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NEARBY



90% support free Metro rides for women: AAP

NEW DELHI
The Aam Aadmi Party on Tuesday said that over 90% of the 71,592 people the party surveyed supported the Delhi government's plan to allow free rides for women in metro trains and government-run buses. AAP Delhi in-charge Gopal Rai said the party had reached out to people and 64,972 respondents had supported the scheme.
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6-year-old girl sexually assaulted by neighbour

NEW DELHI
A six-year-old girl was sexually assaulted allegedly by her 45-year-old neighbour in Outer North Delhi's Bawana on Tuesday, the police said. The accused was nabbed and thrashed by the locals, they said. A senior officer said the Class II student had gone to buy something when she went missing.
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Kota MP Om Birla named as NDA's choice for Speaker's post

He will assume office today after being elected by Lok Sabha members

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT NEW DELHI

Two-term BJP MP from Rajasthan Om Birla will be the new Speaker of the Lok Sabha, after he was nominated by the ruling NDA for the post.

Mr. Birla has been a three-term MLA in the Rajasthan Assembly, and represents the Kota constituency in the Lok Sabha. He will assume office on Wednesday after being elected by the MPs.

Minister for Parliamentary Affairs Pralhad Joshi said that apart from Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Defence Minister Rajnath Singh, Home Minister Amit Shah, and Roads and Highways Minister Nitin Gadkari were the proposers of Mr. Birla.

"The Biju Janata Dal (BJD), the Shiv Sena, the National People's Party, the Mizo National Front, the Akali Dal, the Lok Janshakti Party, the YSRCP, the Janata Dal (United), the AIADMK and the Apna Dal have signed the proposal," said Mr. Joshi.

Congress to back him

The BJP also reached out to the Congress during the day, and by evening, the newly appointed leader of the Congress in the Lok Sabha, Adhir Ranjan Choudhary, said his party too would support Mr.



A happy lot: Om Birla being greeted by his wife, second from right, and family in New Delhi on Tuesday. • SANDEEP SAKENA

Birla's candidature. While it is the norm for experienced MPs to be considered for the position, it will not be the first time that a second-term MP will be appointed.

Before this, Balram Jakhar was Speaker between 1980 and 1989 in his first and second terms respectively. Manohar Joshi of the Shiv Sena was appointed Speaker in his first term in the Lok Sabha, while the late G.M.C. Bhalayogi of the TDP got the position in his second term.

The choice of Mr. Birla, although disclosed at the last moment, is not surprising, with the BJP sending out several signals with one appointment.

A man with an RSS background, Mr. Birla is also an

influential member of the Agarwal community, a bedrock of the BJP's support.

A BJP man from the beginning, he has also been parliamentary secretary with the rank of Minister of State in the Vasundhara Raje government between 2003 and 2008.

In State politics, he is not considered very close to the Raje camp, but enjoys the confidence of Mr. Modi. He has been popular among party members for much generosity, lending out his official bungalow to indigent party workers and helping out those in need of medical assistance.

A LONG-TIME ASSOCIATE OF MODI AND SHAH ▶ PAGE 12

Adhir Ranjan Chowdhury is Cong. LS leader

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT NEW DELHI

Former West Bengal Congress chief Adhir Ranjan Chowdhury will be the party's leader in the Lok Sabha. K. Suresh from Kerala will be designated as the Chief Whip.

Though the Congress did not make any official announcement, Congress Parliamentary Party chairperson Sonia Gandhi was seen informing other Opposition leaders of the choice on the floor of the House, including Sudip Bandopadhyaya of Trinamool Congress.

The decision came after an early morning meeting of Congress MPs, at which president Rahul Gandhi was present. Though there were reports that Mr. Gandhi could lead the Congress in the Lok Sabha, he seemed to have turned down any such suggestion. In the 16th Lok Sabha, Mallikarjun Kharge was the Congress leader and Jyotiraditya Scindia was the Chief Whip.

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An unrelenting scourge



Worrying numbers: A boy with symptoms of Acute Encephalitis Syndrome, which has claimed the lives of 109 children so far, being shifted to a hospital in Bihar's Muzaffarpur on Tuesday. Chief Minister Nitish Kumar ran into a protest when he visited a hospital. • PTI (PAGE 9)

Owner of car used in Pulwama attack among 2 JeM men killed

PEERZADA ASHIQ SRINAGAR

Two Jaish-e-Muhammad (JeM) militants, including a member of its suicide squad whose vehicle was used to carry out the Pulwama attack on February 14, were killed in an operation of the security forces in Anantnag on Tuesday.

A soldier also died in the

gunfight. The police said the militants, identified as Sajad Ahmad Bhat and Tawseef Ahmad Bhat from Bijbehara, were surrounded by the forces around 4 a.m. at Marhama village in Anantnag, "following a tip-off about their presence." "In the exchange of fire, both militants were killed," said the police.

Sajad Bhat, according to

the police, was wanted in the Lethpora car blast in Pulwama, which left 40 CRPF jawans dead.

"The investigation revealed that the Maruti Eco vehicle, used to carry out the suicide attack, was owned by him," said the police.

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Uptick for India on sanitation in UN report

Major drop seen in open defecation

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT NEW DELHI

India has made great gains in providing basic sanitation facilities since the start of the millennium, accounting for almost two-thirds of the 650 million people globally who stopped practising open defecation between 2000 and 2017.

However, a monitoring report by UN organisations released on Tuesday shows that there has been absolutely no growth in the population with access to piped water facilities over that period, while large inequalities remain between rural and urban areas.

As for drinking water, the Joint Monitoring Programme report by UNICEF and WHO shows India has increased the percentage of



Inequalities remain in piped water supply between rural and urban areas.

its population with access to a protected drinking water source less than 30 minutes away, from 79% in 2000 to 93% in 2017.

However, the percentage of households getting piped water has remained stagnant at 44% over the 17-year period.

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Delhi goes looking for giraffes in Thailand zoos

Zoo director asks for the animal in exchange programme

NIKHIL M BABU NEW DELHI

The National Zoological Park, better known as Delhi zoo, has not had a single giraffe for the last four years. The zoo authorities have now written to three zoos in Thailand for the animal through an exchange programme.

Thailand has 24 giraffes in seven of its zoos and the NZP has asked for five of them, an official privy to the development said.

In 2015, Delhi zoo's last giraffe, eight-year-old Ankit, died after suffering a heart attack and kidney failure.

Since then multiple attempts have been made for the zoo to acquire a giraffe. "In the past two years since I



Ankit (left), the last giraffe at Delhi zoo, died in 2015. • FILE PHOTO

took charge, we have written to several other zoos for giraffes in exchange programmes," NZP director Re-

nu Singh told *The Hindu*. Earlier this month, they wrote to zoos in Mysuru and Patna for giraffes and are still awaiting their response.

"To maintain the animal collection and fulfil the objective of imparting education, I hereby propose an animal exchange programme with your esteemed institute," read Ms. Singh's letters sent to the three zoos in Thailand on Tuesday. The letters have been sent along with a list of Delhi zoo's surplus animals, including blackbucks and spotted deer.

"We have an enclosure ready for the giraffes. It has been cleaned and prepared," the zoo director said.

Life term for 4 in Ayodhya terror attack

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ALLAHABAD

A special court here has sentenced four persons to life imprisonment and acquitted one in connection with the 2005 terror attack on a makeshift temple at the Ram Janmabhoomi-Babri Masjid complex in Ayodhya in which two locals were killed and seven CRPF personnel injured.

Special judge Dinesh Chandra, who announced the verdict inside the Naini Central Jail where the accused are lodged, also imposed a fine of ₹2.4 lakh on each of the four, Public Prosecutor Gulab Chandra Agrahari told reporters here. He said those who got life imprisonment were Doctor Irrfan, Shakeel Ahmed, Asif Iqbal and Mohammed Naseem.

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A Pakistani fan video that tickles all

23-year-old Lahore man, who is based in London, trolls the fitness levels of the team

NAMRATA JOSHI MUMBAI

One of the biggest takeaways of the India-Pakistan CWC 2019 match on Sunday was the show of self-deprecating humour by Pakistani fans, manifesting most prominently in their sporting tweets in the face of defeat.

The blockbuster of the day, however, was 23-year-old London-based Lahore man Momin Saqib's "burger-pizzzey-Hico ice cream" gig about a Pakistani fan's pain at the abominable fitness levels of the team.

The hyper melodramatic-comic tone and the relatable "Punjabiness" of the act made it go viral on social media in India as well, and it is still regaling many online. "People are happily sharing the video and editing clips



Comic relief: Momin Saqib's meme on the Pakistani cricket team has gone viral.

into other relevant memes as well," Mr. Saqib told *The Hindu* in an email exchange.

Shot outside Old Trafford, Manchester, the meltdown of the fan is set up like a spontaneous interview. While Momin vents his feelings on the 'betrayal' by captain Sarfaraz Ahmed and how the world came crashing down at the score

of 119, his elder brother, Bilal bin Saqib, wipes his simulated tears with the country's flag. "Everything that happened [in the video] was spur-of-the-moment and totally impromptu," he said.

Mr. Saqib's cricket videos have been popular in Pakistan for a while but this one worked in both sides of

the border. People in Pakistan have been able to relate to it due to the shared disappointment and displeasure that he expressed whereas in India it is the humour that has attracted the audience.

Part of the game

The fun has come as a refreshing relief in the "war zones" that India-Pakistan cricket matches seem to have become of late. Mr. Saqib thinks that cricketer rivalry is equally prevalent in India and Pakistan and both the nations know that winning and losing is part of the game. "Since the emergence of social media's meme trend, we have been able to handle defeat with humour for quite a long time now and that beautifies the game itself," he says.

Many Oppn. leaders to skip Modi's meet

SOBHANA K. NAIR SANDEEP PHUKAN NEW DELHI

Leaders of many Opposition parties are likely to skip the meeting called by Prime Minister Narendra Modi to discuss his "one nation, one election" proposal.

They include Dravida

Munnetra Kazhagam president M.K. Stalin, Trinamool chief Mamata Banerjee, Telugu Desam Party chief N. Chandrababu Naidu and Nationalist Congress Party leader Sharad Pawar.

The issue was discussed at the first floor coordination meeting chaired by Con-

gress Parliamentary Party leader Sonia Gandhi on Tuesday evening. Though Congress chief Rahul Gandhi attended the coordination meeting, he refused to answer whether he would take part in Mr. Modi's meeting.

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