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## PM announces 21-day lockdown as toll rises

"Several families will be destroyed. India is at a stage of the pandemic where our actions will decide our future," he said.

"While at home you must think of those endangering their lives to combat this pandemic — medical care workers, doctors, nurses, sanitation workers, ambulance drivers who are facing the challenge of treating the disease," the Prime Minister said.

"Pray for the sanitation workers cleaning up our neighbourhoods to keep you safe, please think of the media personnel who are braving infection to keep you informed, of policemen enforcing the law while facing, in some cases, your anger," he added.

Mr. Modi quoted figures on the spread of the pandemic to stress his point. "It took 67 days for the first 100,000 cases to come up, the next 100,000 came up in just 11 days, and it took only four days for the next

100,000 cases to appear," he said.

"The rate of infection of the Corona virus is very fast and the only way to break the chain of infection is social distancing, staying indoors. This applies to every citizen of the country including the Prime Minister," he said.

### Resist rumours

Mr. Modi also cautioned against believing rumours.

He acknowledged that the challenge would be particularly hard for the poor and said that alongside the government, civil society organisations should also step up to mitigate some of the hardships.

"We have to prioritise what is required for saving lives. 21 days of lockdown is a long time but for the safety of your family this is the only way that we have. I am confident that every Indian will not only combat this difficult situation but will emerge victorious," he said.

## Ensure tight surveillance, Centre tells States

With the lockdown hitting the Indian industry hard and causing job losses, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman told reporters an economic package to help tide over the crisis will be announced very soon.

In a letter to Chief Secretaries on Tuesday, Cabinet Secretary Rajiv Gauba asked them to ensure that no suspected or high-risk person was left out of surveillance efforts to prevent the spread of the pandemic.

He also called upon chief secretaries to make sure that hospitals are earmarked for treating COVID-19 cases and in a state of "full readiness" to deal with the situation in the event of a "further spike in the num-

ber of confirmed cases."

Meanwhile complaints of discrimination against healthcare workers, airline staff and people who have been quarantined have also emerged.

As journalists and workers associated with the media faced police action amid the lockdown in some parts of the country, the Centre advised States to facilitate functioning of all print and electronic media outlets.

The Ministry of Information and Broadcasting (I&B) said in an advisory, "false and fake news need to be avoided and good practices need to be promoted and these networks play a pivotal role in ensuring the same."

## Government extends tax deadlines to June 30

For bigger companies, only interest would be charged at the reduced rate of 9%.

The date for filing annual GST returns for 2018-19 has also been extended to the last week of June.

Deadlines for the Vivaad se Vishwas and Sabka Vishwas schemes for defaulting taxpayers are also being extended.

### Threshold raised

The Centre has also decided to raise the threshold of default under Section 4 of the Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code, 2016, from ₹1 lakh to ₹1 crore in order to prevent triggering of insolvency proceedings against Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises.

"We will continue to watch the situation. If it improves, there is no reason to worry. However, if the current situation continues

beyond April 30 we may consider suspending Sections 7, 9, 10 of the IBC for a period of 6 months to stop companies at large from being forced into insolvency proceedings in such force majeure cases of default," said Ms. Sitharaman.

Statutory corporate requirements are also being relaxed at this time, including filings in the MCA-21 registry, mandatory board meetings, residency requirements for independent directors and deposit reserve requirements.

The Finance Minister added that customs clearance operations would run around the clock, all seven days of the week, till the end of June.

For fisheries imports, the validity of sanitary permits were being extended, while other requirements were being relaxed.

## Omar Abdullah released after 232 days

"There is a lot to talk about. It's a very different world today to the one that existed on 5th August 2019. J&K is now two Union Territories. But that is later. For now, I believe all those arrested or detained should be released, even those who don't even belong to any party. High-speed 4G Internet services must be restored forthwith so that people can access sites and learn how to fight the COVID-19," he said.

Later, Mr. Abdullah posted pictures of reunion with his family, including mother and father, on the social media. "I had lunch with my mum and dad for the first time in almost eight months. I can't remember a better meal even though I've been in a bit of a daze

and don't remember what I ate," he said.

Several political parties welcomed the decision. "I am glad he is released. For all their talk of women emancipation, it seems this regime fears women the most," said Iltija Mufti, daughter of incarcerated ex-CM and Peoples Democratic Party president Mehbooba Mufti.

CPI(M) leader M.Y. Tarigami said Mr. Abdullah's release was a step to correct one wrong among many wrongs. "The government should release all, including PDP's Mufti and J&K People's Movement chief Dr. Shah Faesal," he said.

J&K Apni Party chief Altfat Bukhari said, "it will help in creating conducive political atmosphere."

## Chouhan wins trust vote in M.P.

BSP, SP and two Independent MLAs vote in favour of BJP government

STAFF REPORTER  
BHOPAL

The Shivraj Singh Chouhan government in Madhya Pradesh secured the support of 112 MLAs, including those of the Samajwadi Party and the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) and two Independents, during the trust vote in the Assembly on Tuesday.

Mr. Chouhan, who took oath as the Chief Minister on Monday, moved the confidence motion in the House, which was unanimously passed. The 92 Congress MLAs were not present at the session, which was adjourned to March 27 after the vote.

"Our entire focus is on tackling [novel] Coronavirus," Mr. Chouhan said later. "However, it is a constitutional necessity to secure the trust vote, which we did today, so that with full force we can combat the disease now."

BSP MLAs Rambai Parihar and Sanjeev Kushwah, Independents Surendra Singh Shera and Rana Vikram Singh and SP MLA Rajesh Shukla, who had previously backed the Kamal Nath government, voted in favour of Mr. Chouhan. The remaining two Independent MLAs were not present.

Though the SP had issued



**Taking charge:** Shivraj Singh Chouhan, wearing a protective mask amid the COVID-19 pandemic, interacting with officials of the Assembly in Bhopal on Tuesday. • PTI

a whip to its MLA for the March 16 Assembly session, this time it did not issue one. Three days ago, SP president Akhilesh Yadav attacked the BJP saying, "The BJP has murdered democracy in Madhya Pradesh."

BSP chief Mayawati has suspended the party membership of Ms. Parihar last December for violating the party's stand by supporting the Citizenship (Amendment) Act.

Congress MLA and former Minister Jitu Patwari had said, "The notification for the session was issued at

12.07 a.m. When there is a lockdown and curfew, then how can MLAs reach the Assembly at such a short notice?"

On Monday night, Speaker N.P. Prajapati tendered his resignation to the Deputy Speaker. In his resignation letter, he wrote that he was resigning on moral grounds.

**Nath questions urgency**  
Former Chief Minister Kamal Nath questioned the urgency with which the session was called. "On the one hand, several decisions such as imposing a lockdown and cur-

few have been taken in view of the Coronavirus, and on the other, the decision by the Shivraj Singh Chouhan government around night to flout its own measures to call for a Vidhan Sabha session during a curfew is beyond my understanding," he wrote on Twitter. He also wrote that as there was time to secure trust vote, why this urgency. "Why these double standards in tackling the Coronavirus?"

The Congress postponed its legislature party meeting scheduled for Wednesday until further notice.

## Opposition welcomes Omar's release

Free Mehbooba Mufti and others too, says Tharoor; Yechury calls for full access to Internet in J&K

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT  
NEW DELHI

The Opposition parties have welcomed the release of National Conference leader Omar Abdullah from eight months of detention. They have also called for the release of other political leaders, including Mehbooba Mufti of the Peoples Democratic Party.

Though the Congress has not issued any official statement, many of its leaders have welcomed Mr. Abdullah's release.

Party MP Shashi Tharoor wrote on Twitter, "Welcome the release of @OmarAbdullah, which we have been call-

ing for ever since his unjustified arrest. Maybe the #COVID19 lockdown makes all detentions unnecessary now? Please release @MehboobaMufti & all other political detainees without delay!"

Manish Tewari, another Congress MP, called for the release of the other leaders, including former Union Minister Saifuddin Soz.

"Glad @OmarAbdullah is being released after his illegal & unjust detention. All others should be released too. Not that they can go anywhere. #COVID19," Salman, son of Mr. Soz, wrote on Twitter.



**Back together:** Omar Abdullah with father Farooq Abdullah and mother in Srinagar on Tuesday. • NISSAR AHMAD

Congress leader and former Home Minister P. Chidambaram said Mr. Abdullah's case would remain a shocking example of the failure of

misunderstanding of the law," he wrote on Twitter.

Ghulam Nabi Azad, a former Congress Chief Minister of Jammu and Kashmir, said Mr. Abdullah's detention was "undemocratic and uncalled for".

CPI(M) general secretary Sitaram Yechury said political detainees outside Jammu and Kashmir should also be released. He also called for an unfettered access to the Internet in Jammu and Kashmir at a time of panic over COVID-19.

CPI general secretary D. Raja said the government should stop releasing the leaders piecemeal.

## Shaheen Bagh site cleared, 9 held

Protests at Nizamuddin, Turkman Gate and Seelampur also cleared

STAFF REPORTER  
NEW DELHI

Amid the lockdown in the capital to check the spread of COVID-19, the police in the early hours of Tuesday cleared Shaheen Bagh of those who had protested against the Citizenship (Amendment) Act for over 100 days.

The protests at Nizamuddin, Turkman Gate and Seelampur were also cleared.

Deputy Commissioner of Police (South East) R.P. Meena said a First Information Report, under Sections 188 (obedience to order duly promulgated by public servant), 186 (obstructing public servant in discharge of public functions) and 353 (assault or criminal force to deter public servant from



**Test of strength:** Security personnel clearing the protest site at Shaheen Bagh in Delhi on Tuesday. • PTI

discharge of his duty) of the Indian Penal Code, was being registered. Nine persons, including six women, were detained.

Around 7 a.m., policemen and paramilitary forces reached the site and asked the 50-odd protesters to va-

cate the area. "The step has been taken because of the current health situation. The protesters were informed that Section 144 has been imposed in Delhi and most important, the route needs to be cleared because it links Noida and Delhi. In case of

any health emergency, vehicles should be able to move," said Mr. Meena.

The protesters alleged that they were manhandled by police and their belongings were thrown away.

A tent put up outside Jamia Millia Islamia University was also removed. Abdur Rehman, a second-year student, said the graffiti on the walls were painted over. "By 8 a.m., the police removed the tent and people not in uniform had started painting over the walls. Last night, we had decided to leave the protest site because of the situation, therefore, no student was inside the tent. Two locals who were there protecting the relief material be for riot victims were detained," he said.

## Parliamentary panels defer meetings

Travel restrictions in view of COVID-19 pandemic preventing movement of MPs

SOBHANA K NAIR  
NEW DELHI

All meetings of parliamentary standing committees have been deferred indefinitely because of the lockdown to curb the spread of COVID-19.

The meetings will not be held till the lockdown announced by Prime Minister Narendra Modi is in place.

The Rajya Sabha Secretariat has ordered a total shutdown till Friday and the Lok Sabha Secretariat till March 31.

The meetings of the committees on commerce and government assurances,



Speaker Om Birla had asked committees to defer all meetings till April 3.

scheduled for Tuesday, were cancelled.

Finance committee chairperson Jayant Sinha told *The Hindu* that at least two com-

mittee meetings, scheduled for March 19 and 26, had to be deferred. "We will resume our meetings once travel restrictions are lifted."

A meeting of the committee on information and technology, scheduled for Wednesday, was also cancelled. It was meant to discuss the 48-hour ban on Malayalam television channels Asianet and Media One.

Committee chairperson Shashi Tharoor said MPs could not travel, with domestic flights cancelled from midnight Tuesday. Lok Sabha Speaker Om Birla had asked the committees to def-

er all meetings till April 3. "I have asked for the next meeting for April 15. But it would be subject to how things are then," Mr. Tharoor said.

The committee on science, technology, environment, forests and climate change has sought to defer the deadline to present its report on the DNA Technology (Use and Application) Regulation Bill, 2019. In a letter to Rajya Sabha Chairman Venkaiah Naidu, committee chairman Jairam Ramesh has sought an extension till the first week of the monsoon session.

## Floor test sends a wrong signal: Tankha

Congress should rebuild itself, he says

SANDEEP PHUKAN  
NEW DELHI

Senior Congress leader and Rajya Sabha member Vivek Tankha on Tuesday criticised the newly sworn in Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan for taking a floor test amid the lockdown due to the Coronavirus outbreak.

In an exclusive interview with *The Hindu*, Mr. Tankha said, "A wrong gets legitimised, in a wrong manner and at a wrong time, which sends a very wrong signal to society."

Mr. Tankha was also forthright about the shortcomings of his party in M.P. and the Kamal Nath government that lasted 15 months. "The Congress should rejig and rebuild itself, remembering that it was the BJP that had lost in 2018 [Assembly Elections] and we had not won the battle convincingly," he said.

### Wrong start

Though civil society groups, activists and farmers ensured the "ascendancy of the Congress", the State leadership did not quite reward them by making them stakeholders in the government. "The start itself was



Vivek Tankha

wrong. The first principle of politics is sharing and we had seven alliance partners. From day one, I had been saying about accommodating them more than our own people. But there were no takers for this argument," he said.

He said that not all 22 MLAs were loyalists of Congress-rebel-turned BJP leader Jyotiraditya Scindia.

"While all of them may have been lured, the MLAs fell into three categories. One group was die-hard Scindia loyalists, while the second group was the lot made up by senior Congress leaders who were disenchanted. The third group was the one that is supposed to have gone entirely because of alleged allurement," he said.

## 2 CRPF jawans found dead in Srinagar

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT  
SRINAGAR

Two Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) men were found dead in an alleged case of fratricide in Srinagar in Jammu and Kashmir on Tuesday.

They reportedly opened fire at each other in a camp located on the Dal Lake.

Police and senior CRPF officials were at the spot, a CRPF official said.

"We are collecting more details," an official spokesman said. They have been identified as constables Siju and Jala Vijay.

(With PTI inputs)

## Interlocutors' plea to authorities, protesters

'It is not a question of win or loss'



Interlocutors appointed by the Supreme Court, advocates Sanjay Hegde and Sadhana Ramchandran. • BIBEK CHETTRI

LEGAL CORRESPONDENT  
NEW DELHI

Supreme Court interlocutors Sanjay Hegde and Sadhana Ramchandran on Tuesday issued a statement urging both the authorities and the Shaheen Bagh protesters to not do anything that may exacerbate the situation at a time when the nation is focussing its resources to fight the Coronavirus scare.

The statement was issued after the authorities cleared the Shaheen Bagh protest site.

### Different priorities

"We request everyone to see the issue not as a question of win or lose. The country has a grave pandemic threatening it and currently that must receive priority in terms of everyone's attention. We request the administration and the protesters to now not do anything that will exacerbate the the underlying tensions that culminated in the street protests," the statement said.

Prior to the Coronavirus scare, both the senior lawyers were appointed by the Supreme Court to talk to the protesters to convince them to clear the protest site and move to an alternative area that would not hamper public movement and traffic flow.

The interlocutors had filed two reports in the court, detailing their efforts and the then prevailing situation.

"Our process of interlocution has reinforced many valuable lessons, including the need for continued dialogue at all times. We believe that the Supreme Court mandated interlocution kept Shaheen Bagh protests peaceful even while violence erupted in other parts of Delhi," the statement said.

"Some rigours of the blockade were relaxed by the protesters clearing some peripheral roads. Today the few remaining Shaheen Bagh protestors have been finally dispersed peacefully with minimal force," it added.

# Amid lockdown, foreign embassies worry about stranded tourists

Diplomatic missions are dealing with twin challenges of keeping staff safe while ensuring their nationals are able to return, given the ban on commercial flights

SUHASINI HAIDAR  
NEW DELHI

Germany is hoping to fly out the first batch of an estimated 3,000 to 5,000 tourists who have been stuck in India since the government banned commercial flights a week ago to contain the spread of the novel coronavirus.

The special flights, starting on Wednesday and expected to operate all week, are being coordinated by an "embassy crisis centre" being run 24/7 at the Embassy in Delhi, which is registering all German tourists and travellers in India so as to evacuate them.

"As an act of solidarity in these difficult times, we are also taking some European Union citizens with us. We

will keep on working to facilitate for all who want to fly back," Germany's Ambassador to India Walter Lindner told *The Hindu*.

## Close to airports

In a video broadcast in German on social media on Tuesday, Mr. Lindner also told citizens that they should try and move to hotels near the Delhi airport in preparation for the flights.

Apart from the challenge of dealing with the large numbers of Germans in India, is the fact that many are individual travellers, including some who are travelling in remote mountains, embassy officials explained.

As the lockdown in Delhi over the pandemic continues, several embassies say

they are dealing with the twin worries of keeping their own staff safe while ensuring their nationals are able to return.

The government announced on March 17 that it would not allow any nationals from 37 countries to come to India, and has banned all commercial flight operations from March 22. However, the External Affairs Ministry says it will "facilitate requests for special flights by resident missions on a case by case basis."

The government has also been coordinating with missions so that flights coming in to evacuate foreigners can bring in Indians stranded in their home countries as in the case of a KLM flight from Amsterdam and an Air Asia



Nowhere to go: Planes stationed on the runway at the Chhatrapati Shivaji International Airport in Mumbai after all domestic and international flights were cancelled. • VIJAY BATE

flight from Kuala Lumpur. The Home Ministry announced last week that it would extend all visas for foreign nationals until April 15.

Another worry a number of embassies say they are facing is the harassment of, and discrimination against, foreign nationals. One Euro-

pean diplomat said their citizens had been denied rooms at hotels when they arrived in Delhi, over fears they might carry the virus.

Among the first major cases of the novel coronavirus in India were 16 Italian tourists in Rajasthan, who came into contact with an estimated over 200 Indians during their stay here. Most of them have now been discharged from hospitals in Gurugram.

The Spanish Embassy in Delhi says it estimates more than 400 of their tourists are still in India, and have been negotiating with local hotels to help accommodate them until they are able to get a special flight, or when commercial operations resume.

"While no hotel is throwing guests out, we are having a hard time securing new hotel reservations, as tourists are returning from places such as Pushkar and

Rishikesh, and need to stay in Delhi," said a Spanish Embassy official.

## Face stigma

"Many of them say that Europeans are being identified and targeted particularly, taunted by bystanders who call them "corona". It is very unusual for them, when this is normally such a friendly country," he added.

The U.S. Embassy in Delhi, which has among the largest citizen populations in India, is also working on ways for Americans to be transported back. "We are working with airline companies and Indian authorities to identify transportation options for U.S. citizens to return," an embassy spokesperson said.

# No curbs on essential goods: Centre

States will act against those violating measures, will send a daily report to Union government

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT  
NEW DELHI

The Ministry of Home Affairs issued a slew of guidelines to be followed by the States to contain COVID-19 and asked all "enforcement authorities to note that these strict restrictions fundamentally relate to the movement of people, but not to that of essential goods."

Health Minister Harsh Vardhan said in a tweet that the "list of essential services remains unchanged since March 22nd Janata Curfew."

The Ministry of Home Affairs said all commercial and private establishments shall be closed, except "ration shops (under the PDS), dealing with food, groceries, fruits and vegetables, dairy and milk booths, meat and fish, animal fodder." However, district authorities may encourage and facilitate

home delivery to minimise the movement of individuals outside their homes," the guidelines said.

## COVID-19

The Ministry said "delivery of all essential goods, including food, pharmaceuticals and medical equipment through e-commerce" would be allowed.

The National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) issued an order asking the States to act against any person violating the containment measures as per provisions of Section 51-60 of the Disaster Management Act, 2005, besides legal action under Section 188 of the IPC, punishable by up to two years in jail and a fine.

In another letter addressed to the Chief Secre-



Stocking up: People waiting at a pharmacy to buy medicines in Mumbai on Tuesday. • AFP

taries, Union Home Secretary Ajay Bhalla asked the States to send daily reports on the implementation of the strict measures as "lack of uniformity in the measures adopted as well as their implementation may not serve the purpose of containing the spread of the virus." The guidelines were similar to the measures be-

ing taken by the States. According to the guidelines, the district magistrates will deploy executive magistrates as "Incident Commanders" in the respective local jurisdictions for the enforcement of the 21-day lockdown as announced by Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

The guidelines said offices of the government of India,

its autonomous subordinate offices and public corporations shall remain closed. But the offices of defence, Central armed police forces, treasury, public utilities (including petroleum, CNG, LPG, PNG), disaster management, power generation and transmission units, post, the National Informatics Centre and early warning agencies would be exempted.

"Hospitals and all related medical establishments, including manufacturing and distribution units such as dispensaries, chemist and medical equipment shops, laboratories, clinics, nursing homes and ambulances, will continue to remain functional. The transportation for all medical personnel, nurses, para-medical staff, other hospital support services be permitted," the Ministry said.

# In letter to PM, Sonia seeks help for construction workers

She also urges Congress CMs to come to their aid

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT  
NEW DELHI

Congress president Sonia Gandhi has asked Prime Minister Narendra Modi to roll out emergency welfare measures for construction industry workers following the lockdown caused by the COVID-19 outbreak, the party said on Tuesday.

In a March 23 letter, she told Mr. Modi that the construction industry employed over 44 million people, and the workers should be given wage support. She wrote to the Chief Ministers of party-ruled States on the issue.

In the letter to Mr. Modi, she said: "Over the last week, lakhs of migrant workers in major cities across India have left for their home towns and villages, fearing a



Sonia Gandhi

prolonged economic downturn. As the second largest [section of] employees in India, over 44 million construction workers are now faced with a precarious future. Many are stranded in cities and are deprived of their livelihoods due to stringent lockdown measures."

"The Building and Other Construction Workers (Reg-

ulation of Employment and Condition of Service) Act, 1996 provides for various welfare measures for workers. The Act also provides for State Welfare Board and the constitution of welfare funds. It is reported that the Welfare Boards collected amounting to ₹ 49,688.07 crores till March 31, 2019. However, only an amount ₹1,93,79.922 crores had been spent."

Ms. Gandhi noted that several countries had announced wage subsidy as part of COVID-19 response.

In letters to Congress Chief Ministers, she said the construction industry that was reeling under the impact of demonetisation and GST had been hit afresh by the pandemic.

# Students stranded at border crossing

They were on their journey home from medical colleges in Bangladesh

KALLOL BHATTACHARJEE  
NEW DELHI

A group of 75 Indian medical students from Kashmir were stranded at the Benapole border crossing of Bangladesh on Tuesday as India shut all land crossings with neighbouring countries.

The students were returning home from medical colleges in Mymensingh and Dhaka and were scheduled to reach Kolkata to board afternoon Kolkata-Srinagar flights, which they missed as they remained stranded at Benapole in Bangladesh's Jessore district.

"We journeyed for 10 hours in buses to reach the Benapole-Petrapole crossing and we learnt of the closure of the border check-posts on the way," said a fourth year student, explaining that the medical colleges in Bangla-



Virus scare: Checkpoints along the India-Bangladesh border have been closed as a safety measure. • AFP

desh had asked students to vacate hostels in view of the COVID-19 crisis. "We were assured by authorities that they would let us enter India but now we are being denied," the student, who spoke on the condition of anonymity, added.

Bangladesh has so far detected 33 cases of COVID-19 infection. Out of that, three patients had died and five had recovered fully while the rest remain under observation. The medical student said that they required urgent help in view of the total

transport halt that India was set to begin from the midnight of Tuesday. Apart from the Indian decision to suspend rail and air services, Bangladesh too will suspend train services from Tuesday evening.

That apart, Bangladesh will also suspend domestic air services from midnight of Tuesday. In view of the unprecedented suspension of air, road transport and rail-ways in both India and Bangladesh, the students urged for prompt action from the Indian authorities to help them reach Srinagar.

Of the stranded students, a few are from institutions in Dhaka while most are from the Community Based Medical College of Mymensingh, which is a private medical college popular with students from India.

# Labour Minister urges CMs to pay workers directly

'Release funds into their accounts to mitigate a crisis'

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT  
NEW DELHI

Union Labour and Employment Minister Santosh Kumar Gangwar on Tuesday wrote to all Chief Ministers and Lieutenant-Governors asking them to directly release funds into the accounts of construction workers using the cess collected by their respective Building and Other Construction Workers' Welfare Boards.

The Minister wrote that the government was taking various measures to provide relief to workers in view of the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

For construction workers, who tend to rely on daily wages, the government is all



Hard life: Construction workers rely on daily wages. • RAJEEV BHATT

States and Union Territories to use the cess fund, a statement from the Ministry said. The Ministry said about 3.5 crore construction workers were registered with the

State boards and about Rs.52,000 crore was available to the boards in the form of cess collected over the years.

In his letter, Mr. Gangwar said each State or Union Territory could decide the amount of payment to be made to the workers. "The financial assistance at this point of time would help to mitigate the financial crisis of our construction workers to some extent and boost their morale to deal with this epidemic," the Minister wrote. Starting Sunday, large parts of the country have been under lock-down to slow down the spread of the coronavirus till March 31, leading to construction activity being hit as well.

# SC adjourns sitting of two Benches

LEGAL CORRESPONDENT  
NEW DELHI

The Supreme Court has adjourned the sitting of two Benches scheduled to hear a few cases through video-conferencing on Wednesday after the announcement of a 21-day lockdown on account of the COVID-19 scare.

A circular issued late on Tuesday informed that the cases for hearing before the two Benches of Justices D.Y. Chandrachud, Surya Kant, L. Nageswara Rao and Aniruddha Bose have been adjourned.

The circular has not given any future date for hearing. The court, on March 23, had decided to further restrict its functioning and resort to the digital mode to prevent spread of infection.

# Polls to 18 Rajya Sabha seats deferred

Situation to be reviewed after March 31

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT  
NEW DELHI

Elections to 18 Rajya Sabha seats that were scheduled to take place on March 26 have been deferred due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Election Commission of India (ECI) said on Tuesday.

On February 25, the ECI announced elections to 55 Rajya Sabha seats spread over 17 States that were to be vacated in April due to the retirement of MPs. Candidates for 37 seats in 10 States had been elected uncontested.

Polling for the remaining 18 seats in Andhra Pradesh, Gujarat, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya and Rajasthan were to take place on Thurs-

day, as per the ECI's schedule.

Taking into account the World Health Organization's declaration of COVID-19 as a global pandemic on March 11 and various advisories from the Centre on containing the spread of the disease, the ECI on Tuesday decided to defer the elections.

In a statement, the ECI noted that the States had also issued lockdown orders. A senior ECI official said polling for the seats, which will be vacated in April, had been postponed and the situation would be reviewed after March 31.

The decision comes after several State Assemblies curtailed their sessions.

# Who will help the poor, asks Congress

Party welcomes lockdown, but says that the announcement has come late

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT  
NEW DELHI

The Congress on Tuesday welcomed Prime Minister Narendra Modi's announcement of a complete lockdown for the next three weeks but qualified its response by asking about what steps the government had taken to protect the poor.

Former Finance Minister P. Chidambaram, in a series of tweets, said he had a "mix of emotions - relief, vindication, frustration, disappointment, worry and fear."

"The lockdown is late, but better late than never. Those who mocked the idea of a lockdown will do the country a great favour by remaining silent for 21 days. PM's announcement left a gaping hole. Who is going to pro-



RAHUL GANDHI, Congress leader

vide cash to the poor that they need for the next 21 days," Mr. Chidambaram asked.

## Open letter

Hours before the lockdown announcement, former Congress president Rahul Gandhi on Tuesday had appealed to citizens to adopt strict social isolation.

"I strongly appeal to each of you to follow strict social isolation and distancing

measures. Containing the virus requires us to minimise our contact with people as much as possible," Mr. Gandhi said in his open letter to citizens.

"The public health personnel have displayed exemplary courage, even at great personal risk to themselves...The COVID-19 pandemic is a test of our ability to work together and collectively fight against unpredictable crises. This is the time

for national solidarity and unity. I strongly appeal to all of you again to heed all the public safety advisories being issued and remain vigilant," Mr. Gandhi said.

His open letter came just hours after he had tweeted that the Narendra Modi government didn't realise the magnitude of the crisis and wasted time.

"I am feeling sad, because this was completely avoidable. We had time to prepare. We should have taken this threat much more seriously and have been much better prepared," Mr. Gandhi tweeted in response to a tweet from a Haryana-based doctor Kamna Kakkar who said hospitals faced an acute shortage of essential personal protective equipment.

# ED officials to attend office on rotation basis

Probes into important cases continue

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT  
NEW DELHI

The Enforcement Directorate has directed its officials to attend office on a rotation basis to avoid crowding in the wake of the COVID-19 outbreak.

"Necessary instructions have been given to ensure skeleton staff in offices across the country. However, officials required for urgent court proceedings have to be present," said a senior official, adding that the agency had taken all precautionary measures, as directed by the government.

The ED's probe into all important cases is continuing as before. Although there is no written order pertaining to the issuance of

summons to witnesses and suspects, sources said the agency may not mandate anyone's presence during the lockdown period. Statements of those turning up may be recorded as per procedure.

Last week, the Department of Personnel and Training had issued a directive to the heads of Ministries and Departments to ensure that 50% of Group B and C employees attended office every day, and the remaining worked from home. They were also told to draft a weekly roster of duty for Group B and C staff, and ask them to attend office on alternate weeks. Working hours of officials have also been staggered.

**No safe place**

Kerala is one of the few States to publish activity trails of people who were identified as infected with the novel coronavirus. This was useful for contact-tracing purposes. An excerpt from one such actual activity trail of five patients from Pathanamthitta is presented below (images are representational and not of one person alone). Before their symptoms peaked, those infected visited a variety of places including hotels, post offices, banks, shopping centres and bus stops. Around the time the trail ended, only 11 people were under home isolation in Pathanamthitta. The number grew to 4,565 as of Monday, and many of whom could have been in contact with these patients. The more the infected persons travelled, the higher the risk of the spread

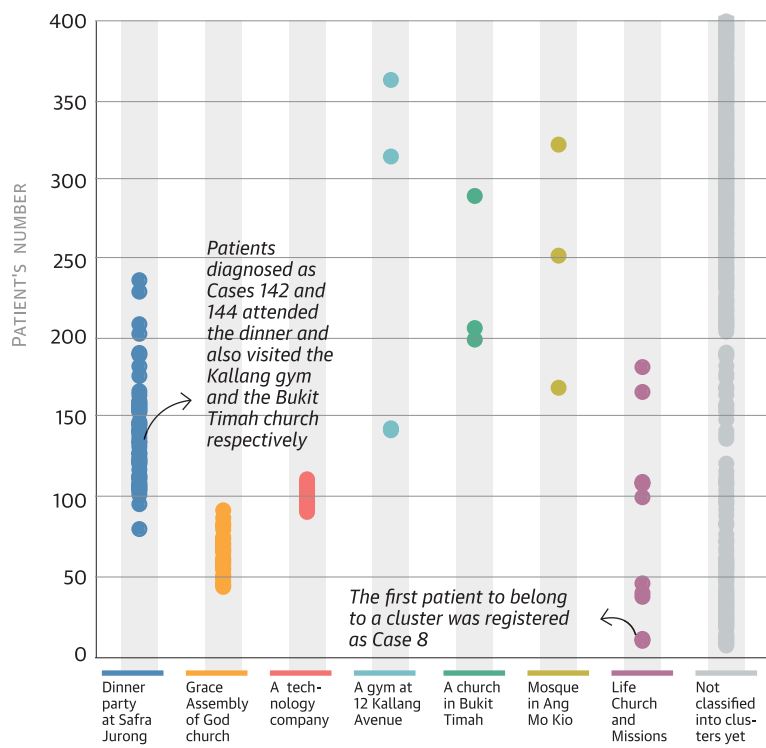


# No option but physical distancing

South Korea had just over 30 COVID-19 cases in the 28 days after it reported the first. But when contact-tracing was done for patient-31, a Pandora's box was opened. In the next 17 days, the number of cases crossed 6,000. Similarly, cases in Singapore would have been much lower if not for a dinner party. Infected persons in Kerala travelled to many places where people congregate before getting diagnosed. Essentially, all it took for the novel coronavirus to spread was one infected person who didn't maintain physical distance. By **Vignesh Radhakrishnan** and **Srravya C**

**The Singapore clusters**

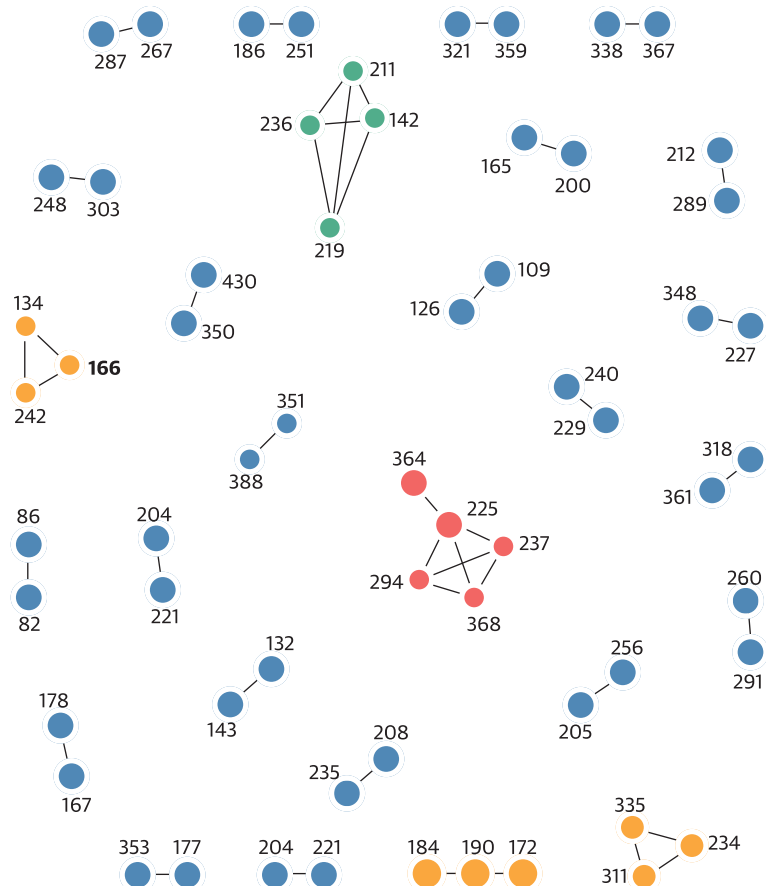
As of March 23, Singapore has identified seven clusters responsible for 50% of its cases. The graph plots cases in each cluster. Each dot corresponds to a case. Close to 47 cases originated from a dinner party on February 15 at a restaurant in Safra Jurong club



While some from the dinner party were declared as confirmed cases early (Cases 94 and 96), there were many who were declared much later (Cases 218 and 224). Some attendees of the dinner party (Cases 142 and 117) were confirmed as cases about 20 and 22 days after February 15 - the day it was organised

**Leaking out of the Singapore clusters**

Case 142, a 26-year-old male, visited two clusters, the dinner party and the gym. The virus spread from him to three others, Cases 211, 236 and 142, not connected to any clusters. So while only 50% of cases are directly connected to the clusters, there are many who indirectly contracted the virus from those who were part of such clusters

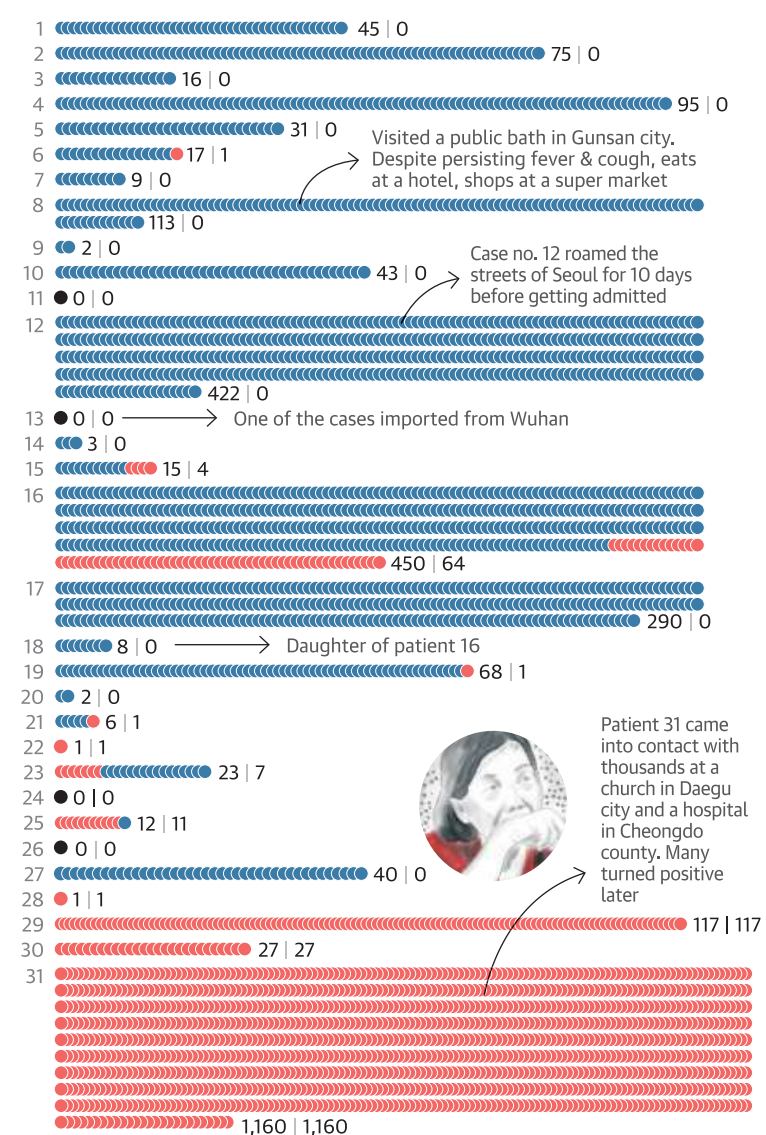


**How S. Korea's Case 31 ignored symptoms, attended church**



**The South Korea clusters**

Patient 31 came into contact with 1,160 people, by far the largest cluster in South Korea. The graph traces the contact history of the first 31 cases. Isolated contacts are in red. For instance, Case 1 came into contact with 45 people, but none were isolated



**A cluster of clusters**

The Shincheonji cluster is responsible for 5,028 cases in South Korea as of March 20. There are many similar clusters. The second biggest cluster was made up of health workers and patients in the Cheongdo Daenam Hospital (119 cases)

According to a New York Times report, South Korean officials have learnt that Patient 31 visited Cheongdo too, in early February. Investigations to link the clusters are ongoing



Source: South Korea data is sourced from Korea Centers for Disease Control & Prevention and Reuters. Singapore data is sourced from Ministry of Health, Singapore. Kerala data is sourced from State Health Minister's facebook account

# U.S. could become virus epicentre: WHO

Trump says he wants to reopen the country for business in weeks, not months; U.K. enforces lockdown

REUTERS  
GENEVA/LONDON

The World Health Organisation said on Tuesday that the U.S. could become the global epicentre of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Britain joined the ranks of countries in lockdown to try to hold back the virus, and data showed business activity collapsing from Australia and Japan and Western Europe at a record pace in March, with the U.S. showing expected to be just as dire.

But amid the gathering gloom, the Chinese province of Hubei, where the virus was first identified in December, said it would lift travel restrictions on people leaving the region as the epidemic eases there.

Confirmed COVID-19 cases around the world exceeded 3,77,000 across 194 countries and territories as of early Tuesday, according to a Reuters tally, more than 16,500 of them fatal.

**'Very large acceleration'** WHO spokeswoman Margaret Harris said there had been a "very large acceleration" in infections in the U.S.

Over the previous 24 hours, 85% of new cases were in Europe and the U.S., and of those, 40% were in the U.S. As of Monday, the virus had infected more than 42,000 people there, killing at least 559.

Asked whether the U.S. could become the new epicentre, Ms. Harris said: "We are now seeing a very large acceleration in cases in the U.S. So it does have that potential."

Some U.S. state and local officials have decried a lack of coordinated federal action, saying that having localities act on their own has put them in competition for supplies.

President Donald Trump



Looming crisis: U.S. President Donald Trump addressing the media in Washington. •AP

## Pak. officials in soup for selfie with patient

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE  
KARACHI

Pakistan has suspended six civil servants after they posed for a selfie with a COVID-19 patient in a quarantine centre, an official said Tuesday.

The selfie – widely shared on social media – pictured a group of men around the apparent patient, several of them smiling broadly and none wearing face masks. The picture was taken at a quarantine facility in Sindh province..

said on Monday he was considering how to restart business life when a 15-day shutdown ends next week.

"America will again and soon be open for business," Mr. Trump told a White House news conference on Monday. "We are not going to let it turn into a long-lasting financial problem."

## In Europe, retirement homes are a 'timebomb'

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE  
MADRID

In Italy, Spain and France, old people's homes have been ravaged by COVID-19 with the elderly and the infirm taking the brunt of the epidemic as it spreads like wildfire across Europe.

"When the virus enters these places, it inevitably turns into a massacre, as unfortunately is already happening in different parts of Italy," Italian pensioners' union SPI-Cgil said this weekend.

"Retirement homes are

ticking time bombs, with 500,000 elderly people in very fragile conditions at risk of being infected."

And there is a similar situation in Spain. "In some places, the Army found some elderly people completely abandoned, sometimes even dead in their beds," said Spanish Defence Minister Margarita Robles.

In France, the epidemic "could end up causing more than 1,00,000 deaths," the main associations representing elderly care homes have warned.

"We can't have the cure be worse than the problem," Mr. Trump said. "We have to open our country because that causes problems that, in my opinion, could be far bigger problems."

Of the top 10 countries by case numbers, Italy has reported the highest fatality rate, at around 10%, which at

least partly reflects its older population. The fatality rate globally is around 4.3%, though national figures can vary widely according to how much testing is done.

Britain on Tuesday began curbs on movement without precedent in peacetime after PM Boris Johnson ordered everyone to stay at home.

# China to lift travel curbs on 50 million people in Hubei

Healthy residents would be allowed to leave the province

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE  
BEIJING

China announced on Tuesday that a lockdown would be lifted on more than 50 million people in central Hubei province, where the coronavirus first emerged late last year.

But fears rose over a second wave of infections in the country fuelled by people arriving from overseas.

After two months living with draconian curbs on daily life, residents will be allowed to leave Hubei from midnight on Tuesday if healthy, said provincial authorities.

**Restrictions till April 7** Wuhan city – the initial epicentre of the outbreak – will end restrictions from April 8.

Hubei ordered the shutdown in January but has



Travel eased: Staff members line up as they prepare to spray disinfectant at the Wuhan railway station on Tuesday. •AFP

been gradually easing rules and permitting people to move about within the province and return to work.

People who wish to travel in or out of Hubei or Wuhan will be able to as long as they have a "green" health code issued by authorities, but schools will remain closed.

Three airports in the province will resume flights

from Wednesday, state broadcaster CCTV reported. "I'm super happy," Hubei native Zoe Wang told AFP.

"I'm going to be able to go back and see my parents."

"I really want freedom as soon as possible," one Wuhan resident named Willa said.

New cases have slowed over the last month.

## Spain toll rises by 514

REUTERS  
MADRID

Another 514 people have died in Spain, raising the death toll to 2,696, as the number of infections surged towards 40,000. As health authorities step up the number of tests, the number of people with COVID-19 rose by nearly 20% to 39,673. At the same time, the death toll increased by 23.5%, the Health Ministry said.

## Death rate drops in Italy

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE  
ROME

Italy on Monday reported a second successive drop in daily deaths and infections that has nevertheless claimed more than 6,000 lives in a month. The daily fatalities come down from a world record 793 on Saturday to 651 on Sunday and 601 on Monday.

## Iran toll inches closer to 2,000

REUTERS  
DUBAI

Iran's death toll from the coronavirus outbreak increased by 122 in the past 24 hours to 1,934, Health Ministry spokesman Kianoush Jahanpour said on Tuesday. The total number of people diagnosed with the disease increased by 1,762 to 24,811, he added.

# 'Loss of smell in some cases'

Experts say this might be a new way to detect the virus

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE  
PARIS

From a mother unable to smell her baby's nappy to a lawmaker who suddenly could not taste food, some COVID-19 patients have described a loss of olfactory senses – and experts say this might be a new way to detect the virus.

Ear, nose and throat (ENT) specialists in Britain, the U.S. and France have noted a growing number of patients in recent weeks with anosmia – the abrupt loss of smell – and have said this could be a sign of COVID-19 in people who other-



wise appear well.

The World Health Organisation lists the most common signs of COVID-19 as fever, tiredness and dry cough.

In Britain, ENT doctors have urged health authorities to advise people with a sudden loss of smell or taste

to self-isolate even if they have no other symptoms. "Anything we can do to delay transmission is absolutely vital," Claire Hopkins, the president of the British Rhinological Society, told AFP.

Ms. Hopkins, who published an open letter on the issue on Friday with ENT U.K. chief Nirmal Kumar, said she was not surprised when she heard initial reports from Iran and France of COVID-19 patients reporting a loss of smell.

Around 40% of cases of sudden loss of smell in adults are caused by post-viral anosmia, she said.

## ELSEWHERE



### Pompeo slashes \$1 bn aid to Afghanistan

DOHA U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo on Monday slashed \$1 billion in aid to Afghan government after a mission to Kabul failed to bridge a divide between feuding leaders. Mr. Pompeo made the surprise trip in hopes of reviving a landmark U.S. accord with the Taliban. •AFP

### Jihadist ambush kills at least 70 Nigerian soldiers

KANO At least 70 Nigerian soldiers were killed in an ambush on their convoy by jihadist fighters in the restive northeast, military and security sources said on Tuesday. Insurgents fired rocket-propelled grenades at a lorry carrying troops as it travelled near Gorgi village in Borno state on Monday, said two military officers. •AFP

# Mahinda convenes all-party meet on COVID-19 preparedness

MPs suggest reconvening of House for better coordination

MEERA SRINIVASAN  
COLOMBO

As Sri Lanka's Parliament stands dissolved since early March, Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa convened an all-party leaders' meeting on Tuesday to discuss the government's ongoing strategies in combating COVID-19 that has affected over 100 persons so far.

"I emphasised the need of working together to successfully battle #COVID19. All present were in agreement and pledged full support. #TogetherWeCan #COVID19SL," Mr. Rajapaksa said in a tweet.

Meanwhile, some participants suggested that the Prime Minister and the government consider reconvening Parliament to help MPs coordinate better in districts. Tamil National Al-

liance spokesman M.A. Sumanthiran said in a tweet: "Reconvening #Parliament was raised at the Party Leaders' Mtg by @RauffHakeem [Sri Lanka Muslim Congress Leader] and myself. It is not necessary to meet physically in one place but it is important to have an active Parliament so that feedback from the people are received and for better accountability." While there has been no official response yet, Mr. Sumanthiran tweeted that there was a "favourable response" to his suggestion.

President Gotabaya Rajapaksa dissolved Parliament and announced general elections for April 25 that now stand indefinitely postponed.

Sri Lankan public health authorities, along with a national task force being head-

ed by the Army commander, has implemented various measures, including an enforced curfew in the country. Over 2,000 people have been arrested since Friday for violating it.

When the curfew was temporarily lifted on Tuesday morning, long queues were seen outside supermarkets but adequate arrangements were made to manage the crowd.

The government said it is organising door-to-door delivery of essentials in capital Colombo, Gampaha and Kalthara districts.

Meanwhile, President Gotabaya Rajapaksa has asked legal experts and the Department of Prisons to explore the possibility of granting some relief to the prisoners who were charged with minor offences.

# Bangladesh to release Khaleda Zia

Former PM's family had sought her release following the virus outbreak

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA  
DHAKA

Bangladesh on Tuesday initiated a process to "conditionally" release jailed former Prime Minister Khaleda Zia for six months following the COVID-19 outbreak in the country.

The Bangladesh Nationalist Party chief is serving a 17-year prison term in two graft cases since February 8, 2018.

"The decision has been taken on humanitarian ground," Law Minister Anisul Huq said.

He said the decision was taken in line with Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's directives and considering the age of the former Prime Minister.

**Freedom for 6 months** "... Zia will be released for a period of six months and she must stay in her own house," the Minister said.

He declined to elaborate



A file photo of Khaleda Zia in Dhaka. •AP

immediately but officials familiar with the process said the Home Ministry would take subsequent steps for the former premier's temporary release under a criminal procedure code (CrPC).

Home Minister Asaduzzaman Khan Kamal said his office would take steps for the release of Zia, who is being treated for old-age complications at the prison cell of a

State-run specialised hospital, "as soon as" they receive the file from the Law Ministry.

The development came a day after Zia's family sought her release over the COVID-19 outbreak.

"This is a decision we welcome," BNP leader Ruhul Kabir Rizvi told reporters in brief comments at the Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University here.

"I thank Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina," Zia's younger sister Selima Islam said. Zia served thrice as the premier since 1991. Her party suffered a miserable defeat in the 2018 elections bagging only six seats in 300-seat parliament.

Her conviction on "moral turpitude" charges debarred her from contesting the polls.

She was sent to jail in February 2018 by a local court on charges of embezzling foreign donations meant for an orphanage, named after her slain husband and President Ziaur Rahman, during her premiership between 2001 and 2006.

Rehman, a military ruler-turned-politician, was the founder of the BNP.

She was convicted in another corruption case later the same year, though her party claims both cases are politically motivated.

# China told to reverse decision to expel scribes

NYT, WSJ and Post emphasise the need for free flow of information from Country

MARC TRACY

The publishers of *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal* and *The Washington Post* on Tuesday released a statement critical of the Chinese government's decision to bar American journalists from working in China.

The unusual statement, signed by A.G. Sulzberger of *The Times*, William Lewis of *The Journal* and Fred Ryan of *The Post*, was released online early Tuesday and was scheduled to appear in the rival newspapers' Tuesday print editions.

"We strongly urge the Chinese government to reverse its decision to force the Americans working for our news organisations to leave the country and, more broadly, to ease the growing crackdown on independent



Media freedom: NYT's journalist Steven Lee Myers, centre, with other journalists in Beijing, in this file photo. •AFP

news organisations that preceded this action," the publishers said in the statement. "The media is collateral damage in a diplomatic dispute between the Chinese and U.S. governments, threatening to deprive the world of critical information at a perilous moment."

On Wednesday, China announced that all American

journalists at the three newspapers based in the country whose credentials were set to expire in 2020 had to hand in their press cards within 10 days. The action would affect at least 13 journalists.

China's move was the latest in an escalating diplomatic feud between the Chinese government, led by President Xi Jinping, and the

Trump administration. The ouster of the American journalists followed the Trump administration's decision to limit to 100 the number of Chinese citizens who can work in the U.S. for five state-run Chinese media organisations.

The letter from the three publishers emphasized the need for a free flow of information during the coronavirus crisis. "This move – made in retaliation for recent expulsions by the U.S. government – is one that we would protest under any circumstances," the publishers wrote.

"But it is uniquely damaging and reckless as the world continues the struggle to control this disease, a struggle that will require the free flow of reliable news and information." NY TIMES

## 64 found dead in container in Mozambique

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE  
MAPUTO

More than 60 suspected undocumented migrants from Ethiopia were found dead on Tuesday in a cargo container in Mozambique's northwest Tete province, a senior hospital official said.

"A truck transporting illegal immigrants from Malawi, suspected to be Ethiopians, was stopped at the Mussacana weight bridge in Tete, and 64 people were found dead. Only 14 survived," an official said on condition of anonymity.

"The cause of death is presumed to be asphyxiation."

The victims were discovered in a blue cargo container loaded on to a haulage truck, according to pictures seen by AFP.

# Albert Uderzo, co-creator of Asterix and Obelix, is dead

He and Rene Goscinny together created 24 comic books

ASSOCIATED PRESS  
PARIS

Albert Uderzo, one of the two creators of the beloved comic book series *Asterix and Obelix*, who captured the spirit of the Gauls of yore and grew a reputation worldwide, died on Tuesday. He was 92. The French press quoted family members as saying that Mr. Uderzo died of a heart attack in the Paris suburb of Neuilly.

Asterix, portrayed as a short man with a droopy mustache always wearing a helmet with wings, was created in the early 1960s by Mr. Uderzo and Rene Goscinny. The character lived in a village in Gaul, present-day France, resisting Roman



Albert Uderzo

Bernard de Choisy, as saying. "He had been very tired for several weeks."

Mr. Uderzo initially illustrated the characters created along with writer Rene Goscinny. Together, they created 24 comic books. After Goscinny's death in 1977, Mr. Uderzo also took over the comic books' writing duties, deciding to continue without his creative partner.

Goscinny's daughter, Anne, called the two men "brothers". "They were as different as fire and water, but they lived something that few among us could live," she told the French daily *Le Parisien*. "They were the kind of friends you don't often have in life."

MARKET WATCH

Table with 3 columns: Instrument, Price, % Change. Includes Sensex, US Dollar, Brent oil.

NIFTY 50

Table listing Nifty 50 stocks with columns for Stock Name, Price, and Change.

EXCHANGE RATES

Table showing exchange rates for various currencies against the Indian Rupee.

IN BRIEF

Dr. Reddy's to raise funds via commercial paper
HYDERABAD
Dr. Reddy's Laboratories said it was considering raising funds...

# Economic package soon, says FM

Task force still not constituted, but FM speaks of multilayered sub-groups holding consultation

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT NEW DELHI

An economic package to deal with COVID-19 situation will be announced soon, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman promised on Tuesday afternoon, adding that the government and regulators are constantly monitoring the state of the economy, markets and rupee depreciation.

However, she still offered little clarity on the composition of an economic task force announced by the PM last week, and explained the delay in announcing an economic package by saying extensive consultations were needed, and till yesterday, Parliament was in session and the Finance Bill had to be cleared.

"Work is going on and we are very close to coming out with an economic package, which will be announced sooner rather than later," she said, adding that the Centre, the Reserve Bank and the regulators have been jointly monitoring the volatility in the stock markets thrice daily. "Every attention is being



Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman addresses the media via video conferencing, in New Delhi on Tuesday. ■PTI

given to the economy. The Prime Minister himself is closely monitoring the situation. A multi-layered composition of the task force is already working."

As The Hindu had reported on Tuesday morning, the economic task force announced in the PM's address to the nation on March 19 has still not been constituted, with the Finance Ministry saying the PM's Office or the Cabinet Secretariat would be responsible for issuing an order to create it. On Tuesday

evening, after the FM's press conference, a Finance Ministry spokesperson once again confirmed to The Hindu that no order has yet been issued to set up the task force.

Ms. Sitharaman was more ambiguous about the status of the task force, saying that sub-groups of MPs, academics and industry leaders were already generating ideas for the task force, but refused to elaborate on its composition or specific mandate. "The Finance Ministry is working intensively on all

these suggestions which are coming in from the various sub groups within the multi-layered task force that exists," she said. "So the work of the task force which is multi-layered is already almost nearing a conclusion. So the task force and the task force based report and the action following the task force's report are almost at its peak and that is why I have said we will announce the economic package sooner rather than later."

She did not respond to specific queries on how the economic package would provide relief for millions of informal sector and daily wage workers who have been hit the hardest by the shutdown.

Ms. Sitharaman attributed the delay in announcing an economic package to the need for extensive consultations and to first pass the Finance Bill. "I appreciate that you would have liked the package to be announced last week. But most things which are as big as an economic package for this kind

of unusual situation requires a lot of consultation to get it right," she told journalists.

"No intention to delay" "We had no intention to delay, we don't want to delay, but then let us be realistic. Till yesterday, the Parliament was in session and the Finance Bill had to be cleared," she said adding that she would have been happy to announce the package in the House if it was ready and the Finance Bill had been passed. "And once the Finance Bill got cleared, it was important for the MPs to recognise there is a lockdown in this country, so everyone had to go where they had to go and serve and be of use for their own constituents. So the Parliament adjourned sine die."

In the final hours of the Lok Sabha session on Monday, a number of opposition MPs had been pressing the Finance Minister to make a statement on the COVID-19 situation and the government's package before the Finance Bill was passed.

# Markets look up a day after worst fall

India VIX index jumps another 14%

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT MUMBAI

Equity benchmarks opened on a strong note on Tuesday, a day after registering their worst single-day fall, but failed to maintain the levels as the underlying weakness in investor sentiment led to some amount of selling pressure. The benchmarks fell into the red briefly before ending the day on a strong note, which was in line with the positive global cues on the back of measures announced by the U.S. Federal Reserve to boost U.S. economy.

Sensex up 2.67% The 30-share Sensex gained 692.79 points, or 2.67%, to close at 26,674.03. Earlier in the day, it had gained nearly 1,500 points to touch an intra-day high of 27,463. The broader Nifty settled the day at 7,801.05, up 190.80 points or 2.51%.

The India VIX index, however, jumped another 14% on Tuesday. Elsewhere in

Asia, Nikkei gained over 7% while Hang Seng was up nearly 4.5%. The overnight U.S. markets also registered strong gains of over 7%.

"Post hitting lower circuit for second time in a month, Indian equity markets bounced back today amidst recovery in global equity markets," said Siddhartha Khemka, Head - Retail Research, Motilal Oswal Financial Services.

Incidentally, stocks pared some of the gains after Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman announced a slew of relaxations in compliance and reporting requirements even as no economic stimulus was included in the announcements.

On BSE, nearly 1,400 stocks were in the red as against 890 gainers.

Foreign portfolio investors (FPIs) continued selling with Tuesday's net sales pegged at nearly ₹2,153 crore while their domestic counterparts bought shares worth ₹1,553 crore.

# FMCG companies see a spurt in 'COVID-19 sales'

Consumers on panic buying spree stock up essentials; firms step up production of soaps, liquid handwashes, cut prices

ASHISH RUKHAIYAR MUMBAI

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to a spike in the demand of consumer staples like milk, milk products and biscuits along with hand sanitisers as people are stocking up essentials amid a complete lockdown like scenario.

Companies like Amul, Parle and Godrej Consumer Products have seen a 10-15% jump in demand across product categories and ramped up production to meet the growing demand.

This assumes significance as more States initiate a com-

plete lockdown amid a growing number of confirmed cases of the virus, which would only push up the demand for such staples.

"We have seen an increase of 15-20% in our average daily sales across most product categories as consumers are stocking products like milk, butter, ghee, cheese and paneer," said R.S. Sodhi, managing director, Gujarat Cooperative Milk Marketing Federation, which owns Amul.

Some States like Maharashtra, Karnataka, Punjab and Delhi have imposed

We have seen an increase of 15-20% in our average daily sales across most product categories

R.S. SODHI, MD, Gujarat Cooperative Milk Marketing Federation

stern restrictions on people movement, along with a lockdown, which has made consumers wary of essential products going out of stock, thereby leading to panic buying.

The popular Parle G biscuit has also seen a notable

increase in demand on the back of panic buying.

"There is a bit of panic buying and we have seen around 10-15% increase in our average weekly sales of Parle G," said Parle Products category head Mayank Shah.

Apart from food essentials, products like hand washes have also seen an increase in sales as authorities have been highlighting the importance of sanitising hands at regular intervals.

"In some categories, such as hand washes and sanitisers, we have seen temporary spike in demand, driven by

the impact of COVID-19," said Vivek Gambhir, MD and CEO, Godrej Consumer Products.

"We have also heard of some instances of consumers trying to hoard essentials. Retailers have begun to put restrictions on quantities being purchased. We believe that there should be no reason to panic as there should be sufficient supplies available," Mr. Gambhir added.

### Production ramped up

To meet the increased demand, companies have also ramped up their production as the virus threat is not

showing any signs of abating as of now. "We have recently ramped up production of soaps by 30% and have increased production of liquid hand washes by 3.5X at our units as well as through our vendor partner units," Mr. Gambhir said.

In a similar context, Mr. Shah said that the company had increased production by 15% while closely working with governments to ensure there is minimal logistical issue and all its trade partners have sufficient stock.

Incidentally, Hindustan Unilever (HUL), which is the

country's largest pure play fast moving consumer goods (FMCG) company, has also reduced the prices of Lifebuoy sanitisers, Lifebuoy Liquid handwash and Domex floor cleaners by 15% and said that the products with the reduced prices would be available in the market in the next few weeks. The company has also ramped up the production of Lifebuoy sanitisers, Lifebuoy Handwash liquid and Domex Floor Cleaners and will be scaling it up even further in the coming weeks, it had said in a statement issued last week.

# RBI advances variable rate term repo auction

Central bank bid to meet liquidity needs

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT MUMBAI

The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) has decided to advance the first of the two variable rate term repo auctions to March 26 from March 30.

The central bank had announced two such auctions of ₹25,000 crore each on March 30 and March 31 to address the additional demand for liquidity.

"On a review of the rapidly evolving financial conditions and taking into account the impact of disruptions caused by COVID-19, it has been decided to advance the first auction scheduled for March 30, 2020 to March 26, 2020" the RBI said in a statement.

There is no change in the

auction scheduled for March 31, 2020.

"As a special case, standalone primary dealers (SPDs) were also allowed to participate in these auctions along with other eligible participants," the central bank said in the statement.

It has been decided to temporarily enhance liquidity available to SPDs under the Reserve Bank's Standing Liquidity Facility (SLF) from ₹2,800 crore to ₹10,000 crore with immediate effect, in order to facilitate year-end liquidity management by SPDs. This enhanced facility will be available till April 17, 2020, the RBI said.

# Auto sector loss per day estimated at ₹2,300 cr.

Many auto/component makers closed

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT NEW DELHI

With manufacturing plants temporarily shut to prevent the spread of COVID-19, the automobile sector has estimated a loss of over ₹2,300 crore per day.

"As per quick estimates by the Society of Indian Automobile Manufacturers (SIAM), it is expected that plant closures of auto OEMs and components makers will lead to loss of more than ₹2,300 crore in turnover for each day of closure," Rajan Wadhera, president of the industry body said on Tuesday.

With almost all districts in the country under a lockdown as part of efforts to

Firms that announced closure include Maruti Suzuki, Kia Motors, and Hyundai Motor

combat COVID-19, automobile and auto component makers have, in the past two days, announced temporary shutdown of their manufacturing plants.

The manufacturers include market leaders Maruti Suzuki and Hero MotoCorp, Chennai-based TVS Motor, Kia Motors, General Motors, India Yamaha Motor, Renault India, Rockman Industries, Hyundai Motor, Honda Cars, Fiat Chrysler Automobiles and Honda Motorcycle & Scooter India.

# Moody's downgrades Indiabulls

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT MUMBAI

Moody's Investors Service has downgraded the corporate family rating (CFR) and foreign-currency senior secured rating of Indiabulls Housing Finance Limited (Indiabulls) to B3 from B2.

In addition, Moody's has downgraded Indiabulls' foreign and local currency senior secured MTN programme ratings to (P)B3 from (P)B2. The outlook on all ratings remains negative, it said, adding, "The downgrade and negative outlook reflect Moody's expectation that Indiabulls' access to funding will remain challenging for longer than expected."

# FM's announcements welcomed

Relaxations in norms will offer respite, say industry bodies

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT MUMBAI

The host of announcements made by Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman for the benefit of individual and business taxpayers in the backdrop of COVID-19 outbreak has been welcomed by MSMEs, experts and trade associations. Rajan Wadhera, president, SIAM said, "The series of announcements made by the Finance Minister will lower the challenges for companies in the immediate term."

### Extending deadline

However, K.E. Raghunathan, past president, All India Manufacturers Association, said, "The deadline for February GST returns, which was due to be filed on March



Rajan Wadhera

20, should have also been extended as many MSMEs have not filed the returns for February as yet."

Colin Shah, vice-chairman, Gem & Jewellery Export Promotion Council of India, said, "These measures will give some relief to a lot of very worried entrepreneurs. Exporters wel-

come the announcement that customs will now function as an essential service and will be working 24x7 till June 30, 2020."

"The FM's announcement that companies with an annual turnover of less than ₹5 crore will not be levied any interest, penalty or late fee with respect to GST till June 30, 2020 will help MSMEs in the gem and jewellery sector," Mr. Shah said. Kamal Khetan, CMD, Sunteck Realty Ltd., said "In the light of the economic slowdown due to COVID-19 pandemic, the government is moving positively to support India Inc. "The announcement by the FM on relaxation of rules for TDS, GST and corporate compliances come as a much-needed respite."

# Aramco capex cut may hurt BPCL divestment

Company's move amid declining oil demand is likely to affect Reliance Industries' stake sale as well

PIYUSH PANDEY MUMBAI

The world's largest oil firm Saudi Aramco's decision to cut its capital expenditure (capex) by \$10 billion is likely to hurt the divestment of Bharat Petroleum Corporation Limited (BPCL) and also the oil giant's plans to buy a 20% stake in Reliance Industries Ltd.'s oil-to-chemicals business, according to analysts.

Saudi Aramco is planning to cut its 2020 capex to \$25-30 billion from the original \$35-40 billion amid concerns over oil demand owing to the outbreak of COVID-19.

The oil major's capex stood at \$32.8 billion in 2019. Saudi Aramco's decision may have a direct bearing on the government's plan to divest its 52.98% stake in BPCL as Saudi Aramco was seen as one of the front runners to buy the stake.

According to Saudi Aramco's annual report, the com-



Slippery future: Saudi Aramco is planning to cut its capital expenditure to \$25-30 bn from the original \$35-40 bn. ■AP

pany will focus on downstream in high-growth markets, including India.

BPCL's market capitalisation has dropped by more than half to ₹56,910 crore as on Tuesday compared to almost ₹1,20,000 crore in November 2019.

BPCL shares on Tuesday closed down 2.62% to ₹262.35, valuing the company at ₹56,910.35 crore. At

current price, governments 52.98% stake will be valued

### NEWS ANALYSIS

at ₹30,151 crore.

"It will be very difficult for the government to sell BPCL at this valuation," said a Mumbai-based oil analyst.

Aramco's focus now is to increase oil production up to 12.3 million barrels per day

(mbpd) compared with its average production of 9.7 mbpd amid an oil price war.

Even as Aramco's management is confident of meeting investors' 2020FY earnings/dividend expectations even if oil price remains at about \$30, the company will consider modifying 2021FY capex plan.

### Stock price correction

Nomura, while raising its weight on Reliance Industries (RIL) due to lower oil prices, said the recent correction in stock price (down 33% vs. Nifty down 28%) factors in potential failure to close the Saudi Aramco deal and lower refining and petrochem margins.

Saudi Aramco, in a conference call, stated that it was still conducting due diligence on a potential investment in RIL's oil-to-chemicals operations.

Once the evaluation was complete, it would move to

the next stage of the approval process.

RIL management, in its Q3 earnings briefing, reiterated that its March 2021 deleveraging target remained unchanged and was not conditional on any transaction (such as Aramco).

"We note that the RIL stock price is down 34% from its peak (in December 2019) and below the price at which they had announced stake sale to Aramco - implying the market is not factoring in this transaction," said BofA Securities in research note to its clients.

"Aramco has the capability to close both the deals simultaneously as they believe their oil will last till eternity. They want long term buyers for Saudi oil.

"However, given the market conditions, the valuations of the both the deals could change to a great extent," an official of an oil PSU told The Hindu.

# Monitoring medicine orders, inventories: IPA

Assures of adequate stock of APIs

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT HYDERABAD

The Indian Pharmaceutical Alliance (IPA) has said its member companies were closely monitoring orders and inventories of medicines.

"With an adequate stock of active pharmaceutical ingredients (APIs), finished product formulations and channel availability, we would be able to sustain the supply of medicines for the coming months. We are not aware of any medicines shortage, to date," a statement from IPA said.

### Keeping tabs on supply

The Alliance that represents 24 national pharmaceutical firms said it was working with various entities globally to assess international developments and any potential impact on supply of medicines globally.



IPA said the member companies were working with the Central and State governments, pharmaceutical industry associations in the country and key stakeholders in the supply chain to ensure patients in India and the world continued to have access to medicines.

The Alliance members contribute to over 80% of the country's exports of drugs and pharmaceuticals and service over 57% of the domestic market, the statement said.

# Ola to waive lease rentals for drivers

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT BENGALURU

Ride-hailing platform Ola has decided to waive lease rentals for its driver partners.

"We can confirm that we are fully waiving away lease rentals, akin to an EMI, for driver partners who operate vehicles owned by Ola's subsidiary, Ola Fleet Technologies, under its leasing programme," the company said in a statement.

Driver partners who are currently in distress due to the temporary lockdowns in the wake of COVID-19, will stand to benefit, it said.

"Our benefits on insurance for drivers and their spouses against loss of income due to contraction of COVID-19 will continue to be offered to all our driver-partners across the country," the ride-hailing platform further said.

# Tokyo 2020 will now be held next year

Japan and IOC take decision with aim to safeguard health of athletes and all involved in the Games

## SUMMER OLYMPICS

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE  
LAUSANNE  
The 2020 Tokyo Olympics has been postponed to no later than the summer of 2021 because of the coronavirus pandemic sweeping the globe, the International Olympic Committee announced on Tuesday.

The Games were scheduled for July 24-August 9, but after telephone discussions between IOC president Thomas Bach and Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, a historic joint decision was taken for the first postponement of an Olympics in peacetime.

Abe said Bach was in "100% agreement" when Japan asked the IOC to push back the Games and said the delayed Olympics "held in a complete form will be a testament to mankind's defeat of the new virus".

In a joint statement, the pair said that based on current World Health Organization information, the Tokyo Games "must be rescheduled to a date beyond 2020 but not later than summer 2021, to safeguard the health of the athletes, everybody involved in the Olympic Games and the international community".

"The leaders agreed that the Olympic Games in Tokyo could stand as a beacon of hope to the world during these troubled times and that the Olympic flame could become the light at the end



**Momentous:** A man walks past a billboard promoting the Tokyo Games. The unprecedented, but anticipated, decision to postpone the mega event was taken on Tuesday. ■ FILE PHOTO: REUTERS

of the tunnel in which the world finds itself at present.

### Flame to stay in Japan

"Therefore, it was agreed that the Olympic flame will stay in Japan. It was also agreed that the Games will keep the name Olympic and Paralympic Games Tokyo 2020," the statement concluded.

Bach later said he did not discuss new dates with Abe and the exact dates is a question for the Tokyo organising committee and an International Olympic Committee panel overseeing the preparations.

The torch relay, due to start on Thursday from the Fukushima, will be postponed and the flame will remain there for now.

The move would be a devastating blow for Tokyo, which had won widespread praise for its organisation, with venues finished well ahead of time and tickets massively oversubscribed.

The Olympics, which has experienced boycotts, terrorist attacks and protests, but has been held every four years since 1948, would be the highest-profile event affected by the virus that has killed thousands and closed sports competitions worldwide.

The IOC has come under increasing pressure in recent days to postpone the Games, scheduled to start on July 24,

with 1.7 billion people across the planet in lockdown to prevent the further spread of COVID-19.

### Preparations affected

Training has become impossible for many athletes and exposes them to the risk of contracting or spreading the disease. Competitions and qualifiers have been scrapped, while international travel is severely limited.

On Sunday, the IOC had initially given itself a deadline of four weeks to come up with a proposal to postpone the Games, a Herculean task that touches on every aspect of Tokyo 2020 planning from venues to security to ticketing.

Tokyo was spending some \$12.6 billion to host the Games, according to its latest budget, and experts believe a postponement could cost it some \$6 billion in the short-term before recouping it when it eventually goes ahead.

It will also be a bitter blow to sponsors and major broadcasters who rely on the four-yearly extravaganza for critical advertising revenue.

It is not the first time Tokyo has seen unscheduled changes to the Games – it was due to be the first Asian country to host the Olympics in 1940 before pulling out due to international pressure over its war with China.

But Tokyo 2020 organisers point to the unparalleled complexity – not to mention cost – of shifting the Games. It is not even clear venues will be available and tens of thousands of hotel rooms will need to be cancelled and rebooked.

### Logistical issues

Squeezing in the 16-day Games into what will already be a hugely crowded 2021 calendar is another major headache, with arguably the two biggest sports, swimming and athletics, due to hold their World Championships that summer.

However, World Athletics has already said it was prepared to shift its World championships, scheduled for August 6-15 next year in Oregon, to accommodate the move.

## Athletes relieved, says IOA

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA  
NEW DELHI

The Indian Olympic Association (IOA) on Tuesday welcomed the decision to postpone the Tokyo Olympic Games, saying the country's athletes have been relieved of having to train during a global health crisis.

"IOA welcomes the decision of IOC. Discussions were held by IOC with organisers and all stakeholders prior to this," IOA secretary-general Rajiv Mehta told PTI.

**Meeting**  
"Soon after the lockdown is over, IOA would be

holding meetings with athletes, federations, sponsors, etc. to revise plans.

"This decision today, relieves our athletes of worries of having to train now during epidemic and perform their best in four months from now," he added.

## Appropriate decision: Sindhu

Gopi Chand welcomes move, awaits new guidelines

V.V. SUBRAHMANYAM  
HYDERABAD

World badminton champion P.V. Sindhu has welcomed the decision to postpone the Tokyo Olympics.

"I think it was the most appropriate decision given the prevailing critical situation.

"The organisers have shown concern for the health of every one involved by not going ahead with the original schedule," Sindhu told *The Hindu* on Tuesday.

"Athletes should be prepared for unforeseen developments. Now, with the Games officially postponed, naturally we will have to re-plan our preparations. But, first, let us all hope that the situation improves globally," added Sindhu.

Chief badminton coach P. Gopi Chand also welcomed the decision.

"I welcome this very good decision for it would have been difficult to con-



**Wait to continue:** Gopi and Sindhu arrive in Hyderabad after the latter's silver-winning show at 2016 Olympics. ■ FILE PHOTO

duct the Games given the uncertainty shrouding the situation. Athletes would have found it extremely challenging to make it to the Games if they were to be held as per the original schedule in July.

"I don't know what kind of impact it (the postponement) will have on badminton players, for first we have to know the BWF guidelines

and the new qualification norms. Whether they will go ahead with the existing norms or not," Gopi said.

### More time, new challenges

"Yes, the move also gives the coaches and athletes time and at the same time new challenges too," said Gopi, who is in self-isolation on return from the All England championship.

## Life always comes first: Mary Kom

Indian stars concur that well-being of athletes is paramount

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA  
NEW DELHI

Life comes first, sport can wait. This was the collective view of India's top Olympic-bound athletes, including M.C. Mary Kom and Saina Nehwal, as they lauded the Games' postponement on Tuesday.

"The situation right now is not good. Life always comes first, everything else can wait. Players' safety is paramount. Everyone who took this decision factored this in. I think it's good," said boxer Mary Kom.

Saina, who was racing against time to qualify for Tokyo, said, "happy that it's postponed even though some of us haven't qualified.



Ravi Dahiya. ■ FILE PHOTO: PTI



Mary. ■ FILE PHOTO: VIVEK BENDRE

We are eager to know what the qualification (process) would be like going ahead."

India's only individual Olympic champion Abhinav Bindra welcomed the decision and stressed on the need to immediately suspend training camps and guard the athletes in the wake of the pandemic.

Wrestler Bajrang Punia said training had been thrown haywire and the postponement is welcome.

"It's a good decision because everyone is disturbed. Athletes' health is paramount. No one is training properly. We first have to save people from this epidemic," said Punia.



Bindra. ■ FILE PHOTO

"We were prepared for Olympics. We were ready but what do you do when something like this happens. It's beyond control," grappler Ravi Dahiya said.

### Hockey coaches' view

Indian men's hockey coach Graham Reid said the team is gutted by the postponement but understands the gravity of the health crisis.

"It is very disappointing that the Olympics will not go ahead, but given the unprecedented circumstances facing the world at present it is totally understandable and expected," Reid said. The view was shared by women's team coach, Sjoerd Marijne.

## Tough, but smart move: Paes

SHAYAN ACHARYA  
MUMBAI

India's tennis ace Leander Paes has termed the decision to postpone the Tokyo Olympics a 'smart move'.

Paes, who won a bronze at the Atlanta Olympics in 1996, told *The Hindu* that it was the right call.

"The Olympic movement stands for good health and is about the global community coming together. At a time like this, when the corona pandemic has touched almost every corner of the world, including Tokyo, full credit to the Olympic committee for postponing the Games," Paes said.

Paes said every aspect had to be considered before taking such a tough call.

"It's a very tough decision to take, because millions and millions of sporting commerce goes into the Olympics. Given the effort the Olympic movement takes to run the Games, it was a hard decision," Paes said.

In December last year, Paes had announced that 2020 would be his farewell year from tennis and he wanted to sign off after featuring in the Tokyo Games. On his plans following the postponement, he said: "My team and I are evaluating."



Leander Paes. ■ FILE PHOTO

## Shooting fraternity hails decision

SANTADEEP DEY  
CHENNAI

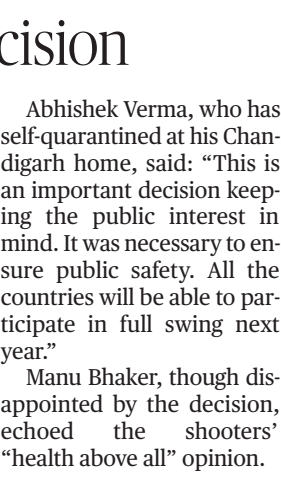
The Indian shooting team has welcomed the postponement of the Tokyo Games.

Apurvi Chandela, who has been training at her own shooting range at home, said she was taken aback by the decision. She, however, said this doesn't affect her preparations. "We have to look at our preparations and stay focused."

SANTADEEP DEY  
CHENNAI

Abhishek Verma, who has self-quarantined at his Chandigarh home, said: "This is an important decision keeping the public interest in mind. It was necessary to ensure public safety. All the countries will be able to participate in full swing next year."

Manu Bhaker, though disappointed by the decision, echoed the shooters' "health above all" opinion.



Apurvi. ■ FILE PHOTO

## COVID-19 IMPACT

### Bajrang donates salary in fight against pandemic

NEW DELHI

Star wrestler Bajrang Punia has donated his six months salary towards fight against the coronavirus pandemic. "I have donated my six months' salary towards relief fund for COVID-19 patients set up by Haryana Chief Minister M.L. Khattar," Punia, who works with the Railways as an officer on special duty (OSD) said in a



tweet. He also called upon people to make contributions towards the "Haryana corona relief fund." ■ IANS

### Senior National badminton put on hold

NEW DELHI

The 84th senior National badminton championship, scheduled to be held in Lucknow from April 27 to May 3, has been put on hold, Badminton Association of India

(BAI) said on Tuesday. "We have put on hold the 84th senior Nationals and 75th inter-State inter-zonal in light of the coronavirus outbreak. We have advised the state secretaries not to book any ticket for the Lucknow event," BAI secretary Ajay Singhania said. ■ PTI

### Bayern Munich and other Bundesliga clubs take pay cuts

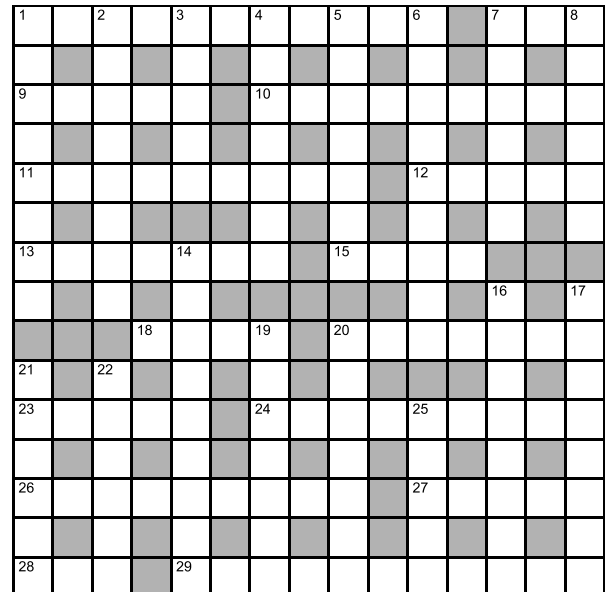
BERLIN

Footballers at Germany's top teams, including Bayern Munich, have agreed to take pay cuts to help clubs survive

the economic impact of the coronavirus, media reports said Tuesday. *Bild* reports that players and club officials at champions Bayern, currently on top of Bundesliga, have accepted a 20% in their salaries. Bayern has a massive wage bill which reached €336 million last year, almost half of club turnover. Players at Borussia Moenchengladbach were the first in the Bundesliga to propose a pay cut. Borussia Dortmund and Bayer Leverkusen players are in talks over pay cut proposals with management. ■ AFP

## THE HINDU CROSSWORD 12892

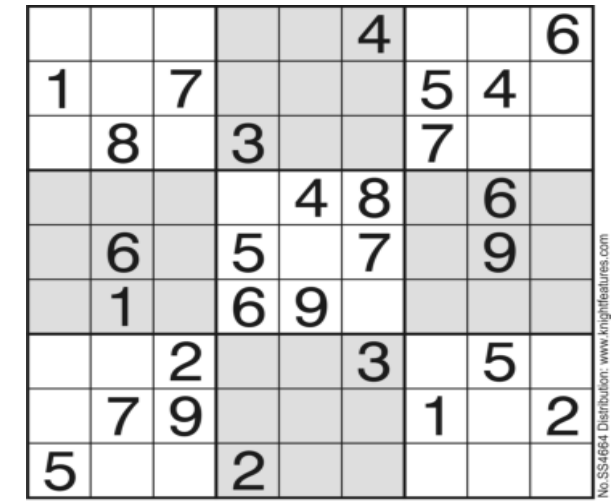
Log on to crossword.thehindu.com for more puzzles



(set by Arden)

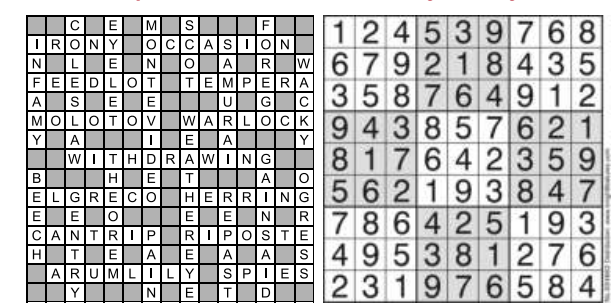
- 12 Hope everyone can suppress discontent (5)
- 13 Bag of tricks – grabbed it, getting ultimate thrill (4,3)
- 15 Image exposed – nice and long (4)
- 18 Hard to check vehicle daily (4)
- 20 He gets a bird on flight (7)
- 23 Only role of abstractionism in painting (2,3)
- 24 Landlord will glance around before entering empty room initially (9)
- 26 Used for divining friend's secret, reportedly (9)
- 27 Well earned, no odds on this animal (5)
- 28 One breaking a contract is a fool (3)
- 29 Free, in case trade is established (11)
- 1 It will slither and stop on tarmac (7)
- 5 Subject of King's ascendancy – they say 'Ayes' have it (7)
- 6 Communicate as per home design (9)
- 7 Perhaps later allowed new growth overhead (6)
- 8 Complaint with business software he has acquired (6)
- 14 Unkempt, hairy – task for him is to fight (9)
- 16 After drink understood he's a man of God (8)
- 17 Butted in, but perhaps didn't stop offensive (8)
- 19 Automatic turnaround for contributor (7)
- 20 Endless plea by painter (7)
- 21 Move on with a ticket (6)
- 22 Everyone's sunk low, Tom goes for vote (6)
- 25 Purge the opponent, finally there's change (5)

## SUDOKU



DIFFICULTY RATING: ★★★★★

Solution to puzzle 12891      Solution to yesterday's Sudoku



## FAITH

### Importance of Acharyas

Alavandar's Stotra Ratnam is about Lord Narayana. But it begins with worship of Acharya Nathamuni. In a work about the Supreme One, how can one begin with praise of an Acharya, we may ask. The answer lies in the fact, that without an Acharya, there is no way we can attain moksha.

It is his guiding hand that shows us the right path, said Valayapet Ramachariar, in a discourse. Milk has a natural sweetness. But add some jaggery, cardamom and saffron to it, and it tastes even better. Similarly, worshipping God becomes even more delightful, when it goes hand in hand with worship of an Acharya. If we are present in a temple, when an Acharya does a mangalasanana of the deity, then is not our joy doubled? Paying obeisance to one's Acharya pleases the Lord. But is there any precedent for such worship? Sage Maitreya fell at the feet of sage Parasara, and asked for advice. Parasara then told him the Vishnu Purana. So Alavandar is only following what had already been the practice, namely paying one's respects to an Acharya, when one seeks knowledge about Bhagavan.

An Acharya is put on a pedestal – Acharya devo bhava – an Acharya is equal to God. Chandogya Upanishad says Acharyavaan Purusho Vedah, that is, only a man who has an Acharya has proper spiritual understanding. So, we can see that the Sastras lay stress on Acharya bhakti. Only with Acharya's help, we can understand Vedantic texts. And the beauty is that a person who has studied under an Acharya, also comprehends that which has not been taught to him. It may not be possible for a shishya to study all literature. His Acharya may teach him only a few. But when he later on reads whatever has not been taught, he still is able to understand the meaning, because of Acharya's grace.



To play an interactive version of this crossword online, scan the QR code

# Mbanda tackling a different opponent now



**Kind gesture:** The strong Maxime Mbanda helps patients to be carried from a wheelchair. • SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

The Italian rugby international is now an ambulance driver for Yellow Cross

## COVID-19

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE  
PARMA

Italian international Maxime Mbanda has leapt from the back row on the rugby pitch to the front line in the fight against the coronavirus, becoming a volunteer ambulance driver in Parma, and bears witness to a frightening reality on the pandemic.

Last Saturday, Mbanda was scheduled to face England in front of 60,000 people in Rome for his 21st Italian cap, but that match, like so many others, has been postponed.

### Volunteers to help

Instead, wearing a mask and protective suit, he went out again as an ambulance driver

with other volunteers from the Yellow Cross in Parma, in Emilia-Romagna, one of the areas most affected by the coronavirus.

"When everything was cancelled in rugby, I wondered how I could help, even without medical expertise," Mbanda, who plays for Zebre Rugby, the Parma club, said.

"I found the Yellow Cross, which had a transport service for medicine and food for the elderly."

### Physical strength used

After delivering masks, food and prescriptions one day, the physical strength of the 26-year-old forward was put to good use where it was most needed, "on the front line, at the heart of the problem".

"I found myself transfer-

ring positive patients from one local hospital to another. I help with the stretcher or if there are patients to be carried from a wheelchair. I also hold the oxygen," he explained.

"If people see what I see in the hospitals, there wouldn't be a queue in front of the supermarkets anymore," he said. "They would think two, three or four times before leaving home, even to go running," he said.

### No medical experience

Mbanda has no medical experience, but he is working with the support of his girlfriend and his father, a surgeon in Milan, "also on the front line."

Mbanda has had to become a psychologist in con-

tact with patients put in wards "where death is the order of the day".

"When you see the look in their eyes... even if they can't speak, they communicate with the eyes and they tell you things you can't imagine," he said.

"I started eight days ago, without a day's break and with shifts of 12 or 13 hours. But faced with what I see in the infectious disease rooms, I tell myself that I can't be tired," he said.

Accustomed, as an Italian international, to tackling stronger opponents, Mbanda said he won't give up.

"As long as I'm strong, I'll keep going. I'm here and I'm staying here. As long as there's an emergency, I'm here and I'm staying here."

# Nepomniachtchi ahead

## CANDIDATES

SPORTS BUREAU  
YEKATERINBURG

Ian Nepomniachtchi scored his second win in as many days to consolidate his lead at the Candidates chess tournament.

The Russian defeated second seed Ding Liren of China in the sixth round and took his tally to 4.5 points.

He is now one point

ahead of the second-placed Maxime Vachier-Lagrave of China.

Top seed Fabiano Caruana of the United States is third with 3.5 points.

**The results (sixth round):** Alexander Grischuk (Rus) 3 drew with Fabiano Caruana (USA) 3; Kirill Alekseenko (Rus) 2 lost to Anish Giri (Ned) 3; Ian Nepomniachtchi (Rus) 4.5 bt Ding Liren (Chn) 2; Wang Hao (Chn) 3 drew with Maxime Vachier-Lagrave (Fra) 3.5.

# Postponement an athlete's nightmare

V.V. SUBRAHMANYAM  
HYDERABAD

Rescheduling of a major event is an athlete's nightmare, says 1996 Atlanta Olympics hockey goalkeeper Aloysius Edwards.

Months of planning and preparation go for a toss, Edwards, who represented India in 147 internationals between 1989 and 2000, including the 1994 World Cup, told *The Hindu* on Tuesday on receiving news of the Tokyo Olympics being postponed.

"The worst-hit will be those who are on the verge of making it to the Olympics, the dream of any athlete," he says.

### Different challenge

"The challenge is of a different nature, too, given that the athlete is at home during a lockdown. If you are forced indoors by injury, you know you can make it back by working on it, but here you are staring at grim possibilities," he says.

"There will be some who may miss the bus for the simple reason that there will be fresh guidelines and qualifying standards, especially in individual disciplines. Young contenders who cannot be ignored will emerge."

"Most athletes prepare



Aloysius Edwards.  
• SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

with the specific objective of peaking at the right time for a major event, especially the Olympics. And, the Games not being held as scheduled will be a huge dampener," he said.

Edwards should know what it means to miss an Olympics! For, after attending the one-month preparatory camp in Brisbane before the 2000 Sydney Olympics and even being presented the official No. 12 jersey (which he exchanged with Jude Felix's No. 1 on the latter's request), the Hyderabad was sent home and Devesh Chauhan preferred.

"However, postponement was the only sensible option left for the Olympics organisers, given the grim scenario across the world. After all, athletes' health and safety are paramount."

# Holding weighs in on Sandpapergate

March 24, 2018, a dark day for Australian cricket

AYAN ACHARYA  
CHENNAI

"Faf is being held together by... I was going to say by sticky tape, but that's probably not the right thing." So began the announcement, nearly four days after the Newlands incident in 2018, of the then South Africa coach Otis Gibson, who had a dig at Australia's ball-tampering weapon of choice.

Australia had its moments when it was exceptionally good, but this was one of its lowest points. Eventually, the players would come good and they would be strong again. It was just one of those things, but March 24 marked two years since Australian cricket was thrown into turmoil by the Cape Town Sandpapergate scandal.

Steven Smith and David Warner, formerly captain and vice-captain of Australia, were banned from playing international and domestic cricket for 12 months by Cricket Australia for their roles in the scandal while Cameron Bancroft, the player caught tampering the ball, was banned from playing for nine months.

The reception Australia has got since that fateful Test against South Africa has usually oscillated between

disgust and awe. Michael Holding, West Indies fast-bowling great who was part of the commentary team during the Test, dismisses the notion that the fallout was over the top.

### Comparison

"I don't think so," said Holding, "considering the level of punishments meted out to individuals and teams whose crime was to not bowl enough overs in a day. And I think the bigger crime was to try and cover up what took place instead of just taking it on the chin and apologising."

Holding did not see the incident live. He had just come off commentary when a broadcasting colleague brought it to his attention. "I went outside the Super-sports commentary box only to be asked by a commentator from another network if I had seen what happened."



Michael Holding. • FILE PHOTO



Bancroft... caught in the act! • FILE PHOTO

Holding recalled. "I went back and watched all the replays from various angles. My immediate reaction was dismay. I couldn't believe anyone could be so naive to do what he [Bancroft] did in today's world."

Holding has "no idea" whether Smith and Warner are better for their experience. "I remember seeing an advertisement that Smith did while under suspension, referring to his involvement in the scandal which, in my opinion, was in poor taste. It didn't suggest to me that there was any remorse. I don't know either gentleman, so can only go by what I see."

# Former India footballer Abdul Latif passes away

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT  
HYDERABAD

Former India footballer Abdul Latif passed away in Guwahati on Monday. He was 73 and had a son and two daughters.

Latif, who played as a midfielder, represented India in the 1970 Asian Games where the team won a bronze.

Earlier, he played for State Bank of Hyderabad in the A-Division Rahim League here. Later, he moved to Bengaluru where he played for HAL before settling down in Guwahati.

Latif was also the coach of the Assam team which won the junior and the sub-junior national titles under his guidance.

He also played for the two famous Kolkata clubs Mohd. Sporting and Mohun Bagan.

Former India captain Victor Amalraj said that Latif was his coach with Mohd. Sporting in 1978 and his strategies were brilliant.

Former internationals Shabbir Ali, Mohd. Habib, Amalraj, Aleem Khan, G. Palguna were among those who expressed their condolences.

# A little panic is useful if it saves lives

Sport engenders complacency, but a measured panic is better in a crisis



## BETWEEN WICKETS

SURESH MENON

Authorities the world over tell us not to panic. But sometimes a little panic can be useful if it saves lives. It may be necessary to frighten adults with the bogeyman, the way children are scared into eating their vegetables, if all of us are to survive.

The insouciance with which many continue to go about their business as if nothing is happening – partying, gathering in public places – seems to be a sign that asking people not to panic is a way of telling them to act irresponsibly.

The five-minute plate-banging and clapping on the Sunday was followed on Monday by crowds on the streets and in marketplaces. It was, as one writer pointed out, as if India had won the World Cup. Citizens concluded that the coronavirus had been driven away.

What has all this got to do with a sports column you might ask, and the answer is, "everything." Sport does not exist outside of normal human practice; it is not something that happens independently of life. Any man's death ought to diminish us for we are involved in mankind, as the poet pointed out.

### Ill-prepared

The worst is yet to come, and we are ill-prepared. The responsibility falls on each of us to follow the rules. Stay home. Wash hands. Avoid people.

The Olympic Games have been postponed. And there is very little chance of the IPL being held any time soon. We might as well accept this and not waste

time speculating or swallowing the highly optimistic statements from some quarters.

According to most estimates, we will be dealing in millions of people affected and killed before the thing tapers off. The best case scenario is a few weeks, the worst 18 months or more. Governments and individuals should prepare for the worst while hoping for the best.

This means we will need more emergency hospital beds, more equipment, more trained personnel and huge amounts of money to handle the medical crisis alone (the economic crisis running on a parallel track calls for financial stimulus too). Not every city can construct a 1000-bed hospital in 10 days, as Wuhan, in China, did. And this is where sports facilities come in.

### Emergency centres

The Sports Authority of India has already put its 10 centres and five stadiums at the government's disposal to be used as temporary emergency centres and quarantine areas.

The cricket stadiums where the IPL is scheduled to be played can be put to better use over the next few weeks and months by turning them into similar centres.

Brazil has already done the same with their football stadiums, and Wales with rugby clubs. The three most populous countries got off to a late start for varying reasons. China, where the virus originated, was more keen on covering up than on warning the rest of the world. The United States has the misfortune of having a President who looks at each issue from the point of view of his personal business growth. The country in between, India, has done well so far, but it has two handicaps: an administration that is fundamentally anti-science, and a too-easily satisfied popu-

lation which is often told what to feel. There is a third too – the reluctance of its billionaires to create a large fund to fight the pandemic. India has 138 of them, at the last count.

### Urgency

The virus is no respecter of persons, and all three countries must deal with it with greater transparency and urgency. There are lessons they can learn from one another, and from Italy, Spain, Korea and the rest of the world.

It is not the end of the world if the IPL is postponed (the start of the cricket season in England has been pushed to at least May 28) or if the Olympic Games are not held on schedule. Such things tell us simultaneously about both the significance and the triviality of sport.

Right now it is the triviality that dominates. But we know this is only a phase, and soon the significance will take over. In the meantime, as the British Prime Minister said, many of us would have lost loved ones.

Many of them might have been saved with a bit of panic that saw them stay at home, wash hands and avoid travel and crowds.

In the spring of 1915, a year after the start of the World War (which ended only in 1919), the Surrey Committee issued the following statement: "The County championship will not take place; but in the event of the War coming to an early conclusion, it is hoped that some matches may be played..."

Surrey's and England's and the world's best batsman, Jack Hobbs later wrote in his autobiography: "How curious it seems today to think that the War might not be prolonged throughout 1915..."

Sport engenders complacency, but measured panic is better in a crisis.

# Nothing decided yet: Ganguly on IPL-13

SHAYAN ACHARYA  
MUMBAI

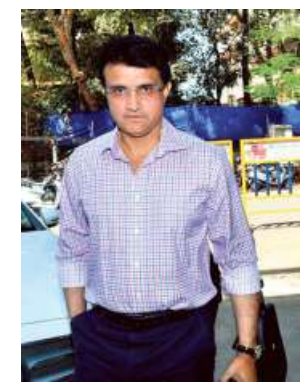
BCCI president Sourav Ganguly said there was no clarity on the fate of IPL-13 as the country has gone into a 21-day lockdown owing to COVID-19.

"Nothing has been decided yet. There is no clarity," Ganguly told *Sportstar* from Kolkata on Tuesday. "Things remain as it was (on March 14) when we decided to postpone the IPL (to April 15). There is no update."

Will the tournament be called off? "We have not decided on that yet. Let's see how things go in the next few days," Ganguly said.

The franchise officials had a conference call last week, raising eyebrows.

Ganguly, however, made it clear that he has not spoken to anyone so far. "What



Ganguly.  
• FILE PHOTO: VIVEK BENDRE

change have you seen in the last one week? Nothing! We have not spoken to any of the franchisees yet."

Does the BCCI plan to donate any fund to the union government for COVID-19 relief?

"We haven't decided on that yet," Ganguly said.

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