise grass root and these elected members in each district will be busy with their so called developmental works where they will not have even any role in development planning or decisions on allocation etc — that will be decided

to pass such an amendment.

This means there will be DDC in all of 716 districts elected through direct vote with 14 members in each district. And as there is no forum for these DDC’s to come together at state or UT level, they will have no forum to come together. Their role will be exclusively development related and not politics. But that much is sufficient to turn MLAs and state assemblies redundant, making way for their subsequent removal. The new system will have 716 DDCs and each state headed by a Lieutenant Governor appointed by the Centre that will run the affairs

The DDC model is literally a move towards turning every state into a UT. BJP has always been a votary of a strong Centre/ centralisation of all power and politics. So, once this DDC model is replicated in other states, the regional politics that is literally the only competition to BJP in the absence of a potent national party will be wiped out.

by centre through its unelected representatives.

The DDC model is literally a move towards turning every state into a UT. BJP has always been a votary of a strong Centre/ centralisation of all power and politics. So, once this DDC model is replicated in other states, the regional politics that is literally the only competition to BJP in the absence of a potent national party will be wiped out.

BJP will only need to make a similar amendment to the central act that they have made to J&K Panchayati Raj Act to introduce election of DDC’s through a direct vote. And they have sufficient numbers in the Parliament

and a Parliament at the Centre. There can, however, be another direct vote to elect a President. There is also a possibility that the elected MPs and DDCs jointly elect a President in the same manner the President is currently elected. These DDC polls in J&K aren’t only about J&K. It is also a pilot project for all states.

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## Don’t Romanticise Harsh Winters

Winter in Kashmir is mainly associated with the closure of schools, late timings for public office, frequent electricity cuts, freezing of water pipelines and closure or blockage of main roads. This mere change in a season brings life almost to the halt in Kashmir and it has become now normal. While it is true that winter in Kashmir is harsh, but it is also true that infrastructure in Kashmir has been left untouched to suit the winter conditions. Every time snow falls, electricity goes off for days be-

cause the power transmission lines fall everywhere. Roads get closed for days before the government scrambles its mechanical department to clear the roads. Waterlogging is also now an emerging concern in urban areas. This is not normal that people take it as. It is just a failure to adapt the infrastructure to the local conditions. It is beyond the understanding of a common person that if these incidents occur every year during winter, why the government has not taken concrete steps to make all these things winter-proof. Why should common people suf-

fer every year just because of change in a season? The Darbar move itself resembles that government escapes and becomes blind to all these problems that Kashmir faces during the winter. The government should take concrete steps to make infrastructure in Kashmir winter-proof so that no one has to suffer. Winter itself is not the problem. The failure of the government to adapt to the conditions of the winter is the actual problem. While the local population has itself developed ways to keep themselves going in the freezing cold, the government has done nothing

to keep itself going during winter. It is high time that the government upgrades the electricity transmission system, water distribution system and install the heating system in its offices and schools so that normal life can go on in winter. Winter and Chilai Kalan should be just like any other change in seasons and there should be no romanticizing of this change. People should confront the bitter truths of failure that winter brings with it.

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# Why Hate Preacher’s New Film Will Inflame Passions

Mehroor Mustafa

A number of renowned Islamic scholars have criticised the film for poor background research and inflammatory content. Iran based Grand Ayatollah Naser Makarem Shirazi has even issued an edict blacklisting the film. He has called upon Muslims to desist from watching or promoting the film.

ANew controversy is brewing as the release date of feature film “Lady of Heaven” depicting the life of Lady Fatima, the daughter of Prophet Muhammad (Pbuh) by a UK based production house, draws close.

Directed by John Stephenson Obe and produced by ‘Enlightened Kingdom’ the film is set for release on the New Years Eve.

A number of renowned Islamic scholars have criticised the film for poor background research and inflammatory content. Iran based Grand Ayatollah Naser Makarem Shirazi has even issued an edict blacklisting the film. He has called upon Muslims to desist from watching or promoting the film.

“Without any doubt those who help to produce and release this film, as well as those who watch it have committed a mortal sin. This is particularly true under the current circumstances, where any sort of attempt at creating disunity among the Muslim people will be helping the enemies of Islam to succeed in their sinister plans against the religion. Such divisive acts do indeed entail severe divine penalty for those who perpetrate them. It is quite likely that the enemies of Islam have a hand in all this and they have planned to incite a lot of bloodshed among the Muslims through this film. Therefore, all those who help in the production of this film will also be responsible for any Muslim blood that is spilled on its account. You must announce to all Shias that those who intend to produce such divisive films are not one of us. These are some liars who seek only to manipulate the religious feelings of some of the followers and adherents of the Ahl-al-Bayt (a), and in particular their affections for the great Lady of Islam, Lady Fatimah Al Zahra (a). Thus, all Muslims must know that the messages intended to be conveyed through this film are neither the messages of Islam nor those of the Shia school.

May Allah bless you all  
Naser Makarem Shirazi

However defending the film, its executive producer Husaain Ashmere says, “There are 250 films on Jesus Christ, 120 films on Moses, 80 about the other prophets, 40 films on Buddha and nine films about Mary, there are none about the life of Lady Fatima (AS), the daughter of the Prophet Muhammad (Pbuh).”

He said, during the making of this film no individual represented a holy personality in accordance with the Islamic tradition.

However according to blogger Hamid Waqar, the main reason behind this controversy is the involvement of Yasser Al-Habib. “Furthermore, the film seemed to portray a dangerous theme promoted by Yasser Al-Habib and the Shirazi clan”.

The film starts with a scene from present day war-torn Iraq. An Iraqi child who has lost his mother to a terrorist attack learns the importance and power of patience in his new home, where a loving grandmother narrates the historical story of The Lady Fatima (AS) and how her suffering as the “first victim of terrorism” spun out of control into the 21st century.

The controversial cleric Yasser Al-Habib, who surfaces as the screenplay writer, is actually said to be the brain behind this film project. Al Habib known for stoking controversies, has previously been jailed in Kuwait for insulting Islam. He later took refuge in the UK where he spent £2million to buy a former evangelical church in Fulmer County and turned it into his base. It houses a mosque and headquarters of his controversial satellite TV channel, Fadak.

Al Habib is widely believed to be a UK point man of Qum based cleric Sayyid Mohammad al-Shirazi, a critic of the Islamic Republic and its founding philosophy. Shirazi heads what has come to be known as ‘Shirazi group’ or ‘Shirazi clan’. The group owns more than 20



satellite television channels in different languages spoken in Muslim lands.

## STOKING FIRE

In 1979 Shirazi left Kuwait and settled in the holy city of Qum immediately after the success of Islamic Revolution in Iran. Shirazi initially supported the revolution but soon fell apart with the leadership because of his extremist views. Later his group was declared outlawed by the Iran government. “Shirazi advised his followers not to reveal all their cards so they do not become mere tools in the hands of the Islamic Republic”, researcher Hassan al Mustafa wrote on Al Arabiya website recently.

“The Shirazis are aware that Iran is a state with huge financial capabilities and political influence that goes beyond its borders. They know they cannot compete with it on this front so they headed towards another field which is possessing the sentiment of the Shia public, addressing it and influencing it especially amid the sectarian conflict in the Middle East and the worsening Sunni-Shia conflict”, Mustafa writes.

“Amid this sectarian polarisation, the group launched a plethora of satellite television channels. They adopted a religious rhetoric and broadcast juristic and doctrinal lectures and prayers and aired footage of visitors to sacred shrines of holy imams.

This combination of religious material touched the worried and wounded Shia sentiment at a time when Al-Qaeda explosions rocked Iraqi cities and killed thousands of innocent people and amid the rise of Daesh and the violence and oppression it represented.

The “Husayni” rhetoric of these channels created an objective and moral space for the public in the Gulf and in Iraq in particular as people found themselves a breather which they can use to declare their own identity amid attempts to bury it and eradicate it, as they tend to believe.

“Arresting the Shia sentimental space” was the task which the Shirazi group found itself capable of in terms of competing with the Iranian government and excelling over it, especially that Islamic Republic presents itself as a state against extremism and sectarianism and promoter of Muslim unity.

The Shirazi group refuses to surrender to the Iranian will but it cannot compete with the Islamic Republic. It can compete with it in controlling the Shia senti-

ment via the project of rituals and satellite channels. This explains why the Shirazi office began establishing ideological channels. By broadcasting controversial and provocative material they have largely succeeded in undoing what Iran has been painstakingly doing, that is to bury the old Shia-Sunni hatchet and forge Muslim unity.

Top Shia clergy in Iran, Iraq and beyond have branded the Shirazi group as an extension of British intelligence service, the MI6. According to a report published in March by the news agency Tasnim that’s close to Iran’s Revolutionary Guards, Shirazi groups media channels work on a daily basis to promote extremist ideology, attack the Iran’s Islamic Republic and ignite the fire of war between Sunni and Shia, i.e. provide indirect services to takfirist movements that wreak havoc in the Muslim Ummah.”

Fadak TV, which broadcasts from the UK premises of al Habib and which is directly supervised by him, is one of the most important channels that adopts a sectarian and slanderous rhetoric that excludes whoever is different whether Sunni or Shia. Habib’s insults have included respectable Sunni and Shia Islamic religious symbols.

Researcher Ahmed Al-Katib has his own opinion on the matter as he said: “Fadak TV and other similar channels express the opinion of the current Shirazi reference, despite the different terms used and the type of the adopted rhetoric. Everyone drinks from the same shallow intellect.”

“Yasser Al-Habib’s movement greatly harmed the image of Shia and depicted them as a group that do nothing but disturb others. This contradicts with the culture we inherited from the Imams of the Ahl al Bayt who forbade insulting, says Islamic scholar Sheikh Habib al-Jumayaa.

In September 2013, Iran’s Supreme Leader Ayatollah Sayed Ali Khamenei warned in a speech about Iran’s “enemies.” Along with the usual suspects, such as the United States and Israel, Ayatollah Khamenei also mentioned satellite channels like Fadak streaming out of the West. Referring to them as a “bunch of mercenaries who add more fuel to the fire” of Sunni-Shia conflicts, Syed Khamenei said emphatically, “They are given a mass media reach. And where are they based? The United States, Britain. The Shiaism that is being broadcast to the world from London is not Shia Islam but British Islam.”

## 2020 In Review: The Year Showed Us What We Truly Are

I rummage through pictures, relive moments of laughter because scars need healing

Sudha Subramanian



bed, some of us leant on the window sill and the others simply sat on the floor. We ate anything that was passed around, we clapped, we hugged and we high-fived without a care. When the clock struck the

dot, we screamed and kissed.

Now, thousands of miles away, as I sit alone on a long dining table sipping on a cup of hot tea, I think of that single evening. Just the picture in my head echoes

I have wondered many evenings if I have told them enough. Have I told my friends that I value their time? Have I hugged my parents enough? Do I remember their warm touch against my skin? It is at these moments that my heart craves to go back into that tightly packed room and feel everyone around me one more time

the one truth that we shy away from — “so many people in one room”. But, that is what this year has taught — the year that went by, the days of loneliness, the hours of anxiety — that time has a strange way of passing by without us ever knowing it. This year has given us the gift of

watching the clock tick by and appreciate the moment that has been lived. Even for a person like me, who thought, ‘I have figured it all out about mindful living’. Yes — I am those privileged few, who have battled a health scare, who has seen death — up close and who understands that we always have to tell people we care that we love them deeply.

### Valuing their time

Yet, I have wondered many evenings if I have told them enough. Have I told my friends that I value their time? Have I hugged my parents enough? Do I remember their warm touch against my skin? It is at these moments that my heart craves to go back into that tightly packed room and feel everyone around me one more time.

It is this moment that I wonder for the millionth time — “Have I really figured it all out?” It is at this moment that I know that, no matter how long we spend knowing that we know our hearts well and we have spent our time wisely that, it is truly never enough. We are but human.

We will never truly figure it out. It is at this moment that my heart takes over my mind and I drop my guard because human touch is important. I long for physical closeness. I burst my bubble for that one tiny moment to feel the person next to me and smile gratefully that I need this.

It is my weakest moment — my most vulnerable self. It is this that I gifted myself for my birthday. Naturally, when I read the message from my friend, I texted her back, “Yes, it is my birthday gift to myself — simple human touch”. Really, we take so many things for granted. Year 2020 — the year that was, showed us what we truly are. We are humans.

Gulf News

Really?”, my friend on my school WhatsApp group wrote, “you let her hug you?”, she asked with a shocked emoticon. I am not surprised. Ever since the beginning of this year, when the world went into madness, I turned inward. I stayed away from people. My personal bubble bloomed to a huge looming sphere and I smiled at everyone from a distance. That was not all. “Isn’t it a bit extreme?”, some people asked. “How much is too much?”, I asked in my defence. I scrubbed and cleaned, disinfected surfaces and hands, and stayed home. I did all of this methodically like a manic germaphobe. It calmed my nerves, soothed my brain because it was there for three weeks. Little did I know then that, this short sprint would chug like a marathon — a run that doesn’t seem to have a finish line any time soon.

The thing about marathons is — it is an endurance test. We move slowly, work our way through, endure the pain, anxiety, overcome mental blocks and go on because we all know that it is only that much long. But, this marathon of 2020 with no sight of the final ribbon that can flash on my chest as my winning sign has deepened scars and has exhumed ugly fears. I rummage through pictures, relive moments of laughter because scars need healing, wounds need balm.

### Dancing the car parks

This time last year — somewhere near the historical fort of Golconda, our extended family met. We drummed, we danced in car parks, we sang our heart out — simply because, that is what families do. Then, on the eve of the New Year, we all gathered in one small room — about thirty of us.

We occupied the couch, the small



## Srinagar Teen ...

Dar and his colleague were staying at a local hotel since their arrival at the tourist destination of Pahalgam on Sunday afternoon

Meanwhile, an official said that the deceased teen's colleague was being questioned by the police.

## Cab Rolls ...

The injured have been identified as Farooq Ahmed (26), Najama Begum (24), Majida Begum (50), Amir Ali (26), Akash Ahmed (30), Shakeel Ahmed (30), Jahangir Ahmed (25), Farida Begum (32) and Saleema Begum (35), all resident of Sawjin. The condition of all the injured is said to be stable even as one of them, Najama Begum, was referred to CHC Mandi.

## Protest In Batwara ...

address it", the protesters said. They said, there was no water supply running through the pipes, with the result they were facing immense difficulties. The locals said that despite bringing their grievances into the notice of concerned authorities, nothing has been done to ease their 'sufferings'.

According to news agency KNT, it was only after the police reached the spot and assured the angry residents to take up the issue with the concerned authorities, the road blockade was lifted.

## LeT Militant ...

seeing police personnel but was chased and apprehended, Inspector General of Police, Jammu, Mukesh Singh said.

He said two hand grenades were recovered from the bag which was found in the possession of Ashraf, who was presently living in Peerbagh Colony in Sunjawan area of the city.

The arrested person is linked to the proscribed militant organization LeT and was tasked by the handlers from across the border to carry out grenade blasts in the city (Jammu), the IGP said.

He said the handler across was in contact with more militant operatives, the search for whom was in progress. (PTI)

## J&K Reports ...

Giving district wise details, the officials said, Srinagar reported 34, Baramulla 8, Budgam 12, Kupwara 14, Pulwama 8, Anantnag 4, Bandipora 4, Ganderbal 4, Kulgam 1, Shopian 1, Jammu 56, Udhampur 3, Kathua 5, and Samba 2 new cases of Covid-19. (With GNS inputs)

## Soldier Injured ...

under fire of militants in Kanigam village of Shopian on Saturday last. With his death, the toll in the encounter reached three.

Earlier, two Al-Badr militants Owais Farooq of Pampore and Asif Lone of Shopian were killed in the fierce 19-hour-long gunfight with state forces in Shopian during which the authorities had also snapped mobile internet services.

Lone, according to police, was besides other activities, also involved in an attack on the army's naka party at Trenz Shopian and pasting threatening posters in Zainapora asking people to stay away from recently concluded DDC elections.

The encounter had raged on Friday afternoon after a joint team of state forces launched a cordon and search operation in Kanigam following a specific input regarding the presence of militants.

## KASHMIR In Capital ...

"Sometimes there was only rice to eat," he said with tearful eyes. "And sometimes, there was nothing..." Amid hardships, a moment of happiness came when he married a local girl in 1992.

"After marriage, I was allotted a small house by my in-laws here in old Delhi," he said.

"From that house, I worked quite hard and opened this restaurant in around 1995."

By then, his homeland was mired in the throes of raging conflict with Delhi desperately trying to revive "democracy" in the strife region.

Despite longing for his home, Hassan chose to struggle in the heat of the capital—then remote-controlling the erstwhile state through president's rule. Even Radio Kashmir was airing the Kashmiri bulletin from Delhi with a signature style: "Ye Radio Kashmir Hai, Ab Aap Sunye Nayi Delhi Se Khabrein".

"Back then, many Kashmiris were migrating to other parts of India for better employment opportunities," Hassan recalled. "It was hard for any business to prosper in the valley due to the uncertain situation."

However, as he stood steadfast in the capital commotion, Hassan rose to become a prominent eatery face away from home. He developed good relations with big hotel owners such as Karims and Al-Jawahar.

But while he was growing in business, many of his competitors tried hard to create obstacles for him.

"They never wanted a Kashmiri to own a restaurant here because they thought it will cause them losses," Hassan said with a smile.

"However, Almighty had some different plans for me, and today I'm here quite well settled."

But things changed in the Covid era—handing him a daily loss of around Rs 10,000. Yet, he didn't shy away from adhering to the quintessential Kashmiri hospitality.

"My own beloved people were

stranded here in Delhi during Covid lockdown, and I just couldn't have let them die with hunger," Hassan recalled the initial Covid-lockdown experience.

"I provided them with food for around two months and along with the help of the Delhi government, arranged a special train for them from Delhi to Jammu. Sustaining lockdown was hard, but with the help of Allah, I'm happy I could play my part to spread some smiles."

His 'service to humanity' came when he had already lost around Rs20 lakhs in pandemic. He said he could've reversed that loss by sacking his employees. However, he still remembers his own struggling days in Delhi.

This same compassion reflects in Towheed Alam, one of Hassan's employees. "Hassan Sahab has treated us like his own sons," Alam told me as we sat to talk about the Budgam man in Old Delhi.

"I have never faced any problem in my entire life working here. He is a great man and he cares for us. I can't expect this sort of love and care from a local restaurant owner, and he being a Kashmiri has proved true to his identity and every other thing Kashmiris are known for."

Most of Hassan's customers are from Kashmir actually. No matter wherever they stay, be it Trans-Yamuna, Nizamuddin, Okhla, or Malviya Nagar, they all come to eat here.

"I have seen people coming from Sopore and Anantnag especially for my restaurant," Hassan continued.

"They say 'even if Karim give us food for free, yet we shall come to Hassan Sahab's place.' It not just makes me feel alive, but also compels me to give them a good discount."

But carrying 'Kashmiri Identity' in Delhi comes at its own costs, especially on the eve of Independence Day or Republic Day, when Kashmiris are asked to leave the hotels they are staying in. "Not just this," Hassan added," hotel owners are also strictly advised to not give space to Kashmiris. Why are my fellow people subjected to such harsh treatment?"

Recently, he said, one of his ex-workers was arrested for trespassing into the parliament.

"As soon as I heard about his arrest, I rushed to the police station and got that kid out because I knew he was new to Delhi and wasn't familiar with the area. He wasn't a trespasser, yet he was harassed. So being a Kashmiri does bring problems sometimes." But compared to his brethren, Hassan feels some sort of safety in Delhi now.

"Here, the authorities may question you regarding your ethnicity, but it isn't much difficult now," he said.

"However, there was a time between 1990s and early 2000s, when times were tough for Kashmiris in Delhi. I remember one Delhi Police ACP, Rajbir Singh. He was notorious for arresting and torturing Kashmiris."

Amid these capital concerns, Hassan often craves for his roots. His family in Delhi gets ecstatic when they've to leave for Kashmir every year in the summers.

"They all love and crave for Kashmir," Hassan said."My daughter and grandchildren enjoy more in Kashmir than here. They eagerly wait for summers all year and when it comes, they get super excited. I love seeing them happy."

Today, even after spending 35 years of his life in Delhi, Hassan still feels he doesn't belong anywhere in the world but his homeland.

"I miss the period I could've lived there in the valley. I've informed my family that, the moment I die, take my body to Kashmir, and bury me there only. I earned a lot here, I got a name, fame, and everything, but today I believe it wasn't worth leaving my homeland behind for this life. I always miss my home, my Kashmir,"Hassan said with tears in his eyes.

## Govt Starts ...

Naib Tehsildars & Patwaris, Block Foresters & Forest Guards one day of-fline training would be provided between January 1st to 8th", he said.

It is pertinent to mention that activists of Jammu & Kashmir RTI Movement led by Dr Raja Muzaffar Bhat along with affected tribal population and traditional forest dwellers of villages in Branwar Zilsidara, Batwodder , Kanidajan in central Kashmir's Budgam held protest demonstrations during last several weeks over issuance of eviction notices, axing of fruit trees and non-implementation of Forest Rights Act in J&K.

Several national and international media organizations gave coverage to this public outcry which prompted the Govt to start rolling out Forest Rights Act (FRA) in Jammu & Kashmir which otherwise was not being implemented on ground in spite of being extended to UT of J&K on October 31st 2019 after abrogation of article 370.

Welcoming the decision of the Govt to implement the Forest Rights Act, Chairman RTI Movement Dr Raja Muzaffar Bhat demanded that Institute of Management Public Administration and Rural Development (IMPARD), Tribal Affairs Department J&K Govt and national level NGO's who have been conducting training courses on FRA in other states be also involved in training govt officials.

"Panchayat members, village forest rights committees and local NGOs also need to be trained on FRA implementation and Govt must seriously think over it and organize training of

trainers (ToT) workshops at district level to create more resource persons locally on FRA. There is a great role of civil society groups in it and they need to be taken on board" he said.

Pertinently, a video conference was held recently on FRA implementation by top Govt functionaries. The virtual meeting was addressed by the Principal Secretary, Home/Revenue Department Shaleen Kabra, Commissioner Secretary Forest, Ecology & Environment Department, Sarita Chauhan, Secretary Tribal Affairs Department, Rehana Batul and Principal Chief Conservator of Forests Dr. Mohit Gera. The action plan/road-map for implementation of FRA was shared and discussed with the Deputy Commissioners. (KNS)

## Snowfall In ...

Meanwhile, fresh snowfall was recorded in many areas in the higher reaches of the valley and the Jammu region during the night, the officials said.

They said the popular ski-resort of Gulmarg, in north Kashmir, recorded two inches of snow, while Pahalgam resort, in the south, and Sonamarg resort, in central Kashmir, each received around an inch of snow.

Gurez in north Kashmir recorded three inches of fresh snowfall, the officials said, adding there are reports of snowfall in other areas in the upper reaches of the valley as well.

Many areas in the Jammu region also received fresh snowfall, they said.

The officials said the area around the Jawahar Tunnel -- on the Srinagar-Jammu national highway -- received two to four inches of snow, leading to temporary disruption of traffic movement on the highway.

The traffic on the highway -- the only all-weather road-link connecting the valley with the rest of the country was suspended for some time in the morning, but was allowed later after the clearance of snow, the officials said.

Kashmir is currently under the grip of 'Chillai-Kalan' -- the 40-day harshest winter period when a cold wave grips the region and the temperature drops considerably leading to the freezing of water bodies including the famous Dal Lake here as well as the water supply lines in several parts of the valley.

The chances of snowfall are most frequent and maximum during this period and most areas, especially in the higher reaches, receive heavy snowfall, the officials said.

While 'Chillai-Kalan' -- which began on December 21 -- will end on January 31, the cold wave continues even after that in Kashmir with a 20-day-long 'Chillai-Khurd' and a 10-day-long 'Chillai-Bachha' following it. The Met office has said the weather would likely remain dry till January 3. (with PTI inputs)

## Most Announcements ...

hope for the business community.

"While appreciating the efforts put in by Lt. Governor for the said package. But at the same time most of the announcements in the package are still awaited," he said.

The spokesperson said that the Committee has recommended an interest subvention of 5% for six months amounting to Rs. 1089.24 Crore, partial waiver of fixed electricity charges for one year amounting to Rs. 80 crore, waiver of water charges for six months costing Rs. 25 crore , time bound one time settlement (OTS) , capital infusion in accordance with the Atma Nirbhar Bharat Abhiyan, replacement of old vehicles and insurances support costing Rs. 50 Crore to the transporters support to artist and others costing Rs. 108.75 crore which are partially implemented and needs immediate attention from the J&K Government.

"Various committees were supposed to be constituted like Committee for settlement of bank, finances and industry issues with association representatives as members to be chaired by Finance Department, Committee in each province/district involving members of the business association to address their issues which shall meet every month at District level and every two months at provincial level to settle issues of the business community. The Committee shall have a representative from I&C/ Finance/Bank as its members but the committees were not constituted yet which results in huge problems faced by the industrial sector," the KCCI spokesperson said.

He further said that the removal of Lakhampur Toll post has hit the business very badly and a committee was formed to ascertain its effects on the industries but the report has not still come out.

"It is a well-known fact that our export performance over five years have deteriorated to the worst level. To encourage exports from J&K, we need to support at all levels in manufacturing, artisans and weavers. In our recent meeting held with Hon'ble Lt. Governor was kind enough to ensure KCC&I delegation that Government constitute a Export Promotion Board for all Export level issues but till date no Board was constituted," he said.

He said the tourism sector in general and tour operators in particular were running into the most difficult time due to business losses since August, 2019.

"In the above said financial package subsidy for installation of the bio-digesters in the houseboat, pending payments to the hotels utilized for quarantine facility, issues related to permission for renovation of Hotels / Houseboats with the Committee of

experts on LAWDA, simplification of process for renewal of licenses of the Houseboats, extension of Tourism incentives scheme for next 15 years for Travel Agents and Tour Operators, Power Tariff at par with Industries are still pending with the concerned authorities," he added.

The KCCI spokesperson further said that the body appreciates the extension order for renewal of fitness and registration papers for transporters till 31st March, 2021.

"But they have to submit the documents online and as you are well aware that internet 4G is not working in Kashmir and on 2G internet speed it's somehow difficult for them to upload the documents online," he said.

The KCCI, he said, requests authorities to waiver off all the penalties and the transport sector must be waived off from paying passenger tax, token tax, fitness charges and permit fees for the last seventeen months besides complete compensation of insurance for the last one year.

"It would be pertinent to mention that GST Council and many more issues which KCC&I submitted to J&K Government are referred to by the Centre Government needs to be followed up by concerned departments which we believe are urgent in nature and require immediate consideration," the KCCI spokesperson said.

"Various other issues were raised by the KCC&I with the State and Central Government being faced by the Industrial and other sectors which needs to be addressed so that the problems faced by the industries and other sectors are taken care off," he said, while seeking intervention of LG.

## Apni Party ...

said, "They built a false narrative against my party that we are the 'B team of BJP' or the 'King's party'. We were trying to build a base in the newly carved out Union Territory and were attracting the right kind of people, including intellectuals and well educated."

"The other political parties made attempts to sabotage our identity and also went ahead in claiming that the elections were for restoration of Article 370, et cetera, et cetera," Bukhari told PTI here.

Asked about the below-expectation performance of the JKAP, the new entrant in the political space of Jammu and Kashmir, he said, "Please understand that 12 (candidates) won on our ticket while 21 independents were supported by us."

"Secondly, we were just born a few months back but our vote share is more than that of the PDP which has been in the political arena for more than two decades. We have been moving around and telling people about our party. The cadre base is building and we will only improve from here," he said.

The JKAP secured 5.3 per cent of votes in the eight-phase elections held between November 28 and December 19. The counting of votes took place on December 22.

The Peoples Democratic Party led by former chief minister Mehbooba Mufti had secured only 3.96 per cent votes.

The BJP topped the chart with 24.82 per cent vote share, followed by the National Conference with 16.46 per cent. Independent candidates had a vote share of 13.82 per cent.

The JKAP was contesting against the People's Alliance for Gupkar Declaration (PAGD) which comprise the National Conference, the PDP, People's Conference, CPI(M), CPI, JK People's Movement and the Awami National Conference.

Bukhari said the JKAP has been working towards having its chairperson in as many as six to seven districts in the union territory.

"People have been approaching us and are willing to cross over. The independent winners are willing to join us as the JKAP is not a dynastic political party and there is scope for climbing up the ladder if one performs well," he said.

While PAGD swept the polls by winning 110 seats, the BJP emerged as the single largest party by getting 75 seats in the first democratic exercise after the revocation of Jammu and Kashmir's special status under Article 370 of the constitution and bifurcation of the erstwhile state into union territories.

There are 280 DDC constituencies 14 each in 20 districts. The results of two seats -- one each in Bandipora and Kupwara districts of north Kashmir -- are awaited as the counting of votes has been deferred there till further orders.

State Election Commissioner K K Sharma had last week said the counting in Drugmulla constituency of Kupwara and Hajin-A in Bandipora have been kept in abeyance to clear the citizen-survey issue of two of the candidates. Two Pakistan-controlled Kashmir (PcK) nationals, who are married to former militants, are among the contestants from the two constituencies. (PTI)

## Panun Kashmir ...

adding it was on this day 29 years back that the historical 'Margdarshan Resolution' was adopted to highlight various demands of the displaced community.

"Panun Kashmir" President Virender Raina in his address said the Margdarshan Resolution represents the sum total of the aspirations of the Kashmiri Pandit community.

"The resolution unambiguously demanded the creation of a separate homeland on the North and East of

river Jhelum with free flow of Indian constitution," he said. He said a Special Crimes Tribunal needs to be established to enquire into the "excesses, genocide and ethnic cleansing" committed against the community.

Raina also demanded fast-track recruitment of the youth of the displaced community in order to fill up all 6,000 reserved posts in the government.

Panun Kashmir General Secretary, Upinder Koul said the overage youth of the displaced community, who could not apply for the government jobs, may be granted one-time compensation so that they are in a position to carry on their life with dignity.

General Secretary (Organisation) Kamal Bagati said the Kashmiri Pandit community's three-decade old struggle in exile has largely contributed to the historical changes in Jammu and Kashmir.

"The central government should bring the basic and fundamental reforms not only in the administrative and political field but also in the social, economic and cultural fields as well. Jammu and Kashmir should always be on the top of the agenda of the party and the government. There are opportunities available to substitute militancy with tourism in the UTs of Ladakh and J&K," he said. (PTI)

## Newly Elected ...

He said the DDC, Srinagar, Dr Shahid Iqbal Choudhary, on Monday administered oath to the recently elected members of Srinagar, who registered their victory in the first DDC election held in Jammu and Kashmir. The oath taking ceremony in Srinagar was attended by Divisional Commissioner P K Pole, who during his address to the members, hoped that they will work for the development and betterment of the people in their respective constituencies and districts.

"DDC already existed in the rest of the country from last over 50 to 60 years and the members to these councils are elected directly by the people. In J&K, the members were to be elected indirectly according to the previous act. The 73 amendment to the Constitution was extended for the first time in J&K following which DDC elections were held in eight phases," Mr Pole told reporters on the sideline of the ceremony.

He said a lot of preparation had to be done for conducting these elections and the people participated in the polls in large numbers. "Now that the people have elected their representatives they hopefully won't have to come to the officers of their Deputy Commissioners or Divisional Commissioner as their issues will be resolved by local level," he added.

While talking to the media, Dr Shahid said that with the completion of the oath ceremony of DDC members, the process to implement three tier Panchayati Raj Act has been fully implemented.

He said that DDC members will be imparted necessary training about the implementation of rules and regulations besides they will be made aware about the powers delegated to them under the Constitution.

Regarding election of DDC chairman, Dr Iqbal said that the process for the election of DDC chairman will be held shortly and the notice for the same will be issued soon.

He said the purpose of the decentralization of powers is to bring governance at the doorsteps of people, adding that elected representatives will work on developmental front to facilitate people in resolving various issues of development and progress.

Dr Shahid said that district offices will extend all possible assistance to the Members in addressing the grievances and fulfilling the developmental needs of the people. This, he said, will increase the public participation in decision making regarding all developmental scenario.

District Development Commissioner (DDC) Budgam, Shabbaz Ahmad Mirza administered oath to newly elected 14 DDC members representing 14 Block Constituencies of Budgam during an impressive function organized at Sheikh Ul Alam Hall. Senior Superintendent of Police (SSP) Budgam, A A Nagpure was also present during the oath ceremony.

He on the occasion appealed to the newly elected DDC members to ensure that the responsibilities and the trust reposed by the public on them is upheld by way of delivering with sincere endeavor and desire at the grass roots level.

The ADC also hailed the efforts and desire of all concerned officers and officials for ensuring conclusion of the whole process with success and transparency. He said with the sincere efforts of all concerned stakeholders, the administration was able to mitigate all urgencies confidently and satisfactorily.

The Deputy Commissioner (DC) Ganderbal, Shafqat Iqbal administered oath to recently elected 14 District Development Council (DDC) members at DC office in Pulwama.

On the occasion, the DC congratulated the newly elected members of District Development Council and said

that the DDC election is a way towards de-centralization and strengthening the grass roots level democracy.

He said the role of DDCs and Panchayats is to make villages vibrant and progressive adding that the district administration is committed to provide all support to the DDCs. He further added that the representatives and administration has to work in synergy for the benefit of people. In a separate function, the Assistant Commissioner Development, Pulwama administered oath to the newly elected panches and sarpanches in presence of the District Development Commissioner Dr Raghav Langer.

The People's Alliance for Gupkar Declaration (PAGD) bagged 110 seats of the total 280 constituencies in the maiden DDC elections. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) secured 75 DDC constituencies followed by J&K National Conference with 67 seats. The PDP bagged 27 while the Congress won 26 seats.

The newly formed J&K Apni Party (JKAP) won 12 while JKPC and CPI-M bagged eight and five seats respectively. Meanwhile, independents turned out to be key players during these elections by winning 50 seats.

## Poll For DDC ...

"As soon as possible but not later than twenty days after oath or affirmation of allegiance under sub-rule(1) is administered or made, the deputy commissioner concerned shall call under his president-ship a meeting of all elected members to elect one of its members to be the chairperson and another member to be the vice-chairperson," reads the Rules.

As per the Rules, the election for chairpersons and vice-chairpersons can be delayed only due to natural calamities and severe law and order.

But in these cases, elections shall be held not later than one month from declaration of result of election of the elected members of the DDCs.

It is worthwhile to mention that all elected DDC members were today administered oaths by deputy commissioners in all 20 districts of J&K Union Territory. In the DDC elections held recently, the Peoples Alliance for Gupkar Declaration (PAGD) emerged victorious on 110 seats. The Bharatiya Janata Party, which fought elections on 230 seats, won 75 seats.

## Will See If ...

Divisional Commissioner Kashmir, P K Pole said Monday that he will check with the Rural Development Department (RDD) department if the anti-defection law can be enacted in Jammu and Kashmir.

Pole was responding to a question from a reporter on the sidelines of the oath ceremony of recently elected DDC members at SKICC here.

He further stated that the DDC members who took oath today will have the powers to prepare the final list of the funds that will be allocated to their respective districts. "The final draft for the allocation of the funds will be approved of DDC members," he said.

He added that people will no longer have to visit his or Deputy Commissioner's (DC) office for their issues like power, roads and water and other developmental issues, adding that they can directly approach their elected representative to get their works done.

Pole said like Maharashtra, the DDCs will have the adequate powers, but it would take time, adding that the DDC members may face hardships for some time till the proper and necessary arrangements will be made for them especially their own offices and other logistic arrangements be made by the administration.

"I wish all the DDC members luck and pray for them that they will be able to deliver whatever they have promised to the people in their respective constituencies," he said.

Earlier, 13 out of 14 DDC members, who were elected recently in the maiden District Development Council (DDC) polls in Srinagar, took oath today at SKICC.

It was said during the ceremony that one of the DDC members couldn't attend the function due to her deteriorating health condition. Div Com Kashmir further stated that the completion of three-tier Panchayati Raj System has realized the dream of Mahatma Gandhi's 'Gram Swaraj'.

While addressing the gathering, the Div Com congratulated the elected members and said that the DDC election has realized the dream of Mahatma Gandhi's Gram Swaraj adding that with this the dawn of new development in J&K has begun.

He assured the DDC members that the administration will extend all logistic support to them at all levels. He expressed hope that they, the DDC members, will resolve the developmental issues of the people at grass root level. He said that from now onwards people need not to approach divisional or district administrations for the purpose of basic amenities and can apprise their respective constituency members about their issues and subsequently the DDC members shall facilitate them in fulfilling all their developmental needs.

Regarding the availability of funds to District Developmental Councils, the Div Com said that the annual budget of districts from next financial year will be prepared and decided by DDC members.

Meanwhile, Div Com also distributed mementos among the DDC members of district Srinagar, who took oath during the event—Agencies



## Stock Markets Scale New Heights On Positive Global Cues



**MUMBAI:** Extending gains for the fourth straight session, benchmark gauges Sensex and Nifty raced to new peaks on Monday in line with broad-based rallies in global equities. The BSE benchmark Sensex settled up by 380.21 points or 0.81 per cent at its all-time closing high of 47,353.75. The index also scaled its fresh record intra-day peak of 47,406.72.

The NSE Nifty ended 123.95 points or 0.90 per cent up at new closing high of 13,873.20. It also touched its all-time intra-day high of 13,885.30.

On the Sensex chart, Titan, SBI, L&T, IndusInd Bank, Ultratech Cement, HDFC Bank and Asian Paints were top gainers.

While, HUL, Sun Pharma, Dr Reddy and Bajaj FinServ closed with losses.

Of the Sensex constituents,

26 stocks settled with gains and 4 with losses.

In the previous trading day on Thursday, the 30-share Sensex had surged 529.36 points or 1.14 per cent to close at 46,973.54. The broader NSE Nifty had zoomed 148.15 points or 1.09 per cent to 13,749.25.

Markets were closed on Friday on account of Christmas.

Elsewhere in Asia, bourses in Mainland China, Japan, South Korea, Hong Kong and other key markets ended with significant gains.

Investor sentiment globally was upbeat after the US cleared a USD 2.3 trillion pandemic aid and the European Union and the UK struck a Brexit trade deal last week.

Meanwhile, the global oil benchmark Brent crude futures rose 1.25 per cent to USD 51.94 per barrel. PTI

**INVESTOR SENTIMENT GLOBALLY WAS** upbeat after the US cleared a USD 2.3 trillion pandemic aid and the European Union and the UK struck a Brexit trade deal last week.

## Irrfan Khan Starrer Last Film 'The Song Of Scorpions' To Release In 2021



Agencies

**MUMBAI:** Late actor Irrfan Khan's last film titled 'The Song of the Scorpions' is set to be released in 2021.

Film critic and movie trade analyst Taran Adarsh took to Twitter on Monday and announced the news.

"IRRFAN'S LAST MOVIE... #Irrfan's last film - #TheSongOfScorpions - to release in 2021... Directed by Anup Singh... Presented by Panorama Spotlight and 70mm Talks."

Adarsh also posted a short clip that featured a message,

"A golden chance to witness the magician on the big screen for the last time!!!" past which a portrait of the 'Anger-zi Medium' star is showcased in the video.

The message is played in the backdrop of a desert, which showcases a blow of wind post which Khan's face close up is shown followed by the announcement of the film release 'Early 2021' is displayed.

The internationally renowned actor Irrfan Khan passed away in April this year at Mumbai's Kokilaben Hospital while battling a rare kind of cancer.



## Gross NPAs Of Banks May Rise To 10.1-10.6% By March 2021: Icra

**MUMBAI:** Banks' gross non-performing assets (NPAs) and net NPAs are expected to rise to 10.1-10.6 per cent and 3.1-3.2 per cent, respectively by March 2021, Icra said Monday.

The agency also expects net NPA to decline to 2.4-2.6 per cent by March 2022.

"As moratorium on loan repayments is over and though we await the Honourable Supreme Court directive on asset classification, the GNPA and NNPA for banks are likely to rise in near term to 10.1-10.6 per cent and 3.1-3.2 per cent, respectively by March 2021 from 7.9 per cent and 2.2 per cent, respectively as of September 2020," the rating agency said in a report.

It, however, said net NPAs and credit provisions will subsequently trend lower in 2021-22 as banks have reported strong collections on their loan portfolio with most of them reporting collections of over 90 per cent.

The report further said the loan restructuring requests are much lower than previously estimated, supported by sharper than expected improvement in economic activities as well liquidity support through the government's emergency credit line guarantee scheme.

The agency has revised its loan restructuring estimate downwards to 2.5-4.5 per cent of advances as against 5-8 per cent estimated earlier.

"With expectations of sustained collections and lower restructuring, the asset quality is expected to improve further with net NPA declining to 2.4-2.6 per cent by March 2022. This will lead to lower credit provisions and better profitability in FY2022," Icra's sector head (financial sector ratings) Anil Gupta said.

The agency said the credit provisions are estimated to decline to 1.8-2.4 per cent of advances during 2021-22 from an estimate of 2.2-3.1 per cent in the ongoing fiscal and 3.1 per cent in 2019-20, which will lead to improvement in return on equity (RoE) for banks.

It expects public sector banks to break-even after six consecutive years (FY 2016- FY 2021) of losses and generate RoE of 0.0-5.4 per cent for FY2022 (-2.3 per cent/ 3.7 per cent for FY2021 and -6.5 per cent for FY2020).

The RoE for private banks is also estimated to improve to 9.5-10.5 per cent in FY2022 (2-7.5 per cent in FY2021 and 6.5 per cent for FY2020), the report said.

"The capital position for large private banks is strong and can withstand the stress case scenario for asset quality after these banks raised Rs 54,400 crore of capital during the nine month of FY2021," Gupta said.

With large capital raise and expectations of improved profitability, banks are also well placed to exercise call options on their Rs 26,000 crore of AT-I bonds falling due in next fiscal and FY2023 without a significant impact on their capital, the report said.

Gupta said public sector banks will need to raise additional capital of up to Rs 43,000 crore next year as they have call options falling due on the AT-I bonds totalling Rs 23,300 crore during 2021-22.

The agency further said low interest rates, improved business volumes, better job prospects and income levels could also stimulate credit demand next year.

This coupled with better competitive positioning of banks vis-a-vis other lenders driven by steep decline in cost of deposits could improve bank credit growth to 6-7 per cent in next fiscal from an estimated 3.9-5.2 per cent in 2020-21 and 6.1 per cent in 2019-20, it added. --- PTI

## Terrible Floods In India Cost \$10 Bn Loss: UK Charity

**NEW DELHI:** Fifteen extreme weather events, influenced by climate change, were identified globally this year, including the terrible floods that struck India cost \$10 billion, killing 2,000, a UK charity report said on Monday.

The London-based Christian Aid's report, 'Counting the cost 2020 A year of climate breakdown', said 10 of those events cost \$1.5 billion or more.

The US was hit by the highest costs due to the record-breaking hurricane season and fires.

Most of these estimates are based only on insured losses, meaning the true financial costs are likely to be higher.

While the report focuses on financial costs, which are usually higher in richer countries because they have more valuable property, some extreme weather events in 2020 were devastating in poorer countries, even though the price tag was lower.

South Sudan, for example, experienced one of its worst floods on record, which killed 138 people and destroyed the year's crops.

Some of the disasters hit fast, like cyclone Amphan, which struck the Bay of Bengal in May and caused losses valued at \$13 billion in just a few days.

Other events unfolded over months, like floods in China and India, which had an estimated cost of \$32 billion and \$10 billion respectively.

Six of the 10 most costly events took place in Asia, five of them associated with an unusually rainy monsoon.

And in Africa, huge locust swarms ravaged crops and vegetation across several countries, causing damages estimated at \$8.5 billion.

The outbreak has been linked to wet conditions brought about by unusual rains fuelled by climate change.

But the impact of extreme weather was felt all over the world. In Europe, two extra-tropical cyclones, Ciara and Alex, had a combined cost of almost \$6 billion.

The US suffered from both a record-breaking hurricane season and a record-breaking fire season adding up to more than \$60 billion in damages.

Some less populated places also suffered the consequences of a warming world.

In Siberia, a heat wave during the first half of the year set a record in the city of Verkhoyansk, with temperatures reaching 38 degrees Celsius.

A few months later, on the other side of the world, heat and drought drove the fires in Bolivia, Argentina, Paraguay and Brazil.

While there were no human casualties reported from these events, the destruction of these areas has a great impact on biodiversity and the planet's capacity to respond to a warmer world.

While climate change may have influenced all these events, many of the countries that bear little responsibility for global warming were affected.

## Gold Prices May Touch Rs 63,000 Per 10 Grams In New Year



PRESS TRUST OF INDIA

**G**old, always considered a safe haven for investment in uncertain times, is likely to glitter more and even soar to Rs 63,000 per 10 grams next year amid expectations of fresh stimulus measures and weaker American dollar.

In 2020, the economic and social uncertainties triggered by the coronavirus pandemic turned the spotlight on gold as a safe haven. The price of the yellow metal reached an all-time high of Rs 56,191 per 10 grams at MCX and USD 2,075 an ounce in the international market in August.

A sharp turn in global monetary policies that led to a low interest rate scenario and unprecedented liquidity, which began in mid-2019, gave a boost to gold price in all major currencies, making the yellow metal attractive for investors.

"The year began (with gold) at Rs 39,100 (per 10 grams) and USD 1,517 (an ounce). The knee jerk reaction to the pandemic was short-lived as the domestic price hit a low of Rs 38,400 from where it steadily rose all the way to Rs 56,191. The stimulus provided subsequently triggered a sharp rise in investment buying in the domestic market," Commtrendz Risk Management Services CEO Gnanasekar Thiagarajan told PTI.

He said the outlook for gold remains strong despite coronavirus vaccine prospects and economic revival post COVID-19, mainly due to fresh stimulus expectations.

"The dollar could weaken on

the back of more stimulus and that could help gold prices rise once again. Also, inflationary expectations due to the massive stimulus can be seen as a positive factor that could attract investment buying once again in 2021," he said.

The political risk in the US due to a weak majority in the Senate could make things difficult for the incoming Joe Biden-led administration to push reforms and that could aid in the bullion's upward movement, Thiagarajan said.

"The physical demand (for gold) from India and China will take centre stage in 2021, which has been weak for the past few years and could see a strong revival. We expect prices to test Rs 60,000 or USD 2,200 at least in 2021, provided the rupee remains stable too," he opined.

HDFC securities Senior Analyst (Commodities) Tapan Patel said the yellow metal is likely to remain bullish next year with targets of USD 2,150 and USD 2,390 in COMEX gold and Rs 57,000 and Rs 63,000 at MCX on concerns over global economic recovery.

"The slower pace of revival of economic activities and labour market growth along with higher amounts of stimulus measures will continue to remain driving factors for gold prices," he added.

In 2020, he said that gold prices in India got an additional support from rupee depreciation against the dollar during the year as spot rupee was down by around three per cent year-to-date.

**THE YEAR BEGAN (WITH GOLD) AT** Rs 39,100 (per 10 grams) and USD 1,517 (an ounce). The knee jerk reaction to the pandemic was short-lived as the domestic price hit a low of Rs 38,400 from where it steadily rose all the way to Rs 56,191. The stimulus provided subsequently triggered a sharp rise in investment buying in the domestic market."

## 60 Food Business Operators Without Registration Booked Under FSS Act

**SRINAGAR:** A fresh drive has been started in district Srinagar against those Food Business Operators, who are running their business without obtaining licenses and registration, mandatory under Food Safety & Standards Act.

As per the statement of the Food & Drug Administration, Department, sixty complaints have been filed in the competent court in this regard. Under Eat Right Challenge, which is a flag ship program of FSSAI, district Srinagar has

to increase the number of licenses, registration by 20 percent up to March 2021, the statement reads, adding that carrying Food business without obtaining license is an offence under FSS Act and carries a punishment or imprisonment up to six months and fine up to five lacs.

The Department has asked all Food Business Operators to obtain license or registration as per their annual turnover by accessing website www.foscofssai.gov.in.

### NEWS MAKERS

## Millennial Pens Short Memoir Of Life With Ratan Tata

**NEW DELHI:** A new book talks about an uncommon bond between a millennial and Ratan Tata, who turned 83 on Monday, giving glimpses of the legendary entrepreneur in warm light.

Tata, who writes a note in the book "I Came Upon a Light-house", says a shared concern for the welfare of the homeless, hungry, ill-treated and abandoned dogs and cats brought him and the author Shantanu Naidu together.

It was their shared empathy for homeless dogs that sparked an unlikely friendship. In 2014, Naidu, an automobile design engineer in his early 20s, developed an innovation to save the

local strays from being run over by speeding cars.

Tata, himself known for his compassion for stray dogs, took note. Impressed, he not only decided to invest in the venture, but over the years became a mentor, boss and an unexpectedly dear friend to Naidu, inspiring new ventures and learnings.

"He (Naidu) and his young friends had been bootstrapping a small start-up in Pune to feed, care for and find homes for these poor animals. He earned recognition when they made reflective collars, based solely on passion and kindness for animals."

"Knowing my love for dogs,



he wrote to my office, not even expecting a response. I was impressed by what they

had done and the compassion that Shantanu and the college kids had shown by

investing their personal time and resources. I decided to invest in his start-up, and they

received not just support but also encouragement to grow it through personal involvement," Tata writes.

The book, published by HarperCollins India, has illustrations by Sanjana Desai.

"I told him (Tata) that when I write a book, I would write about another side of him and not just historic events or business milestones. I would write about us and our adventures together, and how I saw him, colours and shades of him unknown to the world," says Naidu.

According to Naidu, Tata taught him things, in the best way possible: by example.

"How much you can learn from someone like Ratan Tata is

less about him handing out life lessons and more about how attentively you observe and listen," he writes in the book that will release in January.

Naidu says he wanted to show how genuine and wholesome intergenerational friendships can be.

"The thought behind this book has always been that of sharing the privilege of knowing Mr Tata personally with the larger community of his many admirers who only know him through news reports. There are shades of him other than that of a humble businessman which I have tried my best to capture in this light-hearted narrative," he says. PTI





LocalCircles has conducted a survey to understand the impact of this new strain of coronavirus on international travel plans of Indians in the next three months.

# Indians May Put Off Travel Plans Amid Spread Of New Virus Strain, Possible Flight Bans: Survey

Many people may put off their international travel plans due to concerns over the spread of new variant of coronavirus in some countries and possibility of flight bans by nations like Dubai, France and Singapore, a survey has revealed.

The survey, which is based on over 15,000 responses from over 10,000 people from across 204 cities and conducted by online platform LocalCircles, also revealed that as many as 42 per cent of the respondents did not have any travel plan for domestic travel at all.

Post lockdown, the government hasn't yet allowed regular opera-

tion of international flights, instead it operates transport bubbles with 23 countries, including the UK via the Vande Bharat Mission.

However, India imposed a temporary on flights from and to the UK from December 23 till December 31 following the detection of the new variant of the virus in the UK.

LocalCircles has conducted a survey to understand the impact of this new strain of coronavirus on international travel plans of Indians in the next three months.

The platform has observed an increase in citizens' posts suggesting that many may hold back on their travel plans to any international countries as fear and anxi-

ety of getting infected by this new strain as well as the possibility of flight bans from other airline hubs like Dubai, Singapore, Paris, etc. has increased, LocalCircles said in a release.

The survey also tried to understand people's plan to undertake domestic travel in the next three months as with reducing case-loads and COVID fatigue setting in, many more have started to travel since October, it said.

Consumers were asked about their situation in regard to undertaking international travel in the next three months, according to the online platform.

"Local circle received 7,820 re-

sponse, of which as many as 71 per cent consumers said that they have no plans to undertake international travel in the next 3 months, while 2 per cent said they have bookings and will likely travel, and another 2 per cent saying that have bookings but may cancel based on COVID situation," it said.

Also, as many as 16 per cent said they had plans but may not travel due to COVID, while 7 per cent said they might travel based on coronavirus situation.

"The aggregate feedback of consumers suggests that the new virus strain that was recently detected in the UK and related flight bans, the majority planning international

travel in the next 3 months are likely to hold back," the survey revealed.

When only the consumers considering international travel were surveyed – while keeping the 71 per cent consumers who had no plans to undertake international travels in the next three months out of scope, it appears that of the 100 per cent consumers who were considering international travel, 59 per cent of them who had "plans but no bookings" will likely not travel, and 7 per cent who had bookings will cancel those bookings and not travel, as per the survey.

Eight per cent who have international travel bookings already will likely travel and another 26 per cent

who do not have bookings will likely plan their international travel in the next three months based on how the COVID situation develops, it said.

Overall, the survey indicates that the mutant coronavirus and related flight bans have led to 66 per cent of consumers planning international travel in the next 3 months to hold back. However, if India is able to contain the spread of Covid and the new virus mutations, domestic travel is likely to be strong. And if that happens, it seems likely that many might cancel their trip to Switzerland in favour of Dalhousie or Kashmir. -

Press Trust Of India

## Scientists develop new gene therapy for deafness

A new study from Tel Aviv University (TAU) presents an innovative treatment for deafness, based on the delivery of genetic material into the cells of the inner ear. The genetic material "replaces" the genetic defect and enables the cells to continue functioning normally.

The scientists were able to prevent the gradual deterioration of hearing in mice that had a genetic mutation for deafness. They maintain that this novel therapy could lead to a breakthrough in treating children born with various mutations that eventually cause deafness.

The study was led by Professor Karen Avraham of the Department of Human Molecular Genetics and Biochemistry at TAU's Sackler Faculty of Medicine and Sagol School of Neuroscience. The paper was published in EMBO Molecular Medicine. Deafness is the most common sensory disability worldwide.

According to the World Health Organization, there are about half a billion people with hearing loss around the world today, and this figure is expected to double in the coming decades. One in every 200 children is born with a hearing impairment, and one in every 1,000 is born deaf. In about half of these cases, deafness is caused by a genetic mutation.

There are currently about 100 different genes associated with hereditary deafness. "In this study we focused on genetic deafness caused by a mutation in the gene SYNE4 – a rare deafness discovered by our lab several years ago in two Israeli families, and since then identified in Turkey and the UK as well," Professor Avraham reports.

"Children inheriting the defective gene from both parents are born with normal hearing, but they gradually lose their hearing during childhood. The mutation causes mislocalization of cell nuclei in the hair cells inside the cochlea of the inner ear, which serve as sound-wave receptors and are essential for hearing. This defect leads to the degeneration and eventual death of hair cells." "We implemented an innovative gene therapy technology: we created a harmless synthetic virus and used it to deliver genetic material – a normal version of the gene that is defective in both the mouse model and the affected human families," says Shahar Taiber, one of Professor Avraham's students on



We implemented an innovative gene therapy technology: we created a harmless synthetic virus and used it to deliver genetic material -- a normal version of the gene that is defective in both the mouse model and the affected human families

the combined MD-PhD track. "We injected the virus into the inner ear of the mice, so that it entered the hair cells and released its genetic payload. By so doing, we repaired the defect in the hair cells and enabled them to mature and function normally." The treatment was administered soon after birth and the mice's hearing was then monitored using both physiological and behavioural tests. "The findings are most promising," says Professor Jeffrey Holt from Boston Children's Hospital and Harvard Medical School, a collaborator on the study. "Treated mice developed normal hearing, with a sensitivity almost identical to that of healthy mice who do not have the mutation."

Scientists are now developing similar ther-

apies for other mutations that cause deafness. "This is an important study that shows that inner ear gene therapy can be effectively applied to a mouse model of SYNE4 deafness to rescue hearing," says Prof. Wade Chien, MD, from the NIDCD/NIH Inner Ear Gene Therapy Program and Johns Hopkins School of Medicine, who was not involved in the study.

"The magnitude of hearing recovery is impressive. This study is a part of a growing body of literature showing that gene therapy can be successfully applied to mouse models of hereditary hearing loss, and it illustrates the enormous potential of gene therapy as a treatment for deafness."

Agencies

## Study discovers new measures to predict risk of bowel diseases

Mount Sinai researchers claim to have discovered new measures to predict risk for inflammatory bowel diseases (IBD) including Crohn's disease and ulcerative colitis.

The study published in the research journal Gastroenterology shows that the polygenic risk scores, built using association data from multiple populations in Mount Sinai's multi-ethnic BioMe Biobank, maximized IBD predictions for every population in the biobank.

BioMe is a system-wide effort at Mount Sinai that is revolutionizing diagnosis and classification of diseases according to the patient's molecular profile.

The study showed that risk scores calculated from integrating data significantly improved predictions among individuals with European, Ashkenazi Jewish, and Hispanic ancestry in BioMe, as well as European individuals in the UK Biobank, which contains biological and medical data on half a million people between ages 40 and 69 living in the UK.

Predictive power was lower for patients with African ancestry, likely due to substantially smaller reference datasets and substantially greater genetic diversity within populations of African descent.

"The ability to accurately predict genetic disease risk in individuals across ancestries is a critical avenue that may positively affect patient outcomes, as early interventions and even preventive measures are being considered and developed," said the study's senior author Judy H. Cho, MD, Dean of Translational Genetics and Director of The Charles Bronfman Institute for Personalized Medicine at the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai.

"These findings support a need for greater genetic diversity, including more data on African American populations, to enhance disease risk predictions and reduce health disparities for all populations," added Cho. These polygenic risk scores-representing an estimate of overall risk based on the sum of an individual's many, most common, genetic variants-were calculated using IBD association data from cohorts with European, African American, and Ashkenazi Jewish backgrounds.

Additionally, researchers assessed rare variants in genes associated with very-early-onset IBD within each population and found that African American carriers of uncommon LRBA variants showed reduced expression of both proteins LRBA and CTLA-4.

LRBA deficiency increases susceptibility to IBD and results in lower CTLA-4 expression, which can be reversed with the commonly prescribed antimalarial drug chloroquine. Future studies by the Cho Laboratory will focus on predicting which subsets of patients might benefit from targeting this pathway.

"Since lowered LRBA and CTLA-4 expression can lead to IBD, it's encouraging that chloroquine is able to partially recover expression," said the study's first author Kyle Gettler, PhD, a postdoctoral fellow in the Department of Genetics and Genomic Sciences at the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai.

Agencies







# New strain could reinfect recovered Covid-19 persons: DAK

OBSERVER NEWS SERVICE

**SRINAGAR: Doctors Association Kashmir (DAK) on Monday said people who have recovered from Covid-19 infection could be reinfect with the new mutated strain.**

"Those who have got Covid-19 could get sick again with the new variant," said DAK President and influenza expert Dr Nisar ul Hassan. "A new mutated Covid strain has surfaced in the United Kingdom and is spreading to other countries," he said.

"The new variant has multiple mutations in the spike protein of the virus and the most troubling is deletion mutation which makes it spread more easily."

Quoting a new study published in the preprint server bioRxiv, Dr Nisar said that antibodies elicited by natural Covid-19 infection may not be able to neutralize emerging strains that display deletion mutations in their genetic sequence."

"Researchers from South Korea found that a young woman infected with one strain of Covid-19 was, just weeks after recovering, reinfected with a different strain

of the virus," he said. "The findings indicate that the patient's immune response to the first strain did not protect her from the second strain and highlights how mutations could make controlling Covid-19 more difficult than first thought."

Dr Nisar said the mutation in the new variant has resulted in an altered protein product which could evade the immune response elicited by earlier strain of the same virus. "The new strain could lead to resurgence of Covid-19 cases that could reignite the pandemic," he said.

"The mutated variant is the dominant strain in the UK and is responsible for more than 60 per cent of Covid-19 cases."

"While we struggle to come to grips with the news of a new strain of coronavirus being detected in the UK, another variant of the virus, potentially more infectious has emerged in South Africa," said Dr Nisar.

"Kashmir being the favorite tourist destination, the mutants can come to us anytime. We have to be prepared and alert - we need to gear up our hospitals to prevent an outbreak," he said.

## Saudi rights activist Loujain al-Hathloul sentenced to almost six years in jail



**Court suspends some of sentence and backdates start of term, meaning she only has three months left to serve**

AGENCIES

Loujain al-Hathloul, the Saudi women's rights activist detained three years ago by the Saudi government, has been sentenced to five years and eight months in jail after being found guilty of spying with foreign parties and conspiring against the kingdom.

But the court suspended two years and 10 months of her sentence, and backdated the start of her jail term to May 2018, meaning she only has three months left to serve.

Although human rights campaigners will say she should never have been detained for so long without charge, the prospect of serving only a further three months in jail will help defuse a potentially damaging early confrontation with the Biden administration that would have occurred if she had been locked up for a further 20 years, as seemed possible at one point.

The Saudi courts had already cleared the kingdom's prosecutors of torturing her in detention, saying there was no evidence that she was transferred from Jeddah governorate to a secret location where she was tortured and sexually harassed.

The news of her verdict was first tweeted by the newspaper Asharq Al-Awsat, which said a Saudi court had "sentenced a female detainee with incitement to change the kingdom's ruling regime and cooperating with individuals and entities to carry out a foreign agenda".

She had been arrested in May 2018 along with four other human rights activists. She claims she was not allowed to speak to anyone for seven weeks after her arrest.

The Saudi kingdom has repeatedly denied that she was arrested

for campaigning for women's right to drive, a right that was granted in 2018, but instead for mounting a campaign to undermine the royal family. The case underlines how little political dissent is allowed within the kingdom.

The original charge sheet included meeting British and other European diplomats, as well as applying for a job at the United Nations, and using her arrest in her CV. She was also accused of speaking to foreign press agencies and international human rights groups.

Other charges included joining a group on the messaging app Telegram, where she discussed human rights and a new constitution, liaising with the human rights defender Khaled al-Omair and receiving daily expenses of €50 from foreign organisations when attending international conferences to speak about women in Saudi Arabia.

Other alleged offences involve tweets about her drive from UAE into Saudi Arabia and documents found on her laptop including a pdf file of the UN convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women. She was also accused of communicating with European embassies about her case at the time the Saudi crown prince, Mohammed bin Salman, was due to visit those countries.

After more than two years of detention, and some internal debate within the kingdom on how to handle her case, the Saudis waited until after their hosting of the G20 summit in November to transfer her case to the specialised criminal court.

Amnesty International was one of many groups to contrast the Saudi claim to be empowering women with its imprisonment and torture of peaceful female activists.

At the last minute, on 10 December, the Saudis dropped charges that included her having been in contact with British, EU and Dutch embassies, possibly because all three are regarded as friendly powers and their involvement in the case might prompt higher levels of protest.



A GROUP OF NEWLY elected DDC members pose for a picture after taking oath at SKICC Srinagar on Monday.

## Terrible floods in India cost \$10 bn loss: UK charity

AGENCIES

**NEW DELHI:** Fifteen extreme weather events, influenced by climate change, were identified globally this year, including the terrible floods that struck India cost \$10 billion, killing 2,000, a UK charity report said on Monday.

The London-based Christian Aid's report, "Counting the cost 2020 A year of climate breakdown", said 10 of those events cost \$1.5 billion or more.

The US was hit by the highest costs due to the record-breaking hurricane season and fires.

Most of these estimates are based only on insured losses, meaning the true financial costs are likely to be higher.

While the report focuses on financial costs, which are usually higher in richer countries because they have more valuable property, some extreme weather events in 2020 were devastating in poorer countries, even though the price tag was lower.

South Sudan, for example, experienced one of its worst floods on record, which killed 138 people and destroyed the year's crops.

Some of the disasters hit fast, like cyclone Amphan, which struck the Bay of Bengal in May and caused losses valued at \$13 billion in just a few days.

Other events unfolded over months, like floods in China and India, which had an estimated cost of \$32 billion and \$10 billion respectively. Six of the 10 most costly events took place in Asia, five of them associated with an unusually rainy monsoon.

And in Africa, huge locust swarms ravaged crops and vegetation across several countries,

causing damages estimated at \$8.5 billion. The outbreak has been linked to wet conditions brought about by unusual rains fuelled by climate change.

But the impact of extreme weather was felt all over the world. In Europe, two extra-tropical cyclones, Ciara and Alex, had a combined cost of almost \$6 billion.

The US suffered from both a record-breaking hurricane season and a record-breaking fire season adding up to more than \$60 billion in damages.

Some less populated places also suffered the consequences of a warming world.

In Siberia, a heat wave during the first half of the year set a record in the city of Verkhoyansk, with temperatures reaching 38 degrees Celsius. A few months later, on the other side of the world, heat and drought drove the fires in Bolivia, Argentina, Paraguay and Brazil.

While there were no human casualties reported from these events, the destruction of these areas has a great impact on biodiversity and the planet's capacity to respond to a warmer world.

While climate change may have influenced all these events, many of the countries that bear little responsibility for global warming were affected.

This includes Nicaragua, which was hit by hurricane Iota, the strongest storm of the Atlantic hurricane season, and the Philippines, where typhoons Goni and Vamco made landfall almost back-to-back. These extreme events highlight the need for urgent climate action.

The Paris Agreement, which set

the goal of keeping temperature rise "well below" 2 degrees Celsius, and ideally 1.5 degrees, compared to pre-industrial levels, has just turned five years old.

It is critical that countries commit to bold new targets ahead of the next climate conference, which will take place in Glasgow in November 2021.

The report's author Kat Kramer, Christian Aid's climate policy lead, told IANS "The Covid-19 pandemic has understandably been a major worry this year. For millions of people in vulnerable parts of the world, climate breakdown has compounded this."

"The good news is that, like the vaccine for Covid-19, we do know how to fix the climate crisis. We need to keep fossil fuels in the ground, boost clean energy investment and help those who are suffering on the frontline."

"Whether it be floods in Asia, locusts in Africa or storms in Europe and the Americas, climate change has continued to rage in 2020. It is vital that 2021 ushers in a new era of activity to turn this tide."

"With US President-elect Biden in the White House, social movements across the world calling for urgent action, post-Covid green recovery investment and a crucial UN climate summit hosted by the UK, there is a major opportunity for countries to put us on a path to a safe future." Roxy Mathew Koll, climate scientist at the Indian Institute of Tropical Meteorology in Pune, said "2020 was exceptionally warm, as far as the Indian Ocean is concerned. We saw record temperatures in the Arabian Sea and Bay of Bengal, straddling between 30-33 degrees Celsius.

## Over 5% more malicious files detected every day in 2020: Kaspersky

AGENCIES

**NEW DELHI:** Global cybersecurity firm Kaspersky's detection systems discovered an average of 3,60,000 new malicious files every day over the past 12 months, a growth of 5.2 per cent when compared to the same period previous year.

The growth was driven mostly by the number of Trojans -- malicious files capable of a range of actions, including deleting data and spying -- and backdoors, a specific type of Trojan that gives attackers remote control over the infected device, Kaspersky said in its 'Security Bulletin Statistics of the Year Report'.

"It's hard to know whether or not attackers were more active or our solutions detected more malicious files simply because of greater activity. It could be a combination of both," Denis Staforkin, security expert at Kaspersky, said in a statement.

"Either way, we have registered a noticeable increase in the number of new malicious files this year, and this will most likely continue going into 2021 as employees continue to work from home and countries implement different restrictions."

The report said that 60 per cent of those malicious files detected in 2020 were non-specific Trojans. In general, the per cent of Trojans detected increased by 40.5 per cent when compared to

the previous year.

There was also a noticeable increase in the number of backdoors detected, as well as worms - malicious programs that self-replicate on your system -- written on the VisualBasicScript language and usually belonging to the Dinihou malware family.

On the decline is adware -- programmes that bombard you with advertisements -- which experienced a 35 per cent decrease when compared to 2019, Kaspersky said.

The vast majority of malicious files detected (89.80 per cent) occurred via Windows PE files - a file format specific to Windows operating systems, said the report.

At the same time, the number of new malware related to Android operating systems declined by 13.7 per cent. Given that many people were working and studying from home, most likely on computers and laptops, attackers appear to have shifted their focus to these devices.

There was also a 27% increase in the number of different scripts - sent via malicious email campaigns or encountered on infected websites, which could, once again, reflect the fact that people spent more time on the Internet and attackers attempted to capitalise on that fact.

In order to stay protected, Kaspersky recommended that users should not open any suspicious files or attachments received from unknown sources.

## AR Rahman's mother passes away

AGENCIES

**Chennai:** Kareema Begum, mother of Oscar winning composer AR Rahman, passed away in the city due to age related ailments. Mourning her demise, Rahman, posted a photo of her on his verified Twitter account on Monday afternoon.

Commenting on his tweet, celebrities from the world of music and cinema expressed condolences. "Your heart is broken, I know. But your mother left you with an inner strength, an inner resilience and belief... that I have seen and admired for long. Stay strong, my friend," commented director Shekhar Kapur.

"Dear Sir.. deeply saddened

by your loss.. may god give you strength. Remembering Amma's wonderful and gentle soul. She will forever remain in our hearts," tweeted singer Harshdeep Kaur.

"Deeply saddened by this news Rahman sir. She was one of the most gentle affectionate person I have met. Praying for her departed soul," expressed singer Shreya Ghoshal. "Sending you love and strength @arrahman sir," shared actress Aahana Kumra.

Kareema Begum was the wife of noted Malayalam music composer Rajagopala Kulashekharan aka RK Shekhar, who passed away in 1976. She is survived by her son Rahman and daughters AR Reihana, Ishrath Qadri and Fathima Shekhar.

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