



AMAZING ACT

Actor Adah Sharma says she is happy with the audience response to her transgender act in a recent web series

LEISURE P2



DIRECT MONEY TRANSFER

J&K HC orders direct transfer of money into the accounts of land owners to ensure compensation for land

TWO STATES P7



INVESTIGATION IN CHINA

A team of international experts would travel to China next month to help investigate animal origins of Covid-19

INTERNATIONAL P10

IRREGULAR by MANJUL



Hope the members will spend the time more meaningfully like feeding peacocks or playing with parrots!

Cooking gas dearer by ₹50; ATF also up

AGENCIES

New Delhi, Dec 16: Cooking gas LPG price Wednesday was increased by ₹50 per cylinder, the second hike in rate this month following firming of international prices. Also, aviation turbine fuel (ATF) price was raised by a steep 6.3 per cent.

Non-subsidised LPG price was increased to ₹694 per 14.2-kg cylinder from ₹644 earlier, according to a price notification of state fuel marketing companies.

This is the second increase in rate this month. December 1, price was hiked by a similar ₹50 per cylinder. Prior to that, the price had remained unchanged at ₹594 a cylinder since July. This was the same rate at which subsidised LPG refills are also sold.

Since May, most cooking gas customers have not received subsidies as the combination of international oil price collapsed and domestic refill rate increases brought parity between subsidised and market rates. A subsidised cooking gas cylinder was priced at ₹497 in Delhi in June 2019. Since then, prices have cumulatively gone up by ₹147.

Pari case: Fate sealed in sealed envelope

IN A SEALED ENVELOPE, THE SIT SUBMITTED THE AFFIDAVIT TO THE HIGH COURT

POST NEWS NETWORK/ AGENCIES

Bhubaneswar, Dec 16: The Special Investigation Team (SIT) of Odisha Crime Branch, investigating the death case of Nayagarh girl Pari, Wednesday revealed that the five-year-old girl was raped before being murdered, unconfirmed sources said.

The SIT submitted an affidavit in this regard Tuesday with the Orissa High Court. The SIT also mentioned in the affidavit that the prime accused—a resident of Jadupur village in Nayagarh district, the native place of the victim; has also been identified, unconfirmed sources said.

The affidavit read, "The motive of the murder was rape. The investigation revealed that Pari was stripped naked before she was murdered. That she has been raped before being killed was confirmed from the samples collected from her clothes," unconfirmed sources claimed. In a sealed envelope, the SIT team submitted the affidavit to the court. The court scheduled the next hearing date to December 24 after accepting the affidavit.

The SIT team has been led by IPS Arun Bothra. The team started an investigation into the case December 2.

The SIT members also held discussions with the district police who were investigating the case prior to that.



CHILD GOES 'MISSING' IN DHENKANAL DIST

DHENKANAL: A three-year-old boy reportedly went missing while playing on the village road at Khankira under Nihalprasad police limits in the district, Wednesday.

The missing child was identified as Kalia Sahu, son of Chandan Sahu in the village. Police started an investigation after a complaint was lodged by the family members in the police station. Reports said that Kalia was playing on the village road when he suddenly disappeared to everyone's surprise. Family members looked for him in all possible locations but failed to trace him despite their best efforts.

During the Winter Session of the Assembly, the parents of the minor girl Soudamini and Ashok Sahoo attempted self-immolation in front of the Assembly seeking justice for their minor daughter.

Notably, five-year-old Pari from Jadupur village in Nayagarh district was kidnapped July 14, 2020. Sources said she was kidnapped from her house when she was playing in the courtyard. Her skeletal remains were recovered from the backyard of her house nine days later.

Centre's decision to compulsorily retire officer gets CAT's approval

AGENCIES

New Delhi, Dec 16: The government's step of compulsorily retiring some black sheep in the tax administration last year had now got the seal of approval from the Central Administrative Tribunal (CAT).

The principal bench of CAT has dismissed an application from former commissioner of Income Tax Pramod Kumar Bajaj challenging the government's decision to compulsorily retire officers of central services.

In one of the first such cases, the CAT Principal Bench headed by Justice L. Narasimha Reddy as Chairman and Aradhana Johri as Member (Admn) in its order pronounced through video conferencing dismissed Bajaj's application, who was one of the 85 officers compulsorily retired under

Fundamental Rule 56(J). "We do not find any merit in the OA (Original Application) and the same is accordingly dismissed. The MA (Miscellaneous Application) No.1931/2020 also stands disposed of. There shall be no order as to costs," the CAT principal bench said.

Agreeing with the government's contention that the scope of interference with the order passed by invoking FR 56 (J) is very limited and not warranted in the instant case, the Principal Bench has come out very straight on the face of complainant Bajaj, stating that the record of the applicant speaks for itself, and it was no longer in the interest of the department to continue the applicant in service, as "the personal life of the applicant was not only extraordinary but also denied the very reputation of the department."

SC FOR PANEL FORMATION TO SOLVE FARMERS' ISSUES

POST NEWS NETWORK

New Delhi, Dec 16: The Supreme Court Wednesday indicated that it will form a committee comprising representatives from farmer unions and the Union government to resolve the dispute related to three controversial farm laws. The apex court observed that farmers' protests around Delhi could soon become a national issue.

A three-judge bench of the apex court headed by Chief Justice Sharad A Bobde also issued notice to the Union government and state governments of Punjab, Haryana, Delhi and Uttar Pradesh in petitions seeking removal of protesting farmers from Delhi borders. The apex court also permitted the pe-



ernment and farmer unions did not yield desired results. The apex court also held that most of these petitions are ill conceived, except freedom of people to move around the country. The Chief Justice said that the main argument in the petitions is that there is a blocking of traffic and people are not allowed to travel. They want road blocks cleared, CJJ observed. During the hearing, Solicitor General Tushar Mehta apprised the court that farmers and the government are engaged in talks to resolve the issue. Mehta also submitted that the government is ready to discuss all three laws clause-wise but the difficulty is that the farmers only want repeal of laws and they (farmers) want answers in "yes or no."

Home issues prevent state farmers from joining Delhi stir

UNLIKE IN PUNJAB AND HARYANA WHERE FARMERS ARE DONE WITH HARVEST AND PROCUREMENT OF PADDY, FARMERS IN WESTERN ODISHA ARE IN THE MIDDLE OF PROCUREMENT, WHILE MANDIS ARE YET TO OPEN IN COASTAL DISTRICTS

SISIR MISHRA, OP

Sambalpur, Dec 16: The farmers' protests currently raging across the country against the three new farm laws with its epicentre in Delhi have little representation from Odisha. The nationwide stir has a very subdued resonance in the state as well, making one feel as if there is no opposition to the three controversial Acts of the Centre. There are at least two prominent farmer outfits operating here.

What does it show? Does it prove farmers from Odisha have no issue with the three farm laws or they support them unlike their Punjab and Haryana counterparts? Not so.

The farm Acts have evoked equal, if not more, antipathy against the government. However, the all-India stir has come at an inopportune time for Odisha farmers. "They



They haven't been properly timed. The all-India farmers' stir has coincided with paddy harvest and procurement season in Odisha

ASHOK PRADHAN | CO-CONVENER OF PASCHIMA ODISHA KRUSHAK SANGATHAN SMANYOYA SAMITI

We didn't get train tickets because of Covid-19. The pandemic also prevented us from carrying out large-scale awareness activities to mobilise farmers. There was no time for this

LINGARAJ | FARMER LEADER & POKSSS' CO-CONVENER

have not been properly timed. The all-India farmers' stir has coincided with paddy harvest and procurement season in Odisha," Ashok Pradhan, co-convener of Paschima Odisha Krushak Sangathan Smanyoya Samiti (POKSSS), said.

Worse, farmers are currently struggling to sell their stock courtesy a number of faulty procurement policies of the state government.

Unlike in Punjab and Haryana where farmers are done with harvest and procurement of paddy,

farmers in western Odisha are in the middle of procurement, while mandis are even yet to open in coastal districts.

Moreover, Covid-19 and the problems triggered by the pandemic have come in the way of farmers booking

train tickets for Delhi and created other logistics issues. "We did not get train tickets because of Covid-19. The pandemic also prevented us from carrying out large-scale awareness activities to mobilise farmers. There was no time for this," said Lingaraj, farmer leader and co-convener of the POKSSS.

The token system and the artificial capping of the quantity of paddy to be sold under MSP have rankled the farmers for years now. Despite protests from across the state against the highly-unpopular token system, the government has gone ahead with it, forcing farmers to wait in cold which eventually leads to distress sale of paddy. Secondly, the limits on quantity of paddy do not reflect the ground reality, Pradhan said.

At present, the government allows 13 and 19 quintals of paddy per acre

for non-irrigated and irrigated land to be sold under MSP. However, they are way insufficient. "This year there is a bumper crop and we want the present limits to be raised to 17 and 22.5 quintals for non-irrigated and irrigated land respectively," Pradhan said, adding this together with the defective mandi and the token system have brought in a lot of misery to farmers in western Odisha. Around 2.5 lakh packets of paddy are lying in Kuchinda block for pick-up.

The three new farm Acts are a well-oiled design by this government introduced in the guise of agriculture reforms, said Lingaraj, adding by throwing the farm sector open to private parties the government wants to completely withdraw itself. "Even a mere assurance, even if by writing, that MSP won't be tampered with won't suffice, it has to be made a legal right of farmers."



Now, JEE-Mains to be held 4 times a year starting 2021

The first edition of the exam will be held from February 23 to 26, followed by rounds in March, April and May

AGENCIES

New Delhi, Dec 16: The JEE-Mains exam for admission to engineering colleges will be held four times a year starting 2021 to offer flexibility to students and a chance to improve their scores, Union Education minister Ramesh Pokhriyal Nishank announced Wednesday.

The first edition of the exam will be held from February 23 to 26, followed by rounds in March, April and May. "We have examined the suggestions received from students and various quarters and it has been decided that JEE-Mains will be held in four sessions in February, March, April and May," Nishank said.

"The first session will be held from February 23-26 and the results will be declared within five days from the last date of exams," he said.



The move will ensure that students don't miss out on opportunities due to clash of exams or due to the COVID-19 situation at present

RAMESH POKHRIYAL NISHANK | UNION EDUCATION MINISTER

"The move will ensure that students don't miss out on opportunities due to clash of exams or due to the COVID-19 situation at present," he added. Nishank also said students will be given a choice to answer 75 questions (25 each in Physics, Chemistry and Mathematics) out of 90 (30 each in Physics, Chemistry and Mathematics).

MAOISTS SET 6 VEHICLES AFIRE

Following the act of arson by the Maoists, police have tightened the security in Malkangiri district



POST NEWS NETWORK

Malkangiri, Dec 16: Maoists once again made their presence felt at the Malkangiri-Chhattisgarh border. They torched six vehicles Wednesday engaged in the construction of a road at Alabada in Bijapur district of Chhattisgarh. The village is adjacent to the Malkangiri border. Following the act of arson by the Maoists, police have tightened the security in Malkangiri district.

Sources said a group of 10-12 armed Maoists arrived at the camp site and threatened the workers to stop construction of the road at Alabada village. They forced the workers to leave the place and set the vehicles including a tractor and water tanker. Before leaving, they left posters proclaiming that they were members of the Malkangiri-Chhattisgarh division of the banned CPI (Maoist).

On being informed, Bijapur police personnel and security forces rushed to the spot. They have launched a combing operation in the area. However, they are moving cautiously as the Maoists may have planted mines in the area.

Earlier this week, two Maoists including a woman cadre had been gunned down during an exchange of fire with the Special Operations Group (SOG) and District Voluntary Force (DVF) personnel at 'Swabhiman Anchal' in the district. A huge cache of explosives and Maoist literature had been seized by the security personnel from the spot.

leisure



I DON'T HAVE A SMARTPHONE: NOLAN

Hollywood filmmaker Christopher Nolan, believed to be a master storyteller of sci-fi genre of cinema, has surprised everyone with his revelation that he does not own a smartphone. Instead, he has a little flip phone that he uses from time to time.

NAOMI ACKIE TO PLAY WHITNEY HOUSTON

Actress Naomi Ackie is set to portray Whitney Houston in an upcoming musical biopic of the late singer. Titled *I Wanna Dance With Somebody*, the film is directed by Stella Meghie and has screenplay by Bohemian Rhapsody writer Anthony McCarten.



FORTUNE FORECAST

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ARIES
You will be very enterprising and industrious today. You make your plans very carefully and execute them perfectly. Despite this, your progress will be very slow. However, Ganesh advises you not to despair and showers his blessings on you.

TAURUS
You are going to be exceptionally intense in the way you communicate your emotions and feelings. You will, no doubt, succeed in making the impact, the impression you are striving to make, says Ganesh.

GEMINI
You will be in a spot of bother owing to financial problems today. You will try to reduce your expenses and increase your savings, but circumstances will be such that you will have to spend your money. You will spend your day in all this financial jugglery, says Ganesh.

CANCER
Intimate friends will be impressed with your attitude. You will try to make them happy and spend a happy evening with them. Affection and cordial ties will linger for long and prove fruitful.

LEO
You will accomplish all your tasks with courage today. As a result of which, the efforts you have made in the last few months will now bear fruit. You need to make a schedule of the tasks you need to tackle today. You need to guard against over-stressing yourself, otherwise your health could suffer, says Ganesh.

VIRGO
Don't procrastinate matters regarding your health, advises Ganesh. Today you are raring to take on some past wounds. However, peace and quietude are the dominant flavours today. Ganesh suggests that you go ahead and enjoy yourself, if only just to recharge your batteries.

LIBRA
Ganesh says that you will be able to see a huge change in your personal and social status. Ganesh says that this may be due to medium like television or due to your innovative ideas in your work place. People will be praising you and your work today. You will be more interested in the fine arts.

SCORPIO
Your energy levels are on an all time high today, as you plan to begin a new business venture. You are determined to give in your best and toil hard till you succeed in your plans. Well, and the day turns out to be fruitful and worthy when you garner compliments and positive feedback about your work from your peers, says Ganesh.

SAGITTARIUS
Your temper is as hot as a fireball today, foresees Ganesh. Not for nothing they say that anger may destroy the world. Don't axe your own feet by your aggressive behaviour. Cool down and think before you act. There are chances that you may experience financial crunch, handle it carefully, advises Ganesh.

CAPRICORN
You have become workaholic and others may have complains against you for being so busy. But, you should not take to heart as you are finishing off assignments which have been hanging in there for a long time now. Once done with the work, you'll have ample of time for your lover.

AQUARIUS
The monotony of your routine will get little bit of colour with the help of your wit and humour. Your jovial nature will lighten the burden of work from the shoulders of one, says Ganesh. People love to be in your company and that is the reason why you are on the top of every guest list.

PISCES
You will experience mixed feelings today. On one hand tension and stress about how to set a deteriorating situation right will keep you worried, and on the other hand you will be in a mood to accept things for what they are.

Nushratt's pink bikini look raises heat

Mumbai: Actress Nushratt Bharucha looks stunning in her new social media post, striking a pose in a hot pink bikini.

Nushratt posted a string of pictures from a sea facing hotel room. In the images, she is seen flaunting a svelte figure in a bubble gum pink bikini paired with a pristine white cover up. She completed her look with sunglasses.

"This is an appreciation post for all that I had when I had it... all that I did when I did. One year later, today I remember it all so fondly. miss it all so dearly but feel so blessed and lucky to have had it. To have lived it the way I wanted it. So thank you Universe for giving me all that you have, the way that you have! #Gratitude," Nushratt wrote alongside the image.

The actress has started working on her next film, *Chhorii*. Her latest film *Chhalaang*, streams on OTT. **IAN5**



Sonu, Shraddha named Hottest Vegetarians of 2020

Mumbai: Hindi film actors Sonu Sood and Shraddha Kapoor are PETA India's Hottest Vegetarians of 2020, it has been announced.

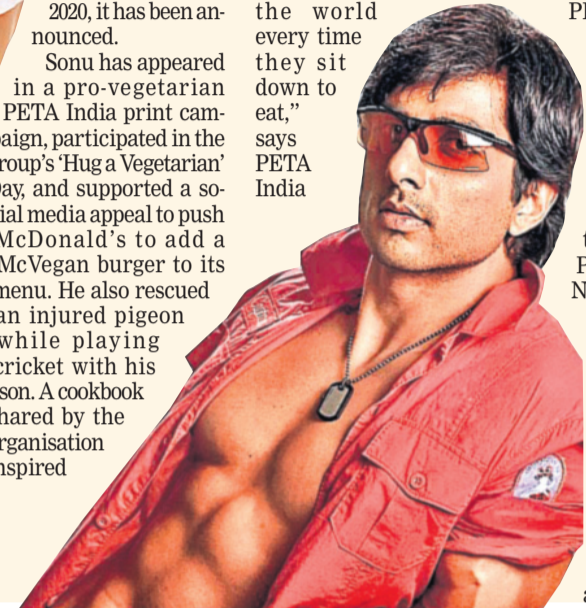
Sonu has appeared in a pro-vegetarian PETA India print campaign, participated in the group's 'Hug a Vegetarian' Day, and supported a social media appeal to push McDonald's to add a McVegan burger to its menu. He also rescued an injured pigeon while playing cricket with his son. A cookbook shared by the organisation inspired

Shraddha to quit meat. The actress never misses an opportunity to speak up for animals. "Sonu Sood and Shraddha Kapoor are helping to change the world every time they sit down to eat," says PETA India

Director of Celebrity and Public Relations Sachin Bangera.

Bangera added: "Fruits and vegetables never caused a pandemic, and PETA India is honouring Sood and Kapoor for living by example and encouraging their fans to make eating meat-free their 'new normal.'"

Past winners of the award include Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Amitabh Bachchan, Manushi Chhillar, Sunil Chhetri, Anushka Sharma, Kartik Aaryan, Vidhut Jammwal, Kangana Ranaut, Shahid Kapoor and Rekha. **IAN5**



Kartik wants to start long hair trend again

Mumbai: Actor Kartik Aaryan flaunts his locks in a new post on Instagram, saying long hair has swag.

In the image, the actor is seen dressed in a denim jacket paired with a yellow T-shirt.

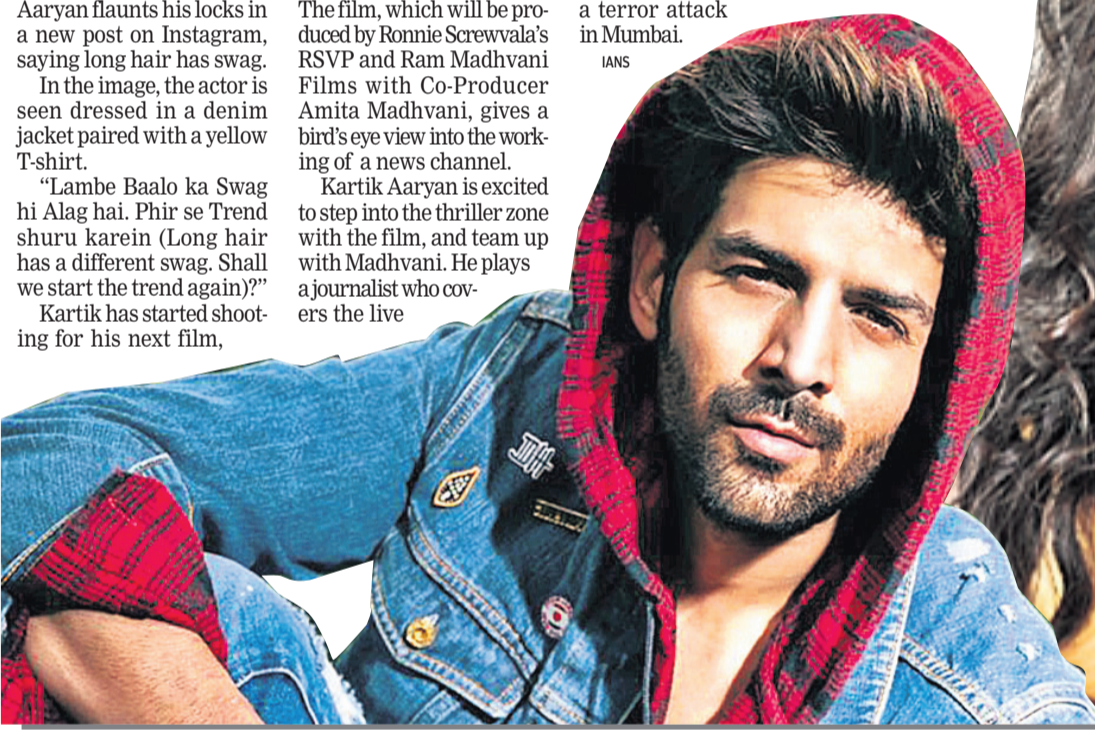
"Lambe Baalo ka Swag hi Alag hai. Phir se Trend shuru karein (Long hair has a different swag. Shall we start the trend again?)"

Kartik has started shooting for his next film,

Ram Madhvani's *Dhamaka*. The film, which will be produced by Ronnie Screwvala's RSVP and Ram Madhvani Films with Co-Producer Amita Madhvani, gives a bird's eye view into the working of a news channel.

Kartik Aaryan is excited to step into the thriller zone with the film, and team up with Madhvani. He plays a journalist who covers the live

broadcast of a terror attack in Mumbai. **IAN5**



Adah happy with response to her transgender act

Mumbai: Actress Adah Sharma is happy with the response she has been getting for her portrayal of a transgender in the recently-released web series, *Pati Patni Aur Panga*.

"I'm so glad so many people are watching Pati Patni Aur Panga! It feels great when the audience appreciates your work.

They can watch it in Telugu, Tamil, Punjabi and Bengali as well because it is dubbed in all these languages," she informed.

The web series directed by Abir Sengupta also features Naveen Kasturia, Hiten Tejwani, Gurpreet Saini, and Alka Amin among others.

Adah is currently gearing up for the second season of the show, as well as the upcoming action film *Commando 4*.

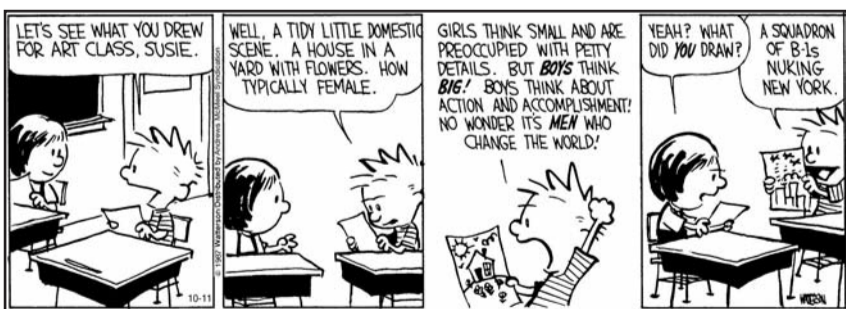
"I love the action genre and I'm fortunate that directors are offering me really cool stuff! I'm getting to do action, romance, comedy, drama. What more can an actor asks for?" smiled Adah. **IAN5**

FUN post

PEANUTS



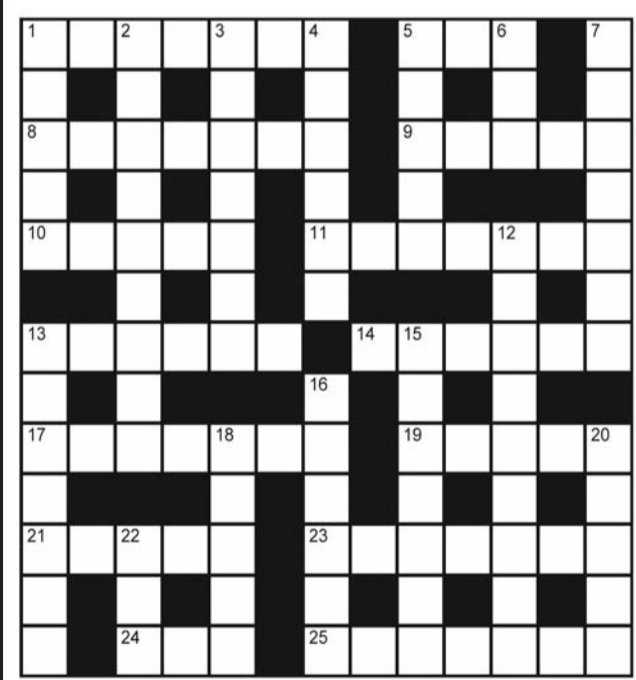
CALVIN AND HOBBS



BREVITY



CROSSWORD



- Across**
- 1 Cheat
 - 5 Navigator's need
 - 8 Reveals something new
 - 9 Parachute material
 - 10 Small herring
 - 11 Blight
 - 13 Fortified wine
 - 14 Paths
 - 17 Have coming
 - 19 Après-ski drink
 - 21 Excuse
 - 23 Pirate
 - 24 Quiche, e.g.
 - 25 Helps out
 - 5 Animal disease
 - 6 Sidekick
 - 7 Hats
 - 12 Lens makers
 - 13 Shooting iron
 - 15 Fancy flowers
 - 16 Mouselike jumping rodent
 - 18 German wine valley
 - 20 Much of Chile
 - 22 Mischief-maker

SUDOKU

To solve the Sudoku puzzle, each row, column and box must contain the numbers 0 to 9 and the letters A to E.

B	7	9						D	0
				C	4	0	1	7	E
D	5	E			8		6		
C			0			A			2
8	0					E			3
	D	1						3	4
					5	3	1	D	2
4	5	0		7	1	2	9		B
6	A		5	B	D				
3		8	4	0				E	
3	7	E	A	5	C				
6	B					0	A		
5	8	9		E				4	C
1	C		7	2				4	B
		C	6		3	7			

SOLUTIONS

CROSSWORD

A	O	R	O	P	O						
P	L	E	G	F	U	R	O	W			
C	D	P	T	Y	L						
B	O	G	T	R	E	K	C	O	T		
V	A	G	O	I	L	J	N				
S	E	A	G	U	L	L	R	U	N	G	
R	E	T	M								
S	W	E	E	P	T	A	M	B	O	U	R
I	S	D	V	O	N						
E	L	K	B	R	A	E	F	E			
L	B	O	R	E	V						
M	O	N	A	C	O	N	A	B	B	E	D
W	T	P	S	B	B	N					

SUDOKU

4	E	7	3	6	9	8	0	C	D	5	A	1	2	B
5	0	3	8	4	B	2	D	E	7	6	1	9	C	A
D	A	9	E	C	5	6	1	3	0	B	2	4	8	7
2	C	1	7	0	D	B	9	A	8	3	4	E	6	5
6	B	8	2	1	A	5	7	4	C	E	9	0	D	3
9	7	C	B	8	4	3	2	D	1	0	5	A	E	6
B	4	D	A	9	0	7	E	1	6	C	3	2	5	8
3	6	0	1	E	C	A	8	5	2	4	7	B	9	D
E	1	2	5	D	3	0	6	B	9	A	8	C	7	4
A	8	5	2	7	C	4	9	6	1	0	3	1	0	0
8	2	A	C	5	9	8	4	7	0	3	1	0	0	0
C	D	E	0	B	1	4	3	7	5	9	6	8	A	2
7	9	B	4	A	8	D	5	2	3	1	E	6	0	C
1	5	6	0	3	2	E	A	0	B	8	C	7	4	9
0	3	4	9	7	6	1	C	8	A	2	D	5	B	E

CHECK FOR SOLUTIONS OF THE PUZZLES TOMORROW

'Transfer money directly to land sellers'

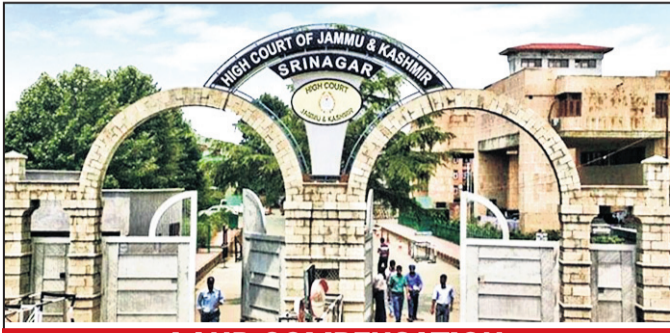
JAMMU & KASHMIR HC ORDERS CONCERNED LAND ACQUISITION COLLECTOR TO TRANSFER MONEY DIRECTLY INTO THE ACCOUNT OF LAND OWNERS

AGENCIES

New Delhi, Dec 16: The Jammu and Kashmir High Court has ordered immediate and direct transfer of money into the accounts of land owners in a first-of-its-kind judgement to ensure compensation for land acquired by the state for infrastructural facilities is not swindled away by middlemen.

The high court has ordered that the concerned Land Acquisition Collector shall directly transfer the amount into the account of the land owner.

Citing a leading judgement of the Supreme Court, the Jammu and Kashmir High Court earlier this month held "To protect the interest of land owners, who very often are swindled by middlemen during the process of disbursement of compensation or harassed by the officials in the office of the Land Acquisition Collector while disbursing the compensation for acquisition of land, the most sustainable way to avoid such harassment of land owners in addition to lessening the time, energy and resources of the concerned depart-



LAND COMPENSATION
The government had announced construction of ring road from Raya Morh to Nagrota and assigned National Highways Authority of India (NHAI) to execute the project

ment is involved is that, subsequent to receipt of the particulars of the land owners eligible for compensation, the amount of compensation should be transferred in the bank account of said land owners by the Collector directly and immediately after the award is announced."

The judgement adds the Land Acquisition Collector shall deputise officers subordinate to him not

The project, when completed, will also create infrastructural facilities in the border areas for movement of our armed forces

below the rank of Naib Tehsildar, who shall get in touch with all the land owners and their legal representatives and inform them about their entitlement and right to receive enhanced compensation.

Directions were passed to dispose of a petition filed by a Jammu resident who had challenged the acquisition of his land for construction of a 58 km ring road, thus

paving the way for completion of the 2,100 crore project hanging fire for nearly three years.

The government had announced construction of ring road from Raya Morh to Nagrota and assigned National Highways Authority of India (NHAI) to execute the project. The project, when completed, will also create infrastructural facilities in the border areas for movement of our armed forces.

The high court held that the project is meant to create infrastructural facilities in Jammu Kashmir. It will not only ease out traffic problem in Jammu City but also work as a ring road, which will originate about 20 km before Jammu city and will link the Jammu-Srinagar Highway, after crossing the Nagrota city, which is about 11 kilometers from Jammu.

Refusing to stall the construction of the road, the high court held it has been consistently opined by the courts that for the matters pertaining to acquisition of land for creation of infrastructural facilities, which are of national importance, interference of the courts should be minimal.

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA

Panaji, Dec 16: Claiming that top BJP leaders were slandering the image of India's first Prime Minister late Jawaharlal Nehru, the Dakshinayan Abhiyaan in Goa, in a letter to President of India Ramnath Kovind has expressed anxiety that the celebration of the 60th anniversary of the state's Liberation could be used to further tarnish Nehru with misinformation.

In the letter to Kovind, who is the main invitee for a state government event December 19, to launch the year-long celebration of Goa's Liberation from Portuguese yoke, the Abhiyaan's state president Damodar Mauzo has also said that Nehru did not intentionally delay the Liberation of Goa in 1961 and the main goal was to avoid bloodshed and violence in the quest for wresting Goa from the colonial power.

"Goans will be deeply hurt if the yearlong celebrations are marked by such unfair and twisted political statements that can damage the image of our beloved Pandit



Jawaharlal Nehru," the Dakshinayan Abhiyaan president said in his letter to the President of India.

"The young independent India that believed in Gandhian approach played its cards very wisely and resultantly, through Operation Vijay Goa was liberated. The peace-loving people of Goa are ever grateful to then PM.

Jawaharlal Nehru whose cautious efforts led to liberation of Goa without bloodshed," the letter authored by Mauzo, a Sahitya Akademi award-winning writer said. Dakshinayan Abhiyaan is an

organisation started by academic scholars, artists, writers, progressive-minded intellectuals, and social activists under the leadership of Dr. Ganesh Devy with the objective of promoting progressive ideas and human values among citizens in general and youth in particular.

The letter also mentions top BJP leaders including Union Minister for Information and Broadcasting, Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan, and Goa CM Pramod Sawant for making misinformed comments on Nehru, blaming the latter for delaying Goa's Liberation.

Demand to replace booth officers after complaints

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA

Panaji, Dec 16: Amid complaints by parties in Goa that objections about electoral rolls were being raised in the name of dead people, the office of Chief Electoral Officer (CEO) Wednesday wrote to South District Electoral Officer (DEO) seeking that the Booth Level Officers (BLOs) be replaced.

In a recent meeting with Chief Electoral Officer Kunal, the Goa Forward Party (GFP) had alleged that objections about the electoral rolls were raised in the name of those citizens, who have already died. Congress's Goa unit general secretary Sankalp Amonkar had also pointed it out to the election officers in Mormugao taluka. He had alleged that BLOs were involved in the "racket" in order to ensure that the names of valid voters were deleted

from the list.

Amonkar had also claimed that BLOs from one particular government department were designated as BLOs in Mormugao taluka, where such instances have been reported.

The CEO is currently holding the special summary revision of photo electoral rolls undertaken by the Election Commission of India.

In the letter written to the DEO, Deputy Chief Electoral Officer Sangeeta Naik said, "In view of the concerns raised by the political parties regarding the parents offices of the BLOs of Mormugao taluka, you are requested to explore the possibility of replacing these BLOs with the staff of other government departments instead of a single department."

Naik has sought action taken report from DEO within eight days.



Army celebrates Vijay Diwas in J&K



PRESS TRUST OF INDIA

Jammu, Dec 16: The Army Wednesday celebrated Vijay Diwas in Jammu and Kashmir and paid homage to soldiers who laid down their lives in the 1971 India-Pakistan war, a Northern Command spokesperson said.

A large number of Army personnel and ex-servicemen participated in the celebrations held at the Northern Command headquarters in Udhampur, he said. Lt Gen Y K Joshi, General Officer Commanding-in-Chief, Northern Command laid a wreath at Dhruva Shahid Smarak to commemorate the occasion, according to the spokesperson.

"While remembering all the bravehearts who laid down their lives for the nation, all ranks of the Northern Command reaffirmed

their steadfast and lifelong commitment to their families," the spokesperson said.

"Their indomitable courage, unflinching zeal and dogged determination shall always be a great source of inspiration for all ranks of the Indian Army," he said.

India celebrates December 16 as Vijay Diwas to commemorate its victory over Pakistan during the 1971 war that led to the creation of Bangladesh. "The swift and professionally planned operations executed by the Indian armed forces led to one of the greatest military victories recorded in the annals of world history," the spokesperson said.

"This historic victory signifies a unique and unparalleled feat wherein our forces fought selflessly for a just and noble cause of liberation of the people of erstwhile

East Pakistan and the creation of a sovereign and independent Bangladesh," he added.

On this day in 1971, 93,000 Pakistani soldiers had surrendered before the Indian Army.

Vijay Diwas was also commemorated at Nagrota Garrison.

"White Knight Corps Commander Lt Gen M V Suchindra Kumar laid a wreath at Ashwamedh Shaurya Sthal War Memorial to honour the valiant martyrs of Army," a defence spokesperson said.

Officers and jawans of White Knight Corps also paid homage to the soldiers who fought in the war, he said. Speaking on the occasion, Lt Gen Kumar exhorted the troops of White Knight Corps to be "ever-ready" to face any challenges with grit, determination and valour and emerge victorious.

Kashmir reels under biting cold

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA

Srinagar, Dec 16: Srinagar, the summer capital of Jammu and Kashmir, experienced the coldest night of the season Wednesday as the valley reeled under cold conditions with the mercury plummeting several degrees below the freezing point owing to a clear sky, MeT officials said.

All the weather stations in the valley recorded the sub-zero night temperature owing to the clear sky and the minimum temperature settled several degrees below the normal for this part of the season, they said. The officials said Srinagar recorded a low of minus 4.8 degrees Celsius, down from the previous night's minus 3.2 degrees Celsius. The minimum temperature was about four degrees below the normal for this part of the season. This was the coldest night of the season so far in the city, they

added. The mercury in Gulmarg, the famous ski-resort in north Kashmir, settled at a low of minus 11.0 degrees Celsius which is about seven degrees below the normal for this time of the season, the officials said.

The resort was the coldest recorded place in the union territory. Pahalgam tourist resort in south Kashmir recorded a low of minus 7.4 degrees Celsius, the officials said.

They said Qazigund, the gateway town to the valley, recorded the minimum of minus 3.3 degrees Celsius, while Kupwara, in the north, registered a low of minus 4.8 degrees Celsius and Kokernag, in the south, minus 5.2 degrees Celsius, they said.

The Meteorological Office has said the weather is likely to remain mainly dry till December 22 with the possibility of a further decrease in the night temperature.



Militants are high on recruitment, but weaponless

THIS DEFICIT IN WEAPONRY HAS PROVOKED DESPERATE ATTEMPTS BY PAKISTAN TO FIND NEW ROUTES AND MODES OF WEAPON DELIVERY – LIKE AIR DROPS – TO MILITANTS IN KASHMIR

AGENCIES

Srinagar, Dec 16: Militancy in Jammu and Kashmir has entered a crucial transitional phase. In the last five years, it kept surging, its lethality increasing year after year—in terms of recruitment, infiltration and violent attacks.

The year 2020 marked a remarkable shift in the trends of militancy, indicating a downgrading in lethality despite high recruitment. The recruitment numbers for the year 2020 do not show a big change compared to last year.

As per news reports, the number of local recruits for this year (till October end) stood at 145—the second highest in a decade. The spate of recruitment suggests that the counter-offensive of security forces is proving to be a zero-sum game, as for every militant killed a new one is being recruited or infiltrated. However, there is another data point which depicts a significant downgrade in militant operations. Data suggests that militants in Kashmir are witnessing a dearth of weaponry and logistics, which is severely denting their capacity to carry out big, lethal attacks.

Data accessed by ORF shows that 176 counter-militancy operations were conducted by the security forces till October end. Out of 245 weapons recovered, 101 were pistol or handguns and 144 were various



LESSER LETHAL ATTACKS

THE YEAR 2020 MARKED A REMARKABLE SHIFT IN THE TRENDS OF MILITANCY, INDICATING A DOWNGRADING IN LETHALITY DESPITE HIGH RECRUITMENT

AS PER NEWS REPORTS, THE NUMBER OF LOCAL RECRUITS FOR THIS YEAR (TILL OCTOBER END) STOOD AT 145—THE SECOND HIGHEST IN A DECADE

DATA SUGGESTS THAT MILITANTS IN KASHMIR ARE WITNESSING A DEARTH OF WEAPONRY AND LOGISTICS, WHICH IS SEVERELY DENTING THEIR CAPACITY TO CARRY OUT BIG, LETHAL ATTACKS

types of assault rifles—AK47, AK56, M4, Insas etc.

Many operations in which militants were killed/arrested/surrendered had no major weapon recovery. Recovery of ammunitions showed that the militants possessing pistols carried on an average 10 rounds for each weapon.

In the case of assault rifles, an average

of 66 rounds per weapon was recorded. A pistol is primarily a self-defence weapon and can only be used to carry out targeted assassinations at point-blank range. The above data clearly shows that the pistol-wielding members posed a lesser threat as they are not capable of carrying out big attacks against the military establishment.

This also explains why there weren't

any major terror attacks in the year 2020 barring a few. The nature of attacks carried out in 2020 were mostly targeted killings of civilians and stand-off attacks on cornered soldiers. Data shows that this year, only one improvised explosive device or IED was recovered compared to the 12 recovered last year. The critical metric to judge the state of militancy is not the disruption in sup-

ply of weapons but the surge in demand for weapons. In other words, the continuous flow of recruits suggests that the demand for weapons is much more than it has been in the last few years. Perhaps, the weapon supply chain has primarily been interrupted by shutting down of the cross-LoC trade and crackdown on the overground networks of the militant outfits.

Goa announces measures to strengthen RLBs

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA

Panaji, Dec 16: Two days after clinching a clear Victory in Zilla Panchayat polls in Goa, the state BJP government on Wednesday announced various measures, including granting of more financial powers, to strengthen the local bodies.

The state Cabinet has increased the allocation of development grants to various Panchayats and granted more powers to Zilla or district Panchayats, Chief Minister Pramod Sawant said.

The BJP Monday made big gains in the Zilla Panchayat elections, winning 32 out of 49 seats on offer, while the opposition Congress performed poorly, bagging just four: Sawant said his government wanted to link Zilla Panchayats with departments like Agriculture and Animal Husbandry to ensure effective implementation of "Swayampurna Goa" mission.

"The development grants to Panchayats have been increased, which will provide them additional financial muscle. With financial empowerment, the Panchayats and their representatives will be able to serve the people in a better way," he added.



We are a country where the growth of communication technology is phenomenal. This presents a tremendous scope for the entertainment and media industry

Prakash Javadekar | Union Information and Broadcasting Minister

MOUNT ABU SHIVERS

As the temperature continues to plummet in Rajasthan, hill station Mount Abu registered a minimum temperature of 1.4 degree Celsius, making it the coldest place in the desert state



of the day quote

The Centre and the state governments should work as "Team India" in addressing the needs of the farmers. Apart from ensuring remunerative prices, the farmers should be provided with timely and affordable credit



M VENKAIHAH NAIDU | VICE PRESIDENT

Today, on the occasion of Vijay Diwas, I salute the tradition of courage and valour of the Indian Army. I remember the bravery of those courageous soldiers who wrote a new tale of valour during the 1971 war



RAJNATH SINGH | DEFENCE MINISTER

The state government may approach the Supreme Court against the Bombay High Court's order staying Mumbai suburban district collector's allotment of 102-acre Kanjurmarg salt pan land for Metro car shed



AJIT PAWAR | MAHARASHTRA DEPUTY CM

SHORT TAKES

Rs 57L looted

Agra: Four armed bandits have disappeared with Rs 57 lakh from a branch of the Indian Overseas Bank in Agra after holding the bank staff hostage. They have vanished without a trace, police said. The loot took place in the IOB branch near Rohta on Gwalior Road on Tuesday evening. A police investigation is underway.

Elephant dies

Kolkata: An adult male elephant was killed after it was knocked down by a speeding truck near Jaldapara National Park in West Bengal's Alipurduar district, a forest official said. The 'Makna' (male elephant without tusks), aged around 15 years, was possibly crossing a highway at Madarihat on Monday night when it got hit by the truck which sped away, the official said.

2 killed, 1 hurt

Gopalganj: Two persons were killed and one injured when their car collided with a truck in Bihar's Gopalganj district Wednesday, police said. The incident took place on NH 28 near Sirsiya village under Kuchaikot police station when the car which was on its way to Gorakhpur collided head on with a truck coming from the opposite direction, Kuchaikot police station SHO Ashok Kumar said.

Naxal killed

Raipur: A Naxal was killed in an encounter with security forces in Chhattisgarh's Sukma district Wednesday, police said. The incident occurred around 10:30 AM in a forest near Miliampalli-Rajpenta villages under Jagargunda police station area when a joint team of security forces was out on an anti-Naxal operation, Inspector General of Police (Bastar range) Sundarraj P said.

RAPE CONVICTION RATE REMAINS ABYSMAL

OUT OF A TOTAL OF 1, 62,741 RAPE CASES WHICH WENT TO TRIAL IN 2019, THE COURT CONVICTED PEOPLE IN ONLY 4,640 CASES

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE

New Delhi, Dec 16: Eight years after the Nirbhaya case of gang-rape and murder of a physiotherapy student shook the conscience of the nation and led to hanging of four rapists earlier this year, the conviction rate in rape cases still remains abysmal despite stringent anti-rape laws in place.

As per the recent National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) data, the conviction rate for rape cases remained at 27.8 per cent in 2019. Out of a total of 1,62,741 rape cases which went to trial in 2019, the court convicted people in only 4,640 cases.

In 2018, however, the rate was 27.2 per cent, down from 32.2 per cent in 2017 and 23.9 per cent the year before that. According to legal experts, one of the reasons why criminals do not get convicted is poor investigation by the police, family pressure on victims, hostility of witnesses and complainants, absence of forensic labs and fast-track courts.

Advocate Aparna Bhatt, former member of Delhi's rape crisis cell, said that the conviction rate will go up only when a support system is created for complainants. "They should be able to complain in a proper way. Thereafter, support should be given through a medical examination and in the court," she emphasised.

Advocate Geeta Luthra, however, said, "It is low because the investigation is very poorly conducted without any scientific tools, forensic and medical evidence of the victim or the accused. As a result, because of the risk of false implication in cases where the investigation is not



being done with scientific tools, the rate of conviction in all cases in India gets lower."

The United Nations Children's Fund on Monday revealed that Dalit girls and women face multiple barriers to justice in India, with conviction rate for rapes against Dalit women being under two per cent as compared to a much higher conviction rate in rape cases against all women.

The Nirbhaya case is one such case in which not only were the culprits convicted but were also hanged by the noose. Condemned convicts - Vinay, Akshay, Pawan and Mukesh were executed on March 20 at 5:30 a.m., over seven years after the crime took place in the national capital.

The case pertains to the gruesome rape of a 23-year-old physiotherapy student, later dubbed 'Nirbhaya', by six men in a moving bus on December 16, 2012. She

had succumbed to her injuries 13 days later. The attackers inserted rods inside her vagina and ripped her intestines apart. The brutality of the crime shook the nation to the core, leading to widespread protests and a drastic change in the country's rape laws.

After the Nirbhaya incident, Justice J.S. Verma Committee formed the basis of the Criminal Law (Amendment) Act of 2013 to set the maximum punishment for rape as death penalty rather than life imprisonment.

In 2013, the Criminal Law (Amendment) Ordinance, 2013 was promulgated by then President Pranab Mukherjee which provided for the death penalty in cases of rape. The Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015 was also passed, allowing for juveniles in conflict with law, involved in heinous offences, to be tried as adults.

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UK foreign secy calls on PM Modi

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA

New Delhi, Dec 16: British Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab called on Prime Minister Narendra Modi Wednesday and discussed the vast potential of the India-UK partnership in the post-Brexit world, and launching of a 'vaccines hub' which will share best practice for clinical trials and foster innovation besides helping in shared fight against coronavirus.

In a tweet after the meeting, Modi said he was looking forward to UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson's visit to India to be the Chief Guest at the Republic Day celebrations next month. "Excellent meeting with Dominic Raab, UK Secretary of State of FCDO/UK. Discussed the vast potential of the India-UK partnership in the post-COVID, post-BREXIT world," Modi tweeted.

During the meeting, Modi recalled his recent telephone conversation with Prime Minister Johnson, and stressed the importance of the India-UK partnership in the post-COVID world, a statement from the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) said.

The Prime Minister called for an ambitious and outcome-oriented 360-degree roadmap covering trade and investment, defence and security, migration and mobility, education, energy, climate change



British Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab handed over a letter from Johnson, inviting the Prime Minister to the G7 meeting

and health, in order to tap the full potential of the bilateral relationship.

Foreign Secretary Raab conveyed greetings of Johnson to Prime Minister Modi and thanked him for participating in the recently held Climate Ambition Summit co-hosted by UK. Raab also stressed the priority that the UK government attaches to elevating relations with India, based on shared values and interests and the potential to address common global challenges together.

During the meeting, Foreign Secretary Raab also handed over a letter from Johnson, inviting Prime Minister Modi to the G7 meeting to be chaired by UK in 2021.

46% Indians taking online consultation: Survey

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE

New Delhi, Dec 16: At least 46 per cent Indians still prefer to connect to their doctors over call for medical consultation instead of physical visits to the doctors, a new survey has revealed Wednesday.

The survey conducted by online doctor consultation platform - Mount Virtual Hospital - was done across metros covering Delhi-NCR, Mumbai, Kolkata, Chennai, Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. The data was collected from age group of 20 to 85 years. The total respondents in the

survey were 2,406 which included 1,455 males and around 951 females.

The findings showed that about 70 per cent of the respondents who had diabetes, heart problems, blood pressure issues, cancer or kidney diseases, who are at increased risk of severe illness from the Covid-19, still want to get the consultation done with their doctors over call to be it for follow up consultation or new consultation.

"With people using digital mediums to connect to doctors, we are observing behavioural change and it will impact the health care sector positively in times to come," Sanjay Singh, Founder of Mount Virtual Hospital, said in a statement.

According to the report, 60 per cent of the women surveyed in age group of 18-45 years, wanted to connect digitally with their doctors for getting consultation related to dermatology, nutrition and diet and mental health issues. The data also showed that 80 per cent of the men in the age group of 45-85 years of age still prefer to have online consultation due to fear of Covid infection keeping their age in mind.

ALWAYS ALERT



Indian army soldiers patrol near Line of control in Poonch district, Wednesday

PTI PHOTO

8 killed, 21 hurt in road accident

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA

Sambhal (UP), Dec 16: Eight people died, while 21 more sustained injuries Wednesday morning when an Uttar Pradesh Roadways bus collided with a gas tanker here amid reduced visibility due to fog, police said.

The crash took place in the Dhanari police station area, they added. "Eight people have died in the accident involving a bus of UP Roadways and a gas tanker. All the injured have been hospitalised. The number of injured persons is 21. The bodies of the deceased have been sent for post-mortem examination. Traffic has been diverted since there is still some gas in the tanker," Moradabad Inspector General of Police (IG) Ramit Sharma said.

Earlier, Superintendent of Police Chakresh Mishra had put the number of injured at 25 and said that the head-on collision took place on the Agra-Moradabad road. Police said the deceased are yet to be identified. District administration and police officials are at the spot and rescue operations are on, they added.

SIKH CLERIC ENDS LIFE

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA

Chandigarh, Dec 16: A Sikh preacher supporting the farmers' agitation against the Centre's agriculture laws allegedly committed suicide near the Singhu border in Delhi Wednesday, police said.

A handwritten note in Punjabi, purportedly left behind by the deceased, says he was unable to bear the "pain of farmers". The note is being verified by police.

An official of the Sonapat police said they had received a call that Sant Ram Singh (65), who hailed from Karnal, allegedly shot himself. The deceased was rushed to a hospital in Panipat where doctors declared him brought dead.

The official said the exact spot where the incident took place is being verified. SAD spokesperson and Delhi Sikh Gurudwara Management Committee president Manjinder Singh Sirsa expressed grief over the incident and urged farmers to exercise restraint.

Technology powering farmers' protest at Singhu border

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA

New Delhi, Dec 16: It's been over two weeks since thousands of farmers arrived at Delhi's Singhu border to demand a repeal of the Centre's agri reforms. Over the days, Good Samaritans, gurdwara committees and NGOs have pooled technological resources to ensure the agitation isn't hampered by the lack of basic amenities.

Gigantic machines that belt out 1,000-1,200 chapattis in an hour, washing machines and solar panels installed on tractor-trolleys for charging mobile phones - technology is keeping the protesters camping at this highway-turned-town-



ship going. The chapatti-makers ensure timely meals for the protesters and that 'langar' is served smoothly till midnight.

"This chapatti-making machine is fully automatic, you just have to put the dough inside. It cuts the dough into circles and in no time you

get the chapattis. "We start the machine around 7 am and it runs till 12 am. We serve meals to over 5,000 people every day," Hardeep Singh from Delhi Sikh Gurdwara Management Committee, which manages one of the 'langars' at the protest site, said.

Living away from the comfort of their homes, another issue faced by the farmers was washing clothes. Initially, some of them bathed and washed their clothes at petrol pumps. But as the temperatures in the national capital dipped and the number of protesters swelled, some farmers and Good Samaritans arranged for washing machines.

On one of his trips back home to

Ludhiana in Punjab to wash his clothes, 30-year-old Prince Sandhu decided to bring two washing machines with him so that he and his fellow protesters didn't have to worry about the chore.

Soon after, someone donated another washing machine and the 'laundry sewa' has been going on in full swing ever since. "Nearly 250 people come here every day to wash their clothes. Many do it on their own. We help out the elderly who don't know how to operate washing machines," said Sandhu, who joined the protest on November 27.

"I wake up at 6 am and help people wash their clothes till 8 pm," he said. Not far from the laundry spot

is Pushpinder Singh's phone charging station. Singh, 36, said he knew protesters would face problems in charging their mobile phones and hence decided to install two 100 watt solar panels atop his tractor trolley before he set out from home in Haryana's Karnal.

"Mobile phones are our only source of knowing what is happening around us. I knew charging them would be a problem. So I bought these two solar panels for Rs 2,400 each before I got here. Not only are they helping us in charging mobile phones but also with lighting," he said. "Now I see many others have also installed solar panels, which is good," he added.

of the day quote

Britain and the European Union have moved closer to sealing a new trade deal but it was still unclear if they would succeed

URSULA VON DER LEYEN | EUROPEAN COMMISSION PRESIDENT

It's not for government to tell people exactly how to handle this pandemic situation

ROBERT JENRICK | UK HOUSING SECRETARY

The hostilities are not just for Trump's America, which ends when he leaves. Obama's America also did bad things to you and the Iranian nation

AYATOLLAH ALI KHAMENEI | IRAN'S SUPREME LEADER

SHORT TAKES

Khamenei hits out at the US

Dubai: Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei on Wednesday used his first public appearance in weeks to suggest the United States would remain hostile towards the Islamic Republic even after President-elect Joe Biden takes office. Speaking at his first public function since rumours surfaced in early December that his health was deteriorating, Khamenei said Washington could not be trusted - a remark indicating a wary attitude towards President Donald Trump's successor.

B'desh celebrates 50th Victory Day

Dhaka: The people of Bangladesh on Wednesday celebrated the 50th Victory Day. On December 16, 1971, Lt. Gen Amir Abdullah Khan Niazi, the Chief Martial Law Administrator of East Pakistan and Commander of Pakistan Army forces located in East Pakistan had signed the Instrument of Surrender the led to the formation of Bangladesh. Niazi had signed the Instrument and Surrender in the presence of Jagjit Singh Aurora, who was representing the Indian and Bangladesh Forces in Dhaka.

PIA clears 110 pilots

Islamabad: The Pakistan Supreme Court was informed that the national flag carrier, Pakistan International Airlines (PIA) has cleared 110 pilots out of the 141 whose licenses had been suspended in the wake of the fake degrees controversy. On Monday, senior advocate Salman Akram Raja, representing the PIA, also informed the three-judge apex court bench headed by Chief Justice Gulzar Ahmed that the airline had cancelled the licences of 15, while 14 others had been declared to be unfit to fly, Dawn news said in a report.

Taliban delegation in Pakistan

Islamabad: A delegation from Taliban's Qatar-based political office is reaching Islamabad Wednesday on a three-day trip for consultations on ongoing Afghan peace process. The delegation led by Taliban's deputy chief for political affairs Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar will meet Prime Minister Imran Khan and Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi during its stay in Islamabad, the Dawn reported.

London enters highest Covid alert

AGENCIES

London, Dec 16: The UK government is reviewing the tiered lockdown allocations for different parts of the country as scheduled by law Wednesday, even as millions of more people in and around London moved into the highest alert level of Tier 3 coronavirus restrictions after a worrying spike in infections.

With the addition of the UK capital and surrounding areas of Essex and Hertfordshire to Tier 3, or near complete lockdown, around 61 per cent of England's population is now living under the toughest lockdown rules which impose a ban on inter-household mingling indoors and a closure of all restaurants and bars except for takeaways and deliveries.

"The number of COVID-19 cases in London has increased significantly over the past two weeks and we continue to experience the highest case rates of anywhere in the country," said Professor Kevin Fenton, London Regional Director for Public Health England.



People party on a street as pubs shut for the night due to tier 3 restrictions in Soho

"We are now in a situation of exponential growth which, if left unchecked, would lead to a rapid escalation in cases and hospitalisations that could overwhelm our NHS (National Health Service) services over the festive period and into the New Year. Whilst no-one wants to see London under tighter restrictions, the stark reality of the situation means we have no choice," he said. The outcome of a review of the tiers for other parts of the country is expected to be announced Thursday. Medical experts have raised concerns over the government's exemption for a so-called "Christmas bubble" to allow up to three households to meet up over the festive period under looser restrictions between December 23 and 27.

UK Housing Secretary Robert Jenrick laid some speculation over a reversal of that policy to rest when he urged the public to "use their own judgement" on who to see over that five days period. "You can come together as three families and bubble for up to five days - but I suspect many, many people across the country will choose to do less than that to protect themselves, their loved ones and broader society," the Cabinet minister told the BBC.

WHO TEAM TO TRAVEL TO CHINA

Geneva, Switzerland: The World Health Organization said Wednesday that a team of international experts would travel to China next month to help investigate the animal origins of Covid-19. "I can confirm that this will take place in January," WHO spokesman Hedinn Halldorsson told AFP when asked about reports that the expert team, which includes epidemiologists and animal health specialists, would finally go to China next month. Meanwhile, the World Health Organisation in Europe warned Wednesday of a "further resurgence" of Covid-19 in early 2021, as it urged families to wear face masks during this year's Christmas gatherings.

BOKO HARAM BEHIND SCHOOLBOYS' ABDUCTION

REUTERS

Maiduguri, Nigeria, Dec 16: A man identifying himself as the leader of Nigeria's Boko Haram said on Tuesday the Islamist group was behind the abduction of more than 300 schoolboys, as anxious parents begged the government to secure their release.

Pupils who escaped kidnap on Friday, by jumping over the fence of the Government Science secondary school in Katsina state in northwestern Nigeria and fleeing through a forest, said the attackers were armed with AK-47 assault rifles and rounded up their victims before marching them off.

Boko Haram, whose name means "Western education is forbidden" in the local Hausa language, has waged an insurgency in the northeast of Nigeria since 2009 but has not previously claimed attacks in the northwest. The claims in the audio tape, if true, could mark a



A view shows an empty classroom with school bags and wares belonging to pupils at the Government Science school where gunmen abducted students

widening influence of jihadist groups operating in northeastern Nigeria, political analysts said.

They could also signal that jihadists have formed alliances with militant groups operating in the Sahel, which could further destabilise the impoverished north of

AUSTRALIA TAKES CHINA TO WTO

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

Sydney, Australia, Dec 16: Australia called Wednesday for the World Trade Organization to investigate Chinese tariffs on barley imports, turning to an "independent umpire" to adjudicate one of several bitter politically tinged disputes between the two nations.

Trade Minister Simon Birmingham denounced Beijing's 80 percent surcharge on Australian barley shipments as "not underpinned by facts and evidence", and suggested further WTO action could be in the pipeline.

"We have continued to raise our concerns with China on numerous occasions," Birmingham said, lamenting that efforts to reach a negotiated settlement had failed.

"We now believe that calling in the independent umpire is the most appropriate course of action to resolve this dispute," he added, admitting the process of arbitration and appeals could take years.

'Trump still involved in ongoing litigation'

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA

Washington, Dec 16: US President Donald Trump is still involved in ongoing litigation related to the November 3 presidential election, according to a top White House official.

The statement from White House Press Secretary Kayleigh McEnany came a day after members of the Electoral College met in various states and formally elected Joe Biden, a Democrat, as the 46th President of the United States. Biden is scheduled to be sworn-in on January 20.

"The president is still involved in ongoing litigation related to the election. Yesterday's vote was one step in the constitutional process. So, I will leave that to him," McEnany told reporters on Tuesday at a news conference.

The hurt and anguish that has been caused in New Zealand's history is inexcusable

CHRIS HIPKINS | MEMBER OF THE NEW ZEALAND PARLIAMENT



LAB-GROWN MEAT

Lab-grown chicken meat will make its debut at a Singapore restaurant in a culinary first this weekend after the company behind the product announced its inaugural sale Wednesday



JOYFUL MOOD



An employee dressed in a Santa Claus costume plays with cats at the Catgarden in Seoul, South Korea



The statement from White House Press Secretary Kayleigh McEnany came a day after members of the Electoral College met in various states and formally elected Joe Biden, a Democrat, as the 46th President of the United States

McEnany was responding to a question if Trump, a Republican, has any plans to invite Biden to the White House now that the Electoral College has voted. "Does the president acknowledge that Joe Biden is the president-elect," she

was asked. "The president is pursuing ongoing litigation," McEnany said. "Yesterday was one step in the constitutional process leading up to the January 20th date in the Constitution," she said.

McEnany defended Trump's litigation against elections. President Trump still refuses to concede, making unsubstantiated claims of widespread fraud during the presidential election won by Biden.

"I think pursuing legitimate litigation through the judicial system is in no way assaulting democracy. In fact, it's using democratic institutions in the manner they are to be used: to pursue legitimate claims with sworn affidavits and additional evidence," she said. Trump, she said, believes he certainly was under assault when it comes to the investigations into his administration. "The Mueller probe, the unfortunate way that our FBI was mishandled by folks like Andy McCabe, by folks like Jim Comey, and weaponised in a political way against his candidacy and then against his presidency," she added.

'Kangaroos can learn to communicate with humans'

REUTERS

Sydney, Dec 16: Kangaroos can learn to communicate with humans similar to how domesticated dogs do, by using their gaze to "point" and ask for help, researchers said in a study published Wednesday.

The study involved 11 kangaroos that lived in captivity but had not been domesticated. Ten of the 11 marsupials intently gazed at researchers when they were unable to open a box with food, according to the report. Nine alternately looked at the human and at the container, as a way of pointing or gesturing toward the object.

"We interpreted this as a deliberate form of communication, a request for help," Alan

McElligott, the Irish researcher who led the study, told Reuters in a call from Hong Kong. "Wild species are not really expected to behave as those subjects were, and that's why it is surprising."

The findings challenge the notion that only domesticated animals such as dogs, horses or goats communicate with humans, and suggests many more animals could grasp how to convey meaning to humans, the paper asserts.

"We've previously thought only domesticated animals try to ask for help with a problem. But kangaroos do it too," concluded co-researcher Alexandra Green from the University of Sydney. "It's more likely to be a learned behaviour when the environment is right."



SPACEX CREW-3 MISSION

Indian-American Raja Chari among 3 astronauts selected by NASA

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA

Washington, Dec 16: Indian-American US Air Force Colonel Raja Chari has been selected as the Commander of the SpaceX Crew-3 mission to the International Space Station (ISS) by NASA and the European Space Agency.

Chari, 43, will serve as the commander while NASA's Tom Marshburn will be pilot and ESA's Matthias Maurer will serve as a mission specialist for the SpaceX Crew-3 mission to the ISS, which is expected to be launched next year.

A fourth crew member will be added at a later date, following a review by NASA and its international partners, NASA said in a statement Monday.

"Excited and honored to be train-

ing with @astro_matthias and @AstroMarshburn in prep for a trip to the @Space_Station," Chari said in a tweet Monday. "Proud to be working and training with Matthias Maurer and Thomas Henry Marshburn in preparation for a mission to the International Space Station aboard the SpaceX Crew Dragon," he posted on his Facebook page.

This will be the first spaceflight for Chari, who became a NASA astronaut in 2017. He was born in Milwaukee, but considers Cedar Falls, Iowa, his hometown, NASA said.

He is a colonel in the US Air Force and joins the mission with extensive experience as a test pilot. He has accumulated more than 2,500 hours of flight time in his career.



Raja Chari

Chari was selected earlier this month as a member of the Artemis Team and is now eligible for assignment to a future lunar mission, it said in a statement.

Chari's father Srinivas Chari came to the US at a young age from

Hyderabad for an engineering degree. "It's official... Next stop: International @Space_Station! In late 2021, I'll fly to humankind's orbital outpost for the first time, continuing our quest to discover more in space for #Earth. Get ready for

#cosmickiss - a declaration of love for space," Maurer tweeted.

Maurer comes from Sankt Wendel, in the German state of Saarland. Like Chari, Maurer will be making his first trip to space with the Crew-3 mission. Before becoming an astronaut, Maurer held a number of engineering and research roles, both in a university setting and at European Space Agency (ESA).

Marshburn is a Statesville, North Carolina, native who became an astronaut in 2004. Prior to serving in the astronaut corps, the medical doctor served as a flight surgeon at NASA's Johnson Space Center in Houston and later became medical operations lead for the International Space Station. The Crew-3 mission will be his third visit to the space

station and his second long-duration mission. When Chari, Marshburn, and Maurer arrive at the orbiting laboratory, they will become expedition crew members for the duration of their six-month stay. The crew will have a slight overlap with the Crew-2 astronauts, who are expected to launch in the spring of 2021. This will not be the first commercial crew mission to overlap. The Crew-1 astronauts, who are currently on the station, and the Crew-2 astronauts, also are expected to coincide in their sojourns for a short time. Increasing the total number of astronauts aboard the station is allowing the agency to boost the number of science investigations conducted in the unique microgravity environment, NASA said.

