

SHORT TAKES

C-17 AIRCRAFT TO CARRY MED AID TO CHINA

New Delhi, Feb. 18: India will send a C-17 military aircraft to Wuhan on February 20 to evacuate more Indians from the coronavirus-hit Chinese city and also provide medical supplies to China, military sources said on Tuesday.

The C-17 Globemaster, the biggest military aircraft in the Air Force, will carry a large consignment of medical supplies to China and bring back more Indians from Wuhan, the epicentre of the coronavirus epidemic, the sources said.

According to the ministry of external affairs, the government till now has evacuated 640 Indians from China by sending Air India planes.

Last week, India had announced that it will send medicines as well as other medical supplies to China.

Meanwhile, the six Indians infected with the novel coronavirus on board the quarantined cruise ship off the Japanese coast were responding well to the treatment, the Indian embassy here said on Tuesday even as 88 new cases of the deadly disease were reported on the vessel, taking the total number of confirmed infections to 542.

China's National Health Commission on Tuesday said the death toll due to the outbreak climbed to 1,868 on Monday while the total number of confirmed cases jumped to 72,436.

OPENNESS TRAIT OF HINDUS: RSS

New Delhi, Feb. 18: Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh chief Mohan Bhagwat is learned to have told a group of columnists on Tuesday that "openness" is a characteristic of Hindus and it should be preserved, adding that the community needed to be "awakened", but not against anyone.

Bhagwat held the day-long closed-door meeting in Delhi's Chhattarpur area with 70 columnists from across the country in an effort to clear misconceptions about the organisation. Few columnists who were present at the meeting were of the opinion that it was "fruitful discussion" on wide-ranging topics. "Openness is the characteristic of Hindus, that must be preserved," a columnist quoted Bhagwat as saying.

Underlining that Hindus should be united and alert, Bhagwat said, "Hindus are to be awakened, but not against anyone. They need not to be reactionary. We don't classify anyone. We don't doubt anyone," the RSS leader said.

On the CAA and protests against it, Bhagwat reiterated that the law could be disliked or demanded to be changed, but buses cannot be burnt or public property destroyed. "That is not democracy. But now they are waving Indian flags, holding the Constitution and even saying 'Bharat Mata Ki Jai'. So who's changing? Who's winning," he asked.

CONG-BJP ROW UNCOVERS MURDER

RABINDRA NATH CHOUDHURY | DC BHOPAL, FEB. 18

Gruesome killing of an 85-year-old woman at a village in Madhya Pradesh allegedly by her own daughter and grandson has been uncovered, thanks to the tussle between Opposition BJP and ruling Congress over her death.

The state government sprang to action by ordering the local police to probe death of Jini Bai Uike in Rani Kamat village under Chhindwara district, after former chief minister and BJP national vice-president Shivraj Singh Chouhan tagged a story which appeared in some Hindi dailies narrating how poverty has driven her family members to pack her body in a sack and throw it in the pond since they could not perform her funeral rites, on his Twitter wall.

Jini's body was found on the bank of the village pond on Saturday. The local media quoted the kin of the deceased as saying that they could not afford the "luxury" of performing her funeral rites owing to poverty and hence threw her body in the pond.

However, the police probe has revealed that the deceased's daughter Phulbati and her son Panji bundled jinni Bai in a sack when she was alive and threw it in the local water body, considering her as a liability to them.



In this handout photo provided by the ITBP, people who were airlifted from Wuhan following outbreak of the deadly novel coronavirus, stand in a queue to collect release certificates before leaving from the quarantine facility at Chhawla in New Delhi on Tuesday. — PTI

Doctor opts to serve in China

A. ARUL PALANI | DC CHENNAI, FEB. 18

A young plastic surgeon hailing from India had two options before him when the deadly novel coronavirus broke out in China last month. One was to return to his country or stay back and treat COVID-19 hit patients in China, which amounts to waging a battle against coronavirus. As a doctor, he chose the second option.

A video showing Amish Vyas treating patients in the hospital in China went viral on social media. The video published by 'China Global Television Network' television channel stated that a courageous doctor decided to stay in China and provide treatment to victims of the novel coronavirus outbreak, instead of returning back to his country, even after pressure from his mother to

come home. Amish Vyas, a native of Ratlam, Madhya Pradesh, is currently living in Hangzhou in Southeast China, with his wife and daughter, and works at a quarantine camp for suspected coronavirus patients. Vyas studied medicine in China, and works as a plastic surgeon, and has been living in Hangzhou since 2014.

In the video, Amish Vyas said, "As a doctor I am not afraid of any infection. Only thing I would like to say to my fellow physicians and surgeons is that we are all one team, and just keep doing what you are doing. We are all together. We are one team all over the world."

In the same video, his mother, Kavitha Vyas, said "I talk to my son every day. But there is nothing I can do. I am in dilemma now. But it's my son's passion."

OVER 240 RELEASED FROM QUARANTINE

PAWAN BALI | DC NEW DELHI, FEB. 18

As many as 248 Indians, mostly students who were evacuated from coronavirus-affected Wuhan area of China were discharged on Tuesday from Indian Army's Manesar quarantine facility. These people have completed the quarantine period of 14 days and were tested negative for the coronavirus by AIIMS Virology department.

Air India aircraft on January 31 and February 1 had evacuate about 600 people from Wuhan. They were then quarantined in Army's Manesar quarantine facility and ITBP facility in Delhi's Chhawla area.

"All of these 248 persons in the Manesar quarantine facility were declared fit and are being sent back to their homes on Tuesday," said sources.

China returnee died of renal failure: Govt

The deceased was running a small restaurant in China

R. VALAYAPATHY | DC PUDUKKOTTAI, FEB. 18

Seeking to put to rest the controversy over the suspected death of a China returnee in Tamil Nadu's Pudukkottai district, allegedly due to the novel Coronavirus (Covid-19) infection, the public health authorities said here on Tuesday that the patient, 42-year-old Sakthikumar, died of renal failure in the wake of him having suffered from jaundice for quite a long time.

Sakthikumar of Avudayarkovil near Arantangi in Pudukkottai district of Tamil Nadu, it may be recalled was entering enough to run a small restaurant in China, had recently returned to his village after an attack

of jaundice. He was forced to fly back to China to run his restaurant, following anxieties over lack of sufficient number of people to take care of his eatery there.

When his jaundice turned severe, he had no other option but to again return home on February 4. Subsequently, he was admitted to a private hospital in Madurai on Friday last, but unfortunately died on Saturday, not responding to treatment, sources in his family said.

Clearing the air over the proximate cause of Sakthikumar's death, amid suspicions that he was perhaps the first Indian Covid-19 victim since his return from China, Dr B Kalaivani, deputy director of public health services, Pudukkottai, told *Deccan Chronicle* over the phone on Tuesday that though the patient had tested negative for the 'nCoV virus', he was asked to remain in his village.

But as his health condition deteriorated, his family admitted him to a private hospital in Madurai where he died on Saturday, clarified the official.

To a question, she said the district administration periodically receives the list of people who have returned from China and "there is no chance of missing" any China

returnee from being checked by the health department's surveillance.

But the deceased was absconding for a few days, which might have given room for speculation in the social media posts.

The official further said her department staff since Monday had put the family members of the deceased on daily surveillance, and screening them for any symptoms of nCoV infection.

As many as 118 people in and around Aranthangi area who had returned from China recently are under the daily surveillance of the public health department, added Dr Kalaivani to drive home that nothing was amiss from the health authorities side.

China allots \$11.4bn to fight virus

DC CORRESPONDENT with agency inputs NEW DELHI, FEB. 18

With China facing enormous pressure following the disastrous Coronavirus outbreak in Wuhan and other parts of Hubei province, Chinese ambassador Sun Weidong sought to put up a brave face on Tuesday, claiming that "it is easier to shake a mountain than China".

"China's economy is stable and strong like a mountain. The fierce wind could blow down the trees but not the mountain. What I want to say is that it's easier to shake a mountain than China," Sun was quoted by news agencies, as saying.

The Chinese envoy said China's confidence to deal with the epidemic came from the country's strong

economy, stating, "As the world's second largest economy, our economic strength is the strong material foundation for us to win this battle." He added the Chinese government has allocated more than 80 billion RMB (Renminbe — also known as Chinese Yuan) (USD 11.4 billion) for epidemic prevention and control. He added that banks and financial institutions have provided more than 537 billion RMB in credit to fight against the epidemic.

"The epidemic has brought certain impact on some industries such as transportation, tourism and catering as well as small and medium-sized enterprises. In the short term, the downward pressure on China's economy will increase, but the impact is still local, temporary and limited," Mr Sun was quoted.

Mr Sun said China has taken the most comprehensive and rigorous prevention and control measures to win the battle against coronavirus at the earliest, asserting that the country has sufficient resources and policy tools to cope with economic fluctuations. At the same time, he said that a virus is a "borderless and a common threat to everyone in the world" and joint efforts are required to combat it.

He also said there is no case of infection as of today among the remaining Indians in Hubei province, the epicentre of the epidemic, and authorities are taking "good care" of them. The Chinese Ambassador appreciated India for extending soli-

darity and expressing readiness to assist China to deal with the epidemic, but significantly stressed that there should not be any restrictions on trade and movement of people between the two neighbours.

It may be recalled that India had earlier this month barred the entry of foreigners who have visited China on or after January 15, 2020, adding that all "visas issued to Chinese passport-holders including regular (sticker) as well as e-visas issued prior to February 5, 2020, have been suspended with immediate effect."

China has been reeling under coronavirus outbreak triggering global health concerns as well as apprehensions about negative impact on the country's economy.

Doctor seeks help to get mother's body from China

DC CORRESPONDENT MUMBAI, FEB. 18

A doctor from Mumbai has sought help from the Indian government to get his mother's body back from China, which is hit by the coronavirus epidemic.

The body of Rita Mehra is currently at the morgue of Henan Province Provincial Hospital in Zhengzhou, China since Jan. 24.

Dentist Puneet Mehra (35) mentioned that three weeks ago on January 24, while he was returning to Mumbai with his 63-year-old mother Rita Mehra from Australia, she died on board due to heart attack. The Air China flight made an emergency

landing at Zhengzhou Airport and the body was taken to the morgue of the provincial hospital there. Puneet Mehra returned on February 7, but his mother's body is still at the morgue.

The doctor has written to President Ram Nath Kovind, office of the External Affairs Ministry and the Ambassador of India in Beijing seeking help in getting back the body so that her last rites can be performed here with due respect.

Dr Mehra said, "I am trying hard to get my mother's dead body back, despite writing to the Central government there is still no sign of my mother's dead body being

brought to India."

In a letter to the family, an Indian Embassy official said, "The Chinese government has taken unprecedented measures to control the epidemic, which is not willing to subsidise so far. In nutshell, it is not normal and an ordinary time that China is facing. The overall situation is extraordinary and completely abnormal necessitating the government to take any conceivable step to contain the spread."

The official added, "However, we will try our hardest and hope as well as pray that we succeed. We will let you know any development or update in this regard the moment it comes."

KASHMIR | IMBROGLIO Mehbooba Mufti's daughter says Indian govt should be sued, demands compensation

Iltija questions detentions, claims bleak future for Kashmir

DC CORRESPONDENT NEW DELHI, FEB. 18

Days after former Jammu and Kashmir chief minister Mehbooba Mufti was slapped with the Public Safety Act while remaining under detention, her daughter Iltija on Tuesday said she felt Kashmir was looking at a very bleak future. She also indicated the possibility of suing the Central government and demanding compensation from it.

Talking to reporters at the Indian Women's Press Corps here, she said, "I think the government should be sued. We should demand compensation". On

being questioned again, she said, "Where else can we go (but the courts). Who else can we go to?"

Iltija, who also questioned the Internet shutdown in Kashmir for over seven months since the abrogation of Article 370 in August, as well as the continued detention of three former chief ministers, including her mother, said while she was a proud Indian, this was not the country she grew up in. "I am a proud Indian, we are now becoming a Hindu Pakistan. I have full respect for the Prime Minister. Either he is being misled or is wilfully misleading the country".



Iltija Mufti during a press interaction at the Indian Women's Press Corps in New Delhi on Tuesday. — PTI

She further added, "I am not anti-India because I am speaking against the BJP, my loyalty lies with the country, it is not mortgaged to the BJP. I am not

at all popular. Kashmiris are angry with my mother, I don't claim I represent Kashmiris".

Iltija replied that she had no plans as of now, but could not commit about the future. "J&K is a political problem. Wounds need to heal. I am doing this because when history is written, I do not want to be on the wrong side," she said.

Questioned on the perceived unpopularity of existing politicians like Omar Abdullah, Farooq Abdullah and Mehbooba Mufti, she said just like it was not possible to hold elections in India without the BJP and the Congress, it was not possible to hold elections in J&K without the PDP and National Conference.

Singhvi backs govt on deporting British MP

DC CORRESPONDENT NEW DELHI, FEB. 18

The e-business visa of British MP Debbie Abrahams was revoked for her alleged involvement in anti-Indian activities and the decision to cancel the visa was conveyed to her on February 14 itself, senior officials claimed.

The Congress, meanwhile, backed the government on this issue on

Tuesday. Party leader Abhishek "Manu" Singhvi claimed she was not just an MP but a "Pakistan proxy". Singhvi tweeted, "The deportation of Debbie Abrahams by India was indeed necessary, as she is not just an MP, but a Pak proxy known for her clasp with Pak govt and ISI. Every attempt that tries to attack India's sovereignty must be thwarted."

IN BRIEF

UK PM, wife reach divorce settlement

London: British Prime Minister Boris Johnson and his estranged wife Marina Wheeler have reached a financial agreement for their divorce, court records showed on Tuesday. Lawyers for Johnson and Wheeler attended a brief private hearing at the Central Family Court in London. Judge Sarah Gibbons barred the media from reporting financial details of the settlement. The judge gave Wheeler permission to apply for a divorce decree that will formally end the couple's marriage. Johnson and Wheeler, a lawyer, married in 1993 and have four children. They announced in September 2018 that they had separated and planned to divorce. Johnson, 55, now lives with 31-year-old partner Carrie Symonds in the prime minister's official residence, 10 Downing Street.

Justice for Mehek gains momentum

London: A group of human rights activists and Indian diaspora representatives have been staging protests outside the Pakistan High Commission here as part of a 'Justice for Mehek Kumari' campaign, a minor Hindu girl who was abducted and forcibly converted to Islam in Pakistan. The campaign has called for protests on social media since Sunday and gathered outside the Pakistan mission in central London with placards reading 'Stand up for Human Rights'. "We are here in support of Mehek Kumari," said one protester. Kumari, 14, was reportedly abducted last month by a man in the Jacobabad district of Sindh province in Pakistan. She has claimed being forcibly converted to Islam, leading to radical clerics issuing a death sentence against her.

Ex-coast guard chief charged

Seoul: A former South Korean coast guard chief was indicted Tuesday for allegedly bungling rescue operations at one of the country's deadliest maritime disasters, when more than 300 people were killed, most of them schoolchildren. The 6,825-tonne *Sewol* capsized off the south coast in April 2014, and many of the students — who were on a school trip — obeyed orders to stay in their cabins as the vessel slowly sank. The disaster triggered intense public fury when it emerged then-president Park Geun-hye was uncontactable for several hours as the disaster unfolded. Kim Suk-kyoon, who led the coast guard at the time of the accident, was indicted on accusations of "professional negligence resulting in death" for failing to take necessary rescue action, said a prosecution representative. He is the most senior official to face criminal trial over the sinking, but another 10 current and former coast guard officers were also indicted on the same charges. *Sewol's* captain Lee Joon-seok was convicted of negligence and murder in 2015.

SEARCH ON FOR MISSING MIGRANTS

Barcelona, Feb. 18: Spain on Tuesday was searching for some 143 people missing on five migrant boats en route to the Canary Islands in the Atlantic Ocean, according to Spain's maritime rescue service. A Civil Guard plane was searching for the boats near the islands of Lanzarote and Fuerteventura, off the northwest coast of Africa, the service said. Authorities were alerted about the missing boats on Monday afternoon. Helena Maleno, of the human rights group Walking Borders, told reporters the migrants, including women and children, are believed to have departed from the northwest coast of Africa between Friday and Saturday. Although the total number of sea crossings to Spain decreased by more than 50% in 2019, arrivals via the dangerous Atlantic route to the Canary Islands doubled. According to the International Organization for Migration at least 210 people died on that route last year.

Breaking bread



United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres (C) eats food along with Pakistan's religious affairs minister Noor-ul-Haq Qadri (L) during his visit to the Sikh Shrine of Guru Nanak Dev at Gurdwara Darbar Sahib in Kartarpur near the Pakistan-India border on Tuesday. Guterres said the opening of the Kartarpur Sahib Corridor was a practical example of Pakistan's desire for peace and inter-faith harmony, as he visited the revered Gurdwara Darbar Sahib, the final resting place of Sikhism founder Guru Nanak Dev. A Sikh boy presented him a bouquet — AFP

Pak stays on terror funding 'grey list'

Escapes new FATF sanctions, final decision on Friday

DC CORRESPONDENT with agency inputs NEW DELHI, FEB. 18

A sub-group of the global anti-terror watchdog Financial Action Task Force (FATF) on Tuesday recommended continuation of Pakistan in the 'Grey List' for its failure to check terror funding and a final decision will be taken on February 21, according to news agency reports. The decision was reportedly taken at a meeting of the FATF's International Co-operation Review Group (ICRG), held at the ongoing Paris plenary. "The ICRG meeting, sub group of the FATF, has recommended to retain Pakistan in the 'Grey List'. A final decision will be taken on Friday when the FATF takes up issues concerning Pakistan," sources were quoted as stating. Other government sources meanwhile told this newspaper that any decision by a sub-group would have to be placed before the FATF plenary for endorsement. Pakistan is trying to

2 Saeed cases in Lahore court now

Lahore, Feb. 18: An anti-terrorism court in Pakistan on Tuesday transferred two terror financing cases against Mumbai attack mastermind and Jamaat-ud-Dawa chief Hafiz Saeed to Lahore on his request. Saeed, a UN designated terrorist on whom the US has placed a \$10 million bounty, was arrested on July 17 in the terror financing cases. The 70-year-old fiery cleric is lodged at the high-security Kot Lakhpat jail here. Lahore High Court Chief Justice Mamoon Rashid Sheikh held the hearing

and terrorism". It had also added that "progress by Pakistan and other countries that present a risk to the financial system" will be evaluated. New Delhi is also keeping a close watch on developments and will be reminding the world about how Pakistan has failed to live up to its promises of ending support to terror groups. Pakistan is trying to wriggle out of the grey list with the help of its all-weather friend China and other nations like Malaysia and Turkey besides certain Western nations whom it is trying to convince. The FATF's 'grey list' comprises nations like Pakistan who are seen to have failed to fulfil their obligations to combat terror-financing. In what was seen as a desperate attempt by Islamabad to convince the world about its intentions on tackling terror, a Pakistani anti-terrorism court had last week convicted Mumbai terror attack mastermind Hafiz Saeed on terrorism-related charges.

PAKISTAN TESTS AIR-LAUNCHED CRUISE MISSILE

Islamabad, Feb. 18: Pakistan conducted a successful flight test of the air launched nuclear-capable cruise missile Ra'ad-II with a range of 600 km on Tuesday, significantly boosting the military's "deterrence capability" on land and at sea. The Ra'ad-II weapon system is equipped with state-of-the-art guidance and navigation systems ensuring engagement of targets with high precision, according to a press release issued by the Inter-Services Public Relations, the military's media wing. The cruise missile with a range of 600 km significantly enhances air delivered strategic standoff capability on land and at sea, it said. The successful flight test was witnessed by senior Pakistan Army officers and military officials, the statement said. Pakistan's development of the Ra'ad could be seen as an attempt to match India's BrahMos cruise missile, according to the US-based Defense Advocacy Alliance. It also said that currently this missile is planned to be attached to Mirage aircraft or F-16 fighter jets. —PTI

Ghani secures second term

Kabul, Feb. 18: Ashraf Ghani has secured a second term as president of Afghanistan, according to final results of the September 28, 2019, poll released on Tuesday by the country's election commission. "The election commission... declares Mr Ashraf Ghani, who has won 50.64 per cent of the votes, as the president of Afghanistan," election commission chief Hawa Alam Nuristani told a press conference in Kabul. "May God help him in serving the people of Afghanistan... I also pray that peace comes to our country," she added. The results had been delayed for nearly five months after allegations of vote-rigging from Ghani's main rival, Afghanistan's Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah, forced a recount. The delay left Afghanistan facing a political crisis just as the US seeks a deal with the Taliban which would allow it to withdraw troops in return for various security guarantees and a promise that the militants would hold peace talks with the Afghan government. If all goes well, then Ghani is likely to be the man sitting across from the Taliban at the negotiating table in a bid to



Ashraf Ghani

chart Afghanistan's future. Earlier this week, Abdullah's team said they would not accept fraudulent results. Current Vice-President Abdul Rashid Dostum, a powerful Uzbek former warlord and Abdullah's ally, has also threatened to form a parallel government if fraudulent election results are announced. Abdullah lost to Ghani in 2014 in a divisive election that saw the US intervene to broker an awkward power-sharing deal between the two rivals. Nearly one million of the initial 2.7 million votes were purged owing to irregularities, meaning the election saw by far the lowest turnout of any Afghan poll. Ultimately, only 1.8 million votes were counted — a tiny number given Afghanistan's estimated population of 35 million and 9.6 million registered voters. —AFP

Bloomberg makes it to Dem debate

Washington, Feb. 18: Billionaire Mike Bloomberg has qualified for the upcoming Democratic presidential debate, marking the first time he'll stand alongside the rivals he has so far avoided by bypassing the early voting states and using his personal fortune to define himself through television ads. A new NPR/PBS NewsHour/Marist poll published on Tuesday shows Bloomberg with 19 per cent support nationally in the Democratic nominating contest. The former New York City mayor, who launched his presidential campaign in November, will appear in Wednesday's debate in Las Vegas alongside former Vice-President Joe Biden, Senators Bernie Sanders, Elizabeth Warren and Amy Klobuchar and former South Bend, Indiana, Mayor Pete Buttigieg. Fellow billionaire and philanthropist Tom Steyer is still hoping to

qualify. Bloomberg's campaign said that it was seeing "a groundswell of support across the country" and that qualifying for Wednesday's debate "is the latest sign that Mike's plan and ability to defeat Donald Trump is resonating" with more Americans. —AP

SEX ABUSE: BOY SCOUTS FILE FOR BANKRUPTCY

Washington, Feb. 18: The Boy Scouts of America filed for bankruptcy Tuesday in what it said was an effort to safeguard compensation payouts for sexual abuse victims. The organization has been accused of covering up generations of abuse inflicted on thousands of its young members and failing to do enough to root out pedophiles using the youth movement to prey on minors over its 110-year history. Bankruptcy proceedings will help the Boy Scouts to "equitably compensate" victims through the establishment of a victims' compensation trust and allow the organization to continue at a local level, a statement from the group said. "The BSA cares deeply about all victims of abuse and sincerely apologises to anyone who was harmed during their time in Scouting," chief executive Roger Mosby said in the statement. More than 12,000 members of the Boy Scouts had been sexually abused since 1944, victims' lawyer Jeff Anderson said last year. He also said files maintained by the Boy Scouts listed more than 7,900 alleged perpetrators of sexual abuse. —AFP

Turkey ramps up Gulen crackdown

Ankara, Feb. 18: Turkish prosecutors have issued detention warrants against 695 people suspected of links to the US-based Muslim cleric blamed by Turkey for a failed coup attempt in 2016, state media reported Tuesday. The warrants were issued as part of a crackdown on the network led by cleric Fethullah Gulen that continues nearly four years after the attempted coup. Turkish authorities maintain that the group remains a national security threat. Anadolu Agency said

prosecutors were seeking the detention of 467 alleged Gulen followers who are suspected of cheating in a police superintendent promotion examination in 2009. Police were conducting simultaneous raids in 67 provinces across Turkey, the agency reported. Gulen, who has lived in self-imposed exile in the United States since 1999, denies involvement in the coup attempt. Turkish authorities and critics of Gulen charge that many have in their hearts against the country," he said, referring to US ally

Voting a religious duty: Khamenei

Tehran, Feb. 18: Iran's supreme leader said on Tuesday it is a "religious duty" for people to vote in this week's general election and strengthen the Islamic republic against the "propaganda" of its enemies. "Participating in elections and voting... is a religious duty, not just a national or revolutionary duty," Ayatollah Ali Khamenei said in a speech, parts of which were aired on state television. "Elections nullify many of the vicious plots the Americans have in their minds and Zionists have in their hearts against the country," he said, referring to US ally

● **IRAN SENTENCED** eight environmental activists, including an Iranian who reportedly also has British and American citizenship, to prison sentences ranging from four to 10 years on charges of spying for the United States and acting against Iran's national security, the judiciary said on Tuesday.

● **IRAN SAID** on Tuesday that a German held in Iran has been released as part of a prisoner swap for an Iranian held in Germany on suspicion of violating US sanctions. "We are ready to free this German national... on condition that they do not extradite our citizen to America," a spokesman said.

barred from running by the Guardian Council. The council, made up of six clerics appointed by the supreme leader and six lawyers selected by the judiciary, disqualified more than half of the 14,444 hopefuls. The move threatens the thin majority of President Hassan Rouhani's alliance in parliament. Friday's election comes after months of domestic turmoil and steeply escalating tensions between Iran and its arch enemy the United States. In November, nationwide demonstrations over petrol price hikes turned violent before being crushed in a deadly crackdown. —AFP

Israel. Iranians are set to elect a new parliament on Friday, with conservatives expected to make a resur-

gence. Observers expect a low turnout as many reformist and moderate candidates have been

HUMANITARIAN | HORROR Over half-a-million children in northwestern Syria forced to flee

Idlib push: Babies freezing to death

Beirut, Feb. 18: The Italian Committee for UNICEF has warned that the imminent arrival of freezing temperatures across the Middle East poses a serious danger for refugees in the area, in particular Syrian children as over half-a-million children in northwestern Syria have been forced to flee amid continued violence and harsh weather. The mass displacement of civilians is sparking

fears of a humanitarian catastrophe. Around 900,000 people have been forced from their homes and shelters in less than three months, leaving huge numbers to sleep rough in the thick of winter. Children have died of exposure in snow-covered camps and the UN has warned that the crisis could worsen if no ceasefire is reached to facilitate the relief effort. "Over the past four days alone, some

43,000 newly displaced people have fled western Aleppo where fighting has been particularly fierce," UN spokesman David Swanson said. Since the start of February, the displacement figure was a staggering 300,000, he said. The wave of displacement is the biggest since the start of the civil war nearly nine years ago. It is the largest exodus of civilians since World War II. "The



Children at a refugee camp. —AFP

residential areas, mosques and markets have been hit," the UN head of humanitarian affairs and emergency relief, Mark Lowcock, said on Monday. He said that basic infrastructure was falling apart, that health facilities were being destroyed and that the risk of disease outbreaks was high. "The biggest humanitarian horror story of the 21st Century will only be avoided if Security

Council members, and those with influence, overcome individual interests and put a collective stake in humanity first," Lowcock said. Russia, the main foreign broker in Syria, has vetoed countless resolutions on the conflict. "The only option is a ceasefire," Lowcock said. Seven children, including a seven-month-old baby, have died from freezing temperatures. —AFP

violence in northwest Syria is indiscriminate. Health facilities, schools,

IN BRIEF

Old people prone to die from virus

Beijing: People infected with the novel coronavirus who are more than 80 years old have the highest chances of dying from infection of all age groups, according to the largest study since the highly contagious outbreak began in China, with details of nearly 44,000 cases. The study, published on Monday in the Chinese Journal of Epidemiology, revealed that a total of 1,023 deaths have occurred among 44,672 confirmed cases as of February 11, for an overall case fatality rate of 2.3 per cent. According to the clinicians from the Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention, majority of the patients were aged 30-69 years (77.8 per cent), male (51.4 per cent), farmers or labourers (22 per cent), and diagnosed in Hubei Province (74.7 per cent).

No China tariff on US medical imports

Beijing: China will waive trade-war tariffs on imports of selected US medical equipment from March 2, the government said Tuesday, as the country battles to contain the new coronavirus epidemic. Products that will qualify for the exemptions include patient monitors, blood transfusion equipment and instruments to measure blood pressure, according to a list released by the Tariff Commission of the State Council. The commission said the move was "to better meet the growing needs of Chinese consumers" and that it would accept applications from firms in China. The tariff exemptions will apply for a designated period, supporting firms that want to import from the US based on "business considerations", said authorities. The list of eligible products also includes a wide range of food items.

Docs' kids to get extra exam points

Beijing: Children of China's medical workers battling the coronavirus will be awarded extra exam points when applying for schools and higher education. Doctors and nurses in Hubei province have been lionised online and by state media. China's schooling system places emphasis on exams, and even younger children face competition to get into top schools that parents believe will raise chances of getting into a good university. The measures will "further care for the province's frontline medical staff" and encourage them to be more "resolute" in their fight to contain the virus, the province said. Children of medical workers applying for high school can receive an additional 10 points in their entrance exams, while younger children will be prioritised for admission at public kindergartens, according to officials.

QUEEN NEPHEW IN LATEST ROYAL SPLIT

London, Feb. 18: Queen Elizabeth II's nephew David Armstrong-Jones is set to divorce, a spokesman said Monday — the second marriage split in the British royal family announced within a week. Armstrong-Jones, 58, the son of Queen Elizabeth's late sister princess Margaret, and his 49-year-old wife Serena have been married since 1993. "The Earl and Countess of Snowdon have amicably agreed that their marriage has come to an end and that they shall be divorced," a spokesman for the couple said. "They ask that the press respect their privacy and that of their family." The earl is the first person in the line of succession to the throne who is not a direct descendant of Queen Elizabeth. He was born fifth in line but is now 21st in the succession order. Known professionally as David Linley, the Earl of Snowdon is a furniture maker and was the chairman of Christie's auction house. The couple have two children: Charles, 20, and 17-year-old Margarita. The news comes after Queen's oldest grandchild Peter Phillips and his wife Autumn announced last Tuesday that they have separated and will divorce. Phillips, 42, and Autumn will share custody of their two daughters and both remain in Gloucestershire, England. The marriage breakdowns have piled more misery on the royal family.



A man (L), who has displayed mild symptoms of the coronavirus, uses a laptop at an exhibition centre converted into a hospital in Wuhan.

— AFP

DIRECTOR OF WUHAN HOSPITAL DIES

Beijing, Feb. 18: A hospital director at the epicentre of China's virus epidemic died Tuesday, state media said, the latest medical worker to fall victim to the new coronavirus spreading across the country. The COVID-19 virus, which is believed to have originated in Wuhan late last year, has infected more than 72,000 people and killed nearly 1,900. Liu Zhiming, the director of Wuchang Hospital in Wuhan, died Tuesday morning after "all-out rescue efforts failed," state broadcaster CCTV reported. China said last week that six medical workers had died from the virus, while 1,716 have been infected. Liu's death was initially reported by Chinese media and bloggers shortly after midnight on Tuesday — but the stories were later deleted and replaced with reports that doctors were still trying to save him. After initial reports of his death were denied, the hospital told AFP on Tuesday morning that doctors were giving him life-saving treatment. Liu's death has echoes of that of Wuhan ophthalmologist Li Wenliang, who had been punished by authorities for sounding the alarm about the virus late December. Li's death prompted a national outpouring of grief as well as anger against the authorities, who were accused of mishandling the crisis. People took to social media to mourn Liu on Tuesday, with many users on the Twitter-like Weibo platform drawing critical comparisons between Liu's death and Li's. In both cases their deaths were initially reported in state media posts — later deleted — and their deaths denied, before being finally confirmed again. "Has everyone forgotten what happened to Li Wenliang? They forcefully attempted resuscitation after he died," one Weibo commenter wrote. Another commenter said, Liu "already died last night, (but) some people are addicted to torturing corpses". — AFP

Virus overreaction, says WHO

China's official toll nears 1,900 with 1,807 fresh cases as over 73,000 infected globally

Critic of President Xi arrested

Beijing, Feb. 18: The World Health Organisation has warned against a global over-reaction to the new coronavirus epidemic following panic-buying, event cancellations and concerns about cruise ship travel, as China's official toll neared 1,900 on Tuesday. More than 73,000 people have now been infected in China and hundreds more abroad, although the WHO stressed the disease has infected a "tiny" proportion of people outside its epicentre and the mortality rate remains relatively low. Hubei province, the outbreak's epicentre, reported 93 of the deaths and 1,807 of the new cases — of which

1,600 were in the provincial capital Wuhan. The outbreak is threatening to dent global economy, with China paralysed by quarantine measures.



Xu Zhiyong

calls for political reform and freedom of speech. The "Chinese government's battle against the coronavirus has in no way diverted it from its ongoing general campaign to crush all dissenting voices," said Patrick Poon, China researcher at Amnesty International, in an emailed statement. Another source, who spoke to AFP on the condition of anonymity, said Xu had been arrested in the southern city of Guangzhou. — AFP

airlines have suspended flights. The cruise ship industry has come into focus as hundreds of people became infected aboard a vessel off Japan. One passenger tested positive after disembarking another liner in Cambodia. The WHO, which has previously said travel restrictions were unnecessary, rejected the suggestion that all cruises should be halted. "Measures should be taken proportional to the situation. Blanket measures may not help," WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus told reporters in Geneva. The WHO has praised China for taking measures to contain the virus. — AFP

China details 80% cases mild

Beijing, Feb. 18: Health officials in China have published the first details on nearly 45,000 cases of the novel coronavirus disease that originated there, saying more than 80 per cent have been mild and new ones seem to be falling since early this month, although it's far too soon to tell whether the outbreak has peaked. Monday's report from the Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention gives the World Health Organisation a "clearer picture of the outbreak, how it's developing and where it's headed," WHO's director-general said at a news conference. "It's too early to tell if this reported decline will continue. Every scenario is still on the table," Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said. The new disease, called Covid-19, first emerged in late December in Wuhan, the capital of China's Hubei province, and has spread to more than two dozen other nations. China says more than 70,000 people have been infected and 1,770 have died in mainland China, but numbers are squishy because the country is counting many cases based on symptoms rather than the methods WHO uses. The new study reports on 44,672 cases confirmed in China as of February 11. The virus caused severe disease such as pneumonia in 14 per cent of them and critical illness in five per cent. The fatality rate for those confirmed cases is 2.3 per cent — 2.8 per cent for males versus 1.7 per cent for females. That's lower than for SARS and MERS, two similar viruses, but COVID-19 ultimately could prove more deadly if it

THIEVES MAKE OFF WITH 6,000 SURGICAL MASKS

Tokyo, Feb. 18: Thieves in Japan have made off with some 6,000 surgical masks from a hospital, with the country facing a mass shortage and a huge price hike online due to the coronavirus. Four boxes containing the face masks disappeared from a locked storage facility at the Japanese Red Cross hospital in the western port city of Kobe, a hospital official said on Tuesday. "We still have a large number of masks — enough to continue our daily operations at the hospital, but this is so deplorable," the official told AFP. Police have launched an investigation as they suspect the thieves intend to resell the masks. Masks have sold out at many drug and discount stores across the nation as number of infections have increased. — AFP

spreads to far more people than the others did. Ordinary flu has a fatality rate of 0.1 per cent yet kills hundreds of thousands because it infects millions each year. The COVID-19 cases include relatively few children, and the risk of death rises with age. It's higher among those with other health problems — more than 10 per cent for those with heart disease, for example, and higher among those in Hubei province versus elsewhere in China. Cases seem to have been declining since February 1. — AP

HOSPITAL TRIES ARRAY OF TREATMENTS

Shanghai, Feb. 18: In a sprawling medical compound an hour's drive from downtown Shanghai, doctors are employing a patchwork of coronavirus treatments in a race to save victims of an epidemic for which there is still no established cure. The Shanghai Public Health Clinical Center is the designated facility for coronavirus cases in China's biggest city, which was previously used to treat victims of the 2002-03 SARS epidemic and was hastily expanded to handle the current outbreak. But doctors said the scale of the COVID-19 health crisis has pushed the centre to its limits. "Admitting so many severe cases all at once is a big test for us," Lu Hongzhou, the centre's co-director, said. — AFP

Ship test over, 500 to leave today

Tokyo, Feb. 18: All passengers and crew on board a ship quarantined off Japan have now been tested for the new coronavirus, the government said Tuesday, as more countries moved to evacuate citizens from the boat. South Korea became the latest to announce it would remove its citizens from the Diamond Princess, where more than 400 people have tested positive for COVID-19. Around 500 passengers will leave the ship on Wednesday after testing negative for the new coronavirus that has infected hundreds on board, a health ministry official said Tuesday. "The number (who will leave Wednesday) is changing, largely because it is up to passengers (if they get off)," the official told reporters. "But it will be around 500 people." Only those who have tested negative and have not been in close contact with a person infected with the virus will be allowed off on Wednesday and many disembarking will be Japanese passengers, the official said. "They will go home on public transport but they will be taken by bus to places such as stations," he added. Those who leave the ship will not face any restrictions, he said. "They won't be forbidden to go out." But not all those who have tested negative will be getting off

Gyms livestream workouts

Shanghai/Beijing, Feb. 18: "Stand in front of a chair. Chest up, core tight and square your pelvis," said Heidi Liu, a pilates instructor at a studio in Shanghai, as she demonstrated a series of poses and stretches. But there were no students in the classroom at the Pilates ProWorks studio located in the middle of a central district in Shanghai. Instead, Liu was livestreaming using an iPad, broadcasting to people working out with her at home. Gyms and restaurants are mostly deserted as millions of Chinese choose to or are forced to stay away from public spaces because of the coronavirus epidemic. While authorities have pledged to offer various support mechanism to virus-hit firms, business owners are scrambling for ways to tide their businesses over or keep busy until policies materialise or customers start venturing back. Livestreaming has been one of the biggest trends to hit China's exercise sector in recent weeks, with gyms going online to help keep residents fit some of whom are stuck indoors for up for 14-day-long quarantines. "We don't want our clients to forget us. And if we are not doing anything, some might be afraid that we were already gone. We are trying to do something to comfort everyone," said Chris Li, Pilates Proworks' owner. The majority of these classes are being offered for free, getting many eyeballs — Liu's 20-minute class received over 4,700 likes — but no income. — Agencies

SOCIAL | MALAISE After big cat kills hubby, Bangla rural women ostracised

Tiger widows shunned as bad luck

Shyamnagar (Bangladesh), Feb. 18: Abandoned by her sons, shunned by her neighbours and branded a witch, Mosammat Rashida's crime? Her husband was killed by a Bengal tiger. Women like her are ostracised in many rural villages in Bangladesh, where they are viewed as the cause of their partner's misfortune. "My sons have told me that I am an unlucky witch," she told AFP in her flimsy plank home, in the honey-hunters' village of Gabura at the edge of the Sundarbans — a 10,000-square-kilometre (3,860-square-mile) mangrove forest that straddles Bangladesh and India.



Mother-of-four Mosammat Rashida, whose husband was killed by a Bengal tiger a decade ago, in her Shyamnagar house.

— AFP

Her husband died while out collecting honey in the jungles there. "Honey-hunters prefer to collect honey mostly in the southwestern Sundarbans, where most of the man-eaters (tigers) live," leading Be-

WOMEN ARE ostracised in many rural villages in Bangladesh, where they are viewed as the cause of their partner's misfortune.

ngal tiger expert at Jahangirnagar University, Monirul Khan, told AFP. Tigers are an endangered species but climate change and human development is reducing their wild habitat, often forcing them towards villages in search of food. Wildlife charities estimate there are some 100 tigers in the Bangladesh side

of the Sundarbans. At least 519 men died from tiger attacks in 50 villages in one district — home to half a million people — between 2001 and 2011, according to Ledars Bangladesh, a charity helping widows reintegrate back in the villages. Their deaths are a double blow for the women left behind. Already grieving the loss of their partner, overnight they become 'tiger widows' — pariahs in their homes and villages at a time when they most need support. They are often left with little means to support themselves or their families. — AFP

