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NEARBY



SC strips Manipur Minister of his office

NEW DELHI
 In an extraordinary display of its constitutional powers, the Supreme Court on Wednesday stripped Manipur Minister T. Shyamkumar, who is facing disqualification proceedings for defection, of his office and banned him from entering the Assembly with immediate effect.

Nation needs NRC, Centre tells SC

NEW DELHI
 Over a month after the Centre informed the Lok Sabha that no decision had been taken to prepare the NRC, the Union Home Ministry filed an affidavit in the Supreme Court stating that preparation of NRC is a "necessary exercise for any sovereign country".

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276 Indians infected with virus abroad

Total cases of COVID-19 in India touch 162, including 25 foreigners: global figure crosses 2,00,000

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT NEW DELHI

With 255 Indians testing positive for the novel coronavirus in Iran and another 21 in other countries, the total number of Indian nationals afflicted with the pandemic rose to 413.

The cases within the country touched 162, including 25 foreigners, on Wednesday.

Globally, the number of cases crossed 2,00,000.

The Ministry of External Affairs confirmed in the Lok Sabha that 255 pilgrims visiting Iran from Kashmir and Ladakh had been affected.

COVID-19

A third batch of 195 Indians from Iran were brought to Jaisalmer by an Air India aircraft on Wednesday evening.

Cases in India

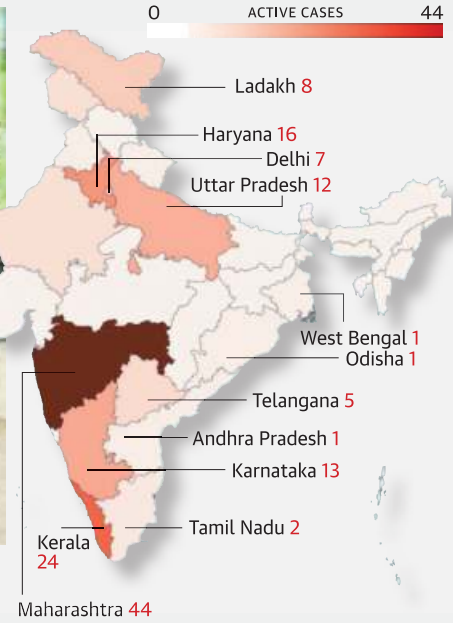
According to reports from the States, 19 new COVID-19 cases were reported within the country, while 14 persons had been discharged. The number of active cases is now 145. Over 5,700 people, who had come in contact

Count rises

Tamil Nadu registered its second COVID-19 case on Wednesday evening and Maharashtra's count went up to 44, taking the total number of active cases to 145 in the country



Safety first: Staff at the Sree Chitra Tirunal Institute for Medical Sciences in Thiruvananthapuram screening a visitor for COVID-19. ■ S.GOPAKUMAR



with positive cases, continue to be under surveillance, the government said.

Karnataka reported three fresh cases on Wednesday, taking the number of infections to 14. The number of cases in Maharashtra rose to 45, including three foreigners, while in Ladakh it rose

to eight, in J&K to four and in Tamil Nadu to two.

Telangana has reported six cases, which include two foreigners. Rajasthan reported seven cases, including two foreigners. Andhra Pradesh, Odisha, Uttarakhand and Punjab reported one case each.

In Haryana, there were two cases, while 14 foreign nationals are being treated in a private Gurugram hospital.

A 34-year-old soldier tested positive in Leh, Army sources said on Wednesday.

NO MEDICAL CARE ▶ PAGE 9
MORE REPORTS ▶ PAGES 2, 3, 8, 9, 14

PM to address nation today

Prime Minister Narendra Modi chaired a high-level meeting to review the ongoing efforts to tackle COVID-19. "Ways to strengthen India's preparedness were discussed. This includes further enhancing testing facilities," noted a release issued by the government. Mr. Modi is scheduled to address the nation on Thursday at 8 p.m.

Section 144 in Rajasthan

The Rajasthan government on Wednesday imposed prohibitory orders (Section 144) across the State, restricting assembly of people at public places till March 31, to contain the spread of COVID-19. The decision was taken after three new COVID-19 positive cases were detected in Jhunjhunu district. ▶ PAGE 5

SC: anxious to avoid horse-trading in M.P.

'Duty is to verify on dissident MLAs'

KRISHNADAS RAJAGOPAL NEW DELHI

The Supreme Court on Wednesday said its primary duty in the Madhya Pradesh political controversy is to independently verify whether the 16 dissident MLAs are holed up in Karnataka or have been held "captive" in the BJP-ruled State.

A Bench of Justices D.Y. Chandrachud and Hemant Gupta said Speaker N.P. Prajapati was yet to decide on the resignations of these absent MLAs and the Congress has accused the BJP of holding the MLAs incommunicado in Bengaluru. In such circumstances, the court had to devise a fool-proof mechanism to satisfy itself that the legislators were not being held against their wishes.

The court declined an offer by senior advocate Maninder Singh, representing the rebel MLAs, to arrange a one-to-one videoconferencing with them. Mr. Singh said TV channels had beamed visuals of the MLAs holding press meets to declare they were in Bengaluru of their own accord. But

Digvijaya held in Bengaluru

Senior Congress leader Digvijaya Singh was taken into preventive custody in Bengaluru on Wednesday while trying to meet the rebel Congress MLAs from Madhya Pradesh staying in a resort. The Karnataka High Court rejected his plea for a directive to the police chief not to stop him from meeting the MLAs. PAGE 12

the court said it cannot decide cases from what was aired on TV.

The court said it was anxious to avoid horse-trading in Madhya Pradesh but senior advocate A.M. Singhvi, for the Speaker, said the "horses are already in captivity".

At one point, the court suggested Mr. Singhvi to consult the Speaker by March 19 on how soon he could decide on the resignations of the 16 rebel MLAs.

DUTY TO PEOPLE ▶ PAGE 12

Gurugram closes malls, weekly markets

Public gatherings in the district capped at 50 people

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT GURUGRAM

All shopping malls, except pharmacies, grocery stores and supermarkets running inside the premises, and weekly markets in Gurugram have been directed to suspend their operations till March 31, in directions issued by the district administration on Wednesday. Also, gatherings at all social, political and religious functions and marriages in the district have

been restricted to 50 people amid COVID-19 scare.

Exercising the "The Haryana Epidemic Disease, COVID-19 Regulations, 2020", Gurugram Deputy Commissioner Amit Khatri, in a single-page order, directed that all shopping malls and weekly markets should be shut down immediately and the operations of all gymnasia, swimming pools, spas, nightclubs, lounges and bars, theatres and multiplexes sus-

pending till the month-end.

The number of people at all gatherings in the district has been restricted to 50 against 200 for the rest of the State. The order said that public dealing at all government offices should be "minimised" without impacting essential services.

The district administration clarified that COVID-19 samples were not being collected from homes, but at 17 hospitals across the district.

Man jumps to death from Delhi hospital

STAFF REPORTER NEW DELHI

A 23-year-old man, who was shifted to the Safdarjung Hospital from the IGI Airport after he was suspected of having been exposed to COVID-19, jumped off the hospital building.

A police team reached the spot and shifted the body to the mortuary. "The nodal officer informed that the man was admitted on Wednesday at 9 p.m. as a suspected coronavirus patient," said an officer. He was a resident of Punjab.

Suicide prevention helpline: Sanjivni, Society for Mental Health; telephone: 011-4076 9002, Monday-Saturday, 10 a.m. -7.30 p.m.

With two weeks to Census start, uncertainty clouds NPR

At least 13 States and Delhi have opposed the new format

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT NEW DELHI

At least 13 States, and Delhi, covering almost 60% of the total population of India, are opposed to the National Population Register (NPR) being updated in the format being prepared by the Centre, even as the nationwide exercise is scheduled to kick off on April 1.

Union Home Minister Amit Shah told Parliament last week that people could choose to not respond to questions, but Chief Ministers and activists have said that this is no guarantee that they would not face any problems in the future.

On March 3, the Ministry

of Home Affairs (MHA) informed the Lok Sabha that it was in discussion with the States that had expressed concerns over the controversial additional questions in the NPR form. There has, however, been no further clarification since then.

On February 18, the MHA informed a parliamentary panel that "during the update of NPR 2020, it is proposed to collect data on some additional items like place of last residence, mother tongue, Aadhaar number (voluntary), mobile number, passport (Indian passport holder), voter ID card, driving licence number, date and place of birth

of father and mother". The Centre hasn't as yet officially published a pro-forma for the NPR.

"The Centre has said it is not mandatory, but hasn't dropped the questions," West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee observed earlier this month. "Now, if you don't provide these documents, they won't ask for it. They will simply mark you as a D (doubtful voter)," asserted Ms. Banerjee, who spoke before Mr. Shah's statement last week that nobody would be marked 'D' for their inability to provide such documents.

CONTINUED ON ▶ PAGE 12

When will you release Omar, SC asks Centre

LEGAL CORRESPONDENT NEW DELHI

The Supreme Court has asked the Centre and the J&K administration to clarify within a week whether it proposes to release former Chief Minister Omar Abdullah, who is in detention since August 2019.

"If you are releasing him, then release him soon or we will hear the matter on merits," a Bench led by Justice Arun Mishra told the lawyers on the government side on Wednesday.

The observation came after counsel for the Centre and the J&K administration said Solicitor General Tushar Mehta was arguing in another court.

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Uttar Pradesh ordinance arbitrary: Allahabad HC

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT LUCKNOW

The Allahabad High Court on Wednesday asked the Uttar Pradesh government to file a reply by March 25 on the recovery of damages ordinance brought by it last week.

The court was hearing a public interest litigation petition challenging the Uttar Pradesh Recovery of Damage to Public and Private Property Ordinance, 2020, notified by the government on Sunday.

In its order, a Division

Bench of Chief Justice Govind Mathur and Justice Samit Goyal, while issuing notice to the government, said the "ordinance is arbitrary in its very nature".

The Bench said it is also "emphasised that the intention of the ordinance is only to frustrate and overrule the law" laid down by a Bench, which recently asked the State to remove hoardings erected by it displaying the personal information of those accused in the violence during the protests against the CAA.

Court slams Centre, telcos on AGR issue

LEGAL CORRESPONDENT NEW DELHI

The Supreme Court on Wednesday slammed the government and the telecom majors for doing "self-assessment or reassessment" of the Adjusted Gross Revenue (AGR) dues worth lakhs of crores of rupees as determined by the top court in its verdict of October 24.

"How can there be self-assessment or reassessment of payable dues? Who has per-

mitted this? How is this not sheer contempt?" asked Justice Arun Mishra.

Almost five months after winning its legal battle in the Supreme Court against the telecom majors for the payment of AGR dues, the Centre recently did a virtual u-turn by filing an urgent application in the court to give the companies a 20-year window to pay the money.

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CM YK