

BIGGEST SPIKE OF 1,945 CASES ON SUNDAY

On table in PM meeting with CMs today: Migrants, easing curbs, financial support

At current doubling rate, India could see 65,000 cases by middle of next month, Centre tells state chief secretaries

ABANTIKA GHOSH
NEW DELHI, APRIL 26

AS STATES prepare for a staggered exit from the second phase of the lockdown that ends May 3, Prime Minister Narendra Modi is likely to ask them not to let their guard down in the fight against COVID-19 in a video conference Monday morning with all chief ministers. This will be his fourth such meeting with state CMs since March 22 when he first spoke with them before announcing a nationwide lockdown on March 24.

Four key demands are likely to be made by states in the

CORONA COUNT

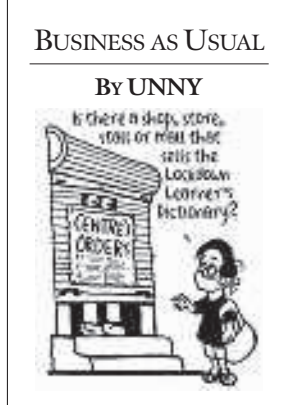
26,917 CASES **826** DEATHS

5,914 RECOVERED

6,25,309 samples have been tested as on April 26

Monday meeting: special trains to transport migrant workers to their home states, permission to allow more economic activities in non-hotspots, financial resources to support small businesses and the vulnerable, and additional testing kits, ventilators

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INSIDE

TOP OFFICIALS MOVED AROUND, EXTENSION FOR HEALTH SECY
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Centre flags gaps in critical care infra; shortages worst in UP, Bihar, Assam

DIPANKAR GHOSE
NEW DELHI, APRIL 26

THE CENTRE on Sunday presented a detailed account of the infirmities in India's COVID-fighting infrastructure, including specifically, the shortage of isolation beds, ventilators, and ICU beds.

According to a presentation made at the meeting, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and Assam had the largest numbers of districts with grave shortages of all these three kinds of equipment. The presentation was based on data up to April 23.

The meeting, which was

TAKING STOCK

	Number of districts	Districts with COVID-19 cases
Fewer than 100 isolation beds	183	67
Zero ICU beds	143	47
Zero ventilator beds	123	39

chaired by the Cabinet Secretary, was attended by the health secretaries of the states.

According to data presented at the meeting, 183 districts across the country have fewer than 100 isolation beds — and 67 of these districts have seen cases of coronavirus infection. As many as 53 (out of 75) districts

in UP have fewer than 100 isolation beds, the data show — and 31 of these districts have reported cases.

Bihar is number 2 on the infirmity list with 20 (out of a total 38) districts having fewer than 100 isolation beds; 9 of these districts have reported infections

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Grain stocks hit record high of 73.85 million tonnes in April

HARISH DAMODARAN
NEW DELHI, APRIL 26

FOODGRAIN STOCKS in the Central pool stood at 73.85 million tonnes (mt) as on April 1, the highest ever for this date and three-and-a-half times the minimum operational-cum-strategic reserve requirement of 21.04 mt.

The 73.85 mt figure includes 24.70 mt of wheat and 32.24 mt of rice. In addition, the Food Corporation of India (FCI) and state government agencies were holding 25.24 mt of un-milled paddy, whose rice equivalent, at an out-turn ratio of 67 per cent, worked out to 16.91 mt. Out-turn is the share of rice extracted from harvested paddy grains after removal of outer husk and inner bran layers.

The wheat stocks of 24.7 mt were 3.3 times the necessary level of 7.46 mt for April 1, when the procurement season for the new crop also starts. The previous record for this date was 24.21 mt in 2013 (see table). Rice stocks (inclusive of the milled paddy equivalent) were also at an all-time-high of 49.15 mt and 3.6 times the normative

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A police officer stands guard on a deserted Howrah bridge on Sunday, day 33 of the lockdown. Partha Paul

33 healthcare workers test positive at Max hospital in Patparganj

ASTHA SAXENA
NEW DELHI, APRIL 26

THIRTY-THREE healthcare workers have tested positive for coronavirus at Max Super Speciality Hospital in East Delhi's Patparganj. With over 400 beds, the hospital is one of the largest private facilities in the district.

The hospital, when contacted, told *The Indian Express*: "As part of our ongoing routine COVID testing for all healthcare workers, admitted patients and new admissions, a total of 33 healthcare workers have tested positive since the exercise began earlier this month at Max Hospital, Patparganj. These include two doctors and 23 nursing staff, while the remaining

are technicians and support staff."

"All of them have been shifted to our COVID-only Max Hospital, Saket, east wing," hospital authorities told *The Indian Express*.

The hospital also said that 145 nurses from the Patparganj facility "were quarantined for 14 days in a private hostel, where they live. The hostel was sealed and declared a containment zone by the local authorities."

"Since the occupancy (at the hospital) is minimal, the hospital is functioning with available staff," it said.

On the 145 nurses being quarantined, a health department official said: "Contact tracing of the hospital staff began

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Alarm bells ringing in Ahmedabad: 19 deaths in one day, 67 in one week

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
AHMEDABAD, APRIL 26

WITH 19 PATIENTS succumbing to COVID-19 in Ahmedabad Sunday, including a Congress corporator, Gujarat's largest city has registered 105 deaths linked to the virus overall — more fatalities than any other city in the country, apart from Mumbai with 204 deaths. Pune with 77 deaths, Indore (57) and Delhi (51) are next in line.

As many as 67 of the virus-linked deaths in Ahmedabad have been reported since April 20. During the same period, Mumbai reported 65 deaths. Outside Ahmedabad, only one death was reported in Gujarat Sunday — from Vadodara.

Ahmedabad district has

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EXPLAINED
New zone of concern

WITH 153 DEATHS from 3,319 positive cases, Gujarat has one of the highest Known Infection Fatality Ratio in the country. The high death rate could also point to a much larger prevalence of the disease in the population than has so far been detected. Gujarat has so far carried out 51,091 tests, which is less than half of what Maharashtra has done so far, and significantly lesser than even Tamil Nadu with more than 80,000 tests.

Mann ki Baat: Modi warns, don't assume the virus will not reach you

LIZ MATHEW
NEW DELHI, APRIL 26

WHILE SOME lockdown restrictions have been eased in some areas over the last few days, Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Sunday cautioned against "negligence" and "overconfidence" in the "people-driven" fight against the novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19).

Quoting the Hindi idiom "Sawdhani hati, durgatna ghati" (an accident happens as soon as the guard is lowered) to underline his point, Modi, in his monthly Mann Ki Baat programme, said: "Let us not get caught in the trap of overconfidence, let us not harbour a feeling that if the coronavirus has not reached our city, village, street or office yet, it will not reach now. Never make such a mistake."

Citing a Sanskrit *shloka*, he said: "Fire, debt and illness, if taken lightly, grow again at the first opportunity, assuming dangerous proportions. So it is important to treat them completely. Therefore, in overenthusiasm, there should be no negligence. We will always have to remain cautious."

Emphasising the importance of social distancing, he said:

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'ECONOMIC ACTIVITY SHOULD START IN NON-HOTSPOTS... OR PEOPLE WILL DIE OF HUNGER'

ASHOK GEHLOT
CHIEF MINISTER OF RAJASTHAN

Pressure on MFs: Finmin takes note of Franklin, in talks with SEBI and RBI

RBI yet to respond to SEBI's March note seeking liquidity support for debt funds

GEORGE MATHEW, SUNNY VERMA & SANDEEP SINGH
MUMBAI, NEW DELHI, APRIL 26

THE FINANCE ministry is in discussion with regulators, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) and the Securities and Exchange Board of India (Sebi) to address mutual funds' need for liquidity and prevent panic selling in debt funds triggered by the abrupt closure of six credit schemes by Franklin Templeton Mutual Fund on Thursday.

A senior government official, who did not wish to be named, said "(it) looks more of a liquidity issue rather than a credit risk problem". "The finance ministry has taken note of the developments and is engaging with the regulators how best it can be resolved," he said.

Capital market regulator Sebi, which was aware of the developments that led to the shutdown of the schemes, is in constant touch with the Association of Mutual Funds of India, the nodal agency for mutual funds, and the RBI, to assess the dynamic situation. In fact, Sebi had written to RBI in March itself im-

pressing upon it the need to provide a liquidity window for mutual funds. "It has, however, not yet happened," said a source in the government, who also did not wish to be named.

The debt fund segment had turned volatile since March and witnessed outflows of Rs 1.94 lakh crore and is staring at further outflows, especially in the Rs 55,000 crore credit risk fund segment because the Templeton move has shaken the confidence of investors. The total corpus of debt schemes shrunk to Rs 10.29 lakh crore as on March 31, 2020.

Recommending an early intervention, former Sebi Chairman UK Sinha had in an article in *The Sunday Express* warned that the mutual fund problem can swiftly migrate to the entire financial services industry, and then soon to the real economy.

In October 2008, at the peak of the global financial crisis, the RBI had opened a special liquidity repo window for mutual funds. Again, in July 2013, when returns on debt mutual funds dropped sharply with rupee falling significantly against US dollar, the RBI opened a special

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The Agra model? Wear PPE, throw food at people who have been locked up



Image grab of food being distributed at a college in Agra

AMIL BHATNAGAR & AVANEESH MISHRA
NOIDA, LUCKNOW, APRIL 26

IN A video clip of a quarantine centre in Agra, a person wearing personal protective equipment (PPE) can be seen throwing water bottles and food packets from outside a locked gate, as dozens of people inside stretch out their hands through the iron grille and try to grab them.

This comes days after the "Agra model of containment" was showcased as a success by both the Centre and the state government.

The video clip, which is being circulated on social media, was reportedly shot at the Hindustan College, registered under the Sharda Group of Institutions, which was taken over by the Agra administration and converted into a quarantine facility.

The woman shooting the video clip can be heard saying that she was brought to the centre for a check-up, which wasn't done.

Some residents claimed that food was distributed at the quarantine centre in a similar fashion earlier too.

Confirming the incident, Agra District Magistrate Prabhu Narain Singh said it happened a few days ago, and "everything is fine now".

"The situation has been taken care of. The DM has ordered an inquiry. There was a slight delay in distributing the food, that is why those staying at the quarantine centre became somewhat restless," Additional Chief Secretary (Home) Awanish Kumar Awasthi said.

Singh said there was a delay of about four hours in distributing the food. "There was a gap of

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THE EDITORIAL PAGE

SAFETY OF HEALERS MOST IMPORTANT

BY DR S K SARIN
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WORLD



GLOBAL DEATHS GO PAST 2 LAKH, SPAIN DAILY TOLL LOWEST IN FIVE WEEKS

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PAGE 1 ANCHOR

ATRI MITRA & AMITAVA CHAKRABORTY
KOLKATA, NEW DELHI, APRIL 26

AS THE man in charge of West Bengal's Central Medical Stores, Dr Biplab Kanti Dasgupta led the distribution of COVID-19 medical supplies to hospitals and health centres across the state — from Personal Protective Equipment to masks and gloves. On Sunday, nine days after he tested positive and months shy of retirement, the 64-year-old Assistant Director of Health Services became the first front-

line health provider in West Bengal to die of the virus.

Dasgupta, who was admitted to a private hospital in Kolkata's Salt Lake area, tested positive on April 17. Diabetic and hypertensive, his condition had deteriorated soon after, and he was put on ventilator support. The cause of his death has been recorded as 'COVID pneumonia'.

After he tested positive, his family and primary contacts, including 17 more staff of the Health Department and another senior medical officer, were put in quarantine and their swab samples sent for testing. So far, his wife and family physician

have tested positive for the virus and are in the same hospital. While one of his sons is stuck in another city and has been unable to return due to the lockdown, the other is in quarantine in a hotel in east Kolkata.

On Sunday, in a series of tweets, Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee said she was "deeply pained at the untimely demise" of Dasgupta. She said Dasgupta's "sacrifice for the cause of ailing humanity will ever be in our hearts and will make our COVID warriors fight the deadly virus with even greater determination."

Hailing from Chattogram in



Dr Biplab Kanti Dasgupta tested positive on April 17.

Bangladesh, Dasgupta, who graduated from Chittagong Medical College in 1980, did his Diploma in Public Health from the All India Institute of Hygiene and Public Health.

An officer of the West Bengal Health Services, Dasgupta has held several senior administrative positions, including that of Superintendent of Kanthi Sub-divisional Hospital in East Midnapore, Chief Medical Officer in Uttar Dinajpur and later, District Leprosy Officer in Murshidabad.

Dr Amit Pan, a Kolkata-based paediatrician who has worked extensively in the area of child

health, said Dasgupta will be remembered for his stint as leprosy officer. "He travelled to the interiors of the districts and played a major role in bringing down the number of leprosy cases in these areas," he said.

Dasgupta also headed the planning and development of the state health services before leading charge of the Central Medical Stores.

Sanjay Banerjee, secretary of the Behala branch of the Indian Medical Association with whom Dasgupta has worked for long, said, "We got to know about his fever only on the seventh day, when Dr Sovan Kumar Kundu

examined him (Kundu has since tested positive) and recommended a COVID-19 test. Even after he tested positive, Biplab told me he had no problems. But a couple of days later, I could sense his breathlessness. That night, he was transferred to a private hospital in Salt Lake and put on ventilator. In the meantime, he also suffered a cardiac arrest. Although he survived that, his urinary output had reduced a lot. He was to be put on dialysis but that never happened. He had comorbidities — diabetes and hypertension. About 7-8 years ago, he had also

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HOW INDIA'S FILM INDUSTRY GOT HIT AND IS PREPARING FOR A NEW NORMAL

While the impact of the lockdown on the Indian film industry at large is still being evaluated, we take a look at how film production and related fields have suffered in India over the past month.

VIDEO OF THE DAY



AT HOME WITH STARS
Rocky & Mayur play the 'who is more likely to' challenge

EXPLAINED



TENSIONS IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA
China has been expanding its presence in the region

EXPRESS AUDIO

iPhone SE and OnePlus 8 series: surprise phone launches

NEW EPISODE EVERYDAY

On the tech podcast, reporters detail the latest surprise smartphone launches, what sets these models apart and how they plan to enter a market hit by the pandemic

FROM PAGE ONE

PM's meeting

and personal protective equipment.

A day before the meeting, Rajasthan Chief Minister Ashok Gehlot told *The Indian Express* that the nation-wide lockdown should be modified and economic activities allowed in non-hotspots. "There was some relaxation for industries and shops... That is fine, but more activities should begin because the revenue of states has become zero. When there is no revenue, how will states work?" he said.

Less than a week back, Chhattisgarh Chief Minister Bhupesh Baghel too had written to the Prime Minister seeking permission to let sweet shops, vehicle and electronic showrooms, repair shops, and retail activities commence operations. He had also demanded funds to the tune of Rs 30,000 crore to support poor and needy families with no means of income.

State government sources in Maharashtra said Chief Minister Uddhav Thackeray is likely to demand arrangement of special trains to transport migrant workers to their home states. They said the state has initiated preliminary preparations for transportation of migrants by buses if trains were not permitted. While Gujarat CM Vijay Rupani is likely to present the way forward for his state after May 3, Punjab CM Amrinder Singh is expected to reiterate his demand for a special financial package, and West Bengal CM Mamata Banerjee is likely to demand the release of past dues to the state and seek additional testing kits.

In another meeting with chief secretaries of all states on Sunday, Cabinet Secretary Rajiv Gauba reviewed the preparedness of states. "A presentation was made outlining the projected scale of the challenge at hand, especially since the current stringent lockdown cannot possibly go on for an indefinite period given its huge economic cost," said an official who was part of the meeting.

On Sunday, the country registered the highest daily increase of 1,945 cases, taking the total number of positive cases to 26,917, as per data released by the health ministry. The number of deaths touched 826, with 47 in the last 24 hours. A total of 5,913 people have recovered from the disease.

Making a summary projec-

tion during the meeting with state chief secretaries, the Central government projected India to record 65,000 COVID-19 cases by May 15. At the present doubling rate of 10-12 days, it said the number of cases could reach 2.74 crore cases by August 15. "By June end we could be heading for one lakh cases a day, according to the projection," said another source who was part of the meeting.

"The idea was to sensitise states to the need to be well prepared. Health is a state subject and all the real work is being done by them. That is why there was also talk about devolution of responsibilities to the district administration or even the city level for better decentralised care of patients so that tertiary care facilities are not overwhelmed," said a third person who was part of the meeting.

Going forward, the doubling time would depend on when and to what extent lockdown is relaxed in various parts of the country. India's worst doubling time was 3.5 days in March. A top official in the government said even in the worst case scenario, the doubling rate may not dip below five as social distancing, hand washing and other behavioural changes are being internalised by people. "But if the doubling time does reach there, the case load would be even more than the projection shared with states," the source said.

During a visit to the AIIMS Trauma Centre in New Delhi, Union Health Minister Harsh Vardhan said: "When we compare the number of active patients who are currently hospitalised, we find that only 2.17 per cent patients have been admitted in ICU, 1.29 per cent patients have required oxygen support and mere 0.36 per cent are on ventilator. We are winning the battles and eventually we will win this war..." The mortality/death rate of COVID patients in India is 3.1 per cent compared with 7 per cent at the global level, he said. "The doubling rate of the country has been showing regular improvement and stands at 10.5 days when seen over a period of three days, 9.3 days over a period of 7 days and 8.1 days over a period of 14 days. These indicators may be taken as positive effects of the lockdown along with the cluster management and containment strategies," he said.

"As on date, 283 districts have not reported any COVID cases, 64

districts have not reported a fresh case since the last 7 days, 48 districts have not reported a fresh case since the last 14 days, 33 districts have not reported a fresh case since the last 21 days and 18 districts have not reported a fresh case since the last 28 days," the Health Minister said.

He, however, urged the people to "observe the lockdown 2.0 in letter and spirit and to treat it as an effective intervention to cut down spread of COVID-19".

(With inputs from Manoj CG in New Delhi and Vishwas Waghmode in Mumbai)

Centre flags gaps

so far. In Assam, which is third on the list, these numbers are 19 (out of 33) and 6 respectively.

The presentation also recorded the worst performing districts in these states. In UP, the three worst performing districts are Saharanpur, Firozabad and Rae Bareilly.

Underscoring the "urgent need to build ICU capacity", the presentation said 143 districts in India have no ICU beds; 47 of these have seen coronavirus cases. Here too, the state with the highest number is UP, with 34 districts with zero ICU beds, of which 19 have seen infections.

Madhya Pradesh is second in this list, with 31 districts that have zero ICU beds; 11 of these districts have seen COVID-19 cases. Bihar is third, with numbers of 29 and 10 respectively.

A total 123 districts nationwide have zero ventilator beds; 39 of these districts have seen cases. UP has 35 of these districts — and 20 of them have reported cases. Bihar and Assam have 28 and 17 such districts respectively; and 10 and 3 of them respectively have seen cases.

The presentation also flagged the possibility of infrastructure shortage based on projections for May 3. For instance, it suggested that Mumbai could see a shortage of isolation beds with oxygen by May 2, with 9,632 cases projected by that date. It recorded 10 districts across the country with the highest bed capacity utilisation, according to available data. Firozabad in UP has 30 beds but 62 active cases; Surat has 253 beds and 440 active cases. Mumbai is recorded as having a total 2,260 beds, and 3,615 cases. Of these 10 districts, four are in UP, and two in Gujarat.

The Cabinet Secretary's presentation seemed critical of the data provided by states — it asked

whether there was overutilisation of beds, where patients were housed, and whether administrations were "actually aware of what is happening in the field", and remarked that "with managing COVID-19 as the only task, it is strange if we cannot do even basic data entry".

Mann ki baat

"Do gaj doori, bahut hai zaroori (a distance of two yards is essential)." He also exhorted people to stop spitting in public places, saying it was time to get rid of this "bad habit" once and for all.

"Due to COVID-19, masks are becoming a part of our lives. It doesn't mean that all those who are wearing it are sick. Masks will become a new symbol of a civilised society. If you want to protect yourself and others from the disease, use of a mask is important," he said.

The Prime Minister said India's fight against COVID-19 was "people-driven" in the truest sense of the term. In recent weeks, he said, people of different faiths have celebrated their religious festivals at home, following the instructions of the authorities.

He also urged more prayers during the ongoing month of Ramzan. "Now that this trouble has come to plague the entire world, it gives us an opportunity to mark this Ramzan as an icon of restraint, goodwill, sensitivity and service. This time, we should pray more than ever before, so that prior to the celebration of Eid, the world is rid of the coronavirus and we celebrate Eid with enthusiasm and gaiety like earlier times," he said. Modi also talked about India's attempts to supply hydroxychloroquine (HCQ) to 13 countries. "We took a decision in keeping with our culture. We undertook the task of providing medical supplies to the needy across the world, and have successfully completed this humanitarian task," he said.

"We have created a digital platform 'covidwarriors.gov.in' — volunteers of social organisations, civil society and local administration are connected through this platform. About 1.25 crore people, including doctors, nurses, NCC cadets among others have already joined this platform. You can also join the fight as a COVID warrior by logging in to the site," he said.

Ahmedabad

accounted for over 68 per cent of

the total deaths in the state, which reached 153 Sunday. Ahmedabad and Surat are among the five new hotspots, including Chennai, Hyderabad and Thane, that will be monitored by Central teams.

Of the 19 deaths in Ahmedabad — the highest reported from the city in one day — eight were of patients who did not have any other serious ailments and were in the age range of 34-59 years. Nine others suffered from high blood pressure, diabetes and heart ailments, and two were listed as "high risk" and aged 60 and 65 years old.

Among the nine was Congress corporator Badruddin Shaikh, 67, who represented Behrampura ward, a hotspot in the city. Shaikh tested positive on April 15, was admitted to Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel (SVP) hospital, and had been on ventilator support for over a week. Officials said Shaikh had undergone a heart surgery recently, was a diabetic and had hypertension.

The city has, meanwhile, ramped up its testing. On Saturday, Chief Minister Vijay Rupani said that Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation was testing 2,701 samples per million population.

Dr Atul Patel, infectious disease specialist at Sterling Hospital, which is one of the three private hospitals in Gujarat authorised to treat COVID-19 patients, attributed the fatality rate to the "likely presence of a deadlier strain" of the virus in the state.

Thirteen of the deaths were of patients being treated at the SVP hospital and the rest at the civil hospital.

Of the 233 new cases reported from across Gujarat, 178 were from Ahmedabad, taking the total number in the district to 2,181, and the total count in the state to 3,319 Sunday.

According to state data, 54.46 per cent of deaths were of those above 60 years of age, 33.04 per cent between 45 and 60 years old, 10.71 per cent between 15 and 45 years old, and 1.78 per cent below 15 years old. And, at least 15 per cent of the total deaths reported in the state till Friday were without any co-morbidities.

Among the new cases reported from the state, 28 were from Surat, eight from Anand, seven from Vadodra, four each from Rajkot, two from Panchmahal, and one each from Banaskantha, Kheda, Navsari and

Patan. Vadodra's new cases took the district's tally to 241, and one death took the toll to 13. The new cases include four from the red zone area of Nagarwada, and others from Panigate, Goya Gate and Fatehpura area. A 63-year-old woman from Marathi Mohalla Navabazar, who tested positive Saturday, died Sunday morning. Of Anand's new cases, all are from Khambhat of which six were reported from the same locality of Pipada Sehri. Kheda district took its COVID-19 tally to six after a 48-year-old woman tested positive. Her husband tested positive on April 21 and her 75-year-old mother on April 22.

Agra model

about four hours, and (in this time) they did all this. However, it was an isolated incident, and we have made sure that no such incident is repeated. Everything has been taken care of. Everything is fine now," he said.

"Following complaints from the Sharda Group of Institutions, I inspected the place. An inspection was done this morning too. All the faults in the system have been repaired. The Chief Development Officer (CDO) has been asked to fix responsibility. He has been asked to submit a report. The teams tasked with COVID-19 management have been asked to work properly and not let such complaints come up again," Singh said.

While Singh said there are over 500 people at the quarantine centre, a local health official put the figure at 130.

"Most of the people at the quarantine centre are those who have small houses, where social distancing is not possible. We believe that if we let them stay in their houses, the virus will spread further. Yesterday, we brought all the close contacts of previous confirmed cases here for sampling and the process is going on," the DM said.

Until Sunday evening, Agra had reported 372 cases (including 49 discharged) and 10 deaths.

Agra Mayor Naveen Jain said he had written to Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath earlier, stating that the authorities were only indulging in "photo ops", and lack of proper effort was worsening the situation in the district.

"I did highlight that patients were not being admitted on time and there are problems in coordination. The CM intervened and the situation became slightly better," he said.

Grain stocks

minimum of 13.58 mt for April 1.

The build-up of stocks to such high levels is mainly a result of governmental procurement of grain exceeding offtake from the Central pool. In 2019-20 (April-March) alone, total procurement amounted to 80.64 mt, comprising 46.51 mt rice and 34.13 mt wheat. As against this, the aggregate offtake was just over 62 mt.

That included 52.85 mt under the National Food Security Act (NFSA), 3.77 mt under midday meals and other welfare schemes, and 5.25 mt of open market sales through e-auctions. The Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana (PMGKY) relief package, announced on March 27 to alleviate the distress of people most affected by the nationwide lockdown, might help whittle down some of the excess food-grain stocks.

The NFSA, currently, entitles three-fourths of all rural and half of all urban households to 5 kg of wheat or rice per person per month at Rs 2/kg and Rs 3/kg, respectively. Under the new package, an extra 5 kg of wheat/rice is being given per person per month, free of cost, for a three-month period from April to June 2020. An additional 12.14 mt of wheat and rice has been allocated for this purpose.

The government was, until recently, not aggressively disposing of stocks from public warehouses, largely for financial and accounting reasons. The FCI's "economic cost" of procuring and distributing grain was estimated at Rs 26.80 per kg for wheat and Rs 37.48 per kg for rice in 2019-20. But concerns over issuing grains at low cost, or even free, have had to take a backseat for two reasons.

The first has, of course, been the prospect of large-scale hunger from a sudden collapse of workdays and incomes following the lockdown. The second is a bumper wheat crop that farmers are now harvesting and bringing to the mandis.

The total storage capacity available with FCI and state agencies has been assessed at 75.85 mt as on December 31, 2019. That includes 62.64 mt of covered godown space, with the remaining 13.20 mt being open storage in cover-and-plinth structures. With procurement of the new crop taking off, the challenge of stocking is expected to go up in the coming weeks. The only "re-

lief" may come from PMGKY.

Apart from economic cost, FCI also incurs interest and storage expenses in holding excess stocks in its godowns. That "carrying cost", estimated at Rs 5.61 per kg in 2019-20, will be saved even when grain is given out free.

Delhi hospital

soon after a patient undergoing dialysis there tested positive. During investigation, we found 145 nurses from the hospital living in the same hostel, with each room being shared by three-four nurses. The entire hostel complex was quarantined and samples of all nurses were sent for testing."

On April 15, the hospital chain had announced it would test its 24,000 healthcare workers and 1,000 patients across the country over the next few weeks.

So far, 50 healthcare workers have tested positive at the Delhi government-run Babu Jagjivan Ram Hospital, 29 at Baba Saheb Ambedkar Hospital, 25 at the Delhi State Cancer Institute and 15 at Lady Harding Medical College, Apollo, Sir Ganga Ram, Moolchand, RML, Safdarjung, AIIMS and Lok Nayak have also reported cases of healthcare workers testing positive.

Bengal doctor

suffered a minor cerebral stroke."

"The last time I spoke to him, he rued about where he could have contracted the virus from. I told him he could have got it from anywhere — after all, he was in contact with workers who were carrying supplies from the Central Medical Stores to various COVID hospitals; or even the government car in which he travelled," Banerjee added.

Dasgupta's friends say that through all his postings, he never gave up medical practice. Dr Samudra Sengupta, his friend and junior in the health services, said, "Since we are in administrative service, we have no permission for clinical practice. But Biplab da would always say, 'Daktari ta chharis na (Don't stop being a doctor). We are born to treat people. That is how we will always be known as.' So Biplab da also never give up practice. He used to treat people free of cost."

While condoling the death, the West Bengal Doctors' Forum called for more testing of healthcare providers. "We once again reiterate that we need more intensive testing, especially of each and every healthcare provider, even asymptomatic ones..."

Top cop exceeded authority in issuing travel letter for Wadhawans: Probe

MOHAMED THAYER
MUMBAI, APRIL 26

THE PROBE ordered by the Maharashtra government against its Principal Secretary (Home) Amitabh Gupta for issuing a letter allowing DHFL promoters Dheeraj Wadhawan and Kapil Wadhawan to travel during the lockdown has concluded that while the IPS officer exceeded his jurisdiction, he has sought to justify the move on humanitarian grounds, *The Indian Express* has learnt.

The report, which was submitted by Additional Chief Secretary (Finance) Manoj Saunik Saturday, also says that if the government accepts Gupta's explanation, it should ask him "to be careful" in future and check the background of those seeking his help.

On Sunday, the CBI took the Wadhawan brothers in custody — for alleged fraud linked to loans obtained from Yes Bank — after the end of their 14-day quarantine period following the journey. Facing non-bailable warrants, the

Wadhawans are being probed by the CBI and the ED on charges linked to the alleged multicore Yes Bank scam.

Gupta was sent on leave on April 9 for allowing the Wadhawan brothers, and 21 others, to travel from Khandala to Mahabaleshwar. The Satara police had also registered an FIR against the 23 for violating the lockdown.

The probe, which was also asked to look into whether there were any previous dealings between Gupta and the Wadhawans, and whether the travel letter was issued with any "mala fide intention", says that a "forensic investigation" by an investigative agency is needed look into these charges.

But the report indicates that it did not appear that Gupta gave the letter to help the Wadhawans evade the law, sources said, adding that this observation is likely to count in the officer's favour.

In a Facebook Live video Sunday, Home Minister Anil Deshmukh said that the report has cited Gupta as saying that he

On Sunday, the CBI took the Wadhawan brothers in custody — for alleged fraud linked to loans obtained from Yes Bank — after the end of their 14-day quarantine period

had given the letter to the Wadhawans himself and was not pressured by anyone to do so. "The CM and I will look through the file and take a decision on the report. Eventually, we will also make the report public," Deshmukh said.

Claiming that "many people" had tried to politicise the issue, Deshmukh said: "...you have senior politicians who have led the state trying to politicise this issue, which is very disappointing."

Former chief minister Devendra Fadnis had earlier hit out at the Maharashtra government over the lockdown "viola-

tion" by the Wadhawans and asked if there was no restriction for the "mighty and rich" in the state.

Sources said Gupta, a 1992-batch officer, stated in his plea before the probe that in the aftermath of the lockdown, a lot of people were caught off guard, including medical patients, migrants and tourists, among others. "He said that many people in the government did intervene on humanitarian grounds to mitigate the circumstances of these people," sources said.

According to sources, Gupta said that apart from the Wadhawans, he had also intervened in other similar cases. They said the official also submitted that he had given an open letter "to whoever it may concern" and that it was not binding. "He argued that, for example, the Satara police did not accept the letter," sources said.

Referring to the Wadhawans, sources said, Gupta submitted that they were stranded in rented accommodation in Khandala and wanted to return to their home in

Mahabaleshwar, both locations within the state. "He accepted that he did issue the letter and mentioned the circumstances, with supporting documents," the official said. Sources said when Gupta was asked about the jurisdiction or authority under which he had issued the letter, the officer acknowledged that he did not have such authority. "Hence, the report says he didn't have the jurisdiction and had exceeded it prima facie on compassionate grounds," they said.

On Sunday, referring to the CBI move, Deshmukh tweeted: "A CBI team has taken both Kapil and Dhiraj Wadhawan into custody. Satara police has given them all required assistance and an escort vehicle with 1+3 (one office and three personnel) guard upto Mumbai on a written request. The arrest procedures are going on. #LawEqualForAll"

In a statement, the CBI confirmed the arrest from Mahabaleshwar and said "both the accused will be produced before the Special CBI Court at Mumbai".

SUSHANT KULKARNI/PUNE

MP toll tops 100, govt to check for a 'more virulent' strain

MILIND GHATWAI
BHOPAL, APRIL 26

A MONTH after the first COVID-19 death was reported from Ujjain on March 25, the toll has now climbed to 103 in Madhya Pradesh with 2,090 positive cases so far. There were 145 new cases over a 24-hour period, including 91 from Indore, as the virus spread to more areas of MP's largest city.

The neighbouring city of Ujjain, which has registered the highest death rate among cities with a minimum of 100 cases in the country, reported two more deaths taking its toll to 17 among 106 positive cases.

Six deaths were earlier reported each from Dewas and Khargone districts, which reported one positive case each in the last 24 hours, taking their respective tally to 23 and 61. The combined and individual death rate in each of these districts is higher than the national average.

With 86 of the total 103 deaths being reported from Indore, Ujjain, Dewas and Khargone dis-

SUSPECTED COVID PATIENT DIES, HIS WIFE DIES OF SHOCK

Bhopal: A non-medical assistant, who was hospitalised for possible COVID-19 infection in Ujjain, died during treatment on Sunday. When his wife heard the news, she died of cardiac arrest. The NMA, posted at leprosy department of the RD Gardi Medical College in Ujjain, had been serving food in the quarantine zone in the hospital. On Saturday, he complained of fever and difficulty in breathing. A day later, he died during treatment. Nodal officer Dr H P Sonaniya told *The Indian Express* that the NMA's sample had been sent for testing for the virus. **ENS**

lent strain has hit the region.

Dean of Mahatma Gandhi Medical College, Indore, Dr Jyoti Bindal said that samples from Indore, Bhopal and Sagar will be sent to Pune for comparison. "Fatality and positivity is more in the region. Countries across the globe are responding with different death and positive rates," she said. The Pune lab had also asked for samples from Gwalior and Jabalpur but the MGM College is sending samples only from Indore, Bhopal and Sagar due to travel constraints.

MP is expecting a surge in positive cases as results of thousands of samples, including those sent to Ahmedabad and Puducherry, are awaited. Former CM Kamal Nath said the death toll and the pendency of nearly 9,000 samples was a matter of concern. He said the state did not have adequate resources like medical equipment and testing kits.

In a video conference, Chief Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan asked officials to adopt best practices in COVID-19 treatment.

tricts, the authorities are considering sending samples to the Pune-based National Institute of Virology to check if a more viru-

3 THE OUTBREAK WEST BENGAL

CORONA WATCH

Adhir seeks free rail for migrants

Kolkata: Leader of the Congress in the Lok Sabha Adhir Ranjan Chowdhury on Sunday wrote to Prime Minister Narendra Modi seeking that migrant labourers in different parts of the country be allowed to travel free of cost to their destination by the Railways once the lockdown is lifted. In a series of four letters to the PM, Chowdhury said that a large portion of the migrant labourers are from the minority community and urged that the government feed these people during the month of Ramadan owing to their "hapless condition" due to the coronavirus induced lockdown. Highlighting the misery of migrant labourers in different parts, Chowdhury sought a "direction to the Ministry of Railways to carry these penniless people to their destination free of cost." **PTI**

BJP holds home sit-ins against govt

Kolkata: Senior BJP leader Kailash Vijayvargiya on Sunday joined members and supporters of the BJP's state unit as they held silent sit-ins at their homes in protest against the Mamata Banerjee government's alleged mismanagement of the crisis caused by the novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic. State BJP chief Dilip Ghosh, Bankura MP Subhas Sarkar, accompanied by other workers, held placards during the sit-in at their homes from 11 am to 1 pm, accusing the government of suppressing facts and figures about the pandemic. Vijayvargiya, the BJP national general secretary, joined the demonstration from his home in Indore. **PTI**



A man has his temperature taken at Alipore Zoological Garden in Kolkata. Partha Paul

In times of social distancing, virtual tours bring people closer to animals & history

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
KOLKATA, APRIL 26

IN A relief for people stuck at home and struggling with ennui because of the COVID-19 pandemic, major tourist spots in the city such as the Alipore Zoological Garden, Victoria Memorial Hall and Indian Museum have come up with engaging online content to keep them busy.

The State Forest Department has come up with an application named "Kolkata Zoo" that will allow people to take a virtual tour of the zoological garden.

"We have arranged live shows also," said Forest Minister Rajib Banerjee. "One can open our application and go for a virtual tour. It is very useful for these lockdown days, especially for children. This lockdown time is very depressing for them.

With this application they can enjoy the zoo, the movements of tigers, lions, zebras, elephants, giraffes, and other animals."

People can follow the naming of newborn animals through the app, the minister said. "Across the state, we have 12 zoos. In these zoos, there are so many newborns, their names will be announced through this application. The audience can follow that."

The forest department website would soon have a new look, said sources. After the lockdown is lifted and the zoo is reopened, people can submit photos clicked there. The best pictures will be published in exhibitions every month.

Meanwhile, the Indian Museum is also trying to attract traffic to its website by uploading audio-visual presentations. In collaboration with Google Art and Culture, the museum has

uploaded many theme-based exhibitions.

It has also uploaded many lecture series organised in the past. "We have also plans to introduce a virtual tour. But, it will take time, at least one month since during the lockdown there are some logistical problems," said the institution's Director Arijit Dutta Chowdhury.

Following the Indian Museum's footsteps, the Victoria Memorial Hall is now showcasing images and curated objects from its vault on Facebook, and has put up links of old lectures.

It is also planning to open up its 64-acre garden to netizens, giving them a virtual, immersive tour.

A team from Google Art and Culture has already filmed a 360-degree video of the garden from 20 locations. The tour will be accompanied with narrations in English and Bengali.

'Bengal yet to receive any Central order on exams'

Kolkata: The West Bengal government has not received any official communication from the Ministry of Human Resource Development or the UGC about framing a guideline to hold examinations that have been postponed, state Education minister Partha Chatterjee said on Sunday.

While the state universities have forwarded certain suggestions to the education department to ensure the academic future of the students was safeguarded, there has been no correspondence from the UGC or the MHRD on chalking out an action plan about ways to conduct

postponed semester examinations, he said.

"I am clearly stating the state universities will take their decisions in the interest of students based on the discussion with the higher education department in light of the present situation," Chatterjee said. **PTI**

40 MORE POSITIVE CASES

Youth among two dead patients, toll rises to 20

Hospital cook tests positive, doctor and three nurses isolated

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
KOLKATA, APRIL 26

THE STATE on Sunday recorded two more coronavirus deaths, including Assistant Director of Health Services Dr Biplab Kanti Dasgupta (58), taking the total death toll to 20.

Another patient, who had tested positive for the disease earlier in the week, also died around 7 am.

"The 34-year-old man was admitted to the hospital on April 23. He, too, had breathing problems and was put on ventilator. He died today morning," officials said.

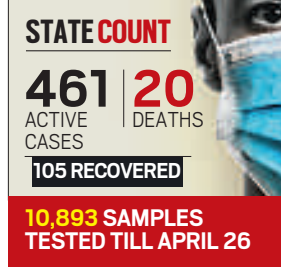
According to an evening bulletin by the state government, 40 more people were tested positive for coronavirus in the last 24 hours. With this, the total number of active cases stands at 461. Active cases refer to total positive cases minus deaths and recoveries. The number of recovered patients stayed at 105.

According to Health Department sources, the mother of a journalist was among the fresh cases. The journalist was quarantined and his employer was making a list of people who had come in his contact in the past 15 days.

On Friday, the state government had said that at least 57 coronavirus positive patients had died, of them 39 had underlying medical conditions.

With 1,003 new samples being tested in the last 24 hours, the total count reached 10,893.

According to the government bulletin, 21,288 people were under home observation/surveillance. At least 3,787 were put in



hospital isolation, of whom, 3,582 have been discharged.

Hospital cook positive, doctor and 3 nurses quarantined

A cook at Belle Vue Clinic, one of the city's top hospitals, tested positive for COVID-19, following which the medical facility shut down one of its kitchens, and placed his co-workers under home quarantine, a senior official at the facility said on Sunday.

The cook, in his early 50s, was admitted to isolation ward of the private hospital as he complained of uneasiness and exhibited symptoms of COVID-19, he said. After test results confirmed he had contracted the disease, the Belle Vue Clinic employee was immediately shifted to Beliaghata ID hospital on Saturday, the official said. A doctor and three nurses who treated him at the private facility have been put in home isolation, he said.

"The doctor and the three nurses had used protective gears while treating him, but as a precautionary measure all three have been sent on 14-day home quarantine. We have two kitchens, one of which has been shut down," he said. **WITH PTI**

Mayor's nod sought to fire medicos not attending duty

Kolkata: The Kolkata Municipal Corporation (KMC) is contemplating termination of services of medical officers who have not been turning up for duty at clinics run by the civic body during the COVID-19 crisis, a KMC official said on Sunday.

The chief municipal health officer (CMHO) of the KMC has written to Mayor Firhad Hakim, seeking approval for terminating the services of medical officers who have not been turning up for duty though the department had made arrangements for their travel or accommodation in the city.

Deputy mayor Atin Ghosh said that around 30 per cent of medical officers and paramedics are not turning up for duty at the KMC-run clinics.

There are 144 wards in the KMC and each ward has a clinic which is supposed to be attended by a doctor and paramedic staff.

On April 21, Ghosh had proposed to the Mayor to issue a "stern warning" to "such category of staff who have not risen to the occasion and have not undertaken duties". **PTI**

Central teams inspect parts of Howrah, Siliguri and Kolkata

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
KOLKATA, SILIGURI, APRIL 26

THE INTER-MINISTERIAL central teams, visiting West Bengal to take stock of situation relating to COVID-19, toured several areas of Kolkata and Siliguri on Sunday to inspect if lockdown restriction were being followed.

The team stationed in Kolkata, which is led by senior bureaucrat in the Ministry of Defence Apurba Chandra, visited Garden Reach, Ekbalpur, Khidderpore, Mominpur, Chetta and Kalighat areas in the south and southwestern parts of the city. They were escorted by sleuths of the Kolkata Police.

They went around in a convoy and did not interact with anyone, including the press. The team also inspected certain pockets of Howrah, such as Salkia and Golabari to see for themselves enforcement of the lockdown.

In Siliguri, the central team led by senior official Vineet Joshi visited Bidhan Market and some other adjoining areas, and interacted with shopkeepers and locals. The team enquired if the people were wearing masks and using sanitisers.

"It seems some people are not taking the lockdown seriously. They should," Joshi later told reporters.

Joshi's team members said they did not see any representative from the state government during the visit, but refused to make any comments on it.

There has been a war of words between the West Bengal government and the Centre over the arrival of the two central teams in the state to assess the coronavirus situation.

The teams are in West Bengal for the past couple of days to look into the state's preparedness for tackling the COVID-19 outbreak. **PTI**

LOCKDOWN LOG

UP to Shillong; Kolkata to Mumbai — two HC judges travel 2,000 km by road to take charge

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
KOLKATA, APRIL 26

WITH AIR and rail passenger services suspended due to the COVID-19-induced lockdown, two judges have embarked on a road journey, each of them covering over 2,000 km, as they gear up to take charge as chief justices of high courts in separate corners of the country.

The judges — who were elevated to the position of high court chief justices only recently — hit the road amid the nationwide shutdown to ensure trials and justice delivery system do not go off the track.

Justice Dipankar Datta, a judge at the Calcutta High Court, is taking turns with son to sit behind the steering wheel, as the family moves to Mumbai, where he will be taking over as the new Chief Justice of Bombay High Court, sources privy to the development said.

Allahabad High Court judge Justice Biswanath Somadder, who has been elevated as Chief Justice of Meghalaya High Court, is driving to Shillong via Kolkata.

Justice Somadder, who had served at the Calcutta High Court before being transferred Allahabad, set out on the journey from the north Indian city along with wife on Friday evening in an official car, the sources said.

He had a chauffeur by his side, who took charge of the

Justice Dipankar Datta, a judge at the Calcutta HC, will be taking over as the new CJ of Bombay HC, while Allahabad HC judge Justice Biswanath Somadder has been elevated as Chief Justice of Meghalaya HC

wheels from time to time. The judge reached Kolkata on Saturday afternoon, and left for Shillong in the evening, after a few hours of rest at his Salt Lake residence here.

He is scheduled to reach the Meghalaya capital on Sunday afternoon.

Justice Datta left for Mumbai from Kolkata on Saturday morning and plans to reach the country's financial capital by Monday afternoon with overnight breaks on the way.

President Ram Nath Kovind had on Thursday elevated Justice Dipankar Datta, senior judge of Calcutta High Court, as the Chief Justice of Bombay High Court, and appointed Justice Biswanath Somadder of Allahabad High Court as Chief Justice of Meghalaya High Court.

Both Justice Datta and Justice Somadder were elevated as permanent judges of the Calcutta High Court on June 22, 2006.

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No. 03 of 2020 (NT)
Dated: 27-04-2020

Sd/
Registrar (I/c)

REVISED GUIDELINES OF DEMURRAGE, WHARFAGE etc. DURING FORCE MAJEURE OF COVID-19

Central Govt. has declared, Spread of Corona Virus as pandemic and force majeure. Under this force majeure condition, to facilitate the booking of goods traffic, it has been declared that none of the charges like Demurrage, Wharfage, Stacking, Stabling, Detention and Ground Usage shall arise till 03.05.2020. But it is noticed that undue delay in loading and unloading in some goods terminals are causing interruption in further loading and smooth movement of goods traffic. Hence to serve the nation in this crucial situation, it has been decided that, if required force majeure condition may be withdrawn by giving 24 hours notice, in a particular Goods Shed and instead may extend the free time to twice the prescribed time limit. Beyond free time, charge will be levied at normal rate. All Railway customers are requested, to take all possible effort to release the Railway Rake as early as possible under observation all precautions against COVID-19. (Railway Board's circulars are available in all Goods Office and can be downloaded from www.indianrailways.gov.in)

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'Economic activity must begin in non-hotspot zones... otherwise people will die of hunger'

RAJASTHAN CHIEF Minister **ASHOK GEHLOT** speaks to **MANOJ C G** on what he is going to suggest to the Prime Minister on the video conference scheduled for Monday.



Prime Minister Narendra Modi will have a video conference with Chief Ministers on Monday to deliberate on the way ahead. What is going to be your suggestion?

There has been some modification in the lockdown, some relaxation for industries and shops etc. That is fine but more activities should begin. Because the revenue of state governments has become zero... When there is no revenue, how will states work?... There will be no money to pay salaries and pensions. You talk about workers. Workers should get wages. What about employees?... They too should get salaries. So, the requirement today is that economic activity should begin in non-hotspot zones while maintaining social distancing norms, wearing masks and other precautions. Otherwise, people will die of

hunger. I can't say how many people will die of corona but if this situation continues, people will die of hunger.

What are the other issues you are going to flag?

The main issue is testing. That will be my number one suggestion. Widespread testing is important. Testing should be scaled up in an extraordinary way. There

is a new machine, it costs around Rs 6.5 crore. It will be able to run up to 4,000 tests per day. We are going to purchase two machines from the US, one for Jodhpur and one for Jaipur. Testing capacity should be increased across the country. And for that, the Central government should come forward and not leave it to the states. The Union Health Ministry today (Sunday) held a video conference with state health secretaries and I am told it was said that the number of COVID cases could shoot up in the coming days, could touch even lakhs. So, the only solution — as Rahul Gandhi has been saying repeatedly — is testing, testing and more testing. The rapid test formula has failed. We had told ICMR it was of no use. So the only solution is RT-PCR tests. So the central government should procure such advanced machines, RNA extraction test kits, masks and PPE in a big way.

Can you elaborate on how the lockdown should be modified?

Economic activities should restart. I told the Prime Minister in previous meetings that states

are facing a financial crunch. I had demanded that the borrowing limit should be relaxed and that there should be a moratorium on payment of dues to financial institutions under RBI and other central agencies. I had told the Prime Minister that the Central government should grant an additional Rs 1 lakh crore to states to tackle the pandemic. Look at the world. All the big countries — be it the US, France, Germany or England — have announced economic packages to the tune of 12 to 15 per cent of their GDP. You must think big to restart the economy. The Rs 1.7 lakh crore package the government had announced is not even 0.6 per cent of the GDP. It is grossly inadequate. When there was an economic slowdown during the UPA time in 2009, the government had earmarked 3 per cent of the GDP. I am not an economist, but my common sense says the government should earmark at least 10 per cent of the GDP for relief and stimulus. Because the economy has collapsed because of the lockdown...

Are you hopeful that the Prime Minister will consider

your suggestions, suggestions from Opposition-ruled states?

See, I accept there is a big challenge before the Central government. But the entire Opposition and state governments are cooperating... Congress president Sonia Gandhi has written to the Prime Minister declaring the party's support. Rahul Gandhi has said he is not going to criticise but give constructive suggestions... So, the Central government should not take our suggestions as criticism. They should consider them as feedback... and it is up to them to accept the suggestions or not. But they should welcome suggestions from Opposition parties.

The Congress has been talking about stranded migrant labourers? What is your view on that?

In the absence of clear instructions from the central government, the movement of migrant labourers was unnecessarily delayed. The central government created some confusion, because of which we faced some problems, but the movement has begun.

The other thing is about the poor and the destitute — be it APL or BPL — MGNREGA workers. We have given them a package. We have transferred Rs 2,500 to each one of them. We have given pensions to 80 lakh people. We have provided them food. The central government is also doing. There is a Pradhan Mantri Gareeb Kalyan Yojana, but they should increase it manifold. What I mean to say is no one should sleep hungry. You have to create confidence in workers. That can only happen if you give a separate financial package for them. What I mean to say is that. There should be separate financial packages for the industry, MSME sector and for the poor. The central government, for instance, is allocating foodgrains under the National Food Security Act based on the 2011 Census. That data does not reflect the ground reality. In Rajasthan, some 60 lakh people are left out and my government is going to purchase foodgrains from FCI at market price. The Centre should have been giving the food grains free. Why should states purchase at market price at such a time?

Amid corona fight, govt effects major bureaucratic rejig

Health Secy gets three more months; two PMO officials get DEA, MSME charge

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
NEW DELHI, APRIL 26

IN A major reshuffle of its senior bureaucracy, the government Sunday made significant appointments of new secretaries to key ministries in the middle of the outbreak containment exercise.

Health Secretary Preeti Sudan, due to retire on April 30, was given a three-month extension, and Rural Development Secretary Rajesh Bhushan was appointed as Officer on Special Duty (OSD) in the Health Ministry in the rank of secretary. He is likely to take over from Sudan after her extended tenure is over.

Two Additional Secretaries currently in the PMO were appointed Secretaries in key ministries. Tarun Bajaj will be the new Department of Economic Affairs Secretary after the incumbent Atanu Chakraborty retires at the end of this month, and Arvind Kumar Sharma will be Secretary in the Ministry of Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises upon retirement of incumbent Arun Kumar Panda on April 30.

Both the DEA and the MSME are expected to play critical roles in the revival of the economy in the wake of the outbreak.

The Appointments Committee of the Cabinet, headed by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, issued these orders Sunday.

As many as 23 senior IAS officers have been appointed as secretaries in different central government departments as part of the reshuffle.

Amit Khare, Secretary,

Department of Higher Education, has been given additional charge as Secretary, Ministry of Information & Broadcasting. Information and Broadcasting Secretary Ravi Mittal has been moved out as Secretary, Department of Sports.

Nagendra Nath Sinha will be the new Secretary of Rural Development Department in place of Rajesh Bhushan. He is at present Secretary, the Department of Border Management in the Home Ministry. In major change in the Road Transport and Highways ministry, Aramane Giridhar, Additional Secretary in the Cabinet Secretariat, has been made its new Secretary in place of Sanjeev Ranjan, who has been placed in line to take over as Secretary, Shipping Ministry, after the retirement of incumbent Gopal Krishna on April 30.

Special Secretary of Road Transport and Highways Ministry Leena Nandan was appointed Secretary, Department of Consumer Affairs, as the current Secretary Pawan Kumar Agarwal has been appointed Special Secretary (Logistics) in the Department of Commerce.

Food and Public Distribution Secretary Ravi Kant has been moved out as the Secretary, Department of Ex-Servicemen Welfare. Senior bureaucrat Sudhanshu Panday will be the Food and Public Distribution Secretary in place of Kant. Panday is currently Additional Secretary, Department of Commerce.

FULL REPORT ON
www.indianexpress.com

Not right to fault a community over actions of some: Mohan Bhagwat

VIVEK DESHPANDE
NAGPUR, APRIL 26



Mohan Bhagwat

IN VEILED remarks on the communalisation of COVID-19 after its spread across the country was blamed on a gathering of the Tablighi Jamaat in Delhi during the lockdown, RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat Sunday said it is "not right" to fault and "keep distance" from an entire community because of the actions of some "out of fear and anger".

In a special *boudhik* (intelligence) discourse, streamed live on Facebook, Bhagwat said the needy must be helped with a feeling of "brotherhood" during the coronavirus crisis irrespective of "provocative acts" by a section of people who have attacked and misbehaved with government officials.

"There will always be some people like that... Some may have acted out of fear of being quarantined, some may have acted out of anger thinking the (lockdown) rules were meant to target them. But to apply this to an entire community and keep distance from it is not right. You must help all with goodwill because all 130 crore people are your own," he said.

"Those who resort to provocative acts generate anger and this anger generates irrational reactions. We should not hold their acts against the entire community. There are people waiting to divide the country. While we must be aware of such people, we must not hold anger or enmity against all," Bhagwat said, adding that "leaders should convey the right message to communities".

The RSS chief also called for re-calibrating developmental priorities and policies, saying the

clear message of the pandemic is adoption of swadeshi and environment-friendly traditional wisdom.

He also spoke on the lynching of sadhus in Palghar, Maharashtra: "Let's keep the war of words aside. Is it good to take the law into our hands? What should the police do? Fear and anger are not expected but are natural. But we have to work constructively and with courage to take the nation forward."

He called for resumption of activities like education, industries and markets with due precautions. "We have to maintain the discipline of social distancing and observe all precautions prescribed for containment of the disease," he said.

"We have to think about the working class. Jobs must remain. We will have to function with limited resources. Self-reliance is the message (of the pandemic). We will have to re-construct sciences and technologies as per the needs of the times (*yugamukul*). We will have to take that path of development which matches the traditional," he said.

Calling for adopting "swadeshi with quality", Bhagwat said, "We must buy things produced in the country. We shouldn't remain dependent on foreign countries."

Working 24X7, full strength, but sugar mill faces 'drastic fall in sales'

AMITAVA CHAKRABORTY
SHAMLI (UP), APRIL 26

Bajaj Hindusthan Sugar Ltd
No. of workers: 650
Usual strength: 650

OUTSIDE the rear gate of Bajaj Hindusthan Sugar Limited's mill, 17 km from Shamli, along the Delhi-Saharanpur road, stand a row of sugarcane farmers queued up as per the size of their vehicle — from the smaller tractors to the larger ones, from tempos to trucks — as a mill official goes down their ranks distributing masks. In the silence on the highway, the vehicles and the mill operations, on 24X7, are the only signs of activity on a hot Wednesday.

General Manager Lekhp Singh (59), who has been working in the sugar industry since 1982 and running this mill for two years now, says they couldn't have stopped production during the lockdown. "Restarting the mill, because of logistics and operational reasons, would have been a nightmare," Singh says.

The mill usually takes a break only for maintenance, once in 20 days.

As a result, sugar mills like Bajaj Hindusthan are the few units which haven't seen production drop, or labour numbers fall, during the month-and-a-half of lockdown. Shamli district had reported 26 coronavirus cases till April 23.

Singh says their production is on a par with before — about 9,000 quintals per day — and they have retained their entire 650 employees (400 on payroll, 250 contractual), who work in 12-hour shifts.

It helps that most of their staff are locals, who have been given passes to come to the mill. The problem is the lack of demand. "We are witnessing a drastic fall in sales," says Subhash Bahuguna, who heads the mill's finance department. "Of the 9,000 quintals we produce daily, we sold around 7,000 quintals



Sugar mills like Bajaj Hindusthan are the few units which haven't seen production drop, or labour numbers fall, during the lockdown. *Gajendra Yadav*



prior to the lockdown. But between March 21 and April 21, we sold about 2,200 quintals on an average. As a result, our godown is filling up. The shutting of restaurants and sweet shops, the fall in consumption of soft beverages, have led to the fall in demand."

Maintenance too has been an issue as this is usually done by a third party, inaccessible due to the travel restrictions.

Sajan, 22, earns Rs 8,000 a month, taking hardly a day off, he says. Now on duty 9 am-9 pm, he gets his food from home and maintains social distancing and regularly uses hand sanitisers at the mill. "It is wearing the mask for long hours that I find difficult," he says.

Saurav Kumar, 24, deployed at the machine that sews mouths of sugar bags, is a college dropout who also lives nearby, at Masai village. His face draped with a *gamchha* (towel), he complains about the heat.

With officials watching closely, General Manager Singh says they are not taking any chances.

The mill has stocked up on sanitisers, placed them across the factory, while carrying out sanitisation of the premises as well as the 51 neighbouring villages from which their workers come.

"We are also purchasing masks and distributing them among farmers for free. The temperature of every worker is checked at the gates. Even the temple located on the premises has been closed, except for the priest to do aarti."

Singh adds that they are paying full salaries to the few workers who were on leave and couldn't join once the lockdown began.

Sitting at the Shamli Ganna Committee Office in the heart of Shamli city, District Cane Officer (DCO) Vijay Bahadur Singh says they classified sugar mills as an

essential service to ensure there was no break in production. "Materials like packaging bags, sulphur etc, are imported from other states and we took steps to ensure their smooth supply. Proactive action across states ensured that the mills never ran out of supply."

According to Singh, production is normal across all the 119 sugar mills in Uttar Pradesh, including the three in Shamli.

About the lack of demand, the DCO says, "Corona kuch leke jayega, aur bahut kuch deke bhi jayega (Corona will take away some things, but also give a lot). The lockdown has helped us digitise everything. Now, leaflets are not sent across villages notifying farmers the date when they can sell their produce to mills. Everything happens on the e-ganna app and over SMS. We have suddenly become paperless."

That is hardly enough for Veer Pal Singh, senior vice president and head of Bajaj's Shamli unit, who has an office next to the mill. Once the lockdown lifts, he says, "We expect an improvement (in sales), though it will not be anything like before."

ARTIST ZARINA HASHMI DIES AT 83

'Her work was minimalist, rooted in Indian aesthetics'

VANDANA KALRA
NEW DELHI, APRIL 26

THE HUMBLE and enigmatic lines took innumerable forms in Zarina Hashmi's works — at times they appeared as political borders, on other occasions they were an exemplification of her interest in architecture, they were also jagged veins that denoted the vague and distinct memories that the artist gathered from her life experiences

and interactions with people and places across the world. Hashmi lived in numerous cities, from Aligarh to Bangkok, Paris, New York and London, and in every place she sought to create a home. The journey came to an end on April 25, when she died in London after a prolonged illness. She was at 83.

"Her work was an extension of herself. It had simplicity of lines and minimalism but was rooted in Indian aesthetics and also political," says Renu Modi,



ZARINA HASHMI
1937-2020

director of Gallery Espace in Delhi, that has represented her for over two decades.

Daughter of a professor at Aligarh Muslim University, Hashmi was 10 when the Partition took place and was witness to the subsequent communal violence. Though her family relocated to Karachi in the late 1950s, the artist by then had married and later travelled with her diplomat husband during his various postings. A graduate in mathematics with a

keen interest in architecture and part of the feminist movement in New York in the 1970s, Hashmi's art training was rather unconventional and included learnings from interactions with papermakers during her visit to Rajasthan in the 1960s, studying printmaking with Stanley William Hayter at Atelier 17 in Paris and woodblock printing at Toshi Yoshida Studio in Tokyo.

Like the places she lived in, her work too gave her refuge. If the 1997 series 'Homes I Made/A

Life in Nine Lines' featured rough floor plans of the homes she lived in, 'Home Is a Foreign Place' in 1999 was an abstract representation of her home in Aligarh.

The 2004 work 'Letters from Home' was based on unposted letters written by her sister Rani to her, and shared years later — the woodblock and metal cut prints featured maps, floorplans and Urdu text that also formed an integral part of Hashmi's practice.

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AN EXPERT EXPLAINS

What is the future of migration from Kerala?

Post COVID-19, Kerala stares at the prospect of large-scale return migration from the Gulf. Scholar who led Kerala Migration Survey looks at trends, possibilities



S IRUDAYA RAJAN

ONCE THE lockdown is lifted, Kerala will face a new challenge with the expected return of a large section of Keralites from the Middle East. This throws the spotlight on the importance of out-migration in Kerala's economy, and raises questions about its future.

Trends, then and now

Migration (both internal and international) has been the single most dynamic factor in the development of Kerala since its formation in 1956. Data available for the old Travancore-Cochin region suggests that it was characterised by a net inflow of persons until 1941. This reversed dramatically in succeeding decades with more people leaving than entering. Until 1971, most Keralites were migrating within India, mostly to emerging cities such as Delhi, Mumbai, Chennai and Bangalore. This is partly due to the demand for skilled/educated persons, which Kerala could contribute due to its high literacy rate.

However, with the opening up of the Gulf economies to foreign workforces in the 1970s

in the wake of a spike in oil prices, the tide of migration from Kerala moved decisively from internal to international. The rate of out-migration (estimated through an indirect method using Indian censuses) peaked in 1971-81, at approximately 250,000. The available data indicates that the outflow continued well into the 1980s and 1990s.

Consequently, many of the Malayalis who had left Kerala for other parts of the country in the earlier days, moved now to the Gulf. Till 1999, Kerala had only one international airport. Today, it has four, due to the importance of international migration and remittances to the economy and society at large.

Kerala Migration Survey

It was in this context that the Centre for Development Studies conducted its first Kerala Migration Survey (KMS) in 1998, co-ordinated by KC Zachariah and myself. Since then, we continue to monitor both internal and international migration, migration corridors, remittances, economic benefits and social costs. Thus far, we have completed eight rounds, the latest in 2018. Let us examine what the various surveys tell us.

The first study, in 1998, indicated that nearly 1.5 million Keralites were then living outside India, with another 750,000 former emigrants having returned. Over the years, the survey found that they live mostly on the savings, work experience, and skills brought with them from abroad. More than a million families depend on internal migrants' earn-

Year	No. of Emigrants	Inter-Survey Difference	Decrease/Increase
1998	1,361,919		
2003	1,838,478	476,559	25.9%
2008	2,193,412	354,934	16.2%
2011	2,280,543	87,131	3.8%
2013	2,400,375	206,963	8.6%
2016	2,271,725	-128,560	-5.6%
2018	2,121,887	-278,488	-13.1%

All data from Kerala Migration Survey

ings for subsistence, children's education and other economic requirements. While the educationally backward Muslims from the Thrissur-Malappuram region provide the backbone of emigration, the educationally forward Ezhawas, Nairs and Syrian Christians from the former Travancore-Cochin State form the core of internal migration.

Emigration begets return emigration. Kerala has seen widespread return migration due to external shocks on at least three occasions — Gulf War, global economic crisis and Nitaqat policy of Saudi Arabia. We can say confidently that Kerala emigrants were resilient on all three occasions. For instance, when the global crisis hit the Gulf, the state government expected large return migration but our estimates put the number around just 50,000 in 2009.

Let us examine the 2018 KMS data. There are an estimated 2.12 million emigrants from Kerala across the world, which is 149,000 less than the 2016 KMS estimate and 278,000 less than the 2013 KMS estimate (see table). Overall, the data shows a continuously decreasing rate of growth of emigration since 2008. However, it should also be noted that there was a positive growth in some years, particularly 2011 and 2013 — 87,000 more people seem to have emigrated in the 2008-11 period, and 1.2 lakh more in 2011-13.

The inter-survey growth rate since 2013 has dropped. The inter-survey differences vary from one interval to another, from an increase of 4.7 lakh during 1998-2003 to a decline of 1.4 lakh during 2016-18. It has shown positive growth for the first four periods and negative growth for the last two

periods. We can see the highest growth rate at the initial phase (1998-2003), which has been continuously decreasing (except during 2011-13), leading to a negative growth rate at the recent phase (2013-18).

The top destination is the Gulf region with 89.2 per cent of the total emigrants. The UAE has remained the favourite destination for Keralites from the beginning. About 1.89 million emigrants live in the Gulf countries. After KMS 2018, Kerala has experienced floods and we have predicted an increase in emigration because most of the remittances were invested in works related to construction of houses. By 2020, we assume the Kerala migrants in six countries (UAE, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Bahrain, Oman, Kuwait) probably reached around 20 lakh (at the most 25 lakh). Our understanding indicates that about one of four in the Gulf is a Keralite.

Emigration after COVID-19

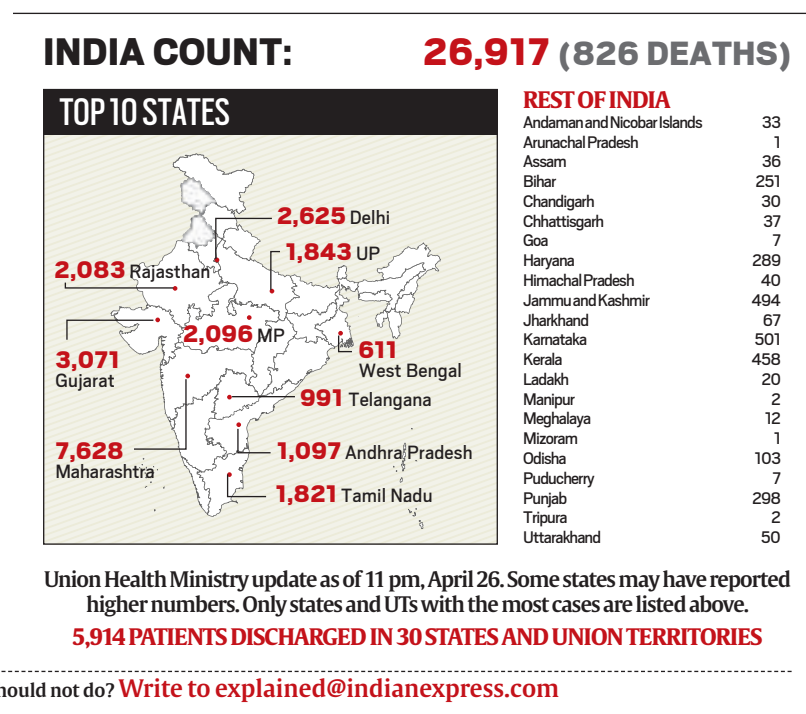
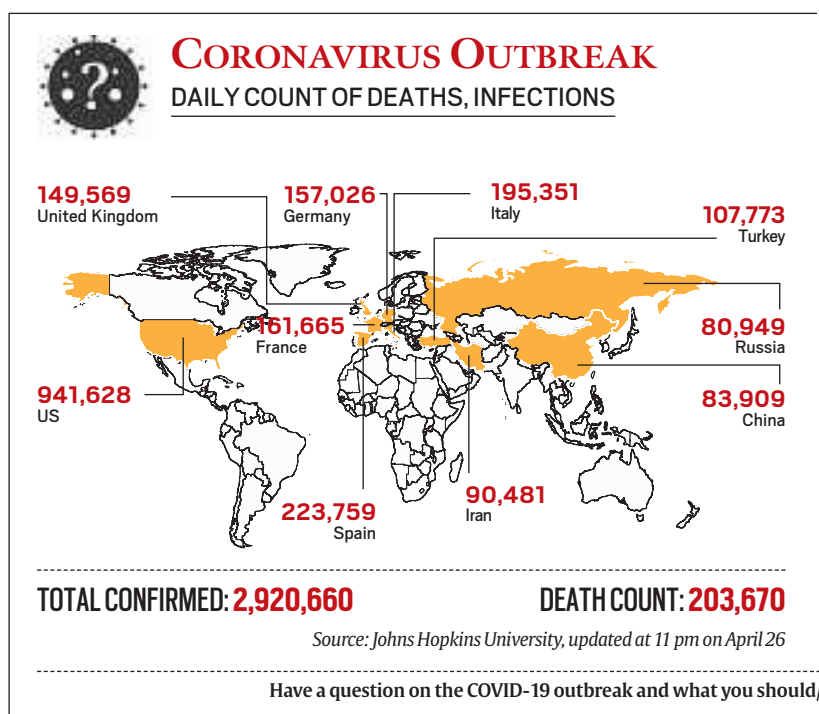
What is the future of emigration to and return emigration from the Gulf? My predictions are as follows: As of now, Kerala has 1 lakh return emigrants who could not go back due to the closure of airports in the Gulf earlier and in India later. Second, about 30,000 new emigrants could not go to the Gulf in spite of having employment visas. Third, once travel is allowed, we expect the first set of priority return emigrants — mostly dependants — to arrive in May 2020. The Gulf countries are already beginning to see the effects of the COVID crisis, with oil prices sink-

ing to an all-time low. Most sectors will likely incur heavy job losses amid changing domestic policies. Thus, before September, we expect another 1 lakh to return.

One more factor will play a major role. At any point of time, at least 10 per cent of Keralite migrants or 2 lakh are undocumented workers. Very recently, Kuwait announced amnesty allowing undocumented workers to leave the country without any fine. If other Gulf countries also grant amnesty to get rid of undocumented workers, most of them will have to return. In any case, we can expect an additional 3 lakh return migrants from the Gulf. It is a major challenge that the government has to take into consideration when deliberating over the future of migration from Kerala. However, the vital importance of migrants to Kerala's economy and society means that the government will have to take careful steps to foster international migration in a post-COVID world.

As stated in the Report of Expert Committee on Strategy for Easing Lockdown Restrictions of Government of Kerala, "A comprehensive Kerala Migration Survey should be undertaken immediately after normalcy is restored for more effective policy formulation for this category in the State."

S Irudaya Rajan is Professor at the Centre for Development Studies, Kerala. He led the Kerala Migration Survey 2018 and is a Member of the Kerala Government Expert Committee on COVID-19



Where does virus first strike? Study pinpoints two cell types in nose

KABIR FIRAQUE
NEW DELHI, APRIL 26

LAST WEEK, scientists reported that they have identified two specific types of cells in the nose as the likely initial infection points for SARS-CoV-2, the novel coronavirus that causes COVID-19 (briefly reported in *The Indian Express*, April 25). A look at how this adds to the emerging knowledge about the new virus:

Was the mechanism of infection not already known?

Yes, previous studies have shown what happens at the cellular level. The entry of the virus takes place by means of a "lock and key" effect. Like all coronaviruses, SARS-CoV-2 consists of a fatty envelope with a "spike protein" on the surface. The spike acts as the "key" to "unlock" a protein on the human cell, called ACE2, which acts as the receptor for the virus. Once inside the cell, the virus uses a second protein, called TMPRSS2, to complete its entry. TMPRSS2 has protein-splitting abilities, which allow the virus to reproduce and transmit itself inside the cell.

So, what has the new study found?

The new study has identified the specific cells where the mechanism of entry most likely comes into play when the virus begins its attack. These are the goblet and ciliated cells in the nose, researchers from the Wellcome Sanger Institute (UK), University Medical Centre Groningen, University Côte d'Azur and CNRS, Nice and their collaborators have reported in the journal *Nature Medicine*.

Goblet cells are mucus-producing cells on the surface of organs, and are found along the respiratory tract, along the intestinal tract, in the upper eyelid etc. Ciliated cells are hair-like cells, again occurring on the surface of various organs, and help sweep mucus, dust etc to the throat, where it can be swallowed.

How did the study identify these cells as the likely points of initial infection?

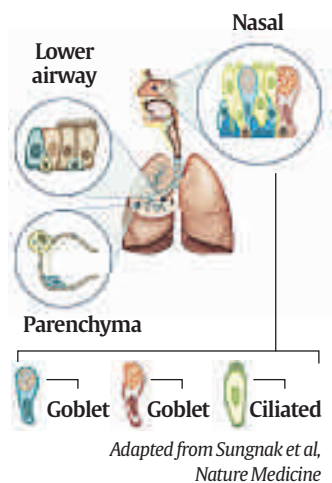
The researchers looked for areas where the two key proteins, ACE2 and TMPRSS2, express themselves most prominently. For this, they turned to the Human Cell Atlas, an international consortium that aims to create comprehensive reference maps of all human cells. They looked at multiple datasets from more than 20 different tissues of non-infected people. These included cells from the lung, nasal cavity, eye, gut, heart, kidney and liver.

And what did the data show?

Both proteins were found in multiple organs. However, ACE2 expression was generally low while TMPRSS2 was highly expressed with a broader distribution. This suggests that ACE2, rather than TMPRSS2, may be a limiting factor for viral entry at the initial infection stage, the researchers wrote in the paper. "We found that... ACE2 and TMPRSS2... are expressed in cells in different organs, including the cells on the inner lining of the nose. We then revealed that mu-

POINT OF ENTRY

Schematic illustration of major anatomical regions in the human respiratory tree. In the nose, the new study identified the goblet and ciliated cells as likely initial infection points.



cus-producing goblet cells and ciliated cells in the nose had the highest levels of both these COVID-19 virus proteins, of all cells in the airways. This makes these cells the most likely initial infection route for the virus," first author Dr Waradun Sungnak, from Wellcome Sanger Institute, said in a statement issued by the institute.

Does this rule out other entry points?

The two entry proteins were also found in cells in the cornea of the eye and in the lining of the intestine. The researchers said this suggests another possible route of infection via the eye and ear ducts, and possible oral-faecal transmission. However, they note that:

■ The two cell types in the nose, where the proteins were expressed at the highest levels, are located at a place that is highly accessible for the virus.

■ The study also found that ACE2 production in the nose cells is probably switched on at the same time as various immune genes that would be activated when the cells are fighting the infection.

■ The virus is thought to be spread through respiratory droplets produced when an infected person coughs or sneezes.

How does the knowledge help?

This is the first time that these two cell types have been pinpointed as the likely points of initial entry. The researchers believe their identification could help explain the high transmission rate of COVID-19. "This information can be used to better understand how coronavirus spreads. Knowing which exact cell types are important for virus transmission also provides a basis for developing potential treatments to reduce the spread of the virus," said Dr Sarah Teichmann, senior author from Wellcome Sanger Institute and co-chair of the Organising Committee of the Human Cell Atlas.

SIMPLY PUT QUESTION & ANSWER

How MPLAD scheme works, and how far its suspension will help COVID-19 fight

CHAKSHU ROY
NEW DELHI, APRIL 26

EARLIER THIS month, the government suspended the Member of Parliament Local Area Development (MPLAD) Scheme so that these funds would be available for its COVID-19 management efforts.

Following the Centre's announcement, UP Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath suspended the state's MLALAD scheme for a year, a move that will allow the state to spend Rs 1,500 crore on COVID-related efforts.

A look at the scheme, and the implications of the move:

What is the MPLAD Scheme?

MPLAD is a central government scheme, under which MPs can recommend development programmes involving spending of Rs 5 crore every year in their respective constituencies. MPs from both Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha, including nominated ones, can do so.

States have their version of this scheme with varying amounts per MLA. Delhi has the highest allocation under MLALAD; each MLA can recommend works for up to Rs 10 crore each year. In Punjab and Kerala, the amount is Rs 5 crore per MLA per year; in Assam, Chhattisgarh, Maharashtra and Karnataka, it is Rs 2 crore; in Uttar Pradesh, it was recently increased from Rs 2 crore to Rs 3 crore.

How much will the suspension contribute to the Centre's efforts to manage the pandemic?

Suspension of the MPLAD Scheme will make Rs 7,800 crore available to the government. For comparison, this is only 4.5% of the Rs 1.70 lakh crore relief package for the poor announced under the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana.

Opposition MPs have reacted sharply. Adhir Ranjan Choudhary, leader of the Congress Legislature Party in Lok Sabha, termed the move a gross injustice towards people's representatives. RJD MP Manoj Jha said the diversion of MPLAD funds would



The MPLAD Scheme was announced in December 2013, during a tumultuous year for the Narasimha Rao government. *Express Archive*

centralise their administration and decrease the efficiency of their disbursement.

How does the scheme work?

MPs and MLAs do not receive any money under these schemes. The government transfers it directly to the respective local authorities. The legislators can only recommend works in their constituencies based on a set of guidelines. For the MPLAD Scheme, the guidelines focus on the creation of durable community assets like roads, school buildings etc. Recommendations for non-durable assets can be made only under limited circumstances. For example, last month, the government allowed use of MPLAD funds for the purchase of personal protection equipment, coronavirus testing kits etc.

The guidelines for use of MLALAD funds differ across states. For example, Delhi MLAs can recommend the operation of fogging machines (to contain dengue mosquitoes), installation of CCTV cameras etc. After the legislators give the list of developmental works, they are executed by the district authorities as per the governments financial, technical and administrative rules.

When did the scheme start?

Prime Minister P V Narasimha Rao announced the scheme on December 23, 1993 in Lok Sabha. He mentioned that it was being started at the request of MPs across parties.

Opposition to the proposal came from CPI(M) MPs Nirmal Kantti Chatterjee and Somnath Chatterjee.

This happened during a tumultuous year for Rao's minority government. Earlier that month, Parliament was agitated that the government was trying to clip Election Commissioner T N Seshan's wings by converting the EC into a multi-member body. Months earlier, the government had survived a controversial trust vote in Lok Sabha. And in May that year, Lok Sabha witnessed the first impeachment proceedings in India's history, against High Court Judge Justice V Ramaswami. These events led some commentators to suggest that the scheme was an attempt by the minority government to appease MPs. Over the years, the scheme was adopted and adapted by state governments.

How long are the schemes supposed to continue?

The central scheme has continued uninterrupted for 27 years. It is budgeted through the government's finances and continues as long as the government is agreeable. In 2018, the Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs approved the scheme until the term of the 14th Finance Commission, that is March 31, 2020.

In the recent past, there has been one example of discontinuation of a Local Area Development scheme. Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar discontinued the state's

scheme in 2010, only to revive it before the 2014 general elections.

What has been the impact of the MPLAD scheme?

In 2018, when continuation of the scheme was approved, the government noted that "the entire population across the country stands to benefit through the creation of durable assets of locally felt needs, namely drinking water, education, public health, sanitation and roads etc, under MPLAD Scheme".

Until 2017, nearly 19 lakh projects worth Rs 45,000 crore had been sanctioned under the MPLAD Scheme. Third-party evaluators appointed by the government reported that the creation of good quality assets had a "positive impact on the local economy, social fabric and feasible environment". Further, 82% of the projects have been in rural areas and the remaining in urban/semi-urban areas.

Why has the scheme been sometimes criticised?

The criticism has been on two broad grounds. First, that it is inconsistent with the spirit of the Constitution as it co-opts legislators into executive functioning. The most vocal critic was a DMK ex-MP and a former Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee, Era Sezhiyan. He said the workload on MPs created by the scheme diverted their attention from holding the government accountable and other legislative work. The National Commission to Review the Working of the Constitution (2000) and the Second Administrative Reforms Commission, headed by Veerappa Moily (2007), recommended discontinuation of the scheme. In 2010, the Supreme Court held that the scheme was constitutional.

The second criticism stems from allegations of corruption associated with allocation of works. The Comptroller and Auditor General has on many occasions highlighted gaps in implementation.

Chakshu Roy is Head of Outreach, PRS Legislative Research



The Indian EXPRESS

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RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

OIL FALL DOWN

Oil producers, refiners and drilling services firms aren't only ones feeling the heat. But there is a ray of hope

LAST WEEK SAW a virtual bloodbath in oil, with US crude prices crashing to an unprecedented minus \$40.32 per barrel before ending at \$16.94. But it wasn't just oil. Raw sugar futures prices for May delivery in New York closed at 9.73 cents per pound, the lowest since June 9, 2008. The front-month corn contract at Chicago, too, fell to \$3.01 a bushel, a level it breached last on September 11, 2009. Crude palm oil prices in Malaysia, likewise, plunged by 7.5 per cent on April 21, while now trading nearly 31 per cent lower since the start of the year. The link with oil is obvious here: Sugarcane and corn are as much sources of food as substrates for ethanol that can be blended with petrol. Only 34 per cent of cane crushed by Brazilian mills in 2019-20 went for sugar production, the rest to make ethanol. Palm oil is used to manufacture bio-diesel. Indonesia, last year, mandated a 30 per cent mix of bio-diesel in the regular transport fuel, while India requires 10 per cent ethanol-blending in petrol.

The above diversion of "food crops" for fuel made economic sense so long as oil prices were reasonably high; both US and Brent crude ruled well above \$50 per barrel till two months ago. Oil's collapse — refineries have significantly curtailed operations, with the coronavirus-induced worldwide lockdowns leading to a plunge in road, sea and air traffic volumes — has meant that ethanol processors are shutting plants and Brazil's mills will allocate more cane for sugar. It is a matter of time before the transmission from crude to sugar, corn and palm oil also spreads to other grains and oilseeds. Low oil prices have brought down the prices of cotton and natural rubber as well, because of synthetic substitutes becoming much cheaper. Simply put, oil producers, refiners and drilling services firms aren't the only ones feeling the heat. Farmers will also suffer. Payment arrears to cane growers in Uttar Pradesh are already mounting as there's little domestic or export demand for sugar. Moreover, given weak petrol sales, oil companies are reluctant to lift ethanol from mills. And with liquor vendors shut, no offtake of potable alcohol is happening either.

The ray of hope, if any, is the fact that the demand for food should recover once hotels, restaurants, sweetmeat shops and ice-cream, beverage and snack makers start running after lockdown restrictions are lifted. Food consumption cannot be put off for too long — unlike travel, tourism, entertainment or real estate investments, which will be the last to emerge from the damage wrought by COVID-19. Indian farmers have done well to feed the nation in this hour of crisis. The prospect of global production shortfalls reasserting themselves — in rice, for instance — should open up opportunities for them to feed the world too.

FINDING THE CURE

Search for Covid vaccine must be informed by conversations between scientists, physicians, bioethicists and regulators

LAST WEEK, AT a video conference convened by the WHO, leaders from the Americas, West Asia, Europe, and Africa agreed to "speed up the development of safe and effective drugs to prevent, diagnose and treat COVID-19". India, the US, Russia, and China stayed away from the meet. Even so, the conference on April 24 showcased rare global solidarity in the four-month-long fight against the coronavirus. Hearteningly, there was also consensus that a vaccine against the virus should be seen as "a global public good" and should be "distributed in all parts of the world".

In the second week of January, Chinese scientists developed and shared a full genetic sequence of the coronavirus. This has spurred more than 100 vaccine development projects in different parts of the world, including India. Last week, clinical trials were approved in the UK, China, and Germany. These are remarkable developments, given that the virus was unknown in most parts of the world four months ago. However, vaccines require several rounds of clinical trials and regulatory scrutiny before they are made available to the public. They have to be first tested in laboratories, then on animals, before being tested on a small group of people. Safety protocols in most parts of the world demand the number of people exposed to the vaccine in clinical trials is gradually increased before a vaccine is approved. But the virulence of the COVID-19 pandemic has led to calls for expediting timelines, even deviations from protocols. For example, a paper published in the Journal of Infectious Diseases on March 31 suggested "a human challenge study with fewer participants than a conventional trial". It recommended injecting volunteers with a potential vaccine and then exposing them to the virus. The paper's authors, prominent bioethicists, acknowledged the ethical questions such trials would raise. However, they argued that "with proper trial design and processes, the net risk for participants can remain low". The US Food and Drug Administration has said that "it will be flexible about regulatory procedures". There need to be more conversations amongst scientists, physicians, bioethicists and regulators before an accelerated paradigm to approve an anti-COVID-19 vaccine is put in place.

There are also concerns about how much the vaccine will cost, and whether pharma companies will put humanitarian concerns before profits. During the H1N1 pandemic in 2009, there was criticism that the wealthier countries had cornered the lion's share of the vaccines. It is reassuring, therefore, that the leaders attending last week's video conference made a commitment to "ensure equal access to vaccines".

FREEZE FRAME

E P UNNY



The safety of healers

Protections for healthcare professionals must stay beyond pandemic



S K SARIN

DOCTORS, NURSES AND healthcare professionals will remember the day the Union government passed an ordinance ensuring that acts of violence against doctors and other medical staff will be a cognisable and non-bailable offence. Imprisonment from six months to seven years and a penalty from Rs 50,000 to Rs 7 lakh can be sanctioned by the courts. Such punishments will serve as a deterrent to unruly patients and their relatives, if found guilty.

This ordinance has been precipitated by the precarious situation and the dire need for flawless health services during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is the result of the combined and timely efforts of several organisations and the leadership of the Indian Medical Association (IMA). Needless to say, any disruption of the health services would not only endanger the lives of hundreds of patients but could also raise questions on the ability of the government to rise to the occasion. Indeed, the prime minister, home minister and health minister have earned rich praise from the medical fraternity as they moved fast enough to assuage the medics who were hurt by the recent insults heaped on them by the society, including stopping of burying the bodies of their deceased colleagues.

There are, however, some major caveats to be kept in mind. The ordinance has been brought as an amendment to the Epidemic Diseases Act, 1897, and hence, may become infructuous after the pandemic is declared over. We do hope that the pandemic dies down at the earliest, but want an assurance that the ordinance will remain in force.

In the times of COVID, healthcare professionals (HCPs) are reaching out to do tests, diagnose and treat the infected and sick, despite the risks. The society, due to obvious fears, often insults these dedicated warriors. Even in the past, nearly every doctor has faced verbal abuse and nasty cryptic re-

marks, more so in India than other parts of the world. The common causes in government hospitals are the delay in appointments, queues for tests and several painful days before the treatment begins. In the private set-up, there are also the costs and limitless demands of paying patients. Doctors often face pressure tactics, accusations of incorrect diagnosis and wrong prescriptions (these could be due to differences in assessment and judgement).

All this could be related to deteriorating civic sense and poor implementation of laws. There is also the possibility of poor communication by the doctors. However, physical abuse and violence against doctors at their place of work is unacceptable. Vandalising of personal and hospital assets has increased exponentially recently. Fears of personal safety, assault on their family and false litigations, intimidates doctors, making them too scared to take proper decisions. They often end up in doing either more tests or referring such patients to another centre.

While hundreds of acts of violence against doctors have been reported every year for the past two decades, many more are never brought to light. The youngest professionals — resident doctors on emergency duty — end up seeing dozens of patients in one night. Few appreciate this. It is possible that in some instances, there may be a delay in arriving at a proper diagnosis and initiating treatment due to the complexities of the disease per se. But this is never intentional.

While we salute the acknowledgment by the government of the unprecedented challenges faced by doctors, it needs to be seen how the doctors or their lawyer will be able to prove that the accused had a guilty intent (mens rea) and was performing an illegal act (actus reus). The enactment of a law is unlikely to curb the near-criminal acts by pa-

tients or their attendants. The public at large needs to appreciate that what they are doing is illegal and inhuman. There is a need to educate society that healthcare professionals genuinely do their best. They have no malice, nor do they intend to do any harm. The public has also to be educated on the complexities of decision-making in complex cases.

Whenever the doctors ask for protection or raise their voice against the violence, their demands are hardly given attention — the fraternity is reminded of the nobleness of the medical profession and the Hippocratic Oath. The remedial alters, the courts, direct them not to protest and return to work. To be beaten again! Court after court, judgment after judgment, has given large compensations to the plaintiffs for alleged medical negligence.

Will the courts change their outlook in the wake of the new ordinance? If these very warriors are ostracised while returning from work or are thrown out of their houses, bruised by a crowd pelting stones, will the courts and judges rise to the occasion and take suo-moto action? Will they be able to deliver timely and exemplary punishments and safeguard the dignity and lives of HCPs? Healthcare professionals need a sensitive and accountable judicial system and this ordinance should be given more punch and wider applicability in the times to come.

The new ordinance has to be weighed in light of these facts and will only achieve the desired results if the society at large appreciates the challenges and pains faced by HCPs. Alas, what was the genuine due of the doctors and HCPs — the tribute and the respect — has come through the law. So be it. Let the hands not waver while delivering judgments.

The writer is director, Institute of Liver and Biliary Sciences, Delhi. He heads the expert panel constituted by Delhi government to tackle coronavirus. Views are personal

I TWEET THEREFORE I'M HEARD

India's digital divide makes the state distant from those who need it most



VRINDA SHUKLA

IT WAS about 9:30 pm. The phone rang. A well-meaning lady was calling to inform that Sujoy Raj and eight others, all migrant workers from West Bengal, didn't have any rations left. She had seen the social media coverage of the police's food-aid initiative and found my number on the district website. She expected the police to help. An hour later, the phone rang again. This time a small uncertain voice spoke at the other end. It was Sujoy, warily telling me that he had been called by the police to his local chowki. I explained to him that all chowkis had been supplied with rations to help those in need. A brief silence followed. He hesitatingly asked, "Mujhe maareng toh nahin?" A lump rose in my throat at the tragedy of distorted perceptions.

An aware citizen, armed with correct and complete information, had felt it well within her right to assert for the need of others. But a starving man thought of raising the issue of his desperate hunger as a crime. Sujoy did receive rations that night. I hope that we managed to redeem ourselves a little in the eyes of Sujoy and his companions and that the police chowki became a less forbidding place in their mental map.

The difference between the confidence of Sujoy and his self-assured advocate could clearly be attributed to an information divide, fuelled most acutely by the digital divide, particularly in the present scenario.

The digital medium has emerged as a powerful passport for millions of citizens to register their expectations from the state and make their voices heard. The lockdown is



ONE OF
800
MILLION
A VOICE, UNDER 35

India's deep digital divide is in ever-sharper focus with most physical means of carrying out business and governance rendered dysfunctional. For instance, most emergency permits being issued by various government authorities are e-passes, which must be applied for and received digitally. As such, the exigencies of the unlettered and the digitally deprived must, by default, languish behind the great divide.

witnessing the informed and digitally connected take to Twitter and other platforms to express their concerns about everything — from the urgent requirement of a permit for the last rites of a loved one to the pressing need for a specific baby food customised to their child's allergies. The authorities respond with alacrity, for social and digital media have evolved as potent barometers to determine the popularity and effectiveness of the state, pinning down the responsibility and accountability of government agencies and gauging their levels of sensitivity and promptness. This is a remarkable empowerment of India's citizens and the rise of a new proximate relationship between the state and its digitally connected people.

But what about those with no Twitter handles or a platform to highlight a particularly aggravating personal situation? India's deep digital divide is in ever-sharper focus with most physical means of carrying out business and governance rendered dysfunctional. For instance, most emergency permits being issued by various government authorities are e-passes, which must be applied for and received digitally. As such, the exigencies of the unlettered and the digitally deprived must, by default, languish behind the great divide. We cannot underestimate the disproportionate burden of the lockdown, both psychological and material, being borne by them.

The way to lighten this burden is through an aggressive bridging of the digital divide. A national network of decentralised virtual

call centres could be operated in local languages and dialects for the purpose of accessing e-governance. Digitally empowered citizens, remotely serving as "digital volunteers" could be equipped with the relevant helpline numbers, website addresses and URLs for accessing public services. The digitally disconnected could seek help through a simple phone call, which would be queued in the system. A digital volunteer could then connect with the caller in her language, understand her requirement, and initiate the necessary procedures.

Similarly, leveraging India's vast mobile phone penetration, an artificial intelligence-powered Interactive Voice Response (IVR) mechanism of placing automated calls could be harnessed for proactive dissemination of area-based vital information. Such digital inclusion is essential for the reassurance of India's teeming millions that the state is in their service and won't let them languish without an anchor. In this digital age, there is no other way to make every citizen feel like a valued stakeholder than to find a way of connecting them to the power of the digital ethos.

As educated empowered citizens, we must take it upon ourselves to serve as ambassadors of the digitally disconnected. So let us share our awareness. Share our access. Share our Twitter handle for those on the wrong side of the digital divide.

The writer, 31, is an IPS officer serving as DCP in Noida, Uttar Pradesh. Views are personal

APRIL 27, 1980, FORTY YEARS AGO



GANGA DIALOGUE
THE JOINT RIVERS Commission of India and Bangladesh, currently in session in Delhi, is about to throw up its hands in despair over failure to resolve the differences between the two countries on the sharing of the Ganga waters. Rather than going into the pros and cons of the positions of the two countries, the Commission was busy discussing whether the issue of augmentation of the Ganga waters should be remitted back to the two governments for resolution. The Indian delegation virtually made it clear to the Bangladesh delegation that the commission was not in a position to bridge the gulf separating the positions of the two governments and as such it was better the two governments themselves took up the task.

ASSAM BANDH
EVEN AS THE five-day picketing of government offices by the agitating organisations ended in Assam, associations of state and central government employees announced that they would abstain from work on Monday. The All Assam Employees Parishad decided to "boycott offices" in protest against the suspension of employees for taking part in the "current peaceful movement" on the foreign national issue. The central and semi-central employees parishad has also decided to call upon its members to stay away from work for a day in response to the state government employees' appeal.

US ON IRAN MISSION
WITH UNANSWERED QUESTIONS and fu-

ture intentions left dangling, the Jimmy Carter administration is reacting with unusual calm to the failure of its dramatic effort to free the US hostages in Teheran. Despite the loss of eight American military men, whose bodies were left behind in blazing aircraft wreckage on an Iranian salt desert, the response of President Jimmy Carter and key associates is in no way reminiscent of past moments of national dejection at daring plans gone awry. Instead of exhibiting the never-again attitude shown by the then President John Kennedy after the abortive 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba by US-backed Cuban exiles, few officials in Washington seem willing to say that another Iran rescue mission might not go forward in the near future.

7 THE IDEAS PAGE

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

In a time of crisis art becomes more central to our lives

— THE GUARDIAN

Humanitarian emergency

The ongoing crisis calls for universal delivery of food and cash transfers by the state. It can be done

JAYATI GHOSH,
PRABHAT PATNAIK
AND HARSH MANDER

THE IMMEDIATE NEED for universal food and cash delivery is by now obvious and urgent. Across the country, there are reports of people — migrant workers, local workers, peasants, pastoralists, fisherpeople, vendors, ragpickers, and the destitute — facing extreme hardship, even starvation, because their livelihoods have been extinguished by the lockdown. These have created further an unprecedented humanitarian crisis, as millions of households with depleted savings have no way to access food and other basic necessities over the coming weeks. The threat of infection from COVID-19 makes even harder their coping mechanisms.

In these dire circumstances, it is essential for the state to directly provide the basic means of survival to anyone who needs it. This must be in both cash and kind. Food access is the most important, but because of the closure of economic activity and the absence of any livelihood opportunity, this must be combined with cash transfers to tide over this period and the immediate aftermath. Food transfers must be provided for at least six months, and cash transfers for at least three months, though these can be extended depending on the period of lockdown.

Because of the severity of the crisis and the high probability of widespread hunger and descent into poverty, these transfers must be universal, made available to every person who needs them, without relying on exclusionary criteria, existing lists or biometric identification.

What will this cost? Consider first free universal provisioning of 10 kg of grain (wheat or rice) per person per month. This is likely to be availed of by at most around 80 per cent of the population. With an estimated population of 1.3 billion, providing this for six months would require 62.4 million tonnes of grain. This is a maximal estimate — the actual requirement would be lower. The FCI is currently holding 77 million tonnes of food-grain stocks, compared to buffer stock norms of 24 million tonnes. It is expected to procure another 40 million tonnes from the current rabi harvest. It could easily release and allow the free distribution of foodgrain of 62.5 million tonnes and still have foodgrain stocks of 54.5 million tonnes, if the expected rabi procurement targets are met.

Furthermore, it is costly for the FCI to store this grain. The current costs of storage are estimated to be Rs 5.60 per kilogramme per year or Rs 2.80 for six months. This means that by releasing 62.4 million tonnes to feed the hungry of India over the next six months, the FCI would actually be saving Rs 17,472 crore, assuming that these idle stocks would have persisted. But even if these were sold, the costs are the revenue that would have been earned. This is difficult to estimate; but if we just blow up Nirmala Sitharaman's estimate, mentioned in her package, for six months and for 80 per cent of the population then we get a (maximal) figure of Rs 1,17,000 crore.

In addition to cereals, it is important to provide some pulses, cooking oil, salt, etc., but these would add relatively small amounts to the total expenditure, and some expenditure on pulses has already been in-



C R Sasikumar

cluded by using Sitharaman's estimate. This amount of physical grain could also be utilised in community kitchens and other efforts to provide cooked food to those (such as migrant workers and the homeless) who are not in a position to cook for themselves.

In addition, we propose a cash transfer of Rs 7,000 per month for three months to every household, assuming again that 80 per cent of households would receive this. With five persons per household, this expenditure would be Rs 4,36,800 crore. The two transfers together amount to Rs 5,53,800 crore, or around 2.9 per cent of currently estimated GDP.

This is not a forbidding sum, especially considering that India has no wealth tax, a potentially rich source of revenue. Needless to say, a great part of the responsibility to make these resources available vests with the Union government. But whatever taxes are introduced in a supplementary budget that has become unavoidable, the expenditure incurred has to be financed immediately through a fiscal deficit.

Given the massive deflationary pressures and a complete collapse of economic activity, there is a strong case for financing the additional public expenditure through deficit financing or borrowing directly from the RBI. This is required both for coping with the pandemic and for softening the blow of the lockdown.

The question then arises of how universal delivery of these food and cash transfers is to be ensured. Existing lists are inadequate for the purpose because they significantly underestimate and exclude those who should be beneficiaries. For example, as pointed out by Dreze, Khera and Mungikar, at least 100 million people are excluded from access to food under the National Food Security Act based on the 2011 Census. The most effective way of dealing with the food emergency is to provide food delivery at doorsteps or neighbourhood collection points to anyone who asks for it, with a simple marker such as the indelible ink used during elections to serve as the indicator of receipt.

For cash transfers, the matter is more complicated. In rural India, MGNREGA job cards and pensions cover most households and allow bank payments. The urban poor include migrants, contract and casual workers mostly in small and medium enterprises, daily wagers, domestic workers, self-em-

In these dire circumstances, it is essential for the state to directly provide the basic means of survival to anyone who needs it. This must be in both cash and kind. Food access is the most important, but because of the closure of economic activity and the absence of any livelihood opportunity, this must be combined with cash transfers to tide over this period and the immediate aftermath. Food transfers must be provided for at least six months, and cash transfers for at least three months, though these can be extended depending on the period of lockdown.

ployed persons like street vendors, sex workers and ragpickers, and the destitute including homeless people. But there is no comprehensive record of the urban poor because the state has instituted no effective mechanisms to secure labour rights or social security rights to most urban workers. The urban poor build and service the city, surviving without rights and a hostile or indifferent state. The legally-mandated registration of inter-state migrants and construction workers in practice excludes most because their employers with the connivance of the state don't wish to be bound to secure their rights.

The humanitarian emergency created by the pandemic and lockdown entails universal cash transfers again to every adult who presents herself to designated officials in decentralised offices. For those who have accessible bank accounts, the funds can be credited to these accounts. For others, the Odisha system, whereby pensions are disbursed as cash in hand at pre-specified times, maybe a useful model to follow. This also can be adopted with indelible ink as proof of receipt.

The income transfers must quickly give way to an expanded rural employment guarantee scheme, and a new urban employment programme, which includes caregiving and building water supply, sanitation and shelter for the urban poor. Private hospitals also need to be nationalised at least for the duration of the pandemic.

All these measures no doubt rely on local administration being honest and accountable, as well as on community participation; but then this pandemic and its fallout cannot be controlled without these. The health emergency was not created by India's working people. They should not be forced to carry the burdens of the pandemic and the sudden loss of food and livelihood, unsupported by an uncaring state. These require a bold resolve, by central and state governments, to literally reach the last person, rural or urban, with the food and cash they require to survive with dignity.

Ghosh is professor of economics, JNU, Patnaik is former professor of economics, JNU, and Mander is a human rights worker and writer

In our homes and hearts

Social distancing is antithetical to celebration of life, and festivals. But in these times, it is the only way



M VENKAIAH NAIDU

WE ARE TODAY in the midst of a grave health crisis. The coronavirus continues to spread across the world. Hardly anyone is untouched by its extraordinary transmissibility. We, in India, like in other parts of the world, are trying to break this alarmingly speedy transmission through a national lockdown, social distancing and personal hygiene measures. Adherence to these new norms of social behaviour has yielded results. The number of cases and fatalities has shown a decline wherever there has been greater compliance. Conversely, there has been a surge wherever there was laxity and violation of prescribed preventive measures. The large congregation in Nizamuddin in Delhi brought this stark unpleasant reality to our attention. However, we should understand that this merely illustrates what can happen if we ignore the warning and slip into an apathetic or denial mode. We should read no more into this event and not let latent prejudices surface, resulting in totally unwarranted finger-pointing at any community. The entire community should not be blamed or viewed as the culprit because of the negligence of a few groups and individuals.

This is a massive disruption in our lives. Our socio-cultural life is enriched by festivals and cultural events in which we mingle with each other and celebrate together. Social distancing is antithetical to the spirit of bonhomie and the collective celebration of life. But, we have opted for this path because it is the only known path of containing the spread of this deadly virus. We have to put up with the milder disruptions in social, religious and cultural life to avoid a major catastrophe. We simply have to live with the situation where we cannot visit places of worship on festival days. We have to avoid congregations and social gatherings for some time to come. It is painful, but there is hardly any alternative.

The nature of this disease and the precautions required to be taken must be widely understood. Citizens must not be afraid or complacent. The severely affected should be given medical help. They should not be stigmatised and ostracised. Randeep Gulera, director of AIIMS, has said in a recent interview, that COVID-19 can be dealt with better if we encourage persons with symptoms to get tested rather than view them with suspicion and stigma. People, irrespective of social standing and religious beliefs, should seek medical attention.

Another facet of stigmatisation is the disturbing trend of sporadic attacks on medical personnel, especially those who are fighting on the frontlines and braving the tremendous risk of getting infected. There are quite a few instances of doctors, nurses, paramedical staff and other social workers being stigmatised and denied housing facilities and viewed with deep suspicion as carriers of the virus. This is truly unfortunate and de-

plorable, especially in a country that has traditionally had a highly reverential attitude towards doctors. Quite rightly, the government has made attacks against health professionals a cognisable, non-bailable offence, carrying imprisonment terms upto seven years. Hopefully, this will curb further violence against health professionals. Ignorance and prejudice, fear and suspicion, should be overcome through authentic and timely flow of information and new societal norms based on our ancient values must be restored.

I am happy that people at large are adhering to the guidelines. All religious leaders are moving away from dogmatic positions and are providing the guidance required to regulate the modes of worship in light of the present circumstances. Stigma and dogma are impediments that need to be removed. A more flexible, adaptable attitude to modify our social behaviour will enable us to effectively continue our way. Almost all religious institutions have now been closed and no religious congregations are being allowed, not only in India but in most of the affected countries around the world. We can win only if we act with wisdom, alacrity and a dispassionate understanding of the preventive actions. These actions cut across religious and regional boundaries. No community has any immunity against this pandemic.

I am happy that we are getting used to a subdued celebration of festivals like Rama Navami, Baisakhi, Easter and Ramzan. Let the spirit of religious sanctity and piety be preserved in our hearts and homes this year. After all, what we pray for is a world that is healthy for us and for entire humanity. As we begin the sacred month of Ramadan, I do hope that we all stay at home and pray for our families and fellow beings and hope that we overcome this challenge soon.

There are a number of challenges that the pandemic has forced us to confront. We are collectively finding answers to these ever evolving challenges. The Central and state governments as well as local bodies are re-viewing the situation and taking well-considered decisions to mitigate the hardship. However, much more needs to be done.

We have apparently some more distance to cover. While the average daily growth in cases has been falling since the lockdown was imposed, we still have a rather high growth rate of around 8 per cent. We need to be vigilant. We must analyse the data in an objective manner and strategise further actions. We need to reinforce measures that cut off the transmission. We also need to step up humanitarian and welfare measures.

This is a moment for us to get our act together. We must distance ourselves physically to arrest the viral transmission. But, we need to come closer as human beings to render help where and when required. We must rediscover the true meaning of central religious tenets. I am hopeful that we shall stand united with an understanding of the real challenge ahead of us and have the collective commitment to act with wisdom to overcome the challenge. Let not differences among political parties come in the way of fighting this pandemic at any level.

Solidarity and alacrity at all levels can help us better navigate the current multi-dimensional crisis.

The writer is Vice President of India

A Marshall Plan for East India

The region will require heavy investment to tide over the post-COVID loss of livelihoods



FROM PLATE TO PLOUGH
BY ASHOK GULATI

A FAMOUS LINE of Tiger in Walt Disney Productions' *Winnie the Pooh* is, "Life is not about how fast you run or how high you climb, but how well you bounce". In the context of today's economy, under siege because of the coronavirus pandemic, what matters is not how big a country's GDP is or how fast it has been growing; the real challenge is how best and how quickly a country can bounce back to a growth rate of 7-8 per cent per annum.

The IMF's projections for GDP growth for this year seem to be either in the negative or below 2 per cent for almost all major countries of the G-20 group. India could do a little better compared to the other BRICS nations, but its growth will most likely be below 2 per cent. This, of course, is under an optimistic scenario. Many experts reckon that India could also go into negative GDP growth this year, if it does not reboot the economy properly and in time.

The Centre and the Reserve Bank of India are trying to remove all roadblocks so that factories and farms can resume op-

erations, albeit in a regulated manner that ensures that the virus is contained. The focus is largely on the supply side — how to ease restrictions and how to increase liquidity in the system for resuming production. My assessment is that it may not take too long as the real problem is the collapse in demand. And that demand may not pick up easily as the virus is likely to stay with us for quite some time. We could have lockdowns again if there is a surge in infection. This will surely limit our travel and restrict our shopping for non-essentials. However, there is one demand that can easily revive — that of food.

The NSSO survey of consumption expenditures for 2011-12 revealed that about 45 per cent of the total expenditure of an Indian household is on food. For the poor, the NSSO reckoned, this figure was about 60 per cent. We do not have information about the consumption patterns in 2020, but my guess is that about 35-40 per cent of the expenditure of an Indian household is on food and for a poor household, this figure is around 50 per cent. Herein, lies the scope to reboot the economy.

We have seen the problems of migrant labourers during the lockdown. The sudden announcement of the nationwide lockdown gave them no time to go back to their families. They lost their jobs and incomes, and having spent whatever little savings they had, these workers have been reduced to penury. The Centre and states, despite their best efforts, have not managed to address the problem of hunger of these workers. Even civil society has not managed to

bridge the gap. The migrant labourers may well have lost their trust in the state, and once the lockdown is lifted, most of them are likely to rush back to their families in villages — as if freed from jail. And, it could be some time before they are back in the cities — that is, if they return at all. So, farms and factories, especially the MSMEs in the relatively developed states of western, southern and north-western India are likely to face labour shortages for many months, perhaps years. This could lead to more mechanisation of farms and factories in these states. In Punjab, for example, most of the wheat harvesting is already done by combined harvesters. Now even paddy harvesting could be done by mechanised harvesters.

However, eastern Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand, West Bengal, and Odisha, from where much of the migrant labour comes, will face a double challenge. Their agriculture, with tiny farm holdings is already saddled with a large labour force — this comprises 45 to 55 per cent of the total labour force of these states. Non-farm income from wages and salaries, through migrant labour, was an important source of income for households in these states. This is now severely hit. In all probability, the per capita rural incomes of these states could shrink, at least in the short run. This could lead to poverty and increase hunger and malnutrition. How does one then reboot the economy and also address hunger and malnutrition?

A special investment package — like the Marshall Plan of USA in 1948 — for the east-

ern belt of India to build better infrastructure, agri-markets and godowns, rural housing, primary health centres, schools and enhances people's skills will go a long way to revive the economy and augment the incomes of the migrant workers. Rising incomes will generate more demand for food as well as manufactured products, giving a fillip to the growth engines of agriculture as well as the MSME sector. Building better supply chains for food directly from farm-to-fork, led by the private sector, will enhance the export competitiveness of agriculture. It will also ensure a higher share of farmers in the consumers' rupee. Such broad-based development in a relatively underdeveloped region of the country will lay the foundations of a long-term, demand-driven, growth of industry in India.

The all India relief package of Rs 1.7 lakh crore announced by the central government earlier, which is about 0.8 per cent of the country's GDP, is too small to reboot the economy. If India has to bounce back quickly, it needs a much bigger relief cum stimulus package — certainly not below 5 per cent of GDP. And, it should focus more on the eastern belt, where the issue is that of survival. Else, the country could do even more badly on the indicators of poverty, hunger, malnutrition, infant mortality and well-being. India could get derailed from its course of attaining the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030.

The writer is Infosys Chair professor for Agriculture at ICRIR

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

VIOLENCE AND VIRUS

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Securing the fighters' (IE, April 24). This prime minister was applauded by the people for expressing his gratitude to the medical fraternity and other essential service providers. But when we see violence against doctors and police personnel, it seems Narendra Modi's noble gesture was wasted on some people. The latest outrage is the violence that occurred after a Chennai doctor died of COVID-19 when a mob attacked the ambulance in which his body was kept and prevented its burial. This incident has underscored the misconception that the contagion may spread if the victim is buried or cremated in the neighbourhood.

Mona Singh, via email

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Securing the fighters' (IE, April 24). There have been cases of skirmishes between the public on the one hand and police personnel, health workers and doctors on the other. The guilty persons, undoubtedly, must be punished. But, at the same time, we must guard against medical malpractice.

LR Gupta, Lucknow

INJECT MONEY

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'How to find money in crisis' (IE April 24). The government may consider rationalising its expenditure and optimally allocating resources in the capital head

LETTER OF THE WEEK AWARD

To encourage quality reader intervention, The Indian Express offers the Letter of the Week award. The letter adjudged the best for the week is published every Saturday. Letters may be e-mailed to editpage@expressindia.com or sent to The Indian Express, B-1/B, Sector 10, Noida-UP 201301.

Sudip Kumar Dey, Kolkata

DIGITAL MONOPOLY

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'A big deal' (IE, April 24). The arrangement between Jio and Facebook could move the telecom sector towards a duopoly or even a monopoly.

Viraj Gavhane, Beed

PANDEMIC WATCH



The Dutch teens in the port of Harlingen on Sunday. AP/PTI

THE NETHERLANDS
Unable to fly, teens sail home across Atlantic

Harlingen: A group of 25 Dutch high school students arrived back in the Netherlands in a two-mast schooner on Sunday, after airline restrictions left them with little choice but to help sail it home from the Caribbean. The group, aged 14-17, had been halfway through a six week sail-study programme in the region on board the *Wylde Swan*. But by mid-March, it appeared they could no longer fly home from Cuba as planned. Organisers decided the ship, including 12 experienced sailors and three teachers, would have to sail back across the Atlantic, a 7,000 km trip that took them five weeks. REUTERS

BANGLADESH
31 ISKCON members test positive

Dhaka: The ISKCON temple here in the Bangladesh capital has reported 31 coronavirus cases, following which the authorities locked down the building to prevent the spread of the virus. "As many as 31 members of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) ashram located in Swamibag area have tested positive for the novel coronavirus," Gendaria police station Officer-in-Charge (OC) Saju Miah was quoted as saying by the *Dhaka Tribune*. PTI

SOUTH KOREA
Only 10 new coronavirus cases reported

Seoul: South Korea has confirmed 10 more cases of the coronavirus over the past 24 hours, a continuation of the country's slowing caseload. The additional cases reported Sunday marks the ninth day in a row that South Korea's daily increase came below 20. The state-run Korea Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said the additionally reported cases brought the country's total to 10,728 with 242 deaths. It said 8,717 patients have recovered and been released from quarantine. AP

Global death toll tops 200,000 as some virus lockdowns eased

ASSOCIATED PRESS
ATLANTA, APRIL 26

AS THE global death toll from the coronavirus surpassed 200,000, countries took cautious steps toward easing lockdowns imposed amid the pandemic, but fears of a surge in infections made even some outbreak-wounded businesses reluctant to reopen.

The worldwide death toll was over 202,000, according to a count by John Hopkins University from government figures on Saturday. The actual death toll is believed to be far higher.

Underscoring the unknowns about the virus, the World Health Organization said "there is currently no evidence" that people who have recovered from COVID-19 cannot fall sick again.

Some countries extended or tightened restrictions, confirming a pattern of caution.

Sri Lanka had partially lifted a month-long daytime curfew in more than two thirds of the country. But it reimposed a 24-hour lockdown countrywide until Monday after a surge of 46 new infections, its highest daily increase.

Norway extended until at least September 1 its ban on events with more than 500 participants.

Belgium sketched out plans for a progressive lockdown relaxation starting May 4 with the resumption of nonessential treatment in hospitals and the reopening of textile and sewing shops to make face masks.

In Italy, where restrictions also will be eased May 4, authorities warned against abandoning social distancing practices as millions return to work. Free masks will be distributed to nursing homes, police, public officials and transportation workers. Workers painted blue circles on Rome's subway platforms to remind people to keep their distance when commuters return.

The country continues to have Europe's highest death toll, with 26,384. The 415 deaths registered in the 24-hour period that ended Saturday evening was the lowest toll since Italy registered 345 on March 17, but only five fewer than Friday.

In France, the government prepared to ease one of Europe's strictest lockdowns from May 11. The health minister detailed plans to scale up testing to help contain any new flare-ups.

Testing shortages also are a problem in Brazil, Latin America's largest nation, which is veering closer to becoming a pandemic hot spot.

Officials in Rio de Janeiro and four other major cities warned that their hospital systems are on the verge of collapse or already overwhelmed. In Manaus, the biggest city in the Amazon, officials said they have been forced to dig mass graves in a cemetery.

A survey from The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research found Americans overwhelmingly support stay-at-home measures and other efforts to prevent the spread of the virus.



Families walk along a boulevard in Barcelona, Spain on Sunday. The Spanish government on Sunday allowed children under the age of 14 years to take walks with a parent for up to one hour and within 1 km from home, even as the country reported its lowest daily death toll in five weeks with 288 patients succumbing to the virus. AP

Italy reports 260 deaths — its lowest daily toll since March 14

REUTERS
MILAN, APRIL 26

DEATHS FROM the COVID-19 epidemic in Italy rose by 260 on Sunday, the smallest daily tally since March 14, the Civil Protection Agency said. The number of new infections was the lowest since April 20 at 2,324 from 2,357 on Saturday.

Sunday's death toll was sharply down from 415 on

Saturday, to mark the third daily fall in succession.

The total of fatalities since the outbreak came to light on February 21 now stands at 26,644, the agency said, the second highest in the world after that of the United States.

The number of confirmed cases was 197,675, the third highest global tally behind those of the United States and Spain.

People registered as currently carrying the illness rose to

106,103 from 105,847 on Saturday.

There were 2,009 people in intensive care on Sunday against 2,102 on Saturday, maintaining a long-running decline. Of those originally infected, 64,928 were declared recovered against 63,120 a day earlier.

The agency said 1.187 million people had been tested for the virus against 1.148 million the day before, out of a population of around 60 million.

Boris Johnson set to return to work today

ASSOCIATED PRESS
LONDON, APRIL 26

BRITISH PRIME Minister Boris Johnson is returning to work after recovering from a coronavirus infection that put him in intensive care, with his government facing growing criticism over the deaths and disruption the virus has caused.

Johnson's office said he would be back at his desk in 10 Downing Street on Monday, two weeks after he was released from a London hospital. Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab, who has been standing in for the prime minister, said Sunday that Johnson was "raring to go".

Britain has recorded more than 20,000 deaths among people hospitalized with COVID-19, the fifth country in the world to reach that total.

Johnson, 55, spent a week at

St. Thomas' Hospital, including three nights in intensive care. After he was released on April 12, he recorded a video message thanking staff at the hospital for saving his life.

Johnson has not been seen in public since, as he recovered at Chequers, the prime minister's country retreat outside London.

Opposition politicians say Britain's toll could have been lower if Johnson's Conservative government had imposed a nationwide lockdown sooner.

"Decisions need to be taken quicker and communication with the public needs to be clearer," opposition Labour Party leader Keir Starmer said in a letter to Johnson.

"The British public have made great sacrifices to make the lockdown work," he wrote. "They deserve to be part of an adult conversation about what comes next."



Larry the cat at 10 Downing Street, the British Prime Minister's official residence and office, on Sunday. Reuters

US calls on feuding Afghan leaders to set aside disputes, focus on virus

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
ISLAMABAD, APRIL 26

THE US peace envoy to Afghanistan on Sunday called on the country's feuding leaders to set their differences aside to combat the coronavirus pandemic and advance a stalled peace agreement signed with the Taliban earlier this year.

"The well-being of the Afghan people and the country itself depend on all parties devoting their full energies to fighting the COVID-19 pandemic, the shared enemy of all," Zalmay Khalilzad tweeted early Sunday.

He said Afghan President Ashraf Ghani and his rival Abdullah Abdullah, who each declared himself the victor in September's election, should "put the interest of the country ahead of their own" during the holy month of Ramadan.

He urged the government and the Taliban to carry out a prisoner exchange that was part of the US-Taliban peace agreement signed in February. The agreement had called for the release of 5,000 Taliban prisoners and 1,000 government personnel held by the insurgents.

To date, Ghani has released 550 detainees based on age, vulnerability to the virus and time served. The Taliban have not said if those are among the prisoners referred to in the agreement.



A group of protesters called 'Open Texas' rally outside the City Hall in Frisco, demanding that businesses, places of work and religious services be reopened in the US state. Reuters

Trump says briefings not worth his time after disinfectant gaffe

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
WASHINGTON, APRIL 26

US PRESIDENT Donald Trump tweeted that his daily coronavirus briefings were not worth his time, two days after sparking a furore by suggesting patients might be injected with disinfectant to kill an infection.

He appeared to confirm media reports that he was considering halting the briefings out of frustration with questions about his handling of the COVID-19 pandemic.

"What is the purpose of having White House News Conferences when the

Lamestream Media asks nothing but hostile questions, & then refuses to report the truth or facts accurately," Trump wrote.

"They get record ratings, & the American people get nothing but Fake News. Not worth his time & effort!" On Thursday the US leader stunned viewers by saying doctors might treat people infected with the coronavirus by shining ultraviolet light inside their bodies, or with injections of household disinfectant.

"Then I see the disinfectant, where it knocks (the virus) out in a minute. One minute. And is there a way we can do something like that, by injection inside or almost a cleaning? Because

you see it gets in the lungs and it does a tremendous number on the lungs," he said.

After a strong rebuff of his suggestion by experts and disinfectant manufacturers, Trump Friday claimed he was speaking "sarcastically". But he limited that day's briefing to just 19 minutes, and did not take any questions from reporters. On Saturday, after 50 briefings over two months, the White House did not hold one at all.

Trump has used the briefings to occupy television screens and promote his administration's policies, fend off critics and attack political rivals — from opposition Democrats to China to the US media.

PAKISTAN

Medical body: Mosques becoming major source of virus transmission

SAJJAD HUSSAIN
ISLAMABAD, APRIL 26

Pakistan's top Islamic medical body has warned that mosques are becoming a major source of transmission for the novel coronavirus and urged people to pray at home during Ramadan, as the COVID-19 cases in the country rose to 13,105 on Sunday.

"Mosques are becoming a major source of virus transmission," Pakistan Islamic Medical Association (PIMA) president Dr Iftikhar Burney said on Saturday.

Talking to reporters, Burney said that the infected cases have surged rapidly during the past week.

"Around 6,000 cases for coronavirus surfaced in a month, but the same has doubled in the last six days," he said, warning that the infection would further go up in the coming months of May and June.

He said the number of patients in the intensive care units (ICUs) of the public hospitals is increasing at a shocking rate. "Most of the hospitals in the country are housing more coronavirus patients that those suffering from other diseases," he told reporters.

His remarks comes days after Pakistan's top doctors warned of "significant mayhem" and "fatal outcomes" if mosques continue to remain open and urged the government to review

its decision to allow congregational prayers during the month of Ramadan amid the deadly coronavirus outbreak.

The Pakistan government early this month succumbed to pressure from the hardline clerics and allowed conditional congregational prayers in mosques during Ramadan.

However, the 20-point agreement signed by the leading clerics with President Arif Alvi on restricting access to mosques during Ramadan was not being followed completely.

Alvi has written a letter to the Imams of mosques urging them to ask worshippers above the age of 50 to pray at home. He pointed out that the point number six of the standard operating procedures (SOPs) set in the agreement said that persons over the age of 50 should avoid offering prayers at the mosque.

Alvi also visited mosques in Rawalpindi to review arrangements made by the administration of mosques to contain the spread of the virus, he tweeted.

Advisor on Health Dr Zafar Mirza also took to Twitter and again urged the "citizens to demonstrate responsibility & avoid congregations during Ramadan to protect themselves from COVID-19".

However, the government was still reluctant to close down the mosques due to fear of backlash by the hardline clerics. PTI

No more hospitalised coronavirus patients in Wuhan: China

THE NEW YORK TIMES
NEW YORK, APRIL 26

WUHAN, THE original epicenter of the pandemic in China, now has no coronavirus patients in its hospitals, a government official said on Sunday.

The city, an industrial metropolis of 11 million, was the first to experience total lockdown and road bans. Officials reported 46,452 total infections and 3,869 deaths from Wuhan in a tally published Sunday, though critics believe the actual figures to be higher.

Once debilitated by the virus, Wuhan has been showing signs of recovery and each milestone has been celebrated.

On Friday, health officials said that only one patient had a severe case of the virus in Wuhan. Officials said that as of Saturday the city still had 12 coronavirus cases, but no new infections.

"As our next step, we will carry out the demands of the central government in continuing to guard against transmissions from the outside and rebounds from within," Mi Feng, the spokesman for China's National Health Commission, said on Sunday.

China on Sunday reported 11 new coronavirus cases in the mainland for the previous day. The latest official tally recorded a total of 82,827 confirmed cases, including 4,632 deaths.

OTHER TOP GLOBAL STORIES

Nepal ex-PM, 4 MPs accuse Oli's associates of abducting party leader

YUBARAJ GHIMIRE
KATHMANDU, APRIL 26

A FORMER Nepal Prime Minister and a group of parliamentarians on Sunday demanded that three associates of current PM K P Sharma Oli be tried for the abduction of their party leader.

Baburam Bhattarai and four parliamentarians of the Samajbadi Party, Nepal (SPN) have lodged a case, alleging that Mahesh Basnet and Kishan Shrestha — MPs of the ruling Communist Party of Nepal (CPN) — as well as former police chief



Nepal PM KP Sharma Oli

Yadav from the hotel Saturday.

The case has been filed at a time when dissidents within the ruling CPN have been lobbying for a meeting of the standing committee of the party to find a replacement for Oli at the earliest.

"We are of the opinion that the ruling party and the government effectively and we must collectively find a way out" Raghujhi Pant, a member of the standing committee, told *The Indian Express*. Around two-thirds of the 45-member committee, which has five non-voting members, are said to be opposed to Oli.

Succession question: who could replace Kim?

SANGMICHA
LONDON, APRIL 26

NORTH KOREA has never announced who would follow leader Kim Jong Un in the event he is incapacitated, and with no details known about his young children, analysts say his sister and loyalists could form a regency until a successor is old enough to take over.

South Korean and Chinese officials have publicly cast doubt on reports that Kim was gravely ill following a cardiovascular procedure, after his absence from a key state anniversary event on April 15 triggered speculation about his health.

The following are key figures in the North Korean leadership.

KIM YO JONG

Kim's younger sister has been the most visible presence around the leader in the past two years, serving formally as a vice director of the ruling Workers' Party's powerful Central Committee but unofficially as her brother's chief of staff.

The leader's sister, believed to be 31, has a firm control of key party functions, setting herself to be the main source of power behind a collective leadership.

PARTY ELDERS

Choe Ryong Hae rose to be North Korea's nominal head of

state last year as president of the Presidium of the Supreme People's Assembly. This capped decades of service with the party for the ruling Kim family.

Choe and Pak Pong Ju, a fellow politburo member who oversaw the North's push to introduce more free-market functions to revive its economy, are likely to be the figureheads leading a collective leadership, analysts say.

ESTRANGED BROTHERS, AUNT

Kim Jong Chol is the leader's older brother but has not been part of the country's leadership, instead leading a quiet life playing music, according to Thae Yong Ho, North Korea's former

deputy ambassador in London, who defected to the South.

Kim Kyong Hui was once a powerful figure in the leadership circle when her brother Kim Jong Il ruled the country. But she has not been seen since her husband, Jang Song Thaek, was executed in 2013 by Kim Jong Un.

FOURTH GENERATION

Kim Jong Un is believed to have three children with Ri Sol Ju, according to the South's National Intelligence Service.

The oldest is a 10-year-old son, meaning any of the three would need the assistance of relatives or political guardians if they were to become a fourth-generation hereditary leader. REUTERS

S Arabia ends death penalty for minors

Dubai: Saudi Arabia's King Salman has ordered an end to the death penalty for crimes committed by minors, according to a statement Sunday by a top official.

The decision comes on the heels of another ordering judges to end the practice of flogging, and bringing one of the kingdom's most controversial forms of public punishment to a close.

King Salman's son and heir, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, is seen as the force behind the kingdom's loosening of restrictions and its pivot away from ultraconservative interpretations of Wahhabism. AP

9 ECONOMY

HOWEVER, FOR FY20, TOTAL PREMIUM INCOME RISES TO ₹2,58,896 CRORE

Amid lockdown, life insurers see 32% decline in new premium income in March

GEORGE MATHEW
MUMBAI, APRIL 26

LIFE INSURANCE companies have reported a 32 per cent decline in new premium income in the month of March, as the business was practically shut for crucial parts of the month in the wake of the lockdown imposed by the government to tackle coronavirus. With the lockdown continuing in April, insurers have now started focussing on online business.

The overall premium income (new business) of 24 players in the segment fell to Rs 25,409 crore this March from Rs 37,459 crore a year ago, as per data released by the Life Insurance Council.

Life Insurance Corporation (LIC), the largest player in the business, witnessed a 31.1 per cent fall in the premium income to Rs 17,066 crore in March from Rs 24,776 crore in the same month last year. HDFC Life Insurance's

EXPLAINED

Focus now to be online biz

AS COVID-19-RELATED disruptions, especially the lockdown, are expected to continue in the months ahead, insurers are looking for ways to overcome the hurdles to their business. One of the approaches is encouraging customers to various product categories online.

premium income declined from Rs 2,551 crore to Rs 2,060 crore during the month, while that of

ICICI Prudential Life fell to Rs 983 crore from Rs 1,451 crore.

However, for the full fiscal 2019-20, total premium income (new business) of the industry rose to Rs 2,58,896 crore from Rs 2,14,672 crore last financial year. LIC's premium income increased to Rs 1,77,977 crore in 2019-20 from Rs 1,42,191 crore in FY19.

"March, which typically is the key month for insurers, turned out to be tougher as the world went into lockdown mode. This impacted the industry growth, as it also got busy with realigning to the new normal. Life insurance is a long term investment and we continue to encourage customers to stay invested in their policies and prepare slowly for their life goals, as the environment changes around us," said Tarun Chugh, MD & CEO, Bajaj Allianz Life Insurance.

Insurers expect COVID-19-related disruptions to continue for the next quarter, with an increase in demand for protection prod-

ucts over the next few months providing some support.

Two significant changes are currently underway. "Face-to-face advisory, until recently, was the preferred mode of communication and customers were reluctant to buy products other than protection plans online. Now, with physical proximity posing a challenge, digital has become way of life. Customers have been compelled to experiment with online platforms," said Anup Seth, chief retail officer, Edelweiss Tokio Life Insurance.

He further said, "Keeping pace with this, insurers are now looking to ramp up efforts in digitising advisory to encourage customers to buy other product categories such as health, investment and savings, online."

"We are already seeing signs of increased customer interest in insurance as a category, with a 30 per cent jump in March in online new business logins from Febru-

ary. The online channel accounts for nearly 12 per cent of total business. During the year, we were also making efforts to scale up digital onboarding. Post-lockdown, we are at 100 per cent digital onboarding now and are focused on retaining this level," Seth added.

"The interest level in searching online has certainly gone up as people have more time and they are constantly on their phone. However, this is yet to convert into a substantial channel for garnering new business," said Roopam Asthana, chief executive officer & whole time director, Liberty General Insurance.

Online transactions for renewal with online payments have certainly gone up substantially as the option of paying by cash or cheque is not available today.

"The real test will be to see how much of this behaviour sticks once the lockdown is lifted and people are able to travel and meet," Asthana said.

PREPARED BY A GROUP OF 50 YOUNG IRS OFFICIALS

Report by IRS officers seeks tax hikes for tackling pandemic, Finmin says 'irresponsible act'

ENS ECONOMIC BUREAU
NEW DELHI, APRIL 26

A HIKE in income tax rate to 40 per cent for those earning an annual income of over Rs 1 crore for a limited time period, the levy of a COVID-19 cess of 4 per cent on taxable income over Rs 10 lakh, a re-introduction of wealth tax for individuals with net wealth of Rs 5 crore are some of the suggestions included in a report titled 'Fiscal Options & Response to COVID-19 Epidemic' prepared by Indian Revenue Services (IRS) officials.

Later in day, Finance Ministry officials claimed the report by "some IRS officials" was "ill-conceived", and its circulation to the media through the IRS Association Twitter handle and website was "an irresponsible act of few officers" who will be asked to explain their "misconduct".

This was followed up with an official statement by the Central Board of Direct Taxes (CBDT) stating that it never asked the Association to prepare such a report and "necessary inquiry" would be conducted.

Among other measures, the report suggested bringing back inheritance tax to reduce concentration of wealth, widen tax base and enhance revenue. The report has been prepared by a group of 50 young IRS officials, with the senior-most official in the group being from the 2014 batch.

"Most high-income earners still have the luxury of working from home, and the wealthy can fall back upon their wealth to cope with the temporary shock. In view of several European economists, taxing the wealthy would be the most "progressive fiscal tool", as wealth is far more concentrated than income and consumption," the report said,

REPORT WAS 'ILL-CONCEIVED'

■ Among other measures, the 'Fiscal Options & Response to COVID-19 Epidemic' report suggested bringing back inheritance tax to reduce concentration of wealth, widen tax base and enhance revenue

■ Finance Ministry officials claimed the report by "some IRS officials" was "ill-conceived", and its circulation to the media through the IRS Association Twitter handle and website was "an irresponsible act of few officers"

The report also proposed measures for providing relief to taxpayers to boost consumption, including deferring tax payment for those who have lost jobs, allowing additional deduction from taxable income under Section 80C for interest payment on house or automobile purchase.

For MSMEs, the report suggested that cash transaction limit be restored to Rs 20,000 from Rs 10,000 currently. Tax audits for businesses below Rs 10 crore turnover be exempted for the ongoing financial year from the current threshold of Rs 1 crore, it said. The report also called for rationalisation of advance tax schedule to mandate a payment of only 25 per cent of total taxes till September 2020 without payment of interest. At present, 45 per cent advance tax is required to be deposited by September 15.

The IRS Association said the CBDT had sought inputs from field formations across the country on economic revival. It sent the report to CBDT "for consideration", the IRS officers' body said, adding that it proposes to submit its report to the Finance Minister also. Later, in a tweet, it said the report "does not purport to represent the official views of the entire IRS, or the IT Dept."

Finance Ministry sources said it is prima facie an act of indiscipline and violation of conduct rules which specifically prohibit officers to go to the media with their personal views on official matters without taking prior permission.

"No permission was sought by the officers before going public with their personal views and suggestions on official matters, which is a violation of extant Conduct Rules. Necessary inquiry is being initiated in this matter," the official statement by CBDT said.

adding that the 40 per cent rate could be for a limited period and its proceeds can be utilised for specific projects.

Calling the "corona economy" as "largely a digital/online/e-commerce economy", it also proposed that equalisation levy, or 'Google tax', should be raised by 1 per cent to 7 per cent for ad services and 3 per cent from 2 per cent for e-commerce to raise revenue from online services which have seen increased consumption during the pandemic.

It also said a 4 per cent cess on income above Rs 10 lakh per annum would help mobilise Rs 15,000-18,000 crore. Gross tax revenue is targeted to increase by 12 per cent to Rs 24.2 lakh crore for the current 2020-21 fiscal, but direct tax revenues will be impacted due to slowdown in economy coupled with impact of COVID-19, it added.

BRIEFLY

Union Bank to lower stake in IndiaFirst Life

New Delhi: Union Bank of India, which received 30 per cent stake in insurance joint venture IndiaFirst Life Insurance by virtue of the mega bank consolidation exercise of the government, plans to pare its holding to less than 10 per cent, MD and CEO Rajkiran Rai G said. **PTI**

China eases export curbs on some products

Beijing: China is dropping a requirement that a number of key virus care products get domestic regulatory approval before export, as long as they are approved in the importing countries, the commerce ministry said on Saturday. China had been stipulating such extra approval at home since the end of March after several European countries complained that Chinese-made test kits were inaccurate, in effect hampering many firms' efforts to supply global efforts against the coronavirus pandemic. The new ruling applies to products such as coronavirus tests, medical masks, protective suits, infrared thermometers and ventilators. Products with overseas approval or registration, after relevant verification by a trade group authorized by the commerce ministry, will be allowed for export, Li Xinqian, an official at China's commerce ministry, said on Sunday. **REUTERS**

Oil reserves get a leg-up since March on falling crude prices, yet FY20 import bill could shrink

ANUPAM CHATTERJEE
NEW DELHI, APRIL 26

INDIA HAS ramped up its strategic oil reserves since mid-March in view of the slump in crude prices and hopes to fill it to the brim by May-end. Yet, the country's oil import bill in FY20 could be just a little over \$100 billion, much lower than \$111.9 billion reported in FY19.

Against the projected \$111.3 billion (233 million tonne) for FY20, India imported just \$95.5 billion (207 million tonne) of crude oil in April-February of the fiscal, which was even 7.2 per cent lower than in the year-ago period

The country's oil import bill in FY20 could be just a little over \$100 billion, much lower than \$111.9 billion reported in FY19

(6.6 per cent lower in rupee term).

Though the March import data have not been officially released yet, according to global oil market research agency Refinitiv, India imported 20.3 MT of crude in the month — the highest monthly import volume since October 2019. Purchases continued at a brisk pace in April too. The monthly average imports in April-February FY20 was 18.8 MT. Refinitiv said Indian "refiners

were among the first to cash in on the low-price environment", and were "among the first to pick up the extra Middle Eastern (West Asian) barrels".

India's crude import bill may decline by 57 per cent to \$43 billion in FY21 if the Indian basket price remains subdued at around \$25 a barrel through the current fiscal year, in what could give a big relief to the country's current account. The price of the Indian

crude oil basket, which stood at an average of \$64 a barrel in January, is now around \$20.

Indian basket has fallen 39 per cent month-on-month in March to \$33.36 a barrel. Even though currently there is very low demand for petroleum products owing to the lockdown to contain the coronavirus outbreak, Indian refiners have picked up more than usual quantities of crude from global markets, apparently to fill up the storage caverns.

Meanwhile, domestic consumption of petroleum products in FY20 remained flat at 213.7 MT as sales of transportation fuels plummeted in March amid the country-wide lockdown. **FE**

'Movement of raw material, workers hurdles in resuming ops'

Supply chain movement, permits for enterprises and passes for workers are key hurdles for industry to restart operations, a Confederation of Indian Industry survey said



15%: Respondents who said movement of inputs and finished goods is timely

39%: Respondents who are experiencing delays movement of inputs and finished goods

23%: Enterprises which said inputs are not available to them at all

46%
Surveyed enterprises, in sectors allowed to function, that said that permits are either not provided or delayed

>40%
Surveyed enterprises, in sectors that are currently functioning, that received permits smoothly

SUGGESTIONS TO FACILITATE RESTART OF ECONOMIC ACTIVITIES:

- Businesses be allowed to function without requirement of permits and only through intimation to local authorities in non-containment zones
- Workers be permitted to commute on basis of a letter issued by employer organisation, with the facility to travel on their own vehicles

42%
Respondents who said passes for employees for movement are

delayed or not available

66%
Enterprises that said transportation of employees between workplace and home is an issue

<10%
Enterprises where employee strength is more than half

58%
Enterprises where employee strength is below 25 per cent

Source: CII/PTI

CBIC clears ₹10.7K-cr of GST, customs duty refunds in 16 days

PRESSTRUST OF INDIA
NEW DELHI, APRIL 26

THE CENTRAL Board of Indirect Taxes (CBIC) has cleared over Rs 10,700 crore worth refunds in Goods and Services Tax and customs duty between April 8 and 23.

In the 'Special Refund and Drawback Disposal Drive', the CBIC officers have cleared over 1.07 lakh GST and IGST refund claims worth Rs 9,818.12 crore.

Over 1.86 lakh customs and duty drawback refund was processed totalling Rs 915.56 crore, the CBIC said in a tweet. "CBIC is committed to help GST Taxpayers/Exim Trade during #COVID19. Expeditious sanction of refunds during Special Refund Drive provide relief to trade, especially MSMEs," it said.

The Finance Ministry had on April 8 said that to provide relief during COVID-19, it has been decided to issue all pending GST and custom refunds which would benefit around 1 lakh business entities, including MSMEs.

The CBIC had earlier asked its field officers to avoid asking for physical submission of documents from entities who are claiming GST and customs refunds and instead use official email for all communication. It had said the decision to process pending refund claims has been taken with a view to provide immediate relief to taxpayers in these difficult times even though the GST Law provides 15 days for issuing acknowledgement or deficiency memo and total 60 days for disposing off refund claims without any liability to pay interest.

India's holding of US govt securities hits record high

PRESSTRUST OF INDIA
NEW DELHI, APRIL 26

Continuing to increase its exposure, India's holding of US government securities jumped by over \$13 billion in a month to record high of \$177.5 billion at the end of February.

In the last one year since February 2019, the overall holding of India has jumped by a staggering \$33.2 billion.

Latest data from the United States Treasury Department showed that the amount of securities owned by India has also gone up by the maximum quantum in a span of one month, at a time when the country slowly increasing the level since November last year when it stood at \$159.2 billion.

FROM PAGE ONE Pressure on MFs: Finmin takes note of Franklin, in talks with SEBI and RBI

window to ease the redemption pressure.

The finance ministry and SEBI did not respond to queries sent by *The Indian Express*. Sources in the MF industry indicated that the Reserve Bank may have to consider direct purchases of non-government securities.

It could be either through a dedicated liquidity window or through the creation of a special purpose vehicle to house some of these non-debt securities which have become illiquid in the near term, but could command full value at redemption.

When the IL&FS fiasco hit the financial sector two years ago, the central bank had opposed a Finance Ministry proposal to open a special liquidity window for NBFCs.

During the 2008 global financial crisis though, the RBI had an-

nounced a 14-day special repo facility to provide liquidity for the non-banking financial sector.

This time around, the challenges are more systemic and can have wider ramifications, a mutual fund industry veteran who is interacting with regulators said. The liquidity issue is affecting not just the mutual funds, but also many NBFCs.

The RBI's approach of persuading banks to subscribe to these non-government debt papers does not seem to be working. "Central banks across the world are doing asset purchases to support the financial sector," the industry veteran said.

Last week, banks largely ignored the Rs 25,000-crore targeted long term repo operations (T-LTRO) conducted by the central bank, indicating their reluctance to bail out troubled NBFCs

and micro-finance institutions (MFIs). Of the Rs 25,000 crore RBI put on the T-LTRO window Thursday, banks took only Rs 12,850 crore (three-year tenor). The RBI offers T-LTRO funds at the repo rate of 4.4 per cent.

Mutual fund sources said there are indications of redemption pressure in the debt segment. Last week, the net asset values (NAVs) of three BOI AXA debt schemes fell up to 50 per cent after the fund house said it would mark down its exposure in select debt securities in its portfolio.

Franklin Templeton's fund of funds (FoFs) schemes, which invest in other mutual fund schemes lost up to 25 per cent in NAV. These FoFs have exposure to Franklin Templeton's six credit schemes which were wound up due to heavy redemption pressure.

US economy expected to bounce back later this summer: Mnuchin

LALIT K JHA
WASHINGTON, APRIL 26

US TREASURY Secretary Steven Mnuchin said on Sunday that the American economy hit hard by the COVID-19 pandemic is expected to bounce back later this summer as States begin to open up their businesses in May and June. "As we begin to reopen the economy in May and June, you're going to see the economy really bounce back in July, August, September," Mnuchin told *Fox News* in an interview.

He said the Trump Administration has put together an unprecedented amount of fiscal relief into the economy. "You're seeing trillions of dollars that's making its way into the economy and I think this is going to have a significant impact," he said.

As a result of the coronavirus pandemic, which has claimed more than 54,000 American lives in the last two months and

16% joblessness possible, says Trump adviser

Washington: The shuttering of the US economy due to the pandemic is a shock of historic proportions that likely will push the national unemployment rate to 16 per cent or higher this month and require more stimulus to ensure a strong rebound, a White House economic adviser said on Sunday.

"It's a really grave situation," President Donald Trump's adviser Kevin Hassett told the ABC program 'This Week'. **REUTERS**

infected over nine lakh others, the US economy has come to a standstill.

Over 95 per cent of the country's 330 million population are under stay at home order. **PTI**

'Prolonged lockdown may push millions into margins of subsistence'

PRESSTRUST OF INDIA
HYDERABAD, APRIL 26

A PROLONGED lockdown may possibly push million of Indians into the "margins of subsistence", former RBI Governor Duvvuri Subbarao said on Sunday while expecting a 'V' curved recovery once the COVID-19 crisis ends and the turnaround in India to be faster than some economies.

He was participating in a webinar "History repeats - but differently - Lessons for the post Corona World", organised by the Manthan Foundation here, in which former Deputy Governor of RBI Usha Thorat took part.

"Because most analysts believe that this year India will actually have negative growth or growth will contract. We must remember that even ahead of the crisis two months ago our growth slowed. Now it has completely stopped.

"Last year growth was five per cent. Just imagine, five per cent growth last year and we are going to negative or zero growth this year, a decline of five per cent



During a webinar, former RBI Governor Duvvuri Subbarao said he expects India's turnaround to be faster than some economies. **File**

growth," he said.

"It is true that India is going to perform in this crisis better than most other countries. But that is no consolation... Because we are a very poor country and if the crisis persists and if the lockdown is not lifted soon enough, it is quite possible that millions of people will be pushed into the margins of subsistence," he said when asked about his views on the present situation.

Subbarao said that as predicted by analysts, India will have a V shaped recovery which is far better than most of the other countries.

"And why do we expect a 'V' shaped recovery? Because unlike in a cyclone or in an earthquake, this is not a natural disaster constraint. No capital has been destroyed. Factories are standing. Our shops are still standing. Our people are ready to work as soon as the lockdown is lifted. So it is quite possible the recovery will be V shaped and while we have a V shaped recovery, I think India has a better chance than most of the countries," he opined.

According to him, India's recovery was faster than many other countries after the 2008 global financial crisis.

Usha Thorat said pumping more liquidity into the system alone cannot work and banks and non-banking finance companies (NBFC) will need credit guarantee or enhancement to start lending. She also said that states need more support during the crisis and streamlining of non-merit subsidies was required.

Games before the restart

Premier League wants to get the show back on road but there's a lot to ponder before a ball is kicked

SHAMIK CHAKRABARTY
KOLKATA, APRIL 26

ON FRIDAY, when the Dutch Football Association voided its season, there was speculation that it might set the template for other European leagues to follow. Close on its heels, however, news came from England that the Premier League is considering a mid-June return. Maybe, the Premier League has a little too much money riding on it to make its 2019-20 season null and void, notwithstanding a coronavirus death toll in excess of 20,000 in the UK.

According to reports, Premier League clubs discussed season resumption on the June 13-14 weekend after Uefa wrote to all football associations in Europe to finish their respective domestic seasons by July 31. The governing body of European football reportedly wants to keep August free for its own competitions - Champions League and Europa League. Of course, the matches will have to be played behind closed doors and likely at a few select venues. But is a mid-June restart realistically possible?

NHS nod needed

A report in *The Guardian* says, "While any resumption is being modelled on matches occurring behind closed doors, guiding the decision-making is the overriding principle that the National Health Service's ability to treat those with Covid-19 should not be compromised and that it has to be at ease with the top flight restarting."

A safe return of English top-flight football largely depends on NHS's testing capacity. Mass testing of players, coaching staff, officials, security personnel and reporters has to be made mandatory for every match. And in that case, the NHS, already overloaded with Covid-19 patients, probably will have to set up a separate unit only for football. UK's 4 million NHS staff has been working overtime. So the bottom line is that the Premier League's return, to a great extent, hinges on the NHS's go-ahead.

Boris is game

According to reports, UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson has been briefed about the plans on restarting the Premier League, with matches taking place behind closed doors. *The Sun* claims that Johnson sees resumption of



If the government clears the resumption of the Premier League, clubs will need at least two weeks of training to make their players match-ready. Reuters

live sport as a morale-booster for the nation. The UK is in the middle of an extended lockdown and the government will review it on May 7. But before that, proposals have been laid out for resumption of other sports as well. *The Times* has reported that a cross-sport group is working with the government with an eye on a return to action.

The Covid-19 situation is evolving and much will depend on how things pan out in the next couple of weeks. If the government clears the resumption of the Premier League, clubs will need at least two weeks of training to make their players match-ready. Arsenal are expected to return to training next week, but group training will not be permitted.

A club spokesperson said: "Players will be permitted access to our London Colney training grounds next week. Access will be limited, carefully managed and social distancing will be maintained at all times. All

Colney buildings remain closed. Players will travel alone, do their individual workout and return home."

Different dynamics

Going back to the Dutch Football Association's decision to void the season, it came in the wake of the Dutch Prime Minister's decision to ban all sporting events until September due to the pandemic. Ajax missed out on the league title, while RKC Waalwijk avoided the drop because there was no promotion or relegation. European qualification was decided on the existing table. Earlier this month, the Belgian Pro League cancelled the rest of its season, declaring Club Brugge champions.

The Premier League, however, has a different dynamic. If the season is voided, clubs collectively will suffer a revenue loss of £1.2 billion. Also, the broadcasters pay the Premier

League a shade over £3 billion per season for the ongoing 2019-2022 cycle. If the season is made null and void, the Premier League might have to pay back broadcasters £762 million.

The 'red axis'

Some Premier League club, West Ham United for example, are in favour of voiding the season. The 'Big Six', though - Manchester United, Liverpool, Arsenal, Chelsea, Manchester City and Tottenham Hotspur - want to finish the season. To be precise, however, it's the 'red axis' - United, Liverpool and Arsenal - that exercises enormous clout in the running of English football.

United and Liverpool are bitter rivals on the pitch. Their fans fight on the streets and terraces. The equation, however, is a bit different in the boardroom. With nine games remaining, Liverpool are just two wins away from securing the title and the general perception, that the United hierarchy will try to put up roadblocks, is misplaced.

United, Liverpool and Arsenal - the English football royalty - look after each others' interests (administratively) and keep the nouveau riche like City out of the cosy club. Not many moons ago, City chief executive Ferran Soriano learnt it the hard way, when the 'red axis' allegedly exercised its influence to deny him a place on the European high table. More recently, City reportedly discovered that Liverpool had been part of a group of clubs working behind the scenes to try and prevent a stay on the Manchester side's two-year European competition ban. Arsenal, too, were allegedly part of the group. That the Premier League's 'red axis' wants to finish the season is a reason why the authorities are walking the extra mile to restart football.

EFL appears iffy

Contrary to the Premier League, the English Football League (EFL) doesn't seem to be in a hurry to resume the Championship, League One and League Two, as it sticks to its safety-first approach. An EFL statement read: "Clearly, before any return to football can take place, suitable testing arrangements for participants must be in place and this is core to our current planning, as is ensuring there is absolutely no negative impact on the country's frontline workers, the emergency services, league and club staff members."

TAJIKISTAN SUSPENDS FOOTBALL

One of the few football leagues in the world still playing will be suspended next week after authorities in Tajikistan ruled to temporarily ban sports events over coronavirus concerns. The Tajik football federation said that matches would go ahead on Sunday before a suspension until at least May 10.

Getting up from the canvas

Live sport has virtually disappeared due to the pandemic, but a few leagues and events are taking their first tentative steps back

NBA LOOKS TO REBOUND

The arrival of the coronavirus pandemic in the United States was well and truly sounded off when Utah Jazz centre Rudy Gobert contracted the Covid-19 strain. The French 7'1 NBA back-to-back defensive player of the year was seen jokingly touching phones and recorders in a press conference days before his diagnosis - the casual gesture bringing home the perils of taking the virus lightly.

The cancellation of NBA games was the start of American sports pulling their shutters down but now the basketball league is planning a slow return to the courts. According to ESPN NBA reporter Adrian Wojnarowski, beginning this Friday, NBA teams will start to reopen practice facilities for players residing in states that have loosened lockdown restrictions.

In states like Georgia, players can resume individual workouts but teams remain prohibited from holding group workouts or organised team activities of any sort. Wojnarowski also reported that in American states where restrictions were tighter, the NBA was looking for means to get players back on the court, even if in an individual training capacity. But training aside, the report made it clear that the opening of practice courts in certain states wasn't reflective of the NBA's timetable for resumption of play.

UFC TO HOST FIGHTS

After including the World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) as an essential service and thus open for business in Florida, the state has now allowed the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) to hold UFC 249 at the Vystar Veterans Memorial Arena in Jacksonville on May 9. The event was set to take place on April 18 in Brooklyn and was one of the last professionally-run sports across the world that was going to continue despite the advent of the pandemic.

However, ESPN, their streaming partners, shut any chance of the event taking place in April and pulled the plug on the card. The UFC, on its website, has stated that the May 9 event will be streamed live on ESPN and ESPN+.

Not only this, the UFC has also decided to stage two more events on May 13 and



Close to two months after Utah Jazz centre Rudy Gobert's diagnosis shuts down NBA, the basketball league is looking to get players back on court.

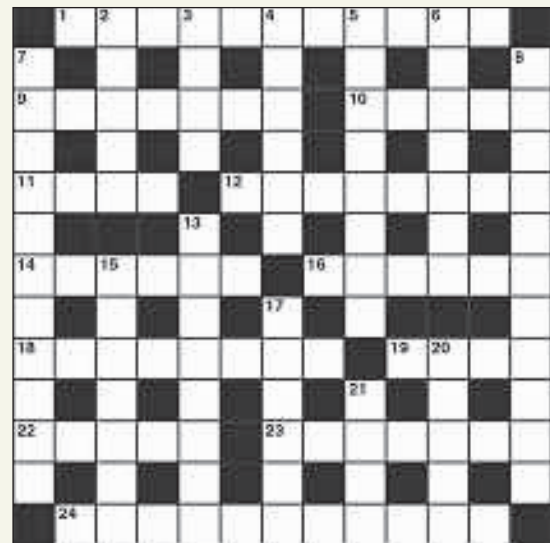
May 16 in Florida. All three events will be closed to the public and will be broadcast with only essential personnel in the arena.

"Sports play an important role in people's lives and can bring moments of escape in challenging times," ESPN said in a statement. "We look forward to bringing UFC to fans again."

BOXING ON IN NICARAGUA

A boxing event was held in Managua, Nicaragua on Saturday night by promoter Rosendo Alvarez - a former two-time world champion. However, even with the offer of free tickets for the eight-fight event, the 8000-seater arena was only about a tenth full. "Here we don't fear the coronavirus, and there is no quarantine. The three deaths (reported so far by the Ministry of Health) came from outside and nobody within the country has been contaminated," Alvarez, known as 'El Búfalo', said before the event. The fights were broadcast by Nicaragua's state-owned Canal 6 and ESPN Latin America through its ESPN KnockOut programme, according to the *Associated Press*. The Nicaraguan baseball and football leagues are still playing, and Saturday's local sports pages included stories on a triathlon and school wrestling tournaments. President Daniel Ortega recently ordered 1.8 million students back to school and 170,000 state employees back to work following a 15-day vacation. SHASHANK NAIR

CROSSWORD 4102



- | ACROSS | DOWN |
|---|---|
| 1 All together now: 'knees bend' (5,6) | 2 Nebraska city beach in Normandy (5) |
| 9 The talk of the district (7) | 3 Nominally Christmas (4) |
| 10 Ring for matches (5) | 4 His work is bound to receive public attention (6) |
| 11 Clue found in a drawer (4) | 5 It may create a stir at mealtime (8) |
| 12 I'd compel in a way to get obeyed (8) | 6 Initial opportunity (7) |
| 14 Demon drink? (6) | 7 Young people arranged to see Scotland (11) |
| 16 A mouth organ (6) | 8 The opposite of having night vision? (11) |
| 18 Score but two (8) | 13 The extent to which diets can vary (8) |
| 19 The lowest sort of people, but always found at the top (4) | 15 Geraint turns out to be a thankless person (7) |
| 22 Coach some coaches (5) | 17 An exceptionally warm spring (6) |
| 23 A race between two Poles and an Arab (7) | 20 Bills rise on October 1st for a chocolate producer (5) |
| 24 Note painter making an entrance (11) | 21 Courage needed on icy roads entrance (4) |

Solutions Crossword 4101: Across: 1 Penned, 4 Clearing, 9 Llamas, 10 Cross-cut, 12 Sash, 13 Inter, 14 Emma, 17 Firm proposal, 20 Holds the line, 23 Airy, 24 Decoy, 25 Felt, 28 Inwardly, 29 Morose, 30 Sunbathe, 31 Sleepy. Down: 1 Pulls off, 2 Noah's ark, 3 Edam, 5 Large portion, 6 Also, 7 Income, 8 Get fat, 11 Untold wealth, 15 Spool, 16 Wages, 18 Tiresome, 19 Leatherly, 21 Varies, 22 Draw in, 26 Area, 27 Foul.

JUMBLED WORDS

Given below are four jumbled words. Solve the jumbles to make proper words and move them to the respective squares below. Select the letters in the shaded squares and jumble them to get the answer for the given quip.

When a dog ___ at you, ___ for him - Thoreah (4,7)

EEEIR

AHSST

EZZLNU

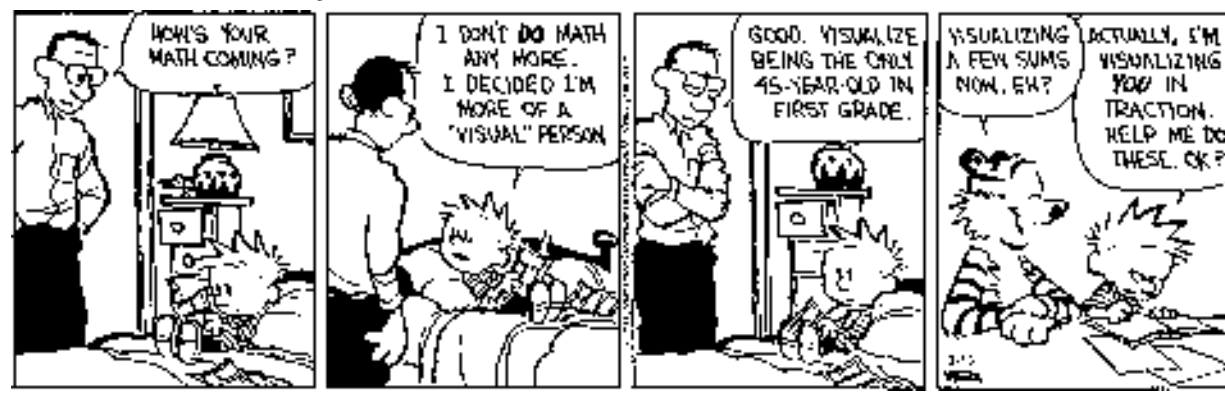
HOOSHW

SOLUTION: EEEEIR: EERIE, STASH, NUTZLE, WHOLE. HOOSHW: HOOSHS

OVER THE HEDGE by Michael Fry & T Lewis



CALVIN & HOBBS by Bill Watterson



MARVIN by Tom Armstrong



SUDOKU 4192

Difficulty Level 1s
Instructions
To solve a Sudoku puzzle, every digit from 1 to 9 must appear in each of the nine vertical columns, in each of the nine horizontal rows and in each of the nine boxes.

Difficulty Level
1s = Very easy; 2s = Easy;
3s = Medium; 4s = Hard;
5s = Very Hard; 6s = Genius



SOLUTION SUDOKU 4191



DAY TODAY

BY PETER VIDAL

ARIES (Mar 21 - Apr 20)

There's an element of doubt as the week begins, but nothing you can't cope with. You should bide your time before tackling personal and emotional issues. Today is a useful moment for sorting out what you feel, an essential move before you try to communicate your desires to others.

TAURUS (Apr 21 - May 21)

There's no substitute for a good, long look at the evidence and facts may come to light very soon which could totally alter your way of looking at a particular person. However, it may be too late for now to turn whatever you find out to advantage in your career.

GEMINI (May 22 - June 21)

It's not always easy to relate to other people but partners and associates must take some of the responsibility for being out of sorts, or at least for behaving out of character. If someone has been getting on your nerves then perhaps it's because they need your help.

CANCER (June 22 - July 23)

You should soon come to realise just how fortunate you are, but not this week! Your principle planetary pattern keeps your feelings on a knife edge, but then you're used to performing emotional high-wire acts. You might even teach the rest of us a thing or two about handling relationships.

LEO (July 24 - Aug 23)

Some kind of a financial commitment will have to be made soon, but it looks as if you have about three days' grace. Today you'd probably do better to focus on personal relationships, making sure that partners are on your side. Are you forgetting something - or someone? It might do you good to get in touch.

VIRGO (Aug 24 - Sep 23)

If you need proof of other people's unreliability, you can try a number of steps. First, try to make them reach firm agreements and, second, persuade them to fulfil their promises. The message of the moment is therefore not to push partners too far, at least not if you want to hang on to their goodwill.

LIBRA (Sep 24 - Oct 23)

Helpful aspects from the Moon indicate that in the ideal world you'd be able to take the day off. Realistically the best you can do is to try to infuse all routine affairs with a little of your unique creative flare. It's OK to repay favours, but don't let anyone exploit you.

SCORPIO (Oct 24 - Nov 23)

Family affairs dominate your daily cycles, so will doubtless require extra attention, but what is very much more important is that you now burn up the brain cells, concentrating intensely on unresolved questions, gathering all the material you need to make the right decisions.

SAGITTARIUS (Nov 24 - Dec 22)

Sometimes everything seems so straightforward; you may even have come to imagine that you know what's going on. Well, think again! Yet what seems like a cast-iron truth this week might look like complete nonsense next week, so tread cautiously.

CAPRICORN (Dec 23 - Jan 20)

Some kind of alteration in the working pattern of your life is inevitable within the next few months. The pressure in this particular cycle is building up now, and one of your major motives should be monetary reward. Perhaps it's time that you're paid what you're owed.

AQUARIUS (Jan 21 - Feb 19)

You can afford to feel hopeful about the outcome of all events, both great and small. You must expect a few mood swings, though, and you'll have to try to match your feelings with your jobs and tasks throughout the day. If you succeed then you should allow yourself to feel a little smug.

PISCES (Feb 20 - Mar 20)

Today's benevolent Moon makes for a pleasant start to your week, encouraging the more outgoing and original elements in your character. It is therefore time to break free and take your chances. If you're planning ahead then put your financial commitments under the microscope.