



The Assam Rising

Projecting the best of Northeast India everyday

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Where were the critics who could have stopped ...

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Steve Clarke to be offered new deal to stay on as Scotland ...

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NEWS IN BRIEF

Positivity rate drops

GUWAHATI, June 01 : For the first time in more than a month, the daily Covid positivity rate in Assam dropped below 4%. Even though the state recorded 65 more Covid deaths in the last 24 hours, the recovery rate inched up to 86.28%. Health officials termed it as a clear indication of the improving Covid scenario in the state. Chief minister Himanta Biswa Sarma has predicted a drastic recovery by June 7. Daily positivity rate in the state plunged to 3.90% on Monday evening, from 4.53% recorded on Sunday. On April 24, the state's Covid positivity rate was 3.24% but the next day, it jumped to 5.48%. Since then, the positivity rate has never dropped below 4%. A total of 4,348 new cases were detected on Monday, as the health department carried out about 1.11 lakh tests.

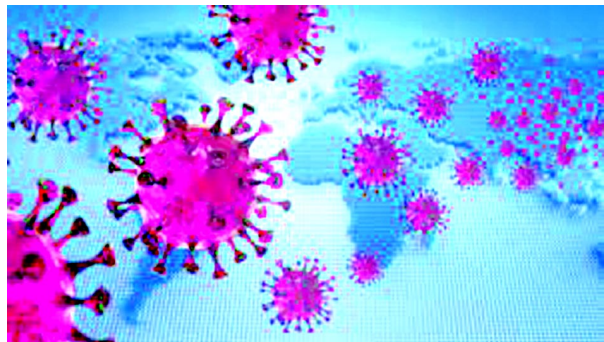
Virology lab at Lakhimpur

Guwahati, June 01 : Assam health minister Keshab Mahanta on Tuesday inaugurated a virology laboratory for Covid emergency at Lakhimpur Medical College Hospital (LMCH) in North Lakhimpur. The laboratory is expected to cater to the demand of the increased RT-PCR tests for Covid-19 in Lakhimpur and its neighboring districts which were earlier sent to the ICMR facility at Dibrugarh. This was done during his visit to Lakhimpur district to take a stock of the Covid situation. Mahanta also inspected the progress of work of the under-construction Lakhimpur Medical College Hospital. The health minister interacted with the doctors and health workers engaged in Covid care at North Lakhimpur Civil Hospital and took updates of the pandemic scenario and the admitted patients. Later Keshab Mahanta attended a Covid vaccination camp organized by the district health department and Lakhimpur district administration.

Sanitary napkins

Guwahati, June 01 : The Assam government has added sanitary napkins to the list of relief materials to be distributed among women and adolescent girls affected by floods and other natural disasters. Revenue and Disaster Management Department Commissioner and Secretary M S Manivannan has issued an order in this regard. Drawing the attention of all district deputy commissioners and sub-divisional officers (civil), the order said menstrual management during emergencies faced by women and adolescent girls living in flood-prone areas have till now remained unattended as a relief measure.

'Kappa' and 'Delta': WHO gives names to Covid-19 variants found in India



New Delhi, June 01 : The World Health Organization (WHO) on Monday announced new labels, using Greek alphabets, for various variants of the coronavirus disease (Covid-19), also giving

names to the two variants that have been found in India thus far. "Labelled using Greek alphabets, WHO announces new labels for Covid variants of concern (VOC) and interest (VOI)," news agency ANI

quoted the world health body as saying. "Covid variant first found in India will be referred to as Delta, while earlier found variant in the country will be known as Kappa," WHO further said. According to WHO, the B.1.617.1 variant has been designated as "Kappa" while the B.1.617.2 variant has been dubbed "Delta." The earliest samples from both the variants from both the variants were documented in October 2020, it said. The labels, said WHO's technical Covid-19 lead Dr Maria Van Kerkhove, don't replace

existing scientific names, which, she said, convey important scientific information and will continue to be used in research. "No country should be stigmatised for detecting and reporting Covid variants," Dr Kerkhove said further. Earlier in the day, Yadav and Firojiya visited a local agriculture market on a motorcycle appealing to people to follow Covid-19 protocols during the unlocking of the "corona curfew". According to a press release by the Cyberabad Police, Prashant boarded a train to

Bikaner and from there he went to the Indo-Pak border and jumped the fence there. akistan releases Hyderabad techie after jail term for crossing border illegally. In , Saraswat said India has got traditional medicine systems for thousands of years and that ayurvedic medicine has been responsible for improving the immunity of people. No use debating over allopathy, ayurveda: NITI Aayog member V K Saraswat. The B.1.617.2 or "Delta" variant, reports of whose unofficial nomenclature after India were dismissed by the central government, is seen as the cause behind the devastating second Covid-19 wave in the country. At the peak of the second wave, in April, India reported more than

CBI books Ghosh Brothers Automobiles in IDBI bank fraud case

Guwahati, June 01 : The Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) has registered a case against Guwahati-based Ghosh Brothers Automobiles and its promoters and directors in a bank fraud case worth Rs 168 crore, officials said on Tuesday. A CBI spokesperson said that the agency has booked Pranab Kumar Ghosh, Pratul Kumar Ghosh, Gita Rani Ghosh and Prabir Kumar Ghosh, all promoters-Directors of Ghosh Brothers Automobiles. Besides the pro-

HSLC and HS exams dates to be announced within two days

Guwahati, June 01 : Dates for conducting the High School Leaving Certificate (HSLC) and Higher Secondary (HS) exams would be announced within two days. This was informed by Assam Education Minister Ranuj Pegu on Tuesday. He said that a decision on conducting HSLC and HS final year examinations will be taken within the next 2 days. "Opinions of all stakeholders have been taken into account. A decision on conducting the exams would be taken very soon," said Assam Education Minister Ranuj Pegu. Also read: Bollywood actor Dia Mirza reacts to Assam



Government's helicopter tourism plans in Kaziranga National Park, says 'leave our forests alone' Earlier, the Assam Government had said that the HSLC and Assam High Madrasa Examinations 2021 will be held as soon as the COVID-19 situation in the State becomes normal. In an order, Contd...Page 6

NSCN (I-M) could be using a new extremist group as a front for extortion in Assam

Guwahati, June 01 : Security forces say arrested 'army chief' of Dimas National Liberation Army revealed links between groups. The Isak-Muivah faction of the National Socialist Council of Nagaland, or NSCN (I-M) could be using a new extremist group as a front for extortion in Assam, officials of security forces engaged in counter-insurgency operations said. A combined

team of the Assam police, paramilitary forces and the Army have been probing a possible nexus between the NSCN (I-M) and the Dimas National Liberation Army (DNLA) after the latter's 'army chief' Minom Phunglasa was caught a few months ago. Phunglasa is alleged to have told his interrogators that the NSCN (I-M) was helping the DNLA with arms, training and shelter



near Nagaland's Dimapur town in exchange for a share of money collected as "taxes" from contractors, traders and timber dealers in Assam, primarily the adjoining hill districts of Dima Hasao and Karbi Anglong. He also named NSCN (I-M)'s "brigadier" Chiplemi Shmrang as having offered weapons and explosives to the DNLA, which was formed before the 2019 Lok

Sabha polls for securing a separate State for the Dimas community. The security forces followed this lead, gathered intelligence in Nagaland and tracked the movement of people suspected to be DNLA members. This culminated in the May 23 encounter in which six DNLA members were gunned down "when challenged" at Dugudisha in Karbi Contd...Page 6

Twitter strives to comply with applicable laws in India, says its spokesperson

New Delhi, June 01 : Twitter Inc told Delhi High Court that it has complied with the new IT Rules and already appointed a Resident Grievance Officer under Rule 4 of the Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Ethics Code) Rules 2021 on May 28. The Delhi High Court issued notice to Twitter after a petition was filed



against it for alleged non-compliance of the Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, 2021. Twitter had said it

No mixing of vaccines, everyone will get 2 doses of Covaxin, Covishield: Govt



New Delhi, June 01 : The central government on Tuesday clarified that there will be no mixing of Covid-19 vaccine doses in India until enough scientific evidence on its effectiveness is gathered. It also clarified that there is no change in

its SOP for vaccination, and all beneficiaries will get two doses of Covishield and Covaxin. These clarifications come amid concerns triggered by some recent comments made by senior officials indicating that the

New Delhi, June 01 : West Bengal Governor Jagdeep Dhankhar on Tuesday (June 1) stirred a controversy by saying 'ego prevailed over public service' on Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee skipping Prime Minister Narendra Modi's meeting to review post-cyclone damages on May 28. Terming the Governor's comment 'unfortunate', the ruling party in the state asserted that the chief minister is involved in public service 24/7 and all her actions are prompted by her concern for the interests of the state. Dhankhar said the Chief Minister had called him up before the meeting at Kalaikunda in Paschim Medinipur district and indicated that she won't attend it if Leader of Opposition Suvendu Adhikari is present in it. "Constrained by false narrative to put record



straight: On May 27 at 2316 hrs CM @MamataOfficial messaged 'may I talk? urgent', Dhankhar tweeted. "Thereafter on phone indicated boycott by her & officials of PM Review Meet #CycloneYaas if LOP @SuvenduWB attends it. Ego prevailed over Public service," he said in another Twitter post. Mamata said she had skipped the meeting because 'a BJP

MLA has no locus to be present in a PM-CM meeting'. Adhikari has defeated Mamata in Nandigram seat in the recent assembly elections. In a letter to PM Narendra Modi on May 31, Mamata had written, "I wanted to have a quiet word with you, a meeting between the PM and the CM as usual. You, however, revised the structure of the meeting to include a local MLA from your party



motors and directors, the CBI has also named Arunabha Chattopadhyay, Chartered Accountant and unknown bank officials and private persons. The official said that

the case has been registered on the basis of a complaint from IDBI Bank for causing a loss of Contd...Page 6

69% decline in COVID-19 cases since peak on May 7: Centre

New Delhi, June 01 : The central government on Tuesday (June 1) said that there has been a decline of about 69 per cent in new COVID-19 cases as compared to the peak that was observed on May 7. "A total of about 1.27 lakh cases were reported in the last 24 hours. Since May 28, the country is reporting less than 2 lakh cases. There is a decline of infection in the country," Lav Agarwal, Joint Secretary, Health Ministry, was quoted. "Active cases are down by 50%, 1.3 lakh decrease Contd...Page 6

Delhi HC rejects drug controller's status report as 'trash' its on how BJP MP Gautam Gambhir got huge quantities of Fabiflu



New Delhi, June 01 : "You can't take us for a ride. If you think we are so gullible, so naive, we are not," the Delhi High Court told the drug controller on Monday for not properly examining how BJP MP Gautam Gambhir procured a huge quantity of COVID-19 drug Fabiflu

and said people's tendency to appear as saviours have to be denounced. The high court said its confidence in the drug controller has "shaken completely" and rejected as "trash" its status report on inquiry into procurement of the medicine Contd...Page 6

Tea garden workers in India's Assam hit by second wave of COVID

Guwahati, June 01 : Gautam Sabar had been complaining of fever and headache for a week so on May 15, his son Gaurab Sabar took him to the in-house hospital at the Dimakuchi tea estate in northeast India's Assam state. There was no doctor to attend to him and the health assistant present at the facility pre-



scribed him some medicine and let him go, Gaurab told Al Jazeera. The next morning, as Gautam's condition deteriorated, the son rushed him to the health facility again. This time the assistant put him in the tea garden's ambulance and sent him to a government facility 20 kilometres (12 miles) away where he tested positive for COVID-19. Not equipped to tackle serious cases, the doctors at this

facility asked them to take Gautam to the Civil Hospital at Udalguri, the district headquarters. Soon after he arrived at the hospital, Gautam, who had a history of diabetes, died. Dimakuchi Tea Estate where Gautam worked has seen 34 positive cases and two deaths since a vicious second wave of the coronavirus hit India in early April. Hundreds of workers

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Transasia Bio-Medicals Ltd. donates 5BiPAP machines to state Government for COVID treatment



Guwahati, June 1: Transasia Bio-Medicals Ltd., India's Leading IVD player for whom India comes first, has been actively supporting various state governments in providing faster diagnosis and treatment to COVID patients. To help the state of Assam in its fight against the second wave of the pandemic, Transasia donated 5 BiPAP machines for deployment in various COVID-dedicated hospitals all over Assam. In spite of the current shortage in the availability of these machines, Transasia procured these machines from its global vendors. Dr. Achyut Ch. Baishya, Principal cum Chief Superintendent, Guwahati Medical College and Hospital and Dr. Sasanka Baruah, Head

of Department, Urology, Guwahati Medical College and Hospital received them from Monoj Kr. Shome, Regional Sales Manager, Transasia Bio-Medicals Ltd. As a part of its COVID-relief efforts, Transasia has donated critical equipment including 200 BiPAP machines for oxygen support, 40 hematology analyzers and 30 coagulation analyzers for monitoring disease severity. These equipment worth more than Rs. 3 crores have been donated to several state governments to aid in the treatment of COVID patients. Transasia's COVID-19 IgG antibody test, RT PCR kit, and those for critical parameters such as D Dimer, CRP, Ferritin are being effectively employed by thousands of laboratories and hospitals all over India and in over 100 countries to monitor the progression of infection. Expressing his gratitude to the Vazirani Foundation and Transasia for extending their support to the Assam government, Dr. Achyut Ch. Baishya, Principal cum Chief Superintendent, Guwahati Medical College and Hospital, said, "It's a timely

donation and essential in the fight against Corona virus. Transasia's efforts to deliver non-invasive ventilation will benefit many COVID-19 patients struggling to breathe while trying to fight off this virus." Added, Dr. Sasanka Baruah, Head of Department, Urology, Guwahati Medical College and Hospital, "We laud Transasia's ongoing efforts in Assam in preventing, detecting, and responding to the pandemic." Speaking on the donation, Suresh Vazirani, Founder & Chairman, Transasia-Erba Group, said, "The second wave is devastating and is taking a toll on the healthcare system of our country. While we are hopeful that things will turn around for India soon, we realized that just hope is not enough. Transasia remains committed to the health of Indians and through our small effort, we intend to reach out to those severely impacted and in urgent need. This is one of the several initiatives that we, through the Vazirani Foundation, intend to continue to use our resources and technology, to aid the Central and state health ministries."

Sipajhar MLA donates Rs 1 lakh to CM relief fund



SIPAJHAR, June 01: The newly elected MLA, Sipajhar Legislative Constituency Dr Paramananda Rajbansi has donated an amount of Rs 1 lakh to Chief Minister's relief

fund recently. Furthermore he also takes steps to provide relief materials to the poor and needy people who are affected in Covid 19th Sipajhar LAC area.

Career Counselling Seminar

Guwahati, 1st June: On 31st May, an online career counselling seminar was organized by the Department of Mechanical Engineering, Assam Don Bosco University and Kiran Academy, Dhemaji. The seminar was held from 7 PM to 9 PM and the resource person for the seminar was prominent career counsellor of the state and Assistant Professor, Department of Mechanical Engineering, Assam Don Bosco University, Dr. Buljit Buragohain. The participants for the career counselling seminar were the final year students of Higher Secondary (Science and Arts) of Kiran Academy and the seminar was coordinated

by Mr. Ashis Paul, Academy Director, Kiran Academy. The career counsellor, Dr. Buragohain explained the various career opportunities that students can have in future for the science and arts stream of higher secondary. Kamaldeep Kalita, Assistant Professor, Department of Mechanical Engineering, informed the students about various courses offered by Assam Don Bosco University. Dr. Buljit Buragohain answered various questions of the students and also informed about the career advice offered through phone (9435188630) on every Saturday from 6 PM to 9 PM.

'Identify hotspots to bring COVID pandemic situation under control', Minister Suklabaidya to Hailakandi district administration

Guwahati, June 01: Minister for Environment and Forest, Fisheries and Excise, Parimal Suklabaidya asked the Hailakandi district administration to identify the hotspots to prevent further contamination and to step up awareness to bring the COVID-19 situation under control. Reviewing the COVID-19 pandemic scenario with Deputy Commissioner, SP, representative of MP, MLAs, political representatives, ADCs, COs and officials of concerned departments at Deputy Commissioner's conference hall here on Tuesday, Minister Suklabaidya said top priority has to be accorded in identifying the areas of contamination and to take remedial measures immediately as the district has a high positivity rate of 5.73% much above the state level. "The way out to bring the

situation under control is to identify the areas of contamination and take remedial measures forthwith," he asserted. The Minister urged the MLAs to create awareness among the people in their respective constituencies to come forward for vaccine as 'it is the only way to stay safe from the coronavirus scourge' and to dispel the wrong notion about vaccine. Taking stock of the status of ICU coming up in the civil hospital, the Minister expressed strong indignation over the tardy pace of work and directed the Executive Engineer (Building) to expedite the process. "It's question of life and death and no one can play with the lives of people by dilly-dallying the setting up of ICU facility", said Suklabaidya, directing the Deputy Commissioner to monitor the work and to blacklist the contractor over inordinate delay in completing the civil work. The Minister asked the administration to focus on the tea garden areas and to step up vaccination in the wake of spike in tea garden areas as well as to ensure ration provided by the government. Suklabaidya took stock of oxygen cylinders, vaccines and bed availability in the district and assured of all possible help in case of requirements. He even instructed the Deputy Commissioner to even hire oxygen cylinders from welders if the need arises. He asked the administration and people's representatives to persuade those affected with COVID-19 and with co-morbidity to come to hospital for treatment without delay as 'the fatality rate in the

second wave is higher than the first wave'. The Minister asked the District Commissioner and CEO, Zilla Parishad to ensure judicious utilisation of 10% of allocation earmarked by 15th Finance Commission for COVID related expenditure. Suklabaidya directed the officials of Food, Civil Supplies and Corporate Affairs to ensure that there is no anomaly in distribution of essential commodities through public distribution system during the pandemic times. "No anomaly or pilferage of essential commodities will be tolerated during the pandemic times. Anyone trying to take advantage of the unprecedented situation will be taken to task," he quipped. Earlier, Deputy Commissioner, Rohan Jha through a power point presentation gave an overview of the COVID-19 scene, and said there are 400 beds available for COVID patients, 25 oxygen concentrators and 50 'D' type cylinders have been ordered. He said the district accounted for 29 deaths in the second wave and 19 containment zones have been set up together with micro containment zones to arrest the spread of the disease. Jha informed the Minister that COVID Care Centres have been set up across the district, including tea garden areas. He said though the vaccine stock for 18-44 age group is less, for 45 plus it will last for some days. Jha further apprised the Minister that out of 19 tea gardens in the district, 15 gardens have been covered. 397 COVID afflicted families have been provided ration at the rate of Rs.2,000, he added.

Labourer dies from electrocution at Nagaon medical college hospital

NAGAON, June 01: A labourer engaged in ongoing construction work of the proposed Nagaon Medical College Hospital at Mahkhuli, on the outskirts of the town, was died due to electrocution today when he was working at the site. The victim has been identified as Bijoy Orang of Amoni area in the district. Sources claimed that the tragic incident took place when Orang unfortunately came in contact with a loose electrical wire at the construction site. Following the tragic death of the labourer, other workers of the site went on a rampage and staged a strong protest against the concerned construction agency. During the protest, the workers alleged that they informed repeatedly about the loose electrical wire affixed at the site to the concerned agency and urged to clear off those obstacle caused by the dangerous electrical wire before hand. But the concerned authorities paid no response to our appeal so far for which one of us finally has to face such tragic catastrophe, the labourers engaged in the construction of medical college hospital at Mahkhuli alleged. They however demanded reasonable compensation to the family members of the victim labourer Bijoy Orang, sources added.

306 fresh cases recorded, one more dies of COVID in Nagaon dist

NAGAON, June 1: Fresh 306 more COVID cases were detected today, taking the total cumulatively active COVID cases in the district to 4534 while one woman who was undergoing treatment in hospital, died of COVID 19 today. Including the death of the woman, a total of 64 people died of COVID 19 in the district till the time of filing of this report, sources said. Sources claimed that among those who tested positive today, 83 were immediately admitted to hospital as well as in various COVID Care Centres set up at various places in the district while the rest were put in home isolation. Meanwhile 438 people who were undergoing treatment in hospital as well as at their homes after being affected by the virus, have been recovered from the infection of the virus so far. Rapid Antigen Test was conducted on 6037 people while RT-PCR test was conducted on 265 swab samples today, sources further added.

Sameswar Nath passes away



SIPAJHAR, June 01: Retired Principal, Garukhuti Higher Secondary School Sameswar Nath breathed his last on June 1 at the age of 80 at his Niz Sipajhar Tubapara village residence. As one of the leading social activist he was served as the vice president of Sipajhar Block Committee of Jnan Vigyan Samitee, Assam and President of the Debananda Panchayat Committee of the Jnan Vigyan Samitee, Assam. He was also one of the life member of Sipajhar branch of Assam Sahitya Sabha and Yogi Sanmillani. He has written two thought provoking books. Furthermore he was also actively associated with Kapor Puri Than, Niz Sipajhar LP School, Radha Govinda Primary school, Niz Sipajhar ME School, Pub Niz Sipajhar Anchalik Unnayan Sangha, Bhaskar Jyoti Sangha and NEEDS. He has left behind his wife, two son, two daughter in law, two daughter and a host of relatives. As one of the religious minded person he has earned respect from the people of all walks of life of the locality during his life. The people of greater Sipajhar area in Darrang district have deeply mourned his demise and paid condolences to the bereaved family.

Pneumococcal Conjugate Vaccine Launched At General Hospital, Aalo

Aalo, June 01: pneumococcal conjugate vaccine (pcv) was launched by west siang deputy commissioner shri moki loyi amid fanfare at general hospital aalo on 31st may last. dr. moli riba, dmo aalo, dr. tomar kamki dfwo cum dio, dr. jombom kato, med. supt. gh, aalo, dr. toli nyorak, pediatric, gh, aalo along with other doctors, nurses, epi staffs of gh, aalo and dpmsu staffs of aalo were present on the occasion. dr. moli riba, dmo briefed about pneumococcal conjugate vaccine (pcv) and its doses to the beneficiaries present and participated



pants as a whole. he also informed that left-out and drop-out beneficiaries for covid-19 vaccination for age category of 45 and above years shall be enlisted through house to house survey through ashas & awws. further, he requested the medical superintendent gh, aalo and the entire mo/ics of chcs & phcs to conduct house to house survey by guiding ashas and awws and completed by 15th of this month.

Arrested thief tries to commit suicide in police custody due to drugs addiction at Nagaon

NAGAON, June 1: With aid of local Gaonrakshi Bahini, Nagaon police led by Sub Inspector Anjushree Kalita arrested one dreaded thief from Nagaon railway station area today. Police seized various stolen items including laptops, cameras, mobile phones, inverter sets, gold ornaments, two pieces of sharp swords and some other items of Namghors from his possession, sources added. The arrested thief has been identified as Mahmud Wakil Bhuyan. Significantly, the arrested Wakil Bhuyan even in police custody tried to commit suicide by cutting his neck with a scissor for not getting drugs. But his attempt has been foiled by SI Anjushree Kalita and she snatched away the scissor from him, sources added. Sources claimed that the local members of Gaonrakshi Bahini traced four youths waiting in search of something near at Nagaon railway station and informed local Morikolong Town Outpost police. When police rushed to the spot, three of them were able to flee from the scene while Wakil Bhuyan came under police net, sources further added.

Dr. Mahendra Bora passes away

Biswanath Chari, June 1: A known physician of Sootea area Dr. Mahendra Bora breathed his last at his L.B Road residence on Tuesday. He was 76. A generous and helpful physician, late Bora was closely associated with many socio-cultural organizations of Sootea. Dr. Bora suddenly felt unwell and breathed his last on Tuesday evening at around 5.30 pm. A medical team of Sootea PHC visited his house and tested late Bora Covid positive.

PEC lauds Indian authorities for corona compensation to scribes



Geneva/Guwahati, June 01: Press Emblem Campaign, the Switzerland based international media rights and safety body, appreciates the initiative of Indian federal government along with many province authorities for sanctioning financial assistances to the families of Covid-19 victims among journalists. As India continues to be a worst affected country with the highest number of scribes died of novel corona virus infection aggravated ailments, PEC (<https://pressemblem.ch/>) also recommends for early vaccination to journalists along with other media workers. Mentionable is that the Union government in New Delhi recently announced that 7.5 hundred thousand (72 Indian rupees=

1 USD) each would be offered to 67 families of journalists, who died because of Covid-19 since arch 2020. Expressing grieves over the demise of scribes in the pandemic, the federal information & broadcasting ministry approved the financial assistances to the affected families. Many State governments also declared compensations to deceased journo-families because of Covid-19, where the Uttar Pradesh offers the highest (?10 lakh each). PEC, while condoling the demise of over 1440 journalists around the world due to Covid-19 till date, urges all the governments to vaccinate the journalists on a priority basis and offer aid to the victim families so that they can

play their roles as frontline corona warriors after the doctors, nurses, other health and sanitation workers, said PEC general secretary Blaise Lempem adding that safety of media workers remains at risk in this crisis because they have to continue working on the ground. According to PEC statistics, India remains at the top of the list of 76 corona affected countries, with 229 journo-casualties, followed by Brazil (222 dead), Peru (161), Mexico (111), Colombia (64), Italy (56), Bangladesh (53), Ecuador (50), USA (49), Iran (32), United Kingdom (30), Argentina (28), Dominican Republic, Pakistan, Turkey (27 each), Russia (21), Venezuela (19), Bolivia (18), Panama (16), Spain, Ukraine

(15 each), Egypt, Nepal (14 each), Honduras (11), Afghanistan, Nigeria, South Africa, France (9 each), etc. "In May, at least 90 journalists succumbed to the virus infection in India, that is 3 per day. For the whole world, more than 180 journalists passed away due to Covid-19 in the month of May, that is 6 per day, a record number," said Nava Thakuria, the country representative of PEC, adding that India lately lost journalists Sagolsem Hemant, Basant Das, Sushil Sharma, R Jawahar, Junagari Ramesh, Prabudha Jagadev, Suresh Kumar Chaturvedi, HS Doreswamy, Vidyut P Mourya, Pradeep Kumar, Roshan Dias, Rajkumar Keswani, Choppadandi Mohan, Prakash Biyani, L Ramesh, Shivani Dua, etc.



Members of Afghan special forces take part in their graduation ceremony at a military training center in Kabul

World's only alpine parrot may have moved to the mountains to avoid people

London, June 01 : New Zealand's rare, highly endangered alpine parrots may have headed for the mountains to avoid people - and researchers say their adaptability could help them survive the climate crisis. The kea is considered the only alpine parrot in the world. But scientists analysing DNA sequencing and fossil records have found kea were once present in other parts of the country. The news is something of a knock to the kea's internationally unique "alpine parrot" status. But it may also be a saving grace for the endangered bird, making it more capable of surviving habitat loss or increased competition. Being an alpine specialist can make species like kea particularly vulnerable to the climate crisis - as the planet heats, alpine environments retreat, more competitive lowland species push in, and species that adapted specifically to alpine conditions can be threatened with extinction. Research from Europe, for example, has found up to 22% of species studied on glaciers in the Italian Alps would disappear from the area once the glaciers had gone. University of Otago researchers used whole genome data of the kea, and a similar, forest-adapted "sister species" of native parrot, the kākā. They were looking to identify the genomic differences associated with the two birds' habitat specialisations - but did not find major genomic differences associated with high-altitude life. They conclude that the kea may instead be a

generalist, which was "using the alpine zone to - for example - avoid lower lying anthropogenic landscapes". Associate professor Michael Knapp, one of the paper's lead authors, said that "Physiologically, there is nothing to stop the kea from surviving at lower altitudes. It's a generalist. It will survive from sea level to alpine." He said that idea that kea had moved specifically to avoid people was still speculative, and there wasn't enough information to establish any causative relationship between human settlements expanding and the birds' adoption of mountainous zones. But given kea were physically able to survive in a variety of habitats, it made sense to examine what the primary differences were. "What distinguishes the alpine habitat from the New Zealand lower-lying open habitats? [There] are usually heavily anthropogenic influences, agriculture going on and so on." Kea have certainly come into conflict with New Zealand's human populations before. They are a particularly intelligent, mischievous and inquisitive species, known for their love of attacking rubber windshield wipers on the cars of mountain visitors. Over the years, they've made headlines for rummaging through tourist bags, stealing wallets and in one case, making off with an unlucky Scottish tourist's passport. But among farmers, they acquired notoriety for attacking and occasionally killing sheep. The attacks so incensed early New Zealand sheep

farmers that the government put up a 'bounty' on kea beaks - a policy that continued for about 100 years, until 1970. Analysis of government bounty payments found that an estimated 100,000 kea were killed for bounty. According to New Zealand's Department of Conservation, kea today are nationally endangered, with only around 3000-7000 birds remaining in the country. Those culls, Knapp said, would have put "huge pressure on the birds". "Again, is that what got them completely out of the lower zone, that they would just be shot if they were anywhere near humans?" Knapp asked. "These are all potential factors ... [but] more information is needed to really make that connection." Researchers speculated that the kea's adaptation to alpine environments may have been helped along by its personality. The change in habitat, they wrote, "may have facilitated - or have been facilitated by - the evolution of the kea's unique behavioural repertoire, which includes high inquisitiveness, learning and problem-solving abilities". If global heating dramatically shrinks alpine habitats for kea, they could return to the forests - a move that would push them back into competition with kākā. When New Zealand passed a motion to declare a climate emergency in 2020, it specifically cited the "alarming trend in species decline and global biodiversity" including the decline in New Zealand's indigenous biodiversity.

The \$3bn bargain: how China dominates Pacific mining, logging and fishing

Beijing, June 01 : Trade data has revealed that China received more than half the total tonnes of seafood, wood and minerals exported from the region in 2019, a haul worth \$3.3bn that has been described by experts as "staggering in magnitude". The country's mass extraction of resources comes as China has deepened its connections with governments across the region, amid a soft power push that sees it rivaling the influence of the US and Australia in the Pacific. China took more by weight of these resources from the Pacific than the next 10 countries combined, with experts saying China "would easily outstrip" other countries, including Australia, when it comes to "gross environmental impact of its extractive industries". Data analysis reveals the extent of China's appetite for Pacific natural resources. In 2019, China imported 4.8m tonnes of wood, 4.8m tonnes of mineral products, and 72,000 tonnes of seafood from the Pacific. The next

single largest customer for the Pacific's extractive resources was Japan, which imported 4.1m tonnes of minerals - mostly petroleum - 370,000 tonnes of wood and 24,000 tonnes of seafood. Australia imported 600,000 tonnes of minerals, 5,000 tonnes of wood and 200 tonnes of seafood. Shane Macleod, a research fellow at the Lowy Institute, says that China is such a dominant customer of Pacific resources because of its proximity to the region and its need to power its economy. "They just have the appetite. They have the need for natural resources and they're looking for sources and the Pacific is geographically close. It has the added benefit that the supply lines are shorter," he said. "So you can look at the Ramu nickel mine in Papua New Guinea. That is providing raw material for China in the region, directly, without having to be transported from the other side of the planet." From Solomon Islands, more than 90% of extractive

resources go to China when measured by weight. And China regularly claims more than 90% of the total tonnes of wood exported by Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands. Beyond direct imports of resources, data from the American Enterprise Institute shows more than US\$2bn was invested by Chinese companies in Pacific mining in the past two decades. These include investments in the controversial Porgera, Ramu Nickel and Frieda River mines in PNG. The Chinese government has also sent billions of dollars in official finance into the region, including tens of millions for new marine and industrial zones. China is the Pacific's biggest customer whether measured by weight or US dollars. But Australia is close behind when measured in value - \$2.8bn to China's \$3.3bn in 2019. This is due to the fact that many extractive products are heavy but relatively inexpensive commodities, like wood. "In terms of the gross environmental impact of its extractive industries, China would easily outstrip other industrial nations that operate in the Pacific region, including Australia," says Prof Bill Laurance from James Cook University in north Queensland. "China's mineral, timber, fossil fuel, food and other imports from Pacific Island nations are staggering in magnitude. They're creating enormous challenges for sustainable development in the region." Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, Tonga and Palau all regularly send more than 90% of their wood exports to

China. China's size doesn't neatly explain this concentration, as it takes less than 10% of the wood exported by Malaysia, a much larger producer. Malaysian companies also dominate logging in PNG and Solomon Islands. A logging truck heads through the village of Vanimo, Papua New Guinea, en route to the Vanimo Forest Products log camp where the logs will be loaded onto a ship for export to China. According to some estimates, illegal timber makes up as much as 70% of logs exported from Solomon Islands. As a very large and nearby country, China is a natural customer for the Pacific's exports. But experts say the outsized take also has to do with China's lack of laws against importing illegal timber, and poor accountability for environmental or social impacts. "Both [Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands] suffer from entrenched endemic corruption that has made it (so far) impossible to hold to account both the logging industry and the politicians profiting from them," says Lela Stanley, a policy adviser at the NGO Global Witness. "They are known high-risk timber producers, and countries with more stringent laws on illegal timber should avoid them accordingly. Currently China has no law explicitly forbidding the import of illegally produced timber." The logging that takes place in the region has huge impacts on communities. "Most of those logs have been produced illegally, often ... through the violation of land rights. This is not an abstract concept in PNG but one with real-life impacts for countless people across the country. Most

rural communities depend directly on their land and forests for at least some of their needs. When that forest vanishes, or is stolen, the impacts are severe." While China's new forest law, which came into effect in July 2020, aims to promote sustainable trade of timber, as well as to safeguard China's forests, there are still concerns about some companies' practices.



People watch plane performance during the Bethpage Air Show at Jones Beach on Long Island of New York

Rise of armed civilian groups in Myanmar fuels fears of full-scale civil war

Yangon, June 01 : Myanmar is on the verge of a new civil war, a spokesperson for the country's parallel government has warned, as communities increasingly take up arms to protect themselves from a relentless campaign of military violence. Conflict has raged for decades in Myanmar's borderlands, where myriad ethnic armed groups are fighting with the military for greater autonomy. Since February's coup, however, dozens of new, grassroots people's defence forces have emerged to oppose the junta, with battles occurring in areas of the country that were previously peaceful. "The people of Myanmar have been left with no other choice. They just have no other option left," said Dr Sasa, spokesperson for Myanmar's national unity government (NUG), which was set up by pro-democracy politicians. It is just the beginning. The situation will become out of control. Even if it is one man in a village, they will not just bow in front of these murderers. It is the whole country on the road to civil war," Sasa said. Over the past week, tens of thousands of people have been displaced in eastern Kayah state by intense fighting between the military, the newly formed Karenni People's Defence Force and the Karenni Army, an established ethnic armed group. On Monday evening, the military used helicopters to bomb and fire at civilian fighters, the Karenni People's Defence Force told local media. "We attacked with light weapons but they responded with artillery shells," a the KPDF member told the independent outlet Myanmar Now. At least 58 defence forces have formed across the country, of which 12 are active, according to the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (Acled), a non-profit that tracks conflict. These groups are formed at a local level and are not necessarily officially linked to the NUG. Groups have revealed little about the nature of their training, but their resources and intensity vary. In the town of Mindat in Chin state, one of the poorest areas of the country, volunteers armed with little more than traditional hunting guns rose up against the military in May. Elsewhere, young city dwellers have fled to the jungle to learn how to make homemade explosives. Celebrities are among those who have announced that they are joining training - from a former beauty queen who represented Myanmar in the Miss Grand International contest, Htar Htet Htet, to Han Htoo Lwin, known as Kyar Pauk, the lead singer of punk rock

band Big Bag. In Myanmar's biggest city, Yangon, members of the security forces have been targeted in a wave of attacks over the past week, including shootings and explosions. A wedding party was also targeted, reportedly because the groom was suspected of being a military informant. Four people were killed - including the bride - after a bomb was disguised as a gift, according to local media. No one has claimed responsibility for the blasts. Schools across the country, some of which have been occupied by the military, have been bombed or set alight by unknown perpetrators, in what may be an attempt to reinforce the shutdown of the education system by anti-coup protesters. The junta has ordered parents to register their children to return to school, but the vast majority have not done so. More than half of the teachers working in state schools are on strike, according

company or [other] western companies, to buy weapons from Russia and China to kill the people of Myanmar," he said. Nine neighbouring south-east Asian countries have reportedly proposed that a draft UN resolution be weakened by removing a call for an arms embargo. Sasa called for like-minded countries to push for the measure, and to introduce tougher, targeted sanctions. The more the international community delayed, he added, "the more bloody it will become, the closer we get to civil war and genocide". More battles are already reported to have taken place in Myanmar in the first half of 2021 than in the entirety of last year, according to Acled. It has also tracked sharp increases in reports of attacks on civilians, and reports of explosions and other forms of remote violence, which include the deployment of artillery, shelling, grenades or



armed groups have offered support to anti-coup forces, though others are ambivalent. Groups could seek to exploit the coup for their own territorial gains, further complicating the crisis. Anti-coup defence forces face an infamously brutal military that has an estimated 400,000 armed personnel, making it the second largest in south-east Asia after Vietnam's. It is supplied primarily by China and Russia, drawing on generous state funding as well as its lucrative business networks - which campaigners are trying to weaken by placing pressure on international companies. Sasa is calling for the international community to recognise the NUG as the official leaders of Myanmar. Doing so, he said, would help the body to demand that oil and gas companies, such as Total and Chevron, hand over payments to democratic officials rather than army generals. "It is an insult to us that the gas that is from the land of Myanmar is being used by these military generals, and being paid for by Total

executive director of the Chin Human Rights Organization, said people from Mindat reported the military had used civilians as human shields during recent clashes. Thousands of people from the town remain stranded just as the rainy season was beginning, he said. "They say they are getting very, very desperate. There has been some delivery of food aid and basic medical aid from volunteers, but there has been no large-scale delivery," he added, warning of an impending humanitarian crisis. Covid-19 is also spreading along the Indian border. At least 833 people have been killed by the military since it seized power in February, according to estimates by the advocacy group Assistance Association for Political Prisoners Burma. Thousands have been detained, often in unknown locations where they are at risk of torture. An activist who has met young people who are training to fight the military, and who asked to remain anonymous, said volunteers believed violence was the only language the military understood. "They want to scare the soldiers coming into their communities making arrests, beating and torturing," she said. "Some people are hoteliers, some have their own restaurants, bars - and they have now left all their businesses." One young medical student had fled alone to train, the activist said. "She was so passionate because her friends got killed. Her place was terrorised under martial law. She saw people burning alive in front of her. That experience pushed her to pick up the gun."

THE ASSAM RISING

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The loss we have occurred

If you're ever going to experience a mental illness, it will most likely start in your adolescent years. One 2005 study found that about 75% of all mental illness starts by age 24; another from 2003 found that this number might even start by age 18. We have known this for some time, long before the pandemic began. Then Covid-19 erupted, triggering a fresh wave of headlines about young people's mental health and a "lost generation". There's good reason to be concerned. Initial evidence suggests that, in the early months of the pandemic at least, emotional problems increased on average in young people. This is unsurprising: lockdowns cause a great deal of stress for this age group, disrupting education and limiting vital contact with friends. Some young people will have been especially vulnerable, such as those who lost loved ones or spent lockdown in homes marked by conflict or violence. But Covid or no Covid, adolescence has always been a period of heightened risk for mental health problems. To understand why, we need to think about what adolescence is actually for, evolutionarily speaking. Consider what a child is like before puberty: they are immature, vulnerable and highly dependent on their parents. By the end of adolescence (roughly about age 24), a person can support and look after themselves, manage complex social interactions and navigate sexual relationships. That's quite the journey. The route involves a number of dramatic, protracted changes to a person's physical body and psychological functioning, ignited by a surge of hormones and underpinned by extensive development in the brain. All being well, this is nothing more than a bumpy ride. But it's this exact series of changes that can sometimes go off piste, and this can trigger a mental disorder. In the words of one group of researchers studying adolescent mental health, "moving parts get broken". Take social development. To become a fully functioning, independent adult, a person must peel away from their parents and develop intimate, complex relationships with their peers. To achieve that, they need to understand and care about what other people think and feel about them. You can do this to an extent as a child, but in adolescence these skills really pick up, as you gradually learn the intricate dance that is adult social interaction. Typically developing teens learn how to grasp subtext and identify sarcasm, jokes and lies. They become better at identifying subtle meaning in a person's tone of voice, facial expressions and body language, and they use this to figure out who likes them, who is flirting with them and who might be a threat. This is cognitively demanding stuff: adolescents expend a great deal of brain power thinking about their peers. The four essential values we relied on last year - and forget now at our peril - but it's easy to see how this social focus could cause problems. For some adolescents, the tendency to think about friends ramps up a little too much, and they become fixated on what others think of them. In its extreme manifestation, this can become social anxiety disorder (Sad), which is characterised by months of debilitating worry about social interactions. Sad most often rears its head in the early teenage years; it has been called the "prototypical adolescent disorder". There are many other examples. Thanks to their newfound biological drives, many adolescents embark on sexual relationships. Most of the time, this doesn't cause issues, but when teenage sex goes wrong, it goes badly wrong. It can result in unwanted pregnancies or humiliating sexting incidents. Adolescents' drive to try risky new things - again, entirely necessary to become an adult who understands what is and isn't safe - can trigger any number of mental health problems, from the trauma of a car accident to substance abuse or addiction. The growing ability to ruminate, which is necessary for learning from past behaviour, maintaining healthy relationships and developing a nuanced sense of self, can go off the rails and escalate into depression. Laid out like this, adolescence sounds disastrous: a ghost train through a haunted house, passing through an endless number of potential pitfalls and shocks. If all this sounds a little bleak, take heart. When we talk about serious levels of psychological distress in adolescents - the level that might be considered a disorder - we are talking about the minority. For example, a study in July 2020 found that 16% of five-16-year-olds have a "probable mental disorder" - but this means 84% of participants didn't meet criteria for a disorder. As we continue the important task of raising mental health awareness, we mustn't fall into the trap of thinking that every adolescent is in crisis, or that all adolescent pain is indicative of ill-health. Plenty of people navigate the "storm and stress" of these years without any significant emotional cost. Of course, we need to pay close attention to the 16%, and the others who are struggling but don't meet the threshold for a disorder. But even in the pandemic, some young people have coped well. For example, when adolescents are interviewed in detail about their experiences during lockdown, a mixed picture emerges. Many of them found it difficult, but others reported that they enjoyed having more time to develop hobbies, or to hang out with their families and pets. For some teenagers, lockdown might actually have removed key sources of stress in their life - such as school bullying and peer pressure. When 11-16s were asked in July 2020 how lockdown had affected their lives, 42.8% said their life was worse, but 29.6% said there had been no change; 27.5% said their life had actually improved. Even among the teenagers who found lockdown hard, many displayed remarkable resilience. They found ways to adapt to their exceptional circumstances, such as by maintaining friendships via video calls and social media, or strengthening relationships at home. In fact, some degree of stress - provided it's at a manageable level and time-limited - can even be helpful for young people in the long run, because it provides them with the opportunity to develop coping strategies for later challenges. Calling today's teenagers the "lost generation" is useful to a point. It hopefully means funding bodies will prioritise research into the impact of the pandemic and what can be done to mitigate its effects. It's useful if it means schools and universities make allowances for how disruptive this year has been for young people, and it's useful if it means mental health services finally get the funding they need. Even pre-pandemic, too many adolescents with mental disorders were waiting too long to get help, or not getting help at all. But I would urge caution. The implication when something is lost, after all, is that you might not get it back.

Where were the critics who could have stopped Johnson leading us to Covid tragedy?



Ten days before England locked down too late to prevent tens of thousands of deaths, a senior government official waltzed into No 10 to prophetically declare: "I think we are absolutely fucked. I think this country is heading for a disaster, I think we're going to kill thousands of people." In a functioning democracy, you might expect senior journalists briefed by No 10 to have at least questioned what was glaringly obvious to those at the very top - that Britain was disastrously ill-equipped and ill-prepared for a pandemic already sweeping the country. This did not happen. Instead, government mantras that reflected both Boris Johnson's denial of the gravity of the crisis and the official lack of preparation were parroted and amplified by senior journalists, and critics were ridiculed. Even as tens of thousands died - "who didn't need to die", as Johnson's former top adviser Dominic Cummings correctly told MPs - as a consequence of the Conservatives' catastrophic strategy, the official opposition stuck studiously to supporting the government for fear of alienating swing voters. Covid-19 proved a tragic case study in what happens when a national emergency collides with a dysfunctional democracy. As Johnson apparently dismissed Covid as a new swine flu and repeatedly suggested the chief medical officer inject him with it on national television to prove it was

nothing to worry about, the BBC's political editor, Laura Kuenssberg, took to Twitter to share a video produced by an obscure podiatrist named "footman447", in which he explained the logic for herd immunity using buckets of water. On social media, Labour's demands that the government publish its scientific advice were ridiculed by commentators as "hipster analysis". Critics were denounced for "politicising" Covid. "Firmly and calmly," gushed one Telegraph editor who later became a government speechwriter, "the UK is leading Europe in the fight against the coronavirus." This was "Boris Johnson's Churchill moment", cooed the Financial Times. Meanwhile, foreign newspapers stared aghast at a country that appeared to be merrily skipping towards a cliff edge. Nineteen days before lockdown, the New York Times made astute observations about Britain's looming calamity that were lacking in most of the domestic press, noting a lack of ventilators, "already overflowing" intensive care beds, some health workers buying their own PPE and an austerity-drained NHS. If such questions had been the focus of UK coverage - rather than breathlessly regurgitated No 10 spin in support of the government's lethal policy of herd immunity - thousands could have been rescued from premature graves. There have been glaring excep-

tions - take the Sunday Times' investigative journalists filleting the Johnson administration's response, or the BBC's Lewis Goodall exposing the care home scandal - but Westminster-based lobby journalists all too often saw their role as passing on anonymous briefings from No 10 to suggest there was a method in the government's madness (as Cummings makes clear, there wasn't). Much of Cummings' testimony already exists in the public domain. He has merely placed it in the context of a Tory psychodrama, allowing him to execute drive-by shootings against favoured targets - not least Matt Hancock - while ludicrously defending Rishi Sunak, who invited lockdown sceptics to Downing Street last September in a successful mission to avert a second national lockdown. For those who treat politics as a soap opera with a less attractive cast, this may quicken the pulse, but it leaves Labour with rather searching questions. Keir Starmer's team decided to simply defer to focus groups urging the opposition not to "play politics" with a national emergency. This was quite unlike the Tories' approach during the financial crash, for example, when they blamed the crisis on Labour's overspending with such skilful repetition that focus groups soon repeated back these lines verbatim. We already knew herd immunity was official policy; that vulnerable patients were discharged to care homes without a test, allowing the virus to let rip; that lockdown was imposed too late; that handing test and trace to private contractors spelled disaster. England's pandemic strategy was led by a man who regretted the first lockdown on the grounds that it damaged the economy and thought Covid was a scare story that only killed 80-year-olds (false, in any case). Yet the Labour leadership declared it would work "constructively" with the government and not be "opposition for opposition's sake", even praising aspects of the official response as "an amazing piece of work" a month into

Renewed diplomacy is urgently needed to prevent another Gaza war

The war in Gaza this month was the third war since 2008, and there have been other rounds of fighting in between. In between the wars there is no peace, as Palestinians live under various forms of occupation in the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem. Diplomats and western media seem to be pointing to these underlying problems more often than in the past, in part because US progressives are starting to see parallels with civil rights and apartheid. But, so far, the ceasefire seems to have brought only a return to business as usual. As just one example, the recent flare-up in violence began with the planned eviction of Palestinian families in the East Jerusalem neighbourhood of Sheikh Jarrah. These evictions are still being considered, along with others in the neighbourhood of Silwan. Palestinians and Israelis working for peace and human rights are worried that the world will look away now the rockets and air raids have stopped. This creates terrible incentives for the parties on the ground. Palestinian nonviolent action barely registers. When Donald Trump announced a "vision for peace", where Israel would keep all its settlements and have sovereignty over the whole of Jerusalem, western analysts mused that the Palestinian - and broader Arab - response seemed muted. As a young Palestinian activist in the West Bank told me that week: Europe measures us only by how many of us go to the streets and get shot. Most world leaders condemned the Trump plan. But they did little to provide an alternative. This is because they are stuck between their official positions, which they don't want to depart from, and their beliefs about what is politically possible. There is a wide international consensus backing a negotiated two-state solution. However, few governments see any prospect of it being implemented in any foreseeable future, given Benjamin Netanyahu's longstanding

opposition to a Palestinian state, the positions of Hamas and the divided nature of the Palestinian leadership. In Israel and Palestine this week, US secretary of state Antony Blinken spoke of security for both peoples. But he didn't mention the two-state solution. This creates a massive problem for diplomacy, as the generally espoused "solution" is not taken seriously as a realistic prospect that the leaders on the ground are actually expected to deliver. World

Jane Kinninmont



leaders have no real interest in expending political capital on reviving a peace process that they don't think will work. So while leaders officially say the status quo cannot be sustained, in reality they send a message that the status quo can continue indefinitely. Most Palestinians understandably think a two-state solution will never happen. As a result, young Palestinians are increasingly calling for equal rights in a single state - because what they see around them is a situation where there is only one state, Israel, where they lack rights and citizenship. But the international community won't back this idea because the demographics of a single state would result in a Palestinian majority, if both the West Bank and Gaza were included. For Israelis and many Jewish people around the world, a single demo-

cratic state based on equal rights, with a Palestinian majority, would in effect mean the end of the only Jewish state. And they generally see this as unthinkable and dangerous, fearing Jewish people would once again be persecuted and expelled. What is needed now is a concerted international renewal of diplomacy. This time, it should not make the future of the occupation conditional on negotiations between the Israeli and Palestinian leaders. The need to

lockdown. When one rightwing commentator declared that Starmer's "definition of opposition is to work out where the Tories are going - and get there first", he was essentially correct, allowing government attack lines on "Captain Hindsight" to cut through. In January, Labour even took the astonishing position of opposing the shut-down of schools in a new lockdown, only U-turning when it learned the government was imminently going to order it. As a result, much of the public has concluded that the government was handed a bad set of cards - that sure, they made mistakes, but who wouldn't in their shoes? - and that Labour would have done little different anyway. Yet Cummings' testimony underlines a basic truth that would represent Britain's biggest scandal since appeasement if democracy was working as it should be. Because of Johnson's incompetence, inhumanity, laziness and hubris, and the entirely avoidable, disastrous decisions made by his team, tens of thousands of people suffered premature and avoidable deaths, without even the comfort of their loved ones to hold their hands in their final moments. Rather than intensely scrutinising government decisions, many senior political journalists attempted to concoct a rationale for them where none existed. Even as thousands were suffocating in hospital beds because of disastrous official failings, the opposition threw the government a lifeline by emphasising just how restrained it intended to be. If you are wondering why our governing party has a sustained and apparently unassailable polling lead even after presiding over a death toll more than three times higher than the Luftwaffe achieved in the Blitz, that is why. "Hopefully this is a case study of how to not to handle something like this," says Cummings; it is also a case study in what happens when national institutions fail in their most basic function of holding the government to account. A healthy democracy is a question of life and death. What a lesson to have to learn at such an unbearable cost.

unstable and unacceptable. Palestinians must be able to be citizens of a state, not least because having millions of people outside the protection of a state that they can belong to creates international problems such as refugee flows and spill-overs of violence. Moreover, while there is no Palestinian state, Israel, as the occupying power, is responsible for protecting Palestinian civilians (including, for instance, providing them with Covid vaccines). The international community should assemble a multilateral international conference, three decades after the 1991 Madrid peace conference, to assess the different options for the political future. The role of the Middle East Quartet - of the UN, EU, US and Russia - should be upgraded with greater diplomatic and financial resources. Human rights, international law and freedom of worship should be placed at the centre of international efforts. International law and human rights are not conditional on having leaders who are effective negotiators; it has worn thin to blame Yasser Arafat's choices at Camp David in 2000 for the restrictions that Palestinians face today. Importantly, it needs to be acknowledged that the "economic track" mooted by many in the past - to improve Palestinian prosperity, regardless of whether the peace process is functioning - is itself dependent on certain rights being respected, particularly around movement and property. Meanwhile, the UN should support Palestinians to hold a badly overdue national dialogue to ensure that they have inclusive representation at any such conference, which would make their diplomacy more effective and more legitimate. It is striking that the voices that are shifting the debate about Palestinian rights are not those of the well-known diplomats but of a new generation of independent, young Palestinian activists, placing rights and citizenship at the centre of their thinking.

Interest payments: Centre's soaring debt may curb productive spending

London, June 01 : Foster expected debt to stabilise at around 92% of GDP by FY25, against 88.9% (Moody's estimate) in FY21. This is among the least optimistic projections of India's debt profile; some other agencies have forecast the burden to ease with a pick-up in economic growth. Moreover, with an eye on growth, the government has budgeted an impressive 26.2% hike in capital expenditure, which has high multiplier effect, for FY22. Of course, the Budget math may go haywire



again due to the second pandemic wave. India's elevated general government debt of about 90% of gross domestic product (GDP) in the wake of the Covid-19 outbreak can potentially inflate interest payments and impair the ability of the Centre as well as states to boost productive spending, economists and senior executives at global rating agencies told FE. Given the damage caused by the second wave, some economists expect the FY22 fiscal deficit to exceed the 6.8% target by as much as one percentage point. Economic travails: Nascent recovery disrupted; consumption needs big push Ramesh Chand, member, Niti Aayog doubling farmers' income by FY23 difficult as states delay reforms: Ramesh Chand, Niti Aayog member The need of the hour, therefore, is to rekindle growth

Regulating apps: Messaging to be free, but calls may come under licensing

Mumbai, June 01 : Official sources said only calling part may be brought under regulation as the messaging part has already been dealt with in the new intermediary guidelines, which require messaging platforms like WhatsApp to trace the first originator of mischievous messages. In essence what this means is that the messaging part of such apps will not be brought under any regulatory framework, but the companies will need to take licence from the government for providing local or national long distance (NLD) calls. The government is contemplating bringing under regulation the call services part of apps such as WhatsApp, Skype, Facetime and Viber, etc, while leaving the messaging part to be covered under the intermediary rules, which came into force from May 26. In essence what this means is that the messaging part of such apps will not be brought under any regulatory framework, but the companies will need to take licence from the government for providing local or national long distance (NLD) calls. mindshare Mindshare wins agency of the year at FOMG The IA is part of the Global Accelerator Network, a group of 100-odd top accelerators in the world. "The IA model closely follows that of TechStars and other internationally-known accelerators," he said. Creating new companies: India Accelerator funded 27 start-ups in 2020; aims to mentor 100 start-ups in 2021 What needs to be seen is how such a segregation between calling and messaging services will be done. Under the licensing framework, such firms need to provide legal interception of calls to security agencies,



impulses fast, which will bolster revenue mop-up and enable the country to pare down its debt, they stressed. This must also be followed up with a credible road map, which should be more sacrosanct than the oft-relaxed FRBM rules, to reduce debt. Expeditious containment of the second wave and effective implementation of structural reforms, especially in factors of production, are key to the country's growth objectives, some of them said. Else, given the parlous state of finances, any

threat to GDP growth outlook will only weigh down debt affordability. According to the IMF data, from a peak of 84.2% of GDP in 2003 (since liberalisation), the general government debt ratio eased to 66% by 2010, before inching up again to reach 73.9% in 2019. In 2020, a deadly combination of a Covid-induced GDP contraction and massive borrowing to bolster spending inflated debt ratio to as high as 89.6%. Jeremy Zook, director (sovereign ratings) at Fitch Ratings, told FE: "We do not foresee India's debt ratio declining to its pre-pandemic level of 73.9% in the next 5 years." Fitch had expected the FY22 debt ratio to decline by 2.5 percentage points from an estimated 90.6% in FY21. But this "will have to be reassessed" in the wake of the second wave, Zook said. William Foster, vice-

president & senior credit officer (sovereign risk) at Moody's, said: "(India's) Debt affordability will remain relatively weak with interest payments reaching about 28% of general government revenue in 2021, the highest among Baa-rated peers and more than three times the Baa median forecast of around 8%." Foster expected debt to stabilise at around 92% of GDP by FY25, against 88.9% (Moody's estimate) in FY21. This is among the least optimistic projections of India's debt profile; some other agencies have forecast the burden to ease with a pick-up in economic growth. Unsurprisingly, a sizeable chunk of resources goes towards interest payments, which shot up to 28.5% of general government revenue last fiscal from 22.9% in FY20. This is projected to drop to 27.5% in FY22 before rising again to 28.3% next fiscal, Moody's has said. M Govinda Rao, a member of the 14th Finance Commission and current chief economic adviser at Brickwork Ratings, said: "Even if the 15th Finance Commission's consolidation path is strictly followed, the Centre's debt is expected to be reduced from 62.9% in FY21 to 56.6% in FY26. This implies that the interest payment will remain at elevated levels and continue to crowd out more productive expenditures." The NK Singh-led FRBM panel had in 2017 suggested that the general government debt be capped at 60% of GDP by FY23. However, Singh, who also headed the 15th Finance Commission, recently said in interviews that given the unprecedented Covid crisis, the Centre and states can exceed their FRBM limits. But once the pandemic is dealt with, they must chart out a clear path to regain fiscal discipline, Singh said. Any debt reduction road map, however, hinges on a spurt in economic growth. "Growth-enhancing structural reforms and addressing infrastructure gaps could boost the outlook if they are well-implemented in our view," Fitch's Zook said. To be sure, debt ratios of economies around the world have surged in the aftermath of the pandemic. According to

an IMF estimate, given the widening deficits and contraction in economic activity, debt worldwide surged to as much as 97% of GDP in 2020. It will rise to 99% in 2021 before stabilising below but close to 100% of GDP, he added. Importantly, the Economic Survey for FY20 pointed out that India's forex reserves of \$584 billion as of January 15, 2021, were greater than its total external debt (even including that of the private sector) of \$556 billion as of September 2020. Forex reserves have since swelled, hitting a record \$593 billion as of May 21. "In corporate finance parlance, therefore, India resembles a firm that has negative debt, whose probability of default is zero by definition." Moreover, with an eye on growth, the government has budgeted an impressive 26.2% hike in capital expenditure, which has high multiplier effect, for FY22. Of course, the Budget math may go haywire again due to the second pandemic wave. The government has also firmed up a road map for capital investments of Rs 111 lakh crore in infrastructure up to FY25. However, drawing large-scale patient capital into infrastructure is unlikely to be easy despite the setting up of a development finance institution. As for the current fiscal, Sonal Varma, chief economist, India and Asia (ex-Japan) at Nomura, said revenues will likely take a hit in the June quarter due to the second wave. "However, as we expect the economic recovery to resume after June, we should see a bounce in tax collections thereafter. A key risk is any delay to disinvestment plans due to second wave disruptions that put the ambitious target of Rs 1.75 lakh crore (~0.8% of GDP) in jeopardy," Varma said. Several agencies, including Barclays, Nomura, S&P and Moody's, recently cut their India growth forecasts for FY22, with a few slashing their projections by as much as four percentage points to just over 9%, as the second Covid wave hit businesses. This has compounded the worries of policymakers who had earlier expected a V-shaped recovery after the first wave.

Doubling farmers' income by FY23 difficult as states delay reforms: Ramesh Chand, Niti Aayog member



London, June 01 : Growth in agriculture gross value added (GVA) in FY22 will likely exceed the expansion seen last year on higher prices of crops and anticipated normal and well-distributed monsoon, according to Niti Aayog member Ramesh Chand. In an interview to FE's Prasanta Sahu and Prabhudatta Mishra, he said: "Except in the case of a few states, little or no progress is seen at state level to bring reforms in agriculture policies and a system of marketing. This is a big setback to achieving the goal of doubling farmers' income by FY23." Also, Chand for the first time clarified that due to public sensitivity towards genetically modified (GM) food in the country, domestic research should focus on matching the same level of productivity through non-GM technologies as many other countries have done. Excerpts: Moreover, with an eye on growth, the government has budgeted an impressive 26.2% hike in capital expenditure, which has high multiplier effect, for FY22. Of course, the Budget math may go haywire again due to the second pandemic wave. Interest payments: Centre's soaring debt may curb productive spending Economic travails: Nascent recovery disrupted; consumption needs big push Agriculture remains a silver lining even as the economy is battered by Covid-19. With a number of states imposing lockdowns in the wake of the second wave of the pan-

dem, how do you see performance of agriculture sector in FY22? The lockdown in May will not have significant effect on agriculture because from the last week of April to middle of June, there is very little economic activity in the farm sector. On the positive side, the terms of trade for agriculture are expected to improve in FY22 as already seen from the sharp rise in domestic and international prices of many agriculture commodities. This will have a strong positive effect on acreage as well as productivity. Secondly, monsoon is predicted to be normal. Agriculture growth is likely to be better this year than in FY21 (3% as per second advance estimate). Will there be a change in cropping pattern, particularly for crops the demand for which slowed because of the lockdown? Crop pattern is expected to shift in favour of pulses and oilseeds in the kharif season as their prices relative to other crops are witnessing an increase. With the second wave of Covid, rural India is reported to be affected more with infections and mortality. Will there be any impact of this on kharif sowing, particularly in terms of labour availability? There are two types of situations in the country. One, states like Punjab and Haryana from where migrant labour working in agriculture has moved out. The second situation refers to the states in the eastern region, where migrant labourers have returned. In much of the country, there

Honda India Power Products fulfils Farmers' need of high discharge & high head Portable Water Pumps Bringing improvements to irrigation work



New Delhi, June 01 : Honda India Power Products Limited (HIPP), a leading manufacturer of power products in India, today fulfilled farmers' need of irrigating farmlands efficiently and economically with their NEW offerings in 2-inch & 3-inch categories of "Self-priming" - "Gasoline (petrol) driven water pumps". Farmers looking to irrigate crops have been demanding light weight and economical pumps to increase their productivity through efficient irrigation requirement of their crops. HIPP has been the market leader in gasoline fuelled water pump category offering a wide range of pump-sets from 2 to 5hp serving the farmers since the last 35 years. The latest addition of "WB20XD & WB30XD" models fulfils irrigation needs of crops in hilly terrains and plains respectively thus appealing to farmers across different regions & segments in India. WB 20XD - the 2 Inch category model - delivers water with the best in class performance at upto 32 meters head and 670 litres discharge volume per minute - while being so light at 24 Kg - fulfilling hilly region farmers' irrigation and ease of carrying needs. WB 30XD - the 3 Inch category model - fulfils economical, timely and efficient irrigation needs of farmers in plains with best in class performance - delivering upto 1,100 litres discharge volume per

minute @ 23 meters head making it capable to supply water from canals, borewells, ponds - in short - water bodies of all possible types - thus improving their productivity. Announcing the launch Gagan Pal - Vice President - Head of Sales, Marketing & Service at Honda India Power Products Limited said "Indian farmers continue to repose their faith and choose Honda gasoline powered water pumps over any other offering - owing to their requirement of entire HONDA PACKAGE featuring fuel economy, portability, easy maintenance, and environment friendliness. Honda water pumps sustained performance is simply because they are built to last long and these are duly cared and backed up by a nationwide network of over 600 Sales and Service dealerships. These two new models will serve even wider and extensive farming irrigation needs, further augmenting Honda's water pump coverage and market share". The newly launched Water Pumps are now available at Honda's retail dealership outlets across the country. More information can be found at www.hondaindiapower.com and Facebook page / [hondapowerproductsindia](https://www.facebook.com/hondapowerproductsindia). Optionally, customers can call on Honda's Toll-Free no. 1800-11-2323 for any Demo/Sales enquiry.

is some movement of labour from urban areas to rural areas. Lockdown has also affected non-farm rural activities rendering such unskilled workers available to work in agriculture. Overall, issue of labour availability is not going to hit the sector. Given that agriculture sector has a relatively small share in GDP, if real estate workers affected by Covid also join farming, what impact will it have on livelihoods? Agriculture sector is the largest sector of Indian economy both in terms of output as well as employment. In FY21, share of agriculture in GDP has risen to 20%; the increase was largely due to negative growth in other sectors and normal growth in agriculture. Agriculture and construction together provide employment to 61% of rural workforce and both these activities in rural India are by and large intact. We need to take concrete measures for livelihood of migrants who have returned to their native places in rural areas and the workforce engaged in informal employment. Only one year left to achieve the target of doubling farmers' income. Where do we stand now? Better price realisation for farmers produces and diversification towards high value crops were among the seven sources identified in Niti Aayog's policy paper to achieve the goal of doubling farmers' income. These measures required policy and marketing reforms like direct marketing, contract farming, e-trading, special treatment to food and vegetables in APMC Law, private mandis, etc. Except in the case of a few states, little or no progress is seen at state level to bring reforms in agriculture policies and system of marketing. This is a big setback to achieving the goal of doubling farmers' income by FY23. There has not been any progress seen in allowing GM crops despite a favourable recommendation by Niti Aayog a few years back. Is there any hope? While GM crops provide certain advantages, some countries are having much higher yields with non-GM varieties as compared to India. Given the public sensitivity towards GM food, our re-

search and development should harness other technology to achieve the same goals as achieved through GM crops in some countries. This is possible. With continuous surplus of rice and wheat production, what is the way out in food policy management as it turned out to be a huge and rising economic burden on the government to maintain and dispose of extra stocks? At present, India produces more rice and wheat than what is domestic demand. If we are not able to export it, then certainly we should not waste resources in producing surplus. Policy support is gradually expanding towards pulses and oilseeds. We need to bring balance in support to rice and wheat vis-a-vis other crops to attract farmers shift some area away from these cereals either towards pulses and oil seeds or towards fruits and vegetables. Why shifting from paddy and other water-guzzling crops, particularly in Punjab and Haryana, has not taken off? There is a very large difference in profitability from rice and wheat as compared to the crops considered an alternative to them. Rice and wheat earned big advantage over other crops because of technological breakthrough as well as assured and committed price support and input subsidies. At present, no field crop comes near to wheat and rice in terms of net income to farmers, even if subsidies on inputs are taken away. Also, price risk in these two crops is nil and production risk is quite low. Thus, to find a viable option, we require upgradation in technology and productivity of alternative crops along with assured pricing environment. Is it feasible to transfer cash subsidy on fertiliser directly to bank accounts of farmers instead of manufacturers. How soon can we expect this to happen? Of course, it is feasible. Some groundwork has already been done by Ministry of Fertilisers in this direction. The issue facing fertiliser use in Indian agriculture has more to do with the structure of subsidy (which is biased towards urea) rather than method of giving subsidy.

Contd. From Page 1

HSLC and HS exams dates

SEBA secretary Suranjana Senapati had said that the revised schedule will be announced by the board after a discussion with the state health department. The order said: "In view of the prevailing situation of Covid-19 in the State of Assam, it has been decided to postpone the HSLC/AHM Examination 2021, scheduled to be held from 11th May, 2021. The revised schedule of the said Examination shall be announced shortly after consultation with the Health Department, Govt. of Assam."

'Kappa' and 'Delta': WHO gives

100,000 Covid-19 cases in a day for the first time, and also went on to see more than 400,000 cases in a single-day, as well as more than or close to 4,000 related fatalities daily. However, in the last few days, the number of fresh infections have fallen below the 200,000-mark. In the last 24 hours, India's infection tally rose by 152,734 cases, while the death toll increased by 3,128 fatalities, according to the Union ministry of health and family welfare (MoHFW) dashboard at 8am on Monday.

CBI books Ghosh Brothers

Rs 168.62 crore. He said that in the complaint it was alleged that term loan and cash credit facility were sanctioned fraudulently to the private company based at Guwahati to the tune of Rs 64.67 crore from IDBI Bank, Guwahati Branch for purchasing vehicles. "It was further alleged that the accused availed loan by submission of false documents and also the accused indulged in diversion of money for the purpose other than for which the loan was sanctioned, and thereby caused loss of Rs 168.62 crore as on January 31, 2021 to the bank," he said. He said that as of July 1, 2020, the outstanding balance was Rs 153.38 crore and the said account became NPA due to the non-payment of dues to the Bank.

NSCN (I-M) could be using a new

Anglong district. A seventh DNLA member named Mushrang escaped from the encounter site toward Nagaland. "The encounter site is about 1.5 km from Beisumpuikam village in Nagaland. This village, about 1 km from Hebron further inside Nagaland, is where the DNLA members stay or lie low," an officer of a security force in Assam said. Hebron is the peace headquarters of the NSCN (I-M), whose leaders helped give space to the DNLA at Beisumpuikam besides arranging for them to get their rations from Daniel Colony nearby, the officer said. It was also found that the NSCN (I-M), in ceasefire mode since July 1997, trained the DNLA for three months, provided the cadres uniform and weapons. These services are paid for by the DNLA from money extorted in Assam, officials said. "In a sense, the NSCN (I-M) has been using the DNLA as a front to operate in Assam," the officer said. The NSCN (I-M) has denied any link with the DNLA. "This is an attempt by the Indian security forces to tarnish our image," a spokesperson from the outfit's publicity wing in Dimapur said, indicating that the bid to project it as the DNLA's mentor could be an attempt to undermine the Naga peace process. Although formed in April 2019, the DNLA became active towards the end of 2020. It came on the radar of the security forces on January 12 this year following the arrest of a member in Dima Hasao's Maibang. On January 27, the outfit killed Amit Nunisa, a social activist and former leader of the disbanded Dima Daogah, and on March 2, a member of the DNLA was caught with a Chinese grenade near a strategic railway station in Karbi Anglong district. The DNLA received its first setback on March 28 when its leader Black Dimasa was killed in an encounter. The trigger for an intensified operation leading to the May 23 encounter was the May 19 killing of a priest named Sanjay Ronghang by the DNLA.

Delhi HC rejects drug controller's

by the cricketer-turned-politician Gambhir. "There is a fundamental error of approach. The manner in which you have conducted the investigation is questionable," it said. The high court took strong exception to the drug controller's report, which concluded that the dealers had ample stock to supply to others, and said everyone knows that the medicine was in short supply and while Gambhir bought thousands of strips of the medicine, other people who needed it could not get it on that day. "Please don't tell us there is no shortage. We know there was a shortage. You don't have to swallow the report. You have to question your officers. You (drug controller) are wrong to say it was not in short supply. You want us to shut our eyes. You think you would get away with this." "You better do your job. If you can't do your job, tell us, we will have you suspended and let someone else do your job," a bench of Justices Vipin Sanghi and Jasmeet Singh said. The bench also pulled up Gambhir again making a statement that he will continue to do such work. "We have already said it is malpractice. This tendency of people trying to take advantage and then trying to appear as a saviour when they themselves created the problem, has to be denounced. And then the person goes on to state he would do it again. If it continues, we know how to deal with it," the bench said. "Thousands of strips he is obtaining. On the day people needed it, they were not able to buy it. Time was of essence. He bought more than what is required. How is it that the dealer has sold it to a foundation," it asked while pointing out that 285 strips are lying unused. The court also perused the status reports on inquiry conducted over allegations of procuring and hoarding medical oxygen made against AAP MLAs Priti Tomar and Praveen Kumar. While the court accepted the report filed with regard to allegations against Tomar, it rejected the status reports filed regarding Gambhir and Kumar, calling them "trash" and granted three days' time to the drug controller of the Delhi government to file better reports and listed the case for hearing on June 3. "Our confidence in you (drug controller) has shaken completely. Let's be very clear about this. Now it is upto you to build that confidence again or not," it said. The high court was hearing a PIL seeking lodging of an FIR on the allegations that politicians are able to procure in huge quantities and distribute COVID-19 medicines even as patients were running from pillar to post to get them. An application was also filed in the pending petition making allegations against Tomar and Kumar. Advocate Nandita Rao, representing the drug controller, said Gambhir through his Gautam Gambhir Foundation (GGF) had organised a medical camp from 22 April to May 7 with the help of Sanjay Garg Hospital and that there was no prescription but a request letter of the hospital was sent to the foundation. She said the letter is towards acceptance of free medical camp and based on the letter of April 19, Gambhir made a purchase order from the licensed dealer and the medicine was given to dealers and not from retailers. "Here is a man who is hoarding thousands of strips of medicine. He is interrupting the flow of medicines... Place before us the relevant rules that govern the dealer and sale. This is the inquiry we wanted you to conduct and not say that so many lives have been saved," the court said. The court questioned how could such a large stock of drug, that is, 2,628 strips of Fabiflu be given to a foundation which is neither a medical practitioner nor has a licence and added, "we dare say it is not permissible". Amicus curiae and senior advocate Rajshekhar Rao said if the procurement of drug was based on a letter citing its requirement, on what basis it was assessed and that this was the peak of the COVID-19 second wave period and it was supplied over a period of time from several camps. Advocate Virag Gupta, representing petitioner Deepak Singh, contended there was the hoarding of medicines and the authorities have booked thousands of common persons for not wearing masks but when it comes to VIPs, they call it a technical violation. He claimed there was a discrepancy in the reports filed by the police and the Drug Controller regarding the location from where the medicines were distributed by GGF. Advocate Satya Ranjan, representing applicant Vedansh Anand who has leveled allegations against the two MLAs, said as claimed, there could not have been any supply of oxygen from Bhatinda in view of an administrative order barring supply to any industry or individual. While accepting the status report regarding the supply of five oxygen cylinders by MLA Tomar to a hospital, the court said, "here there is a hospital with infants on ventilator and they made a call to the ex-MLA (Priti Tomar's husband Jitendra Tomar). This is not a case of breach of law in that sense. Cylinders were of the hospital... Let's not unnecessarily victimise someone who has tried to help. There is no illegality."

Tea garden workers in India's

are reporting sick in Assam's tea gardens amid an abysmally low rate of vaccination as the state government battles to contain the spread of the virus. According to figures maintained by Assam's Labour and Welfare Department, there have been 7,121 COVID-19 cases spread across the state's 403 out of 800 large tea gardens since April. As many as 53 people have died. Assam was one of the five states that held a regional election in March and April even as signs that the pandemic was making a comeback were visible in several pockets of India. As cases started surging in Assam, the authorities announced restrictions in mid-April. On May 11, the state government announced the shutting down of offices in urban and semi-urban areas. But tea gardens are operational and about a million tea workers continue to go out and work for 205 Indian rupees (less than \$3) a day in Brahmaputra Valley and 183 rupees (\$2.50) in Barak Valley, after the recent wage hike of 38 rupees (50 cents). The month of May is picking time for the second flush of tea which would make its way mostly to the international markets. Assam produces more than half of India's tea. The industry is already facing a loss of production due to the lockdown in 2020 and a partial drought in early 2021. "As of today, we have already lost 60 million kilos (132 million pounds) in comparison to 2019 production because of low rainfall. Between January and May 2020, the production was 78 million kilos (171 million pounds) less than the figure in 2019," Bidyandana Barkakoty, an adviser to the North Eastern Tea Association told Al Jazeera. He added that it was "safer for the workers to come to work than stay home". The virus can spread just as easily in the housing quarters. The workers come back home to families sharing a cramped one-room accommodation, often without proper ventilation, sanitation or clean drinking water. Several studies have noted a high rate of malnutrition, anaemia, hypertension and tuberculosis among tea workers brought in from other states in central and eastern India by the British rulers in the 19th century. These workers now comprise 17 percent of the state's population. To contain the spread of the virus, the government banned home isolation in tea garden areas and ordered the establishment of COVID-19 care centres with the state's help. "We are not allowing home quarantine for anybody who is testing positive in the tea garden areas," said Sanjoy Kishan, Assam's minister for Welfare of Tea Tribes, Labour and Employment. Kishan said the government has ordered the setting up of such COVID-19 care centres in all tea gardens. Symptomatic and severe cases were being referred to government health facilities and hospitals, he added. As per records reviewed by Al Jazeera, there are around 288 COVID-19 care centres currently functional in tea gardens across Assam. Barkakoty said the measure has helped to contain the spread. But the number of cases in tea garden areas continues to see a spike, growing by 385 percent in the last 12 days even as the surge has slowed down in Assam. The bulk of the cases and 43 of the 53 deaths have been reported from five districts of Tinsukia, Dibrugarh, Golaghat, Charaideo and Jorhat in the lush tea belt of Upper Assam, where critical healthcare facilities are nearly full, according to multiple officials at the hospitals. Even as officials claim they are ramping up testing for early detection of the infections, there have been instances of people dying before they could be tested. At Hapjan Tea Estate in Tinsukia, 55-year-old Pradhan Murah, who lived with his son in the workers' quarters died on May 20, two days after he complained of fever, cough and chest pain. Minu Sawashi, a local health worker at the tea estate who had been visiting Murah while he was sick, summoned a testing team. "COVID-19 was detected in his dead body," Sawashi told Al Jazeera. Dhiraj Gowala, the president of All Assam Tea Tribes Student Association, a student body representing the tea workers, said the spread of the infection is fast in tea garden areas. "They are densely populated," he said. "The government needs to increase testing and vaccination." As of May 31, only 46,874 people had got the first dose of the coronavirus vaccine and 3,604 were fully vaccinated in the tea garden areas, according to the government records. Community leaders claim that a mix of hesitancy, lack of access to vaccination centres and technology has slowed down the vaccination drive. "Nobody in the tea gardens understands the online process. Many do not have phones," said Karuna Kanta Kairi, a tea worker from Charaideo district, referring to the compulsory requirement of online booking of a slot for vaccination for people in the 18-44 age bracket. "People from the tea gardens cannot go out. They should vaccinate them here," said Gowala. As criticism grew, the government started vaccination camps in about 299 tea gardens and allowed walk-in registrations for those in the 18-44 age bracket. Kishan said committees comprising of district authorities, tea garden management and community organisations have been set up to educate the tea workers about the urgent need for testing and vaccination. But a shortage of vaccines has come in the way of these efforts. "There is a shortage of vaccines not just for the tea gardens, but for the whole community," a health department official in Tinsukia told Al Jazeera on condition of anonymity. "We are trying to arrange for the vaccines. There is a slight problem with supply. But the chief minister has assured us that vaccines will be provided," he said.

No mixing of vaccines

government may consider doing away with the second dose of Covishield. Apart from this, head of a government-appointed expert panel recently said India may begin testing to determine whether mixing two doses of different Covid-19 vaccines could boost immune response. Dr NK Arora, Chairman of the Centre's Covid-19 working group, said this amid speculation whether such mix and match could give better immunity against Covid-19. Addressing a press briefing, Dr VK Paul, Member (health) Niti Aayog and a key member of the government's Covid-19 task force, said the government has not made any change in the vaccination schedule for Covishield and Covaxin. "I would like to clarify that there is absolutely no change in the two-dose regimen that is being followed in India for Covishield and Covaxin. The second dose of Covishield will be given after 12 weeks and the second dose of Covaxin will be given after 4-6 weeks after the first dose. We will continue this schedule and take our vaccination drive ahead. We should avoid any confusion over this," Dr VK Paul said. Speaking on the possibility of mixing two vaccine doses, Dr Paul said it is not part of the vaccine schedule so far and more research is needed on it as it is still a matter of "scientific curiosity". "There are questions whether mixing of two vaccines can result in increasing a person's immunity. Scientifically, that is one possibility, but possibility of severe adverse reactions cannot be ruled out either. There is ongoing research on this in several countries. This is matter of research and there will be no change in the protocol that we are following for vaccination as of now. There will be no mixing of vaccine doses," Dr Paul said. He added that the current SOP is that if someone has received Covaxin as the first dose, their second dose too will be Covaxin. The same is applicable for Covishield too. "This is our SOP. Please stick to it," he said.

69% decline in COVID-19 cases since peak

in active cases in a day. In 30 states/UTs, cases have been consistently declining for one week, it's a positive trend," he added. He further informed that the number of recoveries which stand at 92 per cent is more than daily cases being recorded. Regarding vaccination coverage, the government said, "Total 21.60 crore vaccine doses administered in the country with 1.67 crore doses to health workers, 2.42 crore to front line workers, 15.48 crore to people in 45+ age group while for those in 18-44 age group, 2.03 doses have been administered." "CMR's Balram Bhargava asserted that there is no shortage of vaccines in the country. "By mid-July or August, we will have enough doses to vaccinate 1 crore people per day. We are confident of vaccinating the whole population by December," Bhargava said. The government said that there is no change in the schedule of doses of the two vaccines - Covishield and Covaxin.

Mamata Banerjee threatened

sent a letter to Bandopadhyay recalling him for central deputation. However, the move was strongly protested by Bengal Chief Minister, saying it contradicts the Centre's approval for extension of Bandopadhyay's services as the CS by three months due to the cyclone and COVID situation in the state. Mamata sent a letter to Prime Minister Modi over the issue on Monday and appointed Bandopadhyay as her chief adviser for three years, after allowing him to retire from his post of Bengal Chief Secretary.

Twitter strives to comply with

was concerned by recent events regarding their employees in India and the potential threat to freedom of expression. MeitY asserted that India had a "glorious tradition of free speech and democratic practices" and Twitter's statements were an 'attempt to dictate its terms to the world's largest democracy. As Twitter faces allegations of not complying with the IT rules in the country, the Twitter spokesperson on Monday informed that the microblogging company "strives to comply" with applicable laws in India. As per an official statement by the spokesperson, it informed, "As we have stated earlier, Twitter strives to comply with applicable laws in India. We continue to be strictly guided by principles of transparency, a commitment to empowering every voice on the service, and protecting freedom of expression and privacy under the Indian law." The Delhi High Court today issued notice to Twitter after a petition was filed against it for alleged non-compliance of the Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, 2021. Twitter Inc told Delhi High Court that it has complied with the new IT Rules and already appointed a Resident Grievance Officer under Rule 4 of the Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Ethics Code) Rules 2021 on May 28. A single-judge bench of Justice Rekha Palli asked the Centre and Twitter Inc to file a reply on the petition and listed the matter for July 6. Earlier on Thursday, Twitter had said it was concerned by recent events regarding their employees in India and the potential threat to freedom of expression. "Concerned by recent events regarding our employees in India and potential threat to freedom of expression for people we serve."

Newly appointed SDO(c) of Nazira conducts a Press conference : SDO(c) of Nazira directs all members of the Home Quarantine Committee to create awareness among the masses



Nazira, June 01 : Today, the newly appointed SDO(c) of Nazira, Sabyasachi Kashyap, took part in a press conference with all the journalists at the Conference Hall of Nazira Subdivision. At the onset, Information and Public Relations Officer, Barnali Dutta, along with the journalists gave a hearty welcome to the new SDO(c). During the Interactive session with the journalists, Mr Kashyap was informed about various issues of Nazira Sub-Division. "I will try my best to work at the grass root level, for the holistic development of Nazira. We must all work together to solve the issues of the subdivision. For that I will need the support and Cooperation of all the people," he said. Understanding the various grievances of the journalists, SDO(c) Sabyasachi Kashyap at the end of the discussion said that he would take steps to solve the problems of the subdivision. The meeting was attended by Nazira election officer Sujata Gogoi, journalists of Nazira Press Club, journalists of Nazira District Journalists Association, journalists of Shimoluguri Press Guild, and independent journalists. After concluding the meeting with the journalists he immediately attended another meeting with all the members of the Town Level Home Quarantine Committee. In this meeting, he discussed the steps that are needed to create awareness among the subjects to keep the virus at bay. He said that the COVID positive patients should not be allowed to leave the house for any reason. If any patient comes out and break the protocols given by the government, then the members of the town level committee should inform the concerned Circle Officer or the ASHA workers." In addition, he also instructed the committee members to be vigilant on the asymptomatic covid patients regarding their home isolation, admission of patients above 50 years in hospitals, regular Sanitisation and distribution of essential food items to the target audience. The meeting was attended by Nazira Election Officer Sujata Gogoi, Assistant Commissioner Rajiv Sonowal, Pritam Gogoi, Ruby Kumari Roy, Tanmoy Chetia and Information and Public Relations officer Barnali Dutta.

Change Of Command At Air Force Station Guwahati

Guwahati, June 01 : Air Commodore Atul Sagar took over charge of Air Force Station Borjhar, from Air Commodore Venkat T Mare VSM, on 01 Jun 21. The Air Officer is an alumnus of National Defence Academy (NDA), Khadakwasla. He was commissioned in the Flying Branch of the Indian Air Force as a Helicopter Pilot on December 14, 1991. The officer is an experienced Helicopter Pilot with more than 4600 flying hours and has flown extensively in North East in various operational roles. He has undergone the Staff Course at Defence Service Staff College, Wellington, the Higher Air Command Course at College of Air Warfare, Secunderabad and the Advanced Professional Programme in Public Administration at the Indian Institute of Public Administration, New Delhi. Air Commodore Sagar is a Qualified Flying Instructor and has previously commanded an Operational Helicopter Unit and an Air Base in the North East region. The Air Officer has also served in Namibia as part of the Training Team and as the Air Attaché in Ukraine.

Shi-Yomi Celebrates 'World No Tobacco' Day in a Befitting Manner



Aalo 01 June : The World No Tobacco Day was celebrated by the Shi-Yomi health fraternity with gaiety at Community Health Centre at Mechuka involving all stakeholders on 31st May last. On the occasion, Dr Mrs. Millo Kunya, DMO Shi-Yomi said that tobacco products used by all genres of people today are not only health hazardous to one who consume it but spread disease to other through smoking and spitting in public places in this kind of pandemic situation. She urged all medical staffs and people of Shi-Yomi to shun habit of tobacco addiction and administered the pledge to quit smoking. The doctors from the district also spoke in detail about the ill effects of all tobacco product consumptions.

Soyuncu skipped moving to a major Super Lig club

Leicester, June 01 : This article is part of the Guardian's Euro 2020 Experts' Network, a cooperation between some of the best media organisations from the 24 countries who qualified. theguardian.com is running previews from two countries each day in the run-up to the tournament kicking off on 11 June. Caglar Soyuncu is among the most recognisable names in the Turkey national team. What is less well known is the impact he has had on the game in his home country. Breaking with tradition, Soyuncu skipped moving to a major Super Lig club. He had the option when he was at Altinordu. "I had a choice," he said. "An academy in the Super Lig or the regional amateur league? It was a tough decision but I decided to listen to the manager [Huseyin Eroglu] and the club president [Mehmet Seyit Ozkan] and play in the amateur leagues to gain experience." It was a decision that paid off as the chisel-jawed centre-back attracted interest in Germany, making a name for himself in the Bundesliga for Freiburg before a £20m move to Leicester City. In the process he turned Turkish football on its head. Soyuncu is not the first Turkish player to move to a top-five league but by doing so without having played in Turkey's top tier he trailblazed a new path for other young Turkish footballers. Traditionally, the aim in Turkey is to move to one of Besiktas, Fenerbahce, Galatasaray or Trabzonspor and land a bumper contract. The problem is that the Turkish football market is a bubble. Players are wildly overpaid for what they deliver. Despite being unable to compete with the top five European leagues or the Netherlands, Belgium and Portugal, the dominant Turkish clubs continue to pay players higher wages than sides who continually outperform them. It is a comfort zone. Players have little incentive to improve but are paid above the

odds nevertheless. Soyuncu marked the beginning of a new era and Altinordu were at the centre of it. The plucky little Izmir-based club embarked on a bold project to create a new path. Altinordu saw a gap in the market. Turkey has a huge population of youth footballers - the largest in the Uefa zone - who were largely ignored for decades. Altinordu set out to build an academy geared to developing players to a standard high enough to attract clubs from major leagues.



The club bought land across the Aegean region and Western Anatolia, set up hundreds of football schools and scouted towns and villages previously ignored. At the academy, foreign languages are taught, media training is given, sports psychologists, qualified coaches and analysts are on site. All of which is the norm at clubs in major leagues but definitely not standard fare in Turkey. Soyuncu is a two-footed centre-back, with an impressive passing range and technical ability for a player in his position. Perhaps something he picked up playing as a striker. "When I played as a forward, Wayne Rooney was my idol, I was short at the time so I loved that a striker who was young and not tall managed to become a star," he told TamSaha Magazine in 2016. Only after moving to Buca and then Altinordu at youth level was he converted to a centre-back. "After becoming a defender,

Carles Puyol became my hero. I loved his bravery, character and leadership." Altinordu, Soyuncu was roommates with Cengiz Under. Who would have thought it? Two unknown kids at an unheard club in the lower tiers would go on to become the posterboys of Turkish football. When Freiberg signed Soyuncu in 2016 it barely made a ripple. No one in Turkey noticed. Even after playing two full seasons as a first-team defender in the Bundesliga he still went

unnoticed. And then he got his move to Leicester. A player who had never appeared in the Turkish top tier moved to a Premier League club for £20m. Now he had their attention. Soyuncu struggled for playing time in his first season but has gone from strength to strength since breaking into the side and is widely regarded as one of the best defenders in one of the strongest leagues in the world. Turkish soap operas have garnered popularity abroad and Soyuncu's story could quite easily be seen as a classic rags to riches tale. But in addition to being a real story, it has inspired a new generation of Turkish players to believe in themselves and follow his path. When he was playing in the amateur leagues Soyuncu recalls a friend who went to Galatasaray's academy instead. "He told me that if I play in the amateur leagues I'm nothing. You would have probably said he was right back

Steve Clarke to be offered new deal to stay on as Scotland manager

London, June 01 : The Scottish Football Association will offer Steve Clarke a new contract as reward for taking the country to a first major tournament since 1998. Clarke's deal, worth about £500,000 a year plus qualifying incentives, ends after next year's World Cup finals. Scotland's progress under Clarke, appointed in May 2019, means the 57-year-old has been linked with a return to club football after the Euros. Clarke was previously assistant manager at Aston Villa, Liverpool, West Ham, Chelsea and Newcastle. He also managed West Brom, Reading and Kilmarnock. Ian Maxwell, the SFA's chief executive, said of a new contract: "Absolutely, we'll be talking about that. We want to keep



him. We are absolutely delighted with the job he has done. We'll see how far we get in the Euros and we want to qualify for the World Cup in 2022. Hopefully he's the Scotland manager for a long time to come and we keep qualifying for tournaments." Maxwell replied "absolutely" when asked whether Clarke would take charge of Scotland for the World Cup campaign rather than be coaxed to a club role. Clarke has hinted at unfinished business in the Premier League. "If people are

talking about that I'm delighted because when was the last time people were talking about a Scotland manager moving on in a positive sense?" Maxwell said. "He's done fantastically well. We wanted to qualify [for the Euros] and that's what he has done. I'm totally sure he will lead us on to Qatar and hopefully he does that off the back of getting out the group, making the last 16 or the last eight. Hopefully we get as far as we possibly can and enjoy it." If you'd said to people before Steve was appointed that we were going to have to beat Serbia away to get to the Euros, everybody would have been saying: 'What's the point? We're not going to do that.' But we went into that game with everybody confident we were going to get something out of it. He's been a terrific appointment and we are really looking forward to the finals."

Koepka v DeChambeau an epic spat? More like a glimpse of golfing reality

London, June 01 : 140 During a stroll at Bethpage Black, in advance of the 2019 US PGA Championship, I struck up conversation with one of Europe's leading Ryder Cup players. As said golfer prolonged his reconnaissance work on a green, he waved for the group behind to play through. He duly identified one of the party as yet another hero of the yellow and blue for the biennial event against the United States. "If



I knew it was him. I would have left him waiting on the fairway." And he wasn't kidding. That snapshot came to mind last week, as a supposedly epic spat between Brooks Koepka and Bryson DeChambeau sent golf's chattering classes into a state of frenzy. Koepka, at Kiawah Island's staging of the US PGA, backed off mid-Golf Channel interview as DeChambeau walked behind the platform. DeChambeau is heard to vent his feelings - as he does - and his metal spikes created the kind of background racket that may well have led to a retake anyway. Koepka, his disdain perfectly clear, claims he "lost his train of thought" amid DeChambeau's "bullshit". Whether DeChambeau is actually addressing Koepka is unclear but it mattered not; the snippet was

mysteriously leaked and, millions of page views later, created a level of general excitement that typically greets mating season for the pandas at Edinburgh Zoo. Within this, some of the analysis was genuinely hilarious. Normally sane observers rushed to point out what a disgrace it was that such footage entered the public domain in the first place. Applying this logic, golf has become such a horrendously sanitised world that authentic content - or thought - must somehow be protected. Koepka uttered a couple of swear words but in the grand scheme of sport and life did no harm to anybody. The trouble here is that golf tries overly hard to be sport in its purest - and actually most unnatural - form. This is a world where broadcasters have become partners and behave with sycophancy. It is a scene where everybody must get along in perfect harmony. Erik van Rooyen smashed a tee box to smithereens during an extraordinary temper tantrum at the US PGA, endangering volunteers and a caddy in the process, but we will never learn his punishment because that is not what golf does. Bad for the

brand. The smell of cordite sends golf's administrators into cold sweats. That Koepka and DeChambeau, two alpha males of contrasting professional approach, may not see eye to eye should be no surprise to anybody. As they joust for major championships, it would be pretty dull if they did. Wander around leading amateur events the world over and you will encounter indifference between - frequently precious - players. They don't turn professional and start holding hands. "That's the way it is out here," said Shane Lowry. "I think people go wild for stuff like that but at the end of the day there's 150 big egos. Not everyone is going to like everyone." It should be stressed that Lowry, still the Open champion, remains endearingly free from self-admiration. We have also been subjected to earnest theories about how this episode may undermine US attempts to reclaim the Ryder Cup at Whistling Straits in September. Perhaps Koepka and DeChambeau will attack each other with four-irons during the Friday foursomes as Europeans share ice lollies.

Kyrie Irving cites 'underlying racism' after fan arrested for throwing bottle

London, June 01 : Kyrie Irving says banning fans who mistreat NBA players won't solve the problem. It goes much deeper than that. "[It's] just underlying racism, and treating people like they're in a human zoo," Irving said after a water bottle was thrown at him following Brooklyn's 141-126 victory over the Celtics on Sunday night. "Throwing stuff at people, saying things. There's a certain point where it gets to be too much," said the Nets guard, who spent two years playing in Boston and revealed last week he was the victim of racism during his time in the city. "You see people just feel very entitled out here ... As a Black man playing in the NBA, dealing with a lot of this stuff, it's fairly difficult. You never know what's going to happen." Irving had 39 points and 11 rebounds to quiet the first post-pandemic full house at the TD Garden and lead the Nets to victory in Game 4 of their first-round playoff series. The win gave Brooklyn a 3-1 lead and a chance to clinch at home on Tuesday. As Irving walked off the court, he was nearly hit by a bottle thrown from the stands. Irving and Nets guard Tyler Johnson turned toward the stands and pointed. Police surrounded a man in a Kevin Garnett jersey in the stands before leading him out in handcuffs. A spokeswoman for the TD Garden said Boston Police arrested one person Sunday night "for throwing an object." "We have zero tolerance for violations of our guest code of conduct," spokeswoman Tricia McCorkle said. "And the guest is subject to a lifetime ban from TD Garden." The incident mirrored bad behavior at other NBA games in the past



week as arenas began lifting capacity limits set during the pandemic. In Philadelphia, a fan threw popcorn at Wizards star Russell Westbrook; in New York, one spat at Atlanta's Trae Young as he prepared to inbound the ball. They were banned, as were three fans in Utah who allegedly racially abused the family of Memphis guard Ja Morant. "Fans have got to grow up at some point," Nets forward Kevin Durant said. "I know that being in the house for a year and a half with the pandemic has got a lot of people on edge, has got a lot of people stressed out. But when you come to these games you've got to realize: These men are human. We're not animals. We're not in the circus." You coming to the game is not all about you as a fan. So have some respect for the game. Have some respect for the human beings. And have some respect for yourself. Your mother wouldn't be proud of you throwing water bottles at basketball players, or spitting on players or tossing popcorn. So grow the fuck up and enjoy the game," Durant said. "It's bigger than you." Durant scored 42 and James Harden added 23 points and a career postseason-high 18 assists to help Brooklyn move within one win of their first playoff series victory since 2014.

Robinson and Overton have chance to push case for England's Ashes tour



London, June 01 : Apacked international summer starts on Wednesday with the first of two Tests against New Zealand, and from then on England face a brutal schedule across all three formats running through to the Twenty20 World Cup and the Ashes. It's not just the sheer quantity of games or the quality of the opposition that makes this summer exciting: the ECB has shown in its squad selection that it is going to look after its three-format players, and what that means is opportunity for others. Jofra Archer's injury has already opened the door for Ollie Robinson and for Craig Overton, who last played for his country a couple of years ago. For the last couple of years Jimmy Anderson, Mark Wood, Archer and Stuart Broad have all been involved and there hasn't been a lot of room for anyone else. But Wood's workload has to be managed, as does Archer's when he's fit, and if you are one of those up-

and-coming bowlers you now have a chance to shine. The way Olly Stone bowled in his couple of Tests in India over the winter, with control and pace in unfavourable conditions, suggests that he could really make a name for himself now if he gets a run in the team. I love to see a journey to the Test team that has been a bit leftfield and Robinson's has certainly been that - originally a spinner, he started at Kent, was sacked by Yorkshire and has finally blossomed at Sussex, where his record over the last couple of seasons has been extremely good. That journey means his character and his motivation have been tested, he has had to show strength and resilience, and that will hopefully make him a better player and a stronger person. Both he and Overton spent time in England's biosecure bubble last summer without playing, which means they will be familiar with a lot of the people and the routines,

and will hopefully need less time to settle in. If either of them slips into gear, the opportunity is there to earn a place in the squad for the rest of the summer and the Ashes tour. With Ben Foakes ruled out after his dressing-room slip, James Bracey is in line for a debut as wicketkeeper-batsman. He's been coming in at No3 for Gloucestershire but will possibly bat a bit lower down for England, and having also been in the bubble, and averaging 47.90 for his county this summer, there's a nice window open for him to possibly push some of the other batters, as might Haseeb Hameed if he gets a game. It's an exciting time, with lots of players playing their way into contention. The New Zealand series is not about the tried and trusted - we know what Joe Root has to offer, or Ben Stokes - it's about seeing what a few others can offer, and who seizes the moment. Pressure for places is key in sport - we saw with Eoin Morgan's limited-overs team the kind of impact it can have - and that's now kicking in with the Test squad. New Zealand come with a high-quality bowling unit. They are missing Trent Boult but Tim Southee is one of the best swing bowlers in the world, Neil Wagner can bowl long spells and is very effective with the short ball, and Kyle Jamieson is a very tall bowler who brings awkward bounce. That group has been here practising for a few weeks, and the big question is whether they can manage a Dukes ball. If they can do that they will be a real threat, and this young England team will have serious questions asked of them. The Kiwis also have the experience of Ross Taylor and Kane Williamson, people who have been there, done that and worn the T-shirt, plus Tom Latham has played for Durham and Kent, so has experience of English conditions. They have struggled away in recent years - they have lost only one of 23 home Tests in the last five years, but have lost nine of 15 away - but I think this team is a real threat, and this two-match series will be high-quality preparation for what England still have to come, and also high-quality sport. It will also, maybe most excitingly of all, have fans. Having been in the bubble last year, I know from experience that it can be a bit soulless at times. I remember watching Stokes smash a century against West Indies at Old Trafford, in almost complete silence. If that was a packed house it would have built atmosphere and put pressure on the batsman and the bowlers. The way the crowd noise ebbs and flows changes the game - even the silences build atmosphere. Lord's will have a meaningful crowd and then 18,000 people at Edgbaston is going to be a gamechanger. This is going to be a busy summer of high-quality cricket, but more than anything I'm excited to hear the roar of that crowd.

We're not the good guys: Osaka shows up problems of press conferences

London, June 01 : Regular attendees of Arsenal press conferences at the Emirates Stadium - in the before-times, when these things still happened - will tell of a mysterious character by the name of First Question Man. Nobody ever discovered who FQM worked for, or if he was even a journalist at all. His only real talent, if you can call it that, was to sit in the front row and make sure he asked the first question, usually by barking it while everyone was still taking their seats. Why FQM did this was never clear. It can't have been ego: I never met anybody who knew his real name. Nor was it an attempt to glean some sort of privileged insight: indeed, most of his questions were actually statements: banal bromides beloved of press conferences the world over. "Arsène, you must be happy with the win." "Unai, a point seemed like a fair result." "Mikel, a tough afternoon, your thoughts." "Naturally it was to FQM that my thoughts turned when the world No 2 Naomi Osaka announced that she would be boycotting press conferences at the French Open in order to preserve her mental health. As a journalist who has sat through thousands of these inane obligations, and entertained numerous apocalyptic thoughts in the process, my first instinct was naturally to sympathise. And yet, the resounding chorus of condemnation and blind outrage suggests that there are some surprisingly strong feelings out there. For some, the press conference is clearly a sacred way of life. You may take our lives. But you'll never take our ability to ask an athlete "how they felt it went out there today, you know?". On Monday night, after being fined and threatened with expulsion, Osaka

quit the tournament altogether. Meanwhile her stance has been universally scorned by the print media, who as we know have traditionally been the best people to judge standards of behaviour. An "uppity princess", one newspaper columnist wrote. Others have more soberly pointed out that for any athlete, facing the media is simply part of the job, and that by seceding from the process entirely Osaka is setting a "dangerous precedent". At



this point, it's worth considering exactly what this "danger" consists of. All over the world, the free press is already under unprecedented assault from authoritarian governments, tech giants and online disinformation. In many countries journalists are literally being killed for doing their job. Meanwhile in Paris, tennis journalists are facing the prospect of having to construct an article entirely from their own words. One of these things is not like the others. The real problem here, it strikes me, is not Osaka or even the impressive self-importance of the written media. Rather, it's the press conference itself, which when you think about it is quite a weird idea, and one that es-

entially fails at its central function. The great conceit of the press conference is that it is basically a direct line from the athlete to the public at large, that we humble scribes are but the people's faithful eyes and ears in the land of the gods. In case you hadn't noticed, this hasn't really been true for a while. Athletes now have their own direct line to the public, and spoiler: it's not us. Hard as it is to believe, Osaka's function as an

entertainer and corporate billboard is contingent on her playing tennis at an appointed hour, rather than being forced to sit in a windowless room explaining herself to a roomful of middle-aged men. And so the modern press conference is no longer a meaningful exchange but really a lowest common denominator transaction: a cynical and often predatory game in which the object is to mine as much content from the subject as possible. Gossip: good. Anger: good. Feuds: good. Tears: good. Personal tragedy: good. Meanwhile the young athlete, often still caught up in the emotions of victory or defeat, is expected to answer the most intimate questions in the least

intimate setting, in front of an array of strangers and backed by a piece of sponsored cardboard. There's an odd ritualistic quality to all this: the same characters sitting in the same seats, the same clichés, all these millions of wasted words, the unopened bottles of mineral water. Is there not a better way of doing this? These aren't elected politicians. These are simply people who have been elevated to prominence by dint of their hand-eye coordination and superior cardiovascular fitness. Talk to us, please! Or else! This dynamic is only exacerbated in women's tennis, a highly visible enterprise that takes place not just in a largely white male space, but a white male with free food space. That sense of voracious, engorged entitlement often manifests itself in exceptionally creepy ways. Question: "I noticed you tweeted a picture. Are you prepared that if you go on a long run you may be held up as a sex symbol, given you're very good looking?" (Genie Bouchard, Wimbledon 2013.) Question: "You're a pin-up now, especially in England. Is that good? Do you enjoy that?" (A 17-year-old Maria Sharapova, Wimbledon 2004.) And of course there are plenty of decent, curious journalists out there doing decent, curious things. In a way, this is what makes the chronic lack of self-awareness so utterly self-defeating. Read the room. We are not the good guys here. We are no longer the power. And one of the world's best athletes would literally rather quit a grand slam tournament than have to talk to the press. Rather than scrutinising what that says about her, it might be worth asking what that says about us.

Ange Postecoglou has credentials to deliver at Celtic if he is given time

London, June 01 : Ange Postecoglou, who has been linked with the vacant manager's post at Celtic, has proved a controversial candidate for some, but the Australian coach is a thinker, a scrapper and most of all a winner. But don't just take my word for it, here's what Brendan Rodgers had to say about him back in 2013, long before he had won the 2015 Asian Cup with Australia, or the J-League title with Yokohama F. Marinos in 2019. "Their coach is outstanding," Rodgers said. "I've had a couple of chats with him, and to see his team play, he's very similar to myself and he believes the game should be played in a certain way." At the time Rodgers was in the hot seat at Liverpool, with the Reds in Australia to take on Postecoglou's Melbourne Victory in a pre-season friendly. "You can see the team is very well coached, so we knew it was going to be a tough game for us." There has been a degree of "but he's only from Australia" scepticism about a coach from a country without the footballing heritage or pedigree commensurate with mighty Celtic. But say that to Postecoglou,

and you will soon find out there is more than just a tactician and motivator beneath his grizzly exterior. He resists forcefully any suggestion Australian football should suffer from an inferiority complex, railing against critics "painting a picture of a team that's not good enough, a league that's not good enough, players that are not good enough". He might not bark like Jim McLean or Sir Alex Ferguson, but he'll tell you soon enough he's not one for taking a backward step. That will spell trouble for one or two inside Parkhead. Postecoglou has no problem rattling cages early in his tenure, putting everyone on notice that it's his way or the highway. He put noses out of joint at Brisbane Roar - including those of Charlie Miller and Craig Moore - before reshaping them into the most impressive club side in Australian history. They were known locally as "Roarcelona", and it wasn't entirely tongue in cheek. With the national team he was charged with rejuvenating a squad that had grown stale. That included upsetting members of Australia's "golden generation" that led the

Socceroos to the 2006 World Cup, their first in 32 years. He took the job less than a year out from Brazil 2014 with Australia ranked 59th by Fifa, the lowest of any competing nation. "Any team can be beaten on their day," he responded bullishly. It might sound implausible, but Postecoglou believed passionately that as manager of Australia his imperative was to win the World Cup, not simply qualify and enjoy the hospitality. To that end, he implemented his trademark proactive, high-pressing style that focuses on dominating possession, overloading the midfield, and beating the best at their own game. It was heroically ambitious, although more often than not he lacked the personnel to turn his fantasy into reality. He will be better resourced in Glasgow. But for all Postecoglou's belief in himself and his strategy, not everyone in Australia's volatile football commu-

nity went along for the ride. His 2015 Asian Cup triumph (achieved with a final victory against Son Heung-min's South Korea) failed to cut through. "There were no honours bestowed upon anybody in that group. There was no understanding of the magnitude of the achievement," he reflected years later. "It's almost like within our own game we kind of keep our heads down and don't stick them up too high in case we get them knocked off." So he left, in a public relations shemuzzle. After delivering silverware and qualifying his country for the 2018 World Cup he opted not to coach in the finals.



Slade and Vermeulen lead Exeter to 74-3 demolition of hapless Newcastle



London, June 01 : One or two other sides are finishing the regular season strongly but they still have to loosen the iron grip of last season's champions Exeter. Roared on by the first home fans to populate Sandy Park for five months the rampant Chiefs proved far too much for their under-strength visitors and are now just three points behind leaders Bristol with two rounds to play. The Chiefs also equalled their record tally for a Premiership match, matching the 74 points rattled up against London Welsh six years ago, with man-of-the-match Henry Slade and Jacques Vermeulen collecting two tries apiece. It has not been the greatest of months for Slade, unluckily omitted from the British & Irish Lions squad to tour South Africa, but the gifted centre enjoyed himself here in front of the watching England coach, Eddie Jones. With another pair of Lions, Jonny Hill and Stuart Hogg, given mere cameo roles off the bench and Jonny Gray not involved at all, the ominous message for their future opponents is that Exeter still have plenty left ahead of this season's lengthy run-in. They finished with 12 tries in total and Dean Richards, the Falcons' director of rugby, believes they will take some stopping in June. "I said before the game they're my tip to win the Premiership title and I still stand by that," said Richards, still hopeful his team can finish as high as eighth. "They're a top team." Along with many thousands of other Bank Holiday travellers Newcastle always knew this might not be the simplest weekend to visit Devon. If the traffic jams on the neighbouring M5 on Saturday were nightmarish they remain a rela-

tive joy compared to attempting to stop the power-stacked Chiefs' forward juggernaut from five metres out. If any club has been missing their vocal congregation, furthermore, it has been the Chiefs who had to celebrate both their successes last season behind closed doors. In that context the presence of 3,300 supporters on a gorgeous sunny day was as close to perfection for the locals as the ongoing Covid restrictions allow. From the moment Sam Skinner crashed over from close range in the third minute there was barely any respite for a Falcons side who blooded four Premiership debutants and left with just a solitary Toby Flood penalty to show for their 740-mile round trip. The pick of the Chiefs' dozen tries was the last, a beautiful flick from Slade sending the speedy Tom O'Flaherty diving into the left corner and prompting high praise for the former from his head coach, Ali Hephher. "Even when the pressure is on he's got one of the highest skillsets in world rugby," said Hephher. "His ability to play the ball, the space and what's in front of him is almost second to none and he defends exceptionally well on top of that. We're chuffed to have him and he performed fantastically well today." With the grounds increasingly firm and fast, Slade's ability to make others look good around him also dovetails perfectly with Exeter's forward grunt. The Chiefs had five tries in the bank before half-time and topped 70 points despite disallowed tries for the relentless Sam Simmonds and the under-rated Jack Maunder and Joe Simmonds missing five conversions.

Helio Castroneves wins record-tying fourth Indianapolis 500 at age of 46

London, June 01 : At 46, and one of the oldest drivers in the field, he sprinted along the frontstretch of the speedway after his victory, waving to the 135,000 fans in attendance. He was interrupted during his victory jog by other drivers and most of Team Penske, the organization he spent more than two decades with and won three Indy 500s. "I love Indianapolis! You guys don't understand it! The fans, you give me energy," Castroneves said. His last Indy 500 win was in 2009, and Castroneves has been trying since to join AJ Foyt, Al Unser Sr and Rick Mears, his former mentor at Team Penske, as the only four-time winners of "The Greatest Spectacle in Racing." Mears was the last driver to join the club in 1991. "I've run two races this year and won two races, I'd say that's pretty good," said Castroneves, who noted that Tom Brady won the Super Bowl this year and

50-year-old Phil Mickelson won the PGA Championship last week. It was a stark contrast to the recent theme of young drivers taking over IndyCar, which now has six different winners through six races this season. Three of them have been first-time winners and four are drivers aged 24 or younger. Castroneves found himself in a closing duel with one of the young stars, 24-year-old Spaniard Alex Palou, but he passed Palou for good with two laps remaining and beat him by 0.4928 seconds for the victory. Former Penske teammate Simon Pagenaud, the 2019 Indy winner, was third, followed by Pato O'Ward, the 21-year-old budding IndyCar star. A year ago, no fans were allowed for the race that was delayed from May to August. This year, celebrities were back and fans were everywhere and they were treated to a win by one of the most popular drivers in Indy 500 history.

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