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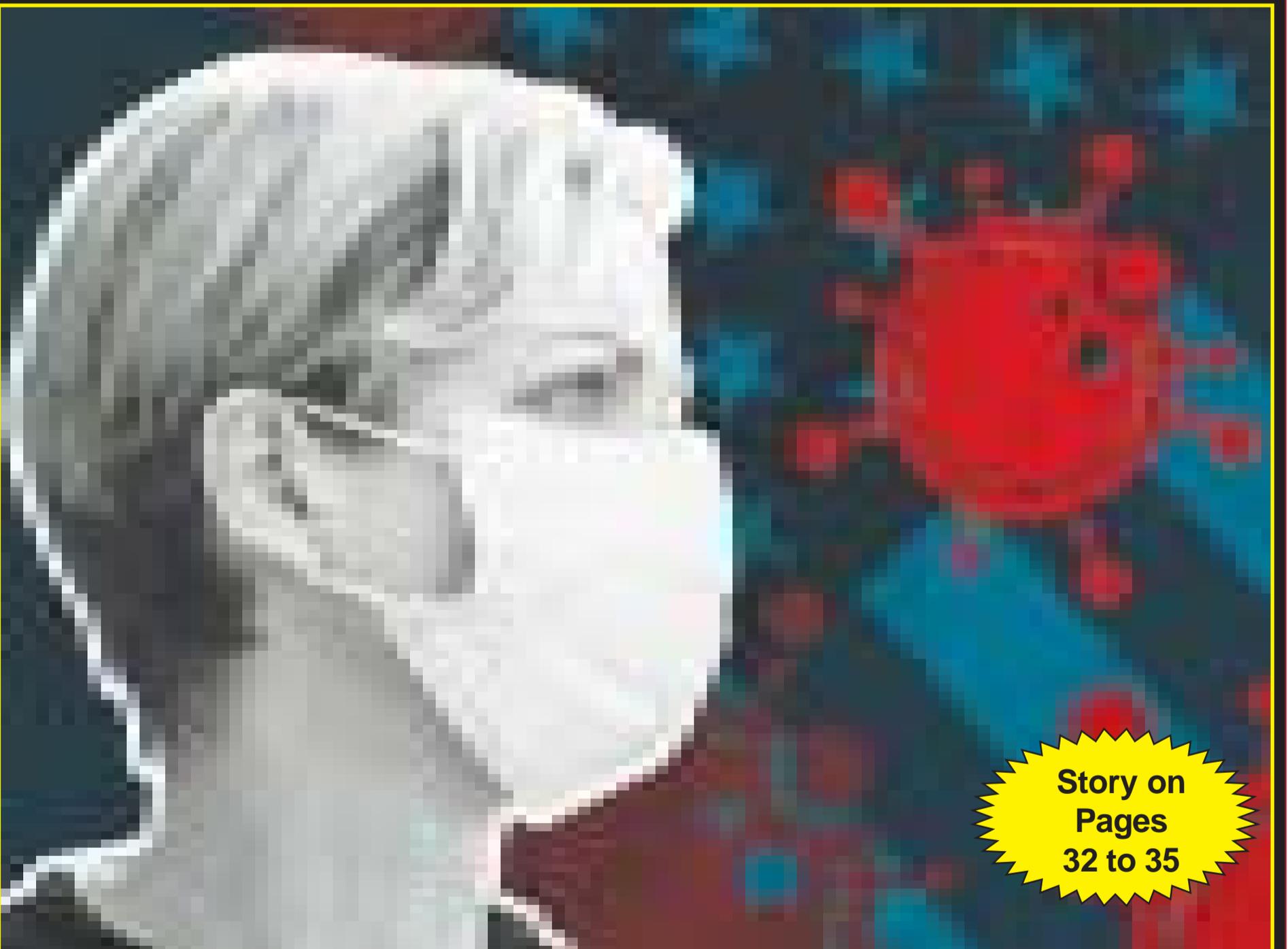
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'A historic event for humanity'

US reaches turning point in fight against COVID-19 as FDA authorizes Pfizer vaccine



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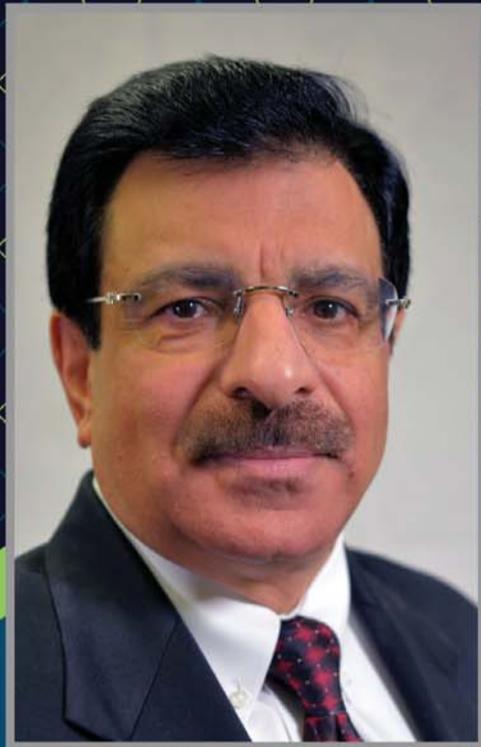
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FRONT PAGE FEATURE

'A historic event for humanity': US reaches turning point in fight against COVID-19 as FDA authorizes Pfizer vaccine

In what is hoped to be the beginning of the end of America's COVID-19 pandemic, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration on Friday night authorized the first vaccine to prevent the disease.

The vaccine, developed by Pfizer and its German partner BioNTech, appears to be extremely safe and highly effective.

It was developed faster than any previously approved vaccine in the United States - not by compromising safety or accepting a mediocre vaccine as some feared - but by spending billions of taxpayer dollars and taking advantage of recent scientific advances.

The vaccine could start to be delivered into people's arms as soon as Monday, if not earlier. About 2.9 million frontline health care workers and nursing home residents are expected to receive the vaccine in the first few days.

More vaccine will be rolled out in the weeks and months to come, with both of two front runners expected to deliver a combined 300 million doses of their vaccines by the middle of next year, enough to vaccinate nearly half the population of the U.S.

"Today is truly a historic event for humanity as a whole," said Moncef Slaoui, an immunologist and retired pharmaceutical executive who helped lead the government's vaccine development effort.

"Eleven months almost to the day after a pandemic virus sequence was identified and devastated lives and livelihoods across the globe, science, industry and government working together were able to discover, develop and manufacture in a record time the first of a series of potent vaccines that undoubtedly will be pivotal to ridding us of this plague."

The FDA's emergency use authorization for the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine BNT162b2 in people ages 16 and up comes as the nation's COVID-19 death toll tops the number of Americans who died on the battlefield in World War II.

President Donald Trump, who announced the decision in a 3-minute video on Twitter, said he was extremely proud of his administration's accomplishment in collaboration

with scientists and the private sector.

"Today's achievement is a reminder of America's unlimited potential when we have the will and the courage to pursue ambitious goals," he said.

Other members of the administration were equally enthusiastic.

"It is nothing short of a medical miracle to have FDA authorization of a vaccine for COVID-19 just over 11 months since the virus was made known to the world," said Alex Azar, head of the department of Health and Human Services in an emailed statement.

major safety concerns. The vaccine was 95% effective across the board, with various groups predisposed to a severe case of COVID-19 - such as people over 70, those with certain medical conditions including diabetes and lung disease, and people who are Black and/or Hispanic - seeing nearly equal protection.

"No better demonstration could be made that we as humans hold our future in our hands," Slaoui said. "We can destroy it or we can restore it ... the choice is ours."

Others were equally exuberant about the scientific

"Now it's our challenge to convince people that it wasn't rushed in a reckless way, that it was an expression of the extraordinary scientific advances made with vaccine platform technology and the investment that was made," Fauci added.

Both China and Russia have been vaccinating their residents for several months with home-grown vaccines but they have not been fully vetted. Both countries began distribution before completing large-scale trials designed to confirm safety and determine effectiveness.

Although a committee meeting Saturday will make a final determination, the vaccine should first be available to frontline health care workers and nursing home residents.

As more vaccine is manufactured in late January or February, vaccination will likely be expanded to include first responders, home

health care workers, teachers, grocery store clerks, other essential workers, people at high risk because of age or health status, and those in prisons and homeless shelters, which have seen particularly devastating outbreaks of COVID-19.

Younger, healthier people in low-risk professions will likely get access to vaccination in April or May, depending on demand and how many vaccines receive FDA authorization.

How RNA technology works in COVID-19 vaccine The Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine, like the one developed by Moderna, depends on so-called messenger RNA technology never before used in an approved vaccine or drug.

The technology takes advantage of the natural function of mRNA, which acts as a go-between or messenger, ferrying a recipe from the DNA to make the proteins responsible for every one of the cell's functions.

With the vaccines, the mRNA is encapsulated in tiny,

protective balls of fat that keep the mRNA from being chewed up by enzymes.

Once injected, the fat ball delivers the mRNA into a cell, triggering production of a protein found on the surface of the virus that causes COVID-19.

The fat balls are very fragile, which is why the vaccines have to be stored at very cold temperatures. Once they disintegrate, the mRNA doesn't hang around very long to cause safety concerns.

The Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine has to be kept at subzero temperatures, with dry ice or a special freezer until five days before use, while Moderna's can be refrigerated for a week before use, and at room temperature for up to 12 hours.

Moderna and BioNTech, a biotech firm based in Mainz, Germany, both have been developing mRNA vaccines for the last decade, but had not passed early trials in people. The COVID-19 pandemic provided them the funding and scientific support to put their novel approach to work.

Moderna was able to design its vaccine in just over a month, after receiving the DNA code of the SARS-CoV-2 virus, which causes COVID-19, last January. BioNTech began developing its vaccine around the same time. COVID-19 vaccine Q&A: Are there side effects to a COVID-19 vaccine? What are the 'ingredients'? The cost?

Both vaccines underwent animal testing and trials in people, starting small and building to large-scale, recently completed trials.

In typical vaccine development, each of those steps would have proceeded in sequence, taking years. Instead, this time, many of the steps were done simultaneously, allowing the vaccines to complete development, testing and manufacturing in record time. Nearly all the vaccines being developed in the United States target a protein on the surface of the SARS-CoV-2 virus, called the "spike" protein. Researchers in the U.S. government, led by Barney Graham at NIAID, discovered the precise configuration of the protein, allowing vaccine developers to take aim at a highly effective target.



Dr. Stephen Hahn, the FDA commissioner, called the authorization "a significant milestone in battling this devastating pandemic that has affected so many families in the United States and around the world."

Next week, a second candidate COVID-19 vaccine, developed by the Cambridge, Massachusetts-based Moderna, will go through the same review process and is expected to be swiftly cleared for use.

The FDA will stop short of fully approving either vaccine. The agency has received all the standard short-term safety and effectiveness data, but the vaccines have not been tested for the two years typical of an approved vaccine so it is not yet clear how long protection will last. "With science guiding our decision-making ... the vaccine's known and potential benefits clearly outweigh its known and potential risks," said Dr. Peter Marks, director of the FDA's Center for Biologics Evaluation and Research.

Data from Pfizer's trial of 44,000 people, half of whom received the active vaccine and half a placebo, found no

achievement, but remain cautious about the future, particularly in the short-term, when vaccines won't be widely available and the virus continues to sicken more than 200,000 Americans a day and kill several thousand. "I think it's remarkable," said Dr. Paul Offit, a pediatric infectious disease expert and director of the Vaccine Education Center at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia.

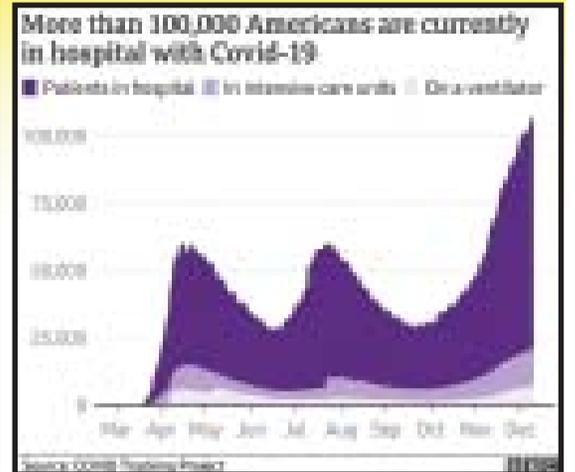
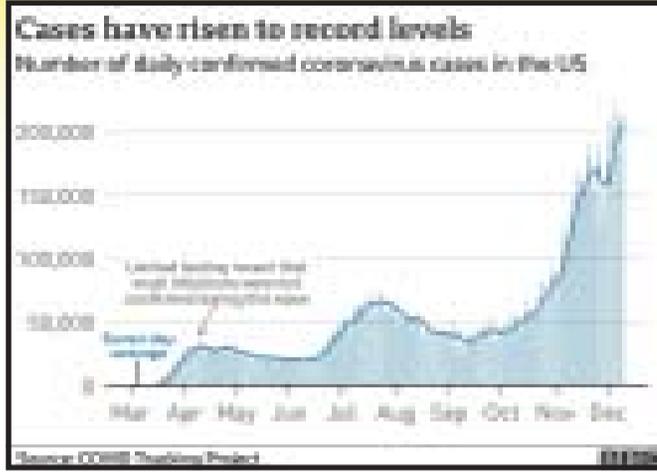
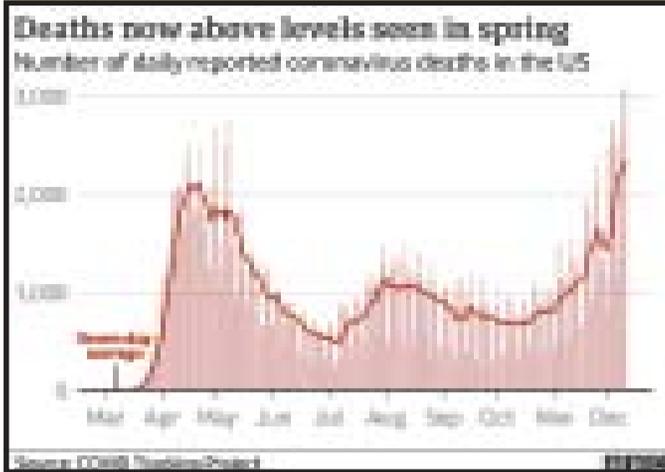
The virus was genetically sequenced for the first time in January. "I don't think you would have found a scientist on this planet who would have predicted this 11 months ago," he said.

Dr. Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases agreed that the speed of vaccine development was almost unbelievable.

"It would have been inconceivable to me a year or two or three ago to think we were going to be successful in that," he said in an interview Friday with the editor of the Journal of the American Medical Association.

FRONT PAGE FEATURE FRONT PAGE FEATURE

Covid-19 in the US: Bleak winter ahead as deaths surge



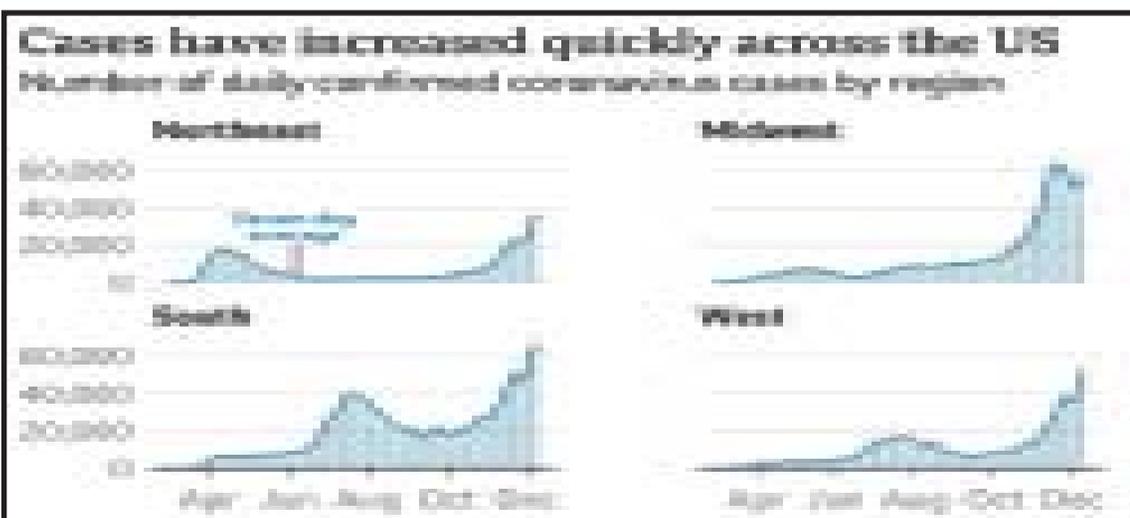
Americans should start being vaccinated against coronavirus in the coming days, providing some light at the end of the tunnel for the country with the highest death toll in the world. But the good news about vaccines comes as the US is experiencing its toughest period of the pandemic so far. The number of daily reported deaths is at a record high while both the number of infections and admissions to hospital continue to rise. Robert Redfield, the head of the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, has warned that the next few months will be "the most difficult in the public health history of this nation". So why is the outlook so bleak and what will next year bring? Deaths are now surging across the US. The number of daily reported deaths began to increase substantially in November and it has now passed 3,000 for the first time since the start of the pandemic. The highest number of deaths in one day during the spring outbreak, which was limited to states in the Northeast, was just below 2,800. If you ignore the recent

slight drop in the seven-day average, which was caused by the limited reporting of data around the Thanksgiving holiday on 26 November, the trend does not look good. Earlier this week, Dr Redfield told the Council on Foreign Relations think-tank that he expected the daily death toll to be higher than the 3,000 killed in the 9/11 attacks "probably for the next 60 to 90 days". At the moment, the US death toll stands at nearly 300,000 - the highest figure in the world and about a fifth of the global total of confirmed coronavirus deaths. Cases are still rising quickly. One of the reasons the death toll is expected to rise at such a fast rate is because the number of infections is also still on the way up. With more than 15 million confirmed cases, the US has the highest number of infections in the world and the spread shows no sign of slowing down. The chart below shows that the current wave is still growing at a faster rate than the previous two - although some of that is down to increased levels of testing. During the spring wave, testing was mostly limited to confirming cases in people who were already in hospital, meaning the

true scale of that outbreak wasn't fully captured. The latest data compiled by the COVID Tracking Project shows the number of cases was up by nearly 30% week on week, while testing was up by just 10%. Dr Anthony Fauci, the top US infectious diseases expert, has said we'll have to wait until mid-December to gauge what effect Thanksgiving gatherings have had on the numbers. But he warned that Christmas will inevitably bring another increase in travelling and social contacts, which will lead to "a very challenging period". The strain on hospitals is growing. Because of the change in the level of testing, a better way to compare waves is to look at the number of people being admitted to hospital because of Covid-19. This data shows that roughly the same number of people across the US were in hospital during the first and second waves of the outbreak. But the current wave has seen far more Covid-19 patients admitted to hospital - more than 100,000 at the moment. The number of patients with coronavirus who are in intensive care units and on ventilators is also rising, which is another

worrying sign - although treatments have improved since the spring outbreak. In a recent study in New York, researchers found that the probability of death among coronavirus patients was down 18 percentage points from the spring, in part due to new treatments and better knowledge of the virus among medical staff. But these improvements are dependent on the quality of care being received, which is put at risk when hospitals reach capacity and staffing levels are put under pressure. Recent analysis of hospital admissions data by the New York Times found that one in 10 Americans lived in an area where intensive care units were either full or fewer than 5% of beds were available. One travel nurse's journey to US Covid hotspots. This wave is hitting every US region. The current wave of infections is the third one to hit the US this year but the one major difference is that it's affecting every region at the same time. The spring wave was predominantly in the Northeast, while the summer one hit the South and West hardest. This time around, it was the Midwest where infections rose fastest - but every region has seen a spike in cases. The Covid Exit Strategy group, which is run by public health experts, ranks the progress each state is making in tackling the outbreak. At the moment, every state but Hawaii is categorised as having an "uncontrolled spread". The only region where the numbers are looking somewhat positive is the Midwest, although we'll have to wait another week

or so to see whether cases continue to fall once the post-Thanksgiving data stabilises. "The mask-wearing US city that bucked the trend. Some normality by end of 2021? Several states have brought in increased measures in recent days in a bid to reduce the spread of the virus, including California and New York. In Pennsylvania, Democratic Governor Tom Wolf banned dining inside restaurants and introduced limits on social gatherings indoors, saying: "We need to slow the spread right now in order to save lives. If we don't, we're going to be in big trouble." Mr Wolf is himself isolating after testing positive for Covid-19. Dr Fauci has called on Americans to "hang on" until the vaccines arrive, saying key public health measures like social distancing and the wearing of face masks are crucial over the next few months. President-elect Joe Biden has vowed to make tackling the pandemic a top priority when he enters the White House on 20 January. He has set a goal of vaccinating 100 million people - nearly a third of the US population - within the first 100 days of his administration. Dr Fauci, who has accepted a role as Mr Biden's chief medical adviser, said last week that if 75% of Americans can be vaccinated by next summer, the country may be able to return to "some degree of normality". However, a recent survey by the Pew Research Center suggests that may be a challenge, with only 60% of people saying they would probably or definitely get the vaccine.



COMMUNITY

Indian-Origin Couple In UK Among 1st In World To Get Covid Vaccine

Hari Shukla from Tyne and Wear said he feels it is his duty to receive his first of the two-dose vaccine, a moment UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson hailed as a "huge step forward"

(Insider Bureau)- An 87-year-old man and his 83-year-old wife from the north east of England on Tuesday became the first Indian-origin couple in the world to get a vaccine against COVID-19, after they got injected with their first of two doses of the Pfizer/BioNTech jab at a hospital in Newcastle.

Dr Hari Shukla, a race relations campaigner based in Tyne and Wear, had been contacted by the National Health Service (NHS) based on the criteria set for the world's first vaccine to receive regulatory approvals in the UK last week.

His wife, Ranjan, then volunteered for the jab as she also falls within the first phase of people aged 80 and over, care home workers as well as NHS workers at high risk eligible to receive the "life-saving jab".

"Hari Shukla and his wife Ranjan have become the first two patients at Newcastle Hospitals - and two of the first people in

the world - to receive the COVID-19 vaccine," Newcastle Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust said.

They join 90-year-old Margaret "Maggie" Keenan from Coventry as the very first in the world to receive her shot, followed by 81-year-old William Shakespeare in Warwickshire as the second.

"I'm so pleased we are hopefully coming towards the end of this pandemic and I am delighted to be doing my bit by having the vaccine, I feel it is my duty to do so and do whatever I can to help," said Shukla, who was born in Kenya and whose father was from Mumbai.

"Having been in contact with the NHS [National Health Service], I know how hard they all work and the greatest respect for them - they have a heart of gold and I am grateful for everything they have done to keep us safe during the pandemic," he said.

Shukla, who has been honoured with an MBE, OBE and CBE for

his work as the Director of the Tyne and Wear Race Equality Council over the years, was notified by the NHS based on the criteria set by the UK's Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation as part of a phased rollout plan based on those at the highest risk of death from the deadly virus.

"Today marks a huge step forward in the UK's fight against coronavirus, as we begin delivering the vaccine to the first patients across the whole country. I am immensely proud of the scientists who developed the vaccine, members of the public who took part in trials, and the NHS who have worked tirelessly to prepare for rollout," said British Prime Minister Boris Johnson.

However, he struck a note of caution to warn that mass vaccination will take time and urged the public to remain "clear-eyed" and continue to follow the lockdown rules over the winter



months ahead.

The NHS said it is undertaking the biggest and most highly anticipated immunisation campaign in history at 50 hospital hubs, with more starting vaccinations over the coming weeks and months as the programme ramps up after the first set of doses arrived from Pfizer's manufacturing site in Belgium.

"We will look back on today, V-day, as a key moment in our fight back against this terrible disease, and I am proud our health services across the United Kingdom are about to embark on our largest ever vaccination programme," said Health Secretary Matt Hancock, who got teary eyed during television

interviews on Tuesday as he declared he felt "proud to be British".

Since the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine got the green light from the UK's Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA) last week, the NHS said its workers have been working around the clock to manage the large-scale logistical challenge of deploying the vaccine.

"Coronavirus is the greatest health challenge in NHS history, taking loved ones from us and disrupting every part of our lives," said Sir Simon Stevens, NHS Chief Executive.

"The deployment of this vaccine marks a decisive turning point in the battle with the pandemic.

Sikh-Americans Hold Protest Rallies Across US Cities Against Farm Laws In India



(Insider Bureau)- Hundreds of Sikh-Americans have held peaceful protest rallies in several cities across the US in support of the Indian farmers who have been protesting against the new agricultural reforms in India.

A large car caravan of protesters from various parts of California blocked the traffic on the Bay Bridge on Saturday as they moved towards the Indian Consulate in San Francisco, while several hundreds gathered in downtown Indianapolis.

The protesters at both the places demanded the new laws be repealed, saying they would push Indian farmers towards poverty

and give the corporate sectors a monopoly.

"Farmers are the soul of any nation. We must protect our soul. People around the world, including many cities in the US and Canada, have come together to dispose of the bills that will open India's agricultural market to the private sector; allowing major corporations to take over independent farming communities and dilute crops' market value," said Indiana-based Gurinder Singh Khalsa. Khalsa was one of the organisers of the rally in downtown Indianapolis attended by nearly 500 Sikh Americans from various parts of Indiana.

Thousands Protest In London To Support Indian Farmers, Several Arrested

(Insider Bureau)- Thousands of people protested in central London on Sunday over the Indian government's agricultural reforms that have triggered a massive demonstration by farmers. Several people were arrested by the police for violating COVID-19 rules, news agency PTI reported.

A crowd of demonstrators converged on the Indian embassy, located on Aldwych, a major artery in the centre of the British capital, and groups marched around the Trafalgar Square area, a Reuters photographer at the scene said. Several police officers in face masks asked people to disperse from the "We stand with farmers of Punjab" demonstration, having warned that strict regulations remain in place to help prevent the spread of coronavirus and therefore demonstrations of larger than 30 risk arrests and fines.

The demonstration, largely made up of British Sikhs, involved



placard-waving with messages such as "Justice for Farmers" and sloganeering as well as several cars blocking roads. There was little social distancing in evidence and few participants were wearing face masks. "Our High Commission has been coordinating closely with the authorities concerned and we will, together with them, address the issues that have come up - for example how this gathering of thousands could take place without specific permission," an Indian High

Commission spokesperson was quoted as saying by PTI. It soon became clear that the gathering was led by anti-India separatists who had taken the opportunity of the protests in India to ostensibly back the farmers in India but use the opportunity to pursue their own anti-India agenda," the spokesperson said. The High Commission reiterated the government's stance that the protest against agriculture reform bills in India is part of an internal democratic process.

OP-ED



Navigating the vaccine challenge

Getting the product, quantity, condition, place, time and cost right is key

For anyone seeking to understand the path ahead for vaccines and vaccination for Sars-CoV-2, there is abundant confusion. Part of this is because there is divergence in information from official sources, academics and "unofficial" sources, and a difference in opinion on the timeliness and completeness. Press releases tell us that vaccines are performing well. On December 2, the United Kingdom (UK)'s Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency became the first regulator to grant temporary authorisation based on a phase III trial, to Pfizer and BioNTech's mRNA-based Covid-19 vaccine. On December 7, the UK began the process of administering vaccines.

Results from the Astra-Zeneca/University of Oxford vaccine, based on a chimpanzee adenoviral vector, well exceed the 50% efficacy requested by the World Health Organization (WHO) and regulators, leading to the reasonable assumption that most vaccines that are based on the spike protein of Sars-CoV-2 will be successful. In India, Pfizer has applied to the Central Drugs Standards Control Organisation for emergency approval, under the provisions of the New Drugs and Clinical Trials Rule, 2019, which allow the national regulatory authority to waive clinical trials. Even if Pfizer is granted approval, it is unlikely that this will be a vaccine that can be widely deployed because it requires storage at -70 degrees

Celsius. Given the limited capacity of even cold storage at -20 degrees Celsius as required by the Moderna vaccine, it is likely that India's national immunisation system, and those of other low- and middle-income countries, will opt for vaccines that can be stored at the more widely available facilities that hold vaccines at 2-8 degrees Celsius.

If vaccines that will not be used for national immunisation programmes are given limited or full approval, the ability to purchase vaccines will differentiate sections of society between those with purchased access and those who must wait for the government to provide vaccines. This situation already exists for many vaccines, such as influenza or chickenpox where vaccines are available in the private sector. Open and transparent discussions about the role of the private sector and access to vaccines are essential for a clearer picture of what lies ahead.

In terms of production capacity, figures vary, but a survey of 113 manufacturers by the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations and partners between March and June 2020 estimated that global capacity was two to four billion doses by the end of 2021. Vaccine production landscapes tend to be slow to change, but much more optimistic figures are now being projected, with the Duke Global Health Innovation Center stating that purchase of more than nine billion doses is in discussion and India

alone already has an advance market commitment of 1.6 billion doses. This figure does not align with the government's announcement of financial commitments to vaccines or plans for immunisation, and company announcements of their production capacity and commitment not just to India, but to global supply through the COVAX facility.

Even if the figures are correct, and India will have access to 1.6 billion doses of vaccines by the end of 2021, there are significant challenges to getting these doses to where they are needed. The WHO has six rights of supply-chain management for immunisation, which are right product, right quantity, right condition, right place, right time and right cost. Making sure that all of these logistics are in place requires permutations of product packed volume, temperature for transport and storage, location of supply and delivery, cycle for vaccination and restocking. Availability of refrigerated transport, security of transport, opportunities for pilferage and replacement with fake products are all very real concerns for which preparation is necessary.

To accompany the complexity of storage and supply, which in India will be managed by the National Cold Chain Vaccine Management Resource Centre and the electronic Vaccine Information Network, redeveloped as COVIN, we will need to train vaccinators, have additional supplies needed

for immunisations, prepare for immunisation sessions and establish systems for waste disposal. And all that, as we develop and use methods to identify and track individuals who need the vaccine.

India does not have an adult immunisation programme beyond the tetanus/diphtheria vaccination for pregnant women. Hence, in the prioritisation lists that have been announced, identifying and reaching all priority groups will be a challenge. States have been asked to list public and private health care workers, and this is feasible and being done. However, moving beyond health care workers and other essential workers, however defined, to the elderly and those with co-morbidities as indicated in official announcements will be difficult and there is a need to prepare for falsified documents and fraud.

As important as the issue of delivering vaccines to those

prioritised, and not those who try to beat the system is the global concern for migrants and refugees who might be excluded from vaccination based on lack of residency documentation. Ensuring that both doses of a two-dose schedule are delivered is also a challenge since drop-outs are already known to be an issue, particularly for the most vulnerable populations, for infant immunisation. This is likely to much greater with adult immunisation.

Not all problems can be anticipated, but we have experience with strengthening immunisation and with the conduct of campaigns, particularly in the last decade. While the government is using that experience to plan for a range of product, supply and logistic scenarios, sharing plans and developing the right partnerships is important, because in this enterprise, all of us are stakeholders.



ASIAN AFFAIRS

US blacklists Chinese triad boss 'Broken Tooth' in latest round of anti-corruption sanctions

(News Agencies)- The United States government has placed sanctions on Wan Kuok-koi, a notorious gangster and triad boss known as "Broken Tooth." Wan is known as a leader of the 14K Triad, which the US Treasury described as "one of the largest Chinese organized criminal organizations in the world," engaging in "drug trafficking, illegal gambling, racketeering, human trafficking, and a range of other criminal activities." Under the sanctions, any assets held by Wan in the US will be frozen and American citizens are forbidden from doing business with him.

Born in the Portuguese colony of Macao, Wan rose through the ranks of the triad to become one of the territory's most powerful crime bosses, waging a bloody

war against rival gangs, with bombings, shootings and stabbings a regular occurrence. He was jailed in November 1999 on a host of charges, shortly before the colony was handed over to China. Upon his release in 2012, Wan, who had always maintained his innocence, sought to reinvent himself -- at least publicly -- as a legitimate businessman, reportedly backing ventures in Cambodia and Palau. According to the US Treasury, he also gained membership of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), an advisory body to the ruling Communist Party. In 2018, the Treasury statement said, Wan established the headquarters of the World Hongmen History and Culture Association in

Cambodia. Also known as Tiandihui, or the Heaven and Earth Society, the Hongmen is a fraternal organization dating to the mid-1600s, with footholds around the world. In Hong Kong and Macao, it has been closely linked to triad activity, and the US sanctions accuse the 14K of "utilizing Broken Tooth's World Hongmen History and Culture Association as an effort to legitimize itself."

"The World Hongmen History and Culture Association has managed to co-opt elite figures in Malaysia and Cambodia. This continues a pattern of overseas Chinese actors trying to paper over illegal criminal activities by framing their actions in terms of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the China Dream, or other major initiatives of the CCP," the Treasury statement said using the acronym for the Chinese Communist Party.

"The World Hongmen History and Culture Association is spreading across Southeast Asia, establishing a powerful business network involved in the development and launching of crypto currencies, real estate, and most recently a security company specialized in protecting BRI

investments," the statement added. CNN could not reach the association for comment on the Treasury accusations. Wan could also not be reached.

The sanctions against Wan are part of a wider effort against worldwide corruption, as part of International Anti-Corruption Day. On Wednesday, the US also designated a Liberian lawmaker and one Kyrgyz individual under Executive Order 13818, which targets corruption and serious human rights abuse.

Belt and road's alleged crime links

The activity ascribed to Wan by the Treasury statement, particularly in Cambodia, resembles that of another alleged Chinese crime boss, Zhao Wei. This week, CNN reported that Zhao -- one of the world's most notorious narcotics traffickers -- was closely linked to a casino development project in Laos, apparently with the imprimatur of the local government. Both Cambodia and Laos are members of the Belt and Road Initiative, a vast trade and infrastructure project that is the signature project of Chinese President Xi Jinping. First

announced in 2013, the project promises to build ports, roads and railways to create new trade corridors linking China to Asia, Africa and Europe, with tens of billions of dollars in investments and loans. The project has been dogged by criticism, particularly from Western countries, that have accused China of saddling developing countries with debts that they cannot afford to repay. According to the US Treasury, the BRI also has links to organized crime. "Chinese enterprises behind the BRI projects have several things in common: their leadership has links to criminal networks or actors involved in illicit activities in other parts of Southeast Asia, as well as China; they have pre-existing organizations engaged in casinos and crypto currencies; they advertise themselves online to be associated with Beijing's BRI and flaunt connections with key Chinese government agencies; and all of them have established associations that actively seek to assist Chinese nationals," the statement said. CNN has reached out to the Chinese government for comment on the Treasury's assertions regarding BRI projects.

Afghan government condemns murder of female journalist and driver as 'utterly despicable'

(News Agencies)-The Afghan government has described the killing of female journalist Malalai Maiwand by gunmen on Thursday as "utterly despicable." Sediqi Sediqi, a spokesperson for President Ashraf Ghani condemned the murder, calling it "cowardly and heinous." "The Afghan government strongly condemns it and conveys

message of condolence and sympathy to her family and friends," Sediqi said in a tweet. "The current senseless violence against our people must end." At 7 a.m. local time, unidentified gunmen shot and killed Maiwand and her driver in an attack on their vehicle in Jalalabad, the capital of the eastern province of Nangarhar,

a statement from the provincial media office said. She was a reporter at Enikas Radio and TV in Nangarhar and this is an incident that underscores an increasing trend of violence against journalists in the country. No one has claimed responsibility for the attack, but Reuters cited Afghan interior ministry spokesman Tariq Arian as saying that -- over the past 15 years -- the Taliban has been behind the majority of attacks on journalists. CNN has reached out to the Taliban for comment. Meanwhile Reuters has cited Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid as saying he denied the group's involvement in the incident.

"She was on the way to office when the incident happened," Attaullah Khogyani, spokesman

for the provincial governor, told Reuters. Enikas has been targeted before, with its owner, Engineer Zalmay, kidnapped for ransom in 2018. Maiwand is also not the first of her family to be targeted. Five years ago, her mother, also an activist, was killed by unknown gunmen.

"With the killing of Malalai, the working field for female journalists is getting more smaller and the journalists may not dare to continue their jobs the way they were doing before," Nai, an organization supporting media in Afghanistan, said in a statement.

Last month, Elyas Dayee, a Radio Azadi journalist, was killed in a bomb blast in the

southern Helmand province, and Yama Siawash, a former TOLONews presenter, was killed in a similar blast in Kabul.

The Afghan government, German embassy, EU delegation and British ambassador condemned growing attacks on journalists and activists.

International donors and governments have also expressed apprehension about a possible reversal of progress on women's rights over the last two decades if the Taliban return to any sort of power with the withdrawal of foreign troops from the country next year.

The Taliban's hardline rule was marked by oppressive laws for women up until the group was toppled following a 2001 US-led invasion of Afghanistan.

US & THE WORLD

Defendant Pleads Guilty to Manslaughter in Stabbing death of Long Island Man

(News Agencies)- Accused Grabbed a Knife from Food Cart to Kill Victim; Faces 17 Years in Prison at Sentencing

Queens District Attorney Melinda Katz announced that John Daves, 34, has pleaded guilty to manslaughter for the September 2018 stabbing death of a 25-year-old Long Island man, who was patronizing a food cart in Jackson Heights, Queens when he was attacked. District Attorney Katz said, "A minor dispute while ordering at a food cart escalated into a man being chased down and brutally stabbed to death. This was a needless act of violence that should never have happened." Daves, whose address is unknown, pleaded guilty to manslaughter in the first degree before Queens Supreme Court Justice Kenneth Holder. The defendant is scheduled to be sentenced on February 3, 2021. Justice Holder indicated he will sentence Daves to 17 years in prison, to be followed by five years' post release supervision. District Attorney Katz said that, shortly after 9:30 p.m. on September

27, 2018, at the intersection of 80th Street and Roosevelt Avenue, Daves and the victim, Miguel Angel Becerra-Perez, were both waiting at a food cart to place their orders. The two men exchanged words and a verbal argument ensued. The defendant grabbed a knife from the food cart and video surveillance of the scene shows him chase the 25-year-old victim down the street, catch up with him and then stab Becerra-Perez in the right arm and chest. The victim died as a result of the knife attack.

Assistant District Attorney Courtney Finnerty, of the District Attorney's Homicide Bureau, prosecuted the case, with the assistance of Assistant District Attorney Adarna DeFrietas, under the supervision of Assistant District Attorneys Brad A. Leventhal, Bureau Chief, Peter J. McCormack III, Senior Deputy Bureau Chief, John W. Kosinski and Kenneth M. Appelbaum, Deputy Bureau Chiefs, and under the overall supervision of Executive Assistant District Attorney for Major Crimes Daniel A. Saunders.

A surfer was attacked and killed by a shark in Hawaii, forcing the suspension of a surfing competition

(News Agencies)- A surfer who was attacked by a shark in Hawaii on Tuesday has died, prompting the suspension a women's professional surfing competition in Honolulu Bay.

The unidentified victim passed away early Wednesday evening, officials at Maui Memorial Medical Center told CNN.

bite mark appearing to measure 17 inches wide.

The attack prompted the indefinite hold of the World Surf League women's professional surfing competition Maui Pro on the day of the incident, according to a release by the WSL.

The WSL announced the decision to cancel the remaining heats of the competition at

Honolua Bay on Wednesday, stating in a release that the organization is working on options to complete the event at an alternate location in Hawaii after working with local authorities and speaking to surfers. The surfer who died in the attack was a recreational surfer and was not involved in the WSL competition, said the DLNR.

The surfing organization shared condolences to the shark attack victim's family, friends and the Maui surfing community in a social media post on Thursday. The WSL has learned that Tuesday's victim of the shark attack at Honolulu Bay has tragically passed away," wrote the WSL in a caption on social media. "Our thoughts and hearts are with the victim's family and friends as well as the entire Maui surfing community."



The 56-year-old man from Lahaina, a city in West Maui, was paddling out from the old ramp in the bay when the incident occurred, according to a release by Hawaii Department of Land and Natural Resources. He was taken to the hospital and admitted for surgery after the attack, said the DLNR. The state department posted multiple photos to social media showing a surfboard with large bite marks. One photo showed a

What does the Hunter Biden investigation actually tell us?

On Wednesday, we learned that Hunter Biden, the son of President-elect Joe Biden, is under investigation by federal prosecutors in Delaware regarding several financial questions that have arisen as a result of his business dealings in foreign countries -- most notably China.

"I learned yesterday for the first time that the U.S. Attorney's Office in Delaware advised my legal counsel, also yesterday, that they are investigating my tax affairs," Hunter Biden said on Wednesday. "I take this matter very seriously but I am confident that a professional and objective review of these matters will demonstrate that I handled my affairs legally and appropriately, including with the benefit of professional tax advisors."

Republicans -- led by President Donald Trump -- rushed to argue that the investigation, which has been reportedly ongoing since 2018, was proof positive that Hunter Biden should have been a bigger issue in the just-concluded 2020

campaign. "10% of voters would have changed their vote if they knew about Hunter Biden." Miranda Devine @nypost @TuckerCarlson," tweeted Trump on Wednesday night. "But I won anyway!" (Fact check: He didn't.) Spin aside, it's worth asking the question: How much trouble could Hunter Biden actually be in?

The short answer is we simply don't know yet. And the reason is, at least in part, because it's just so hard to differentiate the spin from the facts. (Worth noting: Joe Biden is not implicated in any way in the investigation.) What we know is that Hunter Biden had dealings with Chinese companies both during and after his father served as vice president. Consider:

* In 2013, he became involved with and eventually was placed on the board of a directors of a Chinese investment fund management company known as BHR. He resigned from that role in October 2019 and, in a letter posted to Medium by his lawyer, insisted he had never received any sort of compensation for his role. * In 2017, Hunter Biden worked on

securing a deal with CEFC China Energy to invest in US energy companies. That same year, the founder of CEFC gave Hunter a 2.8-karat diamond during a business meeting in Miami. Hunter Biden told the New Yorker in 2019 that he hadn't kept the diamond. "I knew it wasn't a good idea to take it," he told the New Yorker. "I just felt like it was weird."

What we also know is that in 2019, the FBI seized a laptop purportedly belonging to Hunter Biden and alleged to include business documents and other personal materials.

Trump lawyer Rudy Giuliani steered that information to media outlets in the closing days of the 2020 presidential race, insisting -- again, without any proof -- that the laptop was evidence of Hunter Biden's shady dealings with China, among other countries. As CNN's Evan Perez and Pamela Brown wrote of the back-and-forth:

"The involvement of Trump lawyers in the published news stories on the purported Biden laptop led to a flurry of activity by



Republican lawmakers and the Trump campaign looking to amplify allegations of corruption ahead of the election. The FBI met with a former Hunter Biden business associate who publicly made claims about potential wrongdoing. The FBI issued a statement at the time saying that 'as a general matter when contacted, the FBI reviews information from the public for consideration of any violations of applicable federal laws.' "And well, that's about it. (Yes, we also know that Hunter Biden has struggled with addiction, but that seems to have very little to do with the investigation into his business dealings in China.) So, what can we conclude based on

those facts? Well, first and most obviously, it's never a good thing to be the subject of a federal investigation. Like, you would rather not be under federal investigation -- all other things being equal. (For those who think they see the hidden hand of Attorney General -- and Trump consigliere -- Bill Barr in this, the investigation reportedly predates Barr's time as the nation's top cop.) And we know -- and have known -- that it was a bad look for Hunter Biden to be sitting on the boards of foreign companies (Hunter was also on the board of Burisma, a Ukrainian energy company) while his dad was the sitting vice president of the United States.

US & THE WORLD

A Florida man just paid off the past dues for 114 families at risk of having their utilities shut off

(News Agencies)-A Florida business owner who was once down on his luck is giving back by covering the utility bills of 114 families who were facing disconnection. Michael Esmond's generosity started last year when he paid the utility bills of 36 households in his community of Gulf Breeze. This year, with both Hurricane Sally and Covid-induced economic turmoil hitting the city, he thought he needed to up the ante. "This year to me probably is more meaningful than last year with the pandemic and all the people out of work having to stay home," Esmond told CNN. "Hurricane Sally slammed us pretty good and hurt a lot of people. We still have a lot of the blue roofs here, where they're just

covered with tarps." Esmond donated \$7,615.40 to pay for the past-due bills of 114 households, according to Joanne Oliver, the city's utility billing supervisor. Holiday cards notifying the residents will be mailed this week, she says.

While Esmond's donation increased from the \$4,600 he paid last year, he says he was able to help about three times as many households. That's because there were many residents who had bills due of \$100 or less, so he was able to help more people.

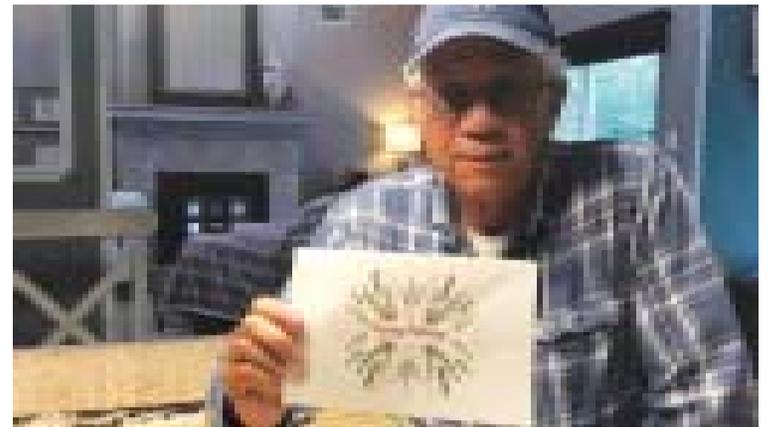
"That really impacted me -- that people can't even afford to pay a \$100 bill on their utilities and things are so bad," Esmond said. "That's why I was able to pay for 114 families." Business was good

in 2020 for 74-year-old Esmond, owner of Gulf Breeze Pools and Spas. It's something he says he's "almost ashamed" to tell people because he knows how hard it's been for many.

"We've had a good year, and that's why I want to share what I have with the people who need it," he said. Beyond the coronavirus pandemic's economic toll, Gulf Breeze has dealt with the lingering effects of Hurricane Sally, which hit the panhandle hard.

A storm-related accident damaged a section of the newly built Pensacola Bay Bridge that connects to Gulf Breeze, authorities said in September.

A barge slammed into a portion of the structure, known to locals as the Three Mile Bridge, Brad



Baker, Santa Rosa County's public safety director, said in a September Facebook video. Given the pandemic's havoc on the city, Oliver, the city's utility billing supervisor, said residents are getting a longer grace period before their utilities for water, gas and sewer are

disconnected. "We're not cutting customers off. We're not disconnecting them for nonpayment until they are more than 60 days past due," Oliver said. The check Esmond wrote covered the bills for people who were 60 days past due, she says.

Smugglers threw seven pounds of chicken wings and 40 pounds of tobacco over a prison wall



(News Agencies)- Smugglers managed to throw a hefty haul of contraband items -- including 20 pounds of tobacco and seven

pounds of barbecued chicken -- over the fence of a Mississippi prison. They may have gotten away with it, if it weren't for the

prison's security technology. Officials at the South Mississippi Correctional Institution in Leakesville intercepted more than 25 packages containing a number of items including four pounds of marijuana, 38 cellphones, chargers and earbuds and cold medication, plus the chicken and tobacco. Some of the items were sewn into footballs so they could be easily thrown over the 18-foot-tall fence surrounding the prison, but new sensing technology alerted guards to the drop, according to a statement

released by the Mississippi Department of Corrections. The unidentified smugglers attempted to throw the packages across a remote section of the prison's grounds, but officers were immediately alerted by the sensors and rushed to the scene, arriving in time to intercept the items and see their vehicle drive away. Authorities are searching for the suspects. The prison has struggled to contain violent gang activities within its walls, and the MDOC says items like these can be dangerous for the inmates'

safety. "We are making Mississippi prisons safer for inmates and Corrections officers by stopping the flow of contraband," MDOC Commissioner Burl Cain said. "Gang leaders use contraband as a way to control other inmates ... Now we're installing and using the latest security systems, drones overhead, and cameras and scanners everywhere."

Prisoners found to be connected to the incident will lose eligibility for early release, according to the MDOC.

European Union agrees on \$2 trillion package -- but fudges deal on rule of law



(News Agencies)-The leaders of the European Union's 27 member states have reached a final agreement on the \$2 trillion package designed to rebuild the bloc's faltering economies in the wake of the coronavirus

recession. The package comprises the EU's •1.1 trillion (\$1.3 trillion) Multi-annual Financial Framework, which is paid into by every member state and distributed across the bloc over a seven-year period, and a

special Covid recovery fund of •750 billion (\$858 billion), for which the EU will centrally raise money on financial markets and hand out as both loans and grants to member states.

The EU reached an agreement on the package back in July, but member states had since struggled to unanimously agree on the conditions attached to receiving funds.

Two member states, Poland and Hungary, had vetoed the agreement at previous meetings of member states in protest at EU demands that funds would be withheld from member states deemed to be in violation of the rule of law. Both countries are

currently under investigation for exactly this, with charges ranging from suppression of political opposition to undermining the independence of judges. However, at a meeting in Brussels, a compromise was found which satisfied the two delinquent states. If enough member states believe that Poland or Hungary, for example, are not meeting the EU's agreed rules and standards, they can trigger a vote which can be secured by a qualified majority. However, the latest agreement provides the country in question with the option to challenge that decision at the European

Court of Justice. Vera Jourova, vice president of the European Commission, said she was "satisfied that the legal text of the Regulation on Rule of Law conditionality remains untouched and that there is "qualified majority voting in the decision of the Council." She also said she believes that "some Member States might want to seek full legal certainty on this important matter before the European Court of Justice. This is their right. I expect the proceeding to go fast. In my view, we are talking about months rather than years."

OPINION

Merkel pleads with Germans to avoid a 'last Christmas with the grandparents,' as country smashes daily death record



(News Agencies)-Germany was praised among European nations for its handling of the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic. But on Tuesday it suffered its deadliest day yet and infection rates are still rising. So what's gone wrong? Speaking in the German parliament Wednesday, Chancellor Angela Merkel warned that nationwide restrictions brought in on November 2 had not proven effective enough, with too many people now dead or in intensive care units with Covid-19.

A day after the country reported a record 590 deaths, Merkel grew emotional as she appealed to her fellow Germans to keep one another safe by reducing their social contacts before the holidays, especially if they plan to visit older people. "If we have too many contacts now before Christmas, and that ends up making it the last Christmas with the grandparents, then we will have failed. We should not do that," she told a budget session in the Bundestag.

The Chancellor added that the daily death toll was a price too high for keeping some shops open, including much-loved waffle and mulled wine stands in the festive season. "There are still 14 days until Christmas and we have to do everything we can to prevent exponential growth again," she said. Merkel urged federal state leaders to start the Christmas holidays sooner, on December 16 rather than December 19, to help people limit their contacts and allow them to isolate for longer before seeing older relatives.

The Chancellor also wants a full lockdown to be implemented for several days, possibly two weeks, after Christmas in order to bring down infection rates. But for that to happen, she needs to get the leaders of all 16 states on side.

As Europe's second wave of coronavirus infections gathered steam going into the autumn,

some European nations -- like France and England -- imposed national lockdown measures. However, Germany's state and federal leaders agreed on lighter restrictions.

A nationwide partial lockdown was imposed which required restaurant and bars to remain closed, but schools and shops remained open. People were urged to avoid travel, keep their contacts to an absolute minimum and limit public meetings to no more than five members of two different households.

These restrictions are due to be relaxed over the Christmas period in much of the country, allowing people to meet in groups of up to 10 people, not counting children.

While some states, like Bavaria, favor stricter measures, others are opposed. Meanwhile, Germany is struggling to contain a surge in new infections and death rates have continued

to climb. The country suffered its deadliest day of the pandemic Tuesday, with 590 known fatalities, the Robert Koch Institute (RKI) said Wednesday. The previous record was 487 known deaths, reported December 2, according to RKI, the country's disease and control agency. The RKI also reported 20,815 new daily infections on Wednesday, about 3,500 more than the same day of the previous week. The total tally of Covid-19 infections in the country is now 1,218,524.

At least 19,932 people have died of Covid-19 in Germany, the public health agency's data shows. This figure is still much lower than that of fellow European nations such as the United Kingdom, France, Italy and Spain, reflecting Germany's success in handling the first pandemic wave.

Seven dead in protests as Covid-19 hits Iraqi government worker salaries

(News Agencies)-At least seven people have been killed in ongoing violent protests since Sunday in northern Iraq, where government workers are demanding their salaries be paid as Covid-19 plunges the country into economic turmoil.

Six protesters were killed after local security forces opened fire to disperse crowds in various parts of Sulaymaniyah province. A security officer also died of his injuries after clashing with protestors. At least 12 other people were wounded.

Hundreds of protesters demonstrated in the city of Sulaymaniyah and nearby towns, saying they have not received their monthly pay checks since October. More than 1.25 million people are employed by the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG).

In recent days, protesters have also set fire to government buildings and political parties' headquarters. Security forces have used live bullets and tear gas to



disperse the demonstrations, witnesses and health officials told CNN on condition of anonymity. The United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq condemned "acts of violence" in the province, saying in a statement on Monday that "the right to peaceful protest must be protected and it is imperative that demonstrations remain peaceful." Iraqi President Barham

Salih said authorities were watching the situation in the province with "deep concern," in a statement urging local officials to listen to protestors' demands. "Solving these problems with violence is a huge error," he said. "We need fast and radical solutions to resolve these issues around the payment of salaries and the conditions in which people are living. This includes taking

swift and serious steps, based on transparency and better use of the country's resources, to serve the Iraqi people, as well as the undertaking of genuine reforms." Salih also called on the regional government to "work toward a comprehensive agreement with Iraq's Federal Government, around salaries and other financial payments, so that we can all ensure that Iraq's citizens can live

freely and with dignity." There is a long-standing dispute between the KRG and the federal government of Iraq over oil and gas shares and distribution. The pandemic has only amplified the crisis. The Prime Minister of KRG, Masrour Barzani, said in a statement released Monday that "the Kurdistan government is exerting all its efforts and capabilities to overcome the difficult financial situations that the region, Iraq and the world are going through." Barzani added that the region "continues negotiations with the federal government to obtain the rights and financial dues for the region that it has not sent so far, unfortunately, although the regional government has shown complete flexibility in order to reach an agreement within the framework of the constitution." The Covid-19 pandemic and dramatic drops in oil prices have seriously impacted Iraq's economy, which depends on oil for 90% of its revenues.

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BUSINESS

How much has Reliance contributed to India's record-breaking stock market rally

At the moment, stock markets in India are peaking new highs every day as sentiments remain strong on hopes of an early coronavirus vaccine. But there is another factor that cannot be ignored - the growth of India's largest company, Reliance Industries Limited

Domestic stock markets in India have performed exceptionally well over the last few months and most experts predict the record-breaking rally to continue next year - a huge feat considering the dreaded impact of the coronavirus pandemic on global markets, with some still struggling to recover.

At the moment, stock markets in India are peaking new highs every day as sentiments remain strong on hopes of an early coronavirus vaccine. But there is another factor that cannot be ignored - the growth of India's largest company, Reliance Industries Limited (RIL).

RIL and India's stock market growth - Reliance shares have grown handsomely during the pandemic against all odds. Mukesh Ambani, the chairman of RIL, has been on a mission to

expand the conglomerate from its traditional energy and oil business.

According to data compiled by Bloomberg, RIL accounted for nearly a fifth of the 75 per cent surge in the S&P BSE Sensex since March. That is literally double the contribution of Apple Inc has made to gains in the S&P 500 index over the same period.

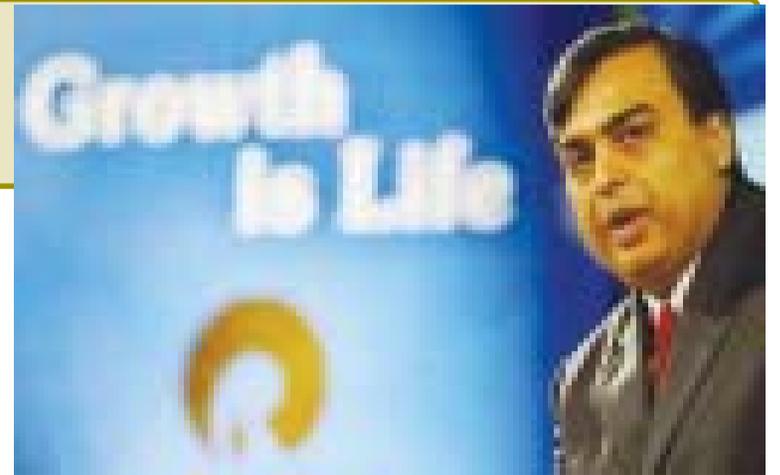
Market experts said Reliance's recent fundraising drive has sharply increased its stock market valuation. They expect RIL's valuation to further rise next year, indicating that the company's stockholders are in a sweet spot at the moment.

Reliance 2020 growth story The reliance growth story in 2020 has been largely about transitioning its traditional energy business to become a more

digitally-focused company. Despite all the challenges, including the economic slowdown triggered by the pandemic, experts say Reliance has done extremely well in outlining its future goals and working towards the transition. As of today, Reliance stock is trading over Rs 2,000 after a 2.5 per cent upward rally.

The fresh rally comes after Ambani announced that Jio 5G will be available from 2021 during his address at the fourth edition of the India Mobile Congress. Ambani said the company plans to roll out the service in the second half of 2021. But this is just a fraction of what Reliance has managed to do in 2020.

Over the year, Ambani has reduced the company's debt substantially, launched a mega rights issue and even managed



to find prominent global investors to invest in his new technology and retail ventures.

These companies have invested billions of dollars in RIL's Jio Platforms and Reliance Retail Ventures Limited (RRVL), both of which are expected to become flagship businesses of the conglomerate.

Ambani, who is the richest man in Asia, had started transitioning his business a few years ago with the launch of Reliance Jio - a network that led to drastic changes in India's telecom sector.

While Jio has now become a hit among millions of Indian, its new offerings including 5G, JioTV+ and JioGlass are likely to have a similar impact on the industry. Moreover, Reliance is also working on a model to capture a substantial chunk of India's vast retail sector, especially the lucrative online grocery business.

At the moment, the future seems bright for the country's largest company and it could prove to be a key factor behind India's stock market boom in future.

Dabur, Marico move advertising regulator over honey purity claims



Both Dabur and Marico have approached advertising regulator ASCI over claims made in their honey ads. The complaints have emerged days after CSE's 'Honeygate' investigation.

Two leading homegrown rival FMCG brands have been involved in a spat after environment watchdog CSE's investigation claimed that top brands in India were adulterating honey with sugar syrup. Dabur and Marico have also approached advertising regulator ASCI over claims regarding their honey brands. On Sunday, Dabur said it will be filing a complaint against rival Marico before the Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI) for claiming that its Saffola honey has passed through the Nuclear Magnetic Resonance (NMR) test, which is the gold standard for deterring the purity of honey. Noida-based Dabur

claimed Marico's Saffola honey has failed NMR test and is misleading consumers. "Dabur is filing a complaint in ASCI against Marico as their Saffola Honey sample from the market has failed the NMR test. Test reports clearly indicate the presence of sugar syrup in Saffola honey. Their claim on NMR test is misleading the consumers," Dabur claimed in a statement. Marico, however, refuted Dabur's claim and said Saffola Honey is also "compliant with each of the quality parameters mandated by FSSAI". It may be noted that Marico had earlier filed a complaint before the ASCI on

October 1 over Dabur's claim against its Saffola Honey brand. The regulator had upheld the complaint. "Marico filed an intra-industry complaint before ASCI, against 'NMR TESTED PURE HONEY' claim by Dabur for its product Dabur Honey. The claim 'NMR tested' was considered false

and misleading by implication and omission and UPHELD under Chapter 1.4 of the ASCI Code," a Marico spokesperson told news agency PTI. Furthermore, Marico has also filed another complaint before ASCI on December 3, 2020 wherein it challenged the claim made by Dabur and added that its

honey brand has passed the German NMR test. "The complaint has been admitted by ASCI and taken on record for further hearing," said Marico. ASCI said it has received four complaints against honey brands over the past few months without naming any of the brands.

Flipkart's PhonePe becomes separate entity, valued at \$5.5 billion

Walmart Inc-controlled Flipkart said on Thursday that it was partially spinning off PhonePe into a separate unit. The move is aimed at widening its digital payments platform to access capital for future expansion. Following the spin-off, PhonePe will raise \$700 million in primary capital, according to a statement issued by Flipkart. The funds will be raised at a post-money valuation of \$5.5 billion from existing Flipkart investors led by Walmart. Sameer Nigam, founder and CEO of PhonePe, said the partial spin-off will give the digital payments business access to dedicated long-term capital, aimed at providing financial inclusion to a billion



Indians. While Flipkart's ownership in PhonePe will reduce after the spin-off, it will still remain a majority shareholder. The development comes at a time when digital payments services are becoming ultra-competitive in India. Other major players like GooglePay, Softbank and Alibaba-backed Paytm, WhatsApp Pay and Amazon Pay are also competing hard to get a larger share of India's vast digital payments market. PhonePe is one of the leading digital payments companies in India with over 100 million monthly active users. GooglePay has also managed in successfully capturing the market, leading to a drop in Paytm's share.

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Pakistan and Saudi Arabia: Why Kashmir won't stop Riyadh's rush to embrace India

(News Agencies)-Pakistan's government last month claimed a victory at the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation annual summit in Niger, announcing that the 57-member Muslim bloc had supported a resolution condemning India over its rescinding of Kashmir's semi-autonomous status. In a statement on the final day of the summit on 28 November, Pakistan's foreign ministry said OIC states had agreed unanimously to reaffirm their "strong support for the Kashmir cause".



defence cooperation between the countries," the Indian Army said in a post on Twitter. Navarane's visit follows recent comments by Saudi Arabia's ambassador to India, Mohammed al-Sati, in which he said that the two countries were expanding a security and defence partnership and had conducted joint naval exercises. Despite this, Tahir Mehmood Ashrafi, a special representative advising Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan on religious harmony, told Middle East Eye that Saudi Arabian and OIC support for Pakistan over Kashmir was real. "Enemies like India propagate that Pakistan does not have support on Kashmir in the Islamic world, however this development [the OIC resolution] indicates very strong relations with Saudi Arabia and UAE.

The resolution "rejected the illegal and unilateral actions by India" since it revoked Article 370 of its constitution which granted the disputed region its own constitution and the right to make its own laws. It "emphasised that the question of Kashmir is of utmost importance for the

Muslim Ummah", and described the resolution of the conflict as "indispensable for the realisation of the dream of peace in South Asia". But the resolution was not published nor circulated by the OIC itself and followed complaints by Pakistani Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi prior to the summit that the Kashmir

issue had not been included on the formal agenda for the meeting. And while India hit back at the OIC and Pakistan, accusing the former of "indulging in anti-India propaganda" at the behest of the latter, the diplomatic storm does not appear to have interrupted New Delhi's pursuit of deepening ties

with influential Gulf states. On Tuesday, Indian army chief General Manoj Mukund Naravane embarked on a four-day diplomatic trip to the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia in the first such visit to the region by an Indian military chief. "The visit aims to further strengthen strategic and

SPECIAL REPORT

Biden's Cabinet picks give Kamala an edge in 2024



from Massachusetts who served in senior roles for John Kerry, Biden's incoming special envoy on climate change. "Obama had a team of rivals, other presidents have had a team of rivals. He's not interested in conflict as much as he wants to have people who have done the job before and they can all work together to get all the work done.

"That," Marsh added, "benefits Kamala Harris."

Several Democratic operatives argued Harris cleared the primary field of other moderate Democrats for 2024 the moment Biden chose her as his vice president. Even if Biden does elevate a 2020 rival to a high-profile Cabinet position, that person would have to resign midway through the term and then mount a challenge against the current vice president.

Harris's mostly dormant political operation was subsumed by Biden campaign aides when he chose her as his running mate. Since their election last month, she's focused on governing nuts and bolts: hiring her own staff, familiarizing herself with the new role and working to integrate with

Biden and his camp. She participates in private Cabinet nomination discussions, meets with elected officials and activists and speaks at proposed nominee rollouts and events on the coronavirus and the economy. One aide, offering an early assessment of her involvement, said Harris has been integral in the transition- "she's been involved across the board" - and that there have been preliminary talks about how Harris could "split the work" of organizing the federal response to the pandemic.

While Obama ultimately put Biden in charge of the economic recovery, Harris has yet to be tasked with overseeing any one area. Nor has she made an explicit ask for specific assignments. Biden also served as Obama's chief Senate liaison, in large part because of Biden's personal and deep ties in the chamber. Harris joined the Senate nearly four years ago.

Harris's earliest work is anchored in four of the biggest issues facing the new administration: public health, the economy, racial injustice and climate

change. Aides said she could take on more defined responsibilities on any of the issues, but they stressed that wouldn't pull her away from being a "full partner in the room for everything," as another Biden transition official put it.

Biden still could bring in people with presidential aspirations. Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti, who is close with the president-elect, is expected to join the administration in what was described as a "significant role," though it might not be a Cabinet-level position, two officials told POLITICO. Garcetti expressed a particular interest in Commerce secretary and has been talked up as a prospect to head the Transportation Department. Two sources said Garcetti is under consideration to serve as an envoy to U.S. governors and mayors on climate change and another said he could be under consideration to be put in charge of the Navy.

Former South Bend, Ind., Mayor Pete Buttigieg and former Massachusetts Gov. Deval Patrick, who both ran in 2020, are also in the mix for posts.

Joe Biden hasn't picked any of the nearly two dozen Democrats who ran against him to serve in his administration - and that bodes quite well for the former rival he did elevate as his No. 2, Kamala Harris.

Biden's decision to forgo a Cabinet of ambitious pols in favor of a group heavy on seasoned loyalists and technocrats contrasts with Donald Trump and Barack Obama's appointment of next-generation officials to top posts. And it could deny a springboard to potential Harris competitors in 2024 if Biden decides to retire after one term rather than running for reelection in his 80s. While several people

around Biden and Harris were reluctant to speak publicly about a topic they view as taboo, they acknowledged Biden's choices for top positions reinforce Harris's status as president-in-waiting.

While several people around Biden and Harris were reluctant to speak publicly about a topic they view as taboo, they acknowledged Biden's choices for top positions reinforce Harris's status as president-in-waiting. Biden has built an administration free of political threats to Harris. "He's not putting together a team of rivals, he's putting together a team. That sets him apart from everybody," said Mary Anne Marsh, a Democratic strategist



Donald Trump lost the presidency, but his opponents so far have not achieved the victory they want most: A fatal puncturing of the Trump movement, a repudiation so complete that it severs his astonishing grip on supporters and leaves him with no choice but to slink offstage and into the blurry past. For now, Trump dominates conversations about both present and future. His outlandish claims that he won

the election except for comprehensive fraud have helped raise more than \$200 million since Election Day. Many of his partisans share his dream of recapturing the presidency in 2024. For those who despise him, to paraphrase a famous Democratic speech, it seems clear the work goes on, the cause endures, the fear still lives, and the nightmare shall never die. Except it will die - most likely with more speed and force than

looks possible today. There are three primary reasons to be deeply skeptical that Trump's moment of dominating his party and public consciousness will continue long after Jan. 20. Most important are the abundant precedents suggesting Trump does not have another important act in national politics. The perception that Trump will remain relevant hinges on the possibility that he is a unique historical figure. Trump, however, is

Relax, A Trump Comeback In 2024 Is Not Going To Happen

singular in one sense only: No politician of his stripe has ever achieved the presidency. In multiple other ways, he is a familiar American type, anticipated by such diverse figures as Joseph McCarthy, George Wallace, and Ross Perot. Like Trump, they all possessed flamboyant, self-dramatizing personas. They tapped into genuine dly. Cults of personality in American politics are quite common. But they never live long, and Trump has offered no reason to suppose he will be an exception.

That's the second reason Trump is not well-positioned to retain his hold on public attention: He has largely abandoned any pretense that he thinks about anything other than his personal resentments, or that he is trying to harness his movement to big ideas that will improve the lives

of citizens. When he vaulted into presidential politics five years ago, Trump's still-potent gifts - for channeling anger, for mockery, for conspiracy theory - were once channeled to an agenda that fellow Republicans were largely neglecting, over trade, immigration, globalization, and perceptions of national decline. These days, no one can follow Trump's Twitter feed and believe that he cares more about the public's problems than his own, and that is not a recipe for sustaining political power. Here is the third reason to be bearish on Trump's future: Politics never stands still, but Trump largely does. As he leaves the White House, Trump should be haunted by a stark reality - if he had any capacity for self-calibration, he wouldn't be leaving the White House at all.

ENTERTAINMENT

Mira Nair's A SUITABLE BOY

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show really got off the ground and he was confirmed as our Maan. We have a great relationship and he has a real understanding of the part. He worships Tabu who plays Saeeda Bai, the courtesan he falls in love with. I'm just thrilled that he is our Maan, because I'm not exaggerating when I say that there was no other Maan, but Ishaan.

What attracted you to A Suitable Boy?

A Suitable Boy has been one of my favourite novels since the day it was written. I read it repeatedly and felt as if it was my best friend. I felt a sense of great companionship and understanding and a sense of evoking a time in India in which I longed to have lived. I just vowed to direct the adaptation of it but it was too big at the time for me to get my hands on it. It really gives me extraordinary pleasure and pride to have the privilege of directing this show because it is something that has inspired me so much. It also gives me this vast canvas as I have 113 actors in the show and six hours to let the story unfold.

The acclaimed miniseries hit A SUITABLE BOY has now premiered in North America and is currently streaming exclusively on the streaming service Acorn TV. The first two episodes of the Mira Nair-directed series are now available to watch with new episodes debuting weekly through January 4, 2021. More information on Acorn TV is available at <http://signup.acorn.tv> where a free trial is also being offered. Mira Nair sat down to discuss how she made this epic series in this new interview below. An Interview with Mira Nair - Director and Executive Producer of A Suitable Boy

A Suitable Boy is a massive yet intimate saga of four interwoven families across northern India in the year 1951; four years after Indian independence from the British. It's an extraordinary tale of love and friendship across class and certainly across religion. Vikram Seth is able to reach the depths of human relationships - the heart, the mind and love in all its peculiarities. It's universal and affects and relates to everyone. One level of our story is the journey of Lata finding herself, her own voice, finding love and being loved. At the same time, India goes on its own journey towards its first national election. Besides the

affairs of the human heart, what interests me in this story is the interweaving of the personal story of Lata and her family but also the political story of our country, finding its own voice.

How did you cast the character of Lata and what has Tanya Maniktala brought to the role?

I searched all over India to cast Lata and I must have seen more than 500 young women, and they were all extraordinarily talented. But when I saw Tanya Maniktala, I just knew this was Lata. She has a sense of wonder in her eyes, a sense of being curious about the world and yet, a very self-

possessed sweetness. That is very real and genuine and not acted. It was very difficult in modern India to find a young woman who had not seen the world, and so was protected from it, and yet had this intelligence about it.

What has Ishaan Khatter brought to the role of Maan Kapoor?

When I found Ishaan Khatter, which was almost a year ago, there was just no going back. He was Maan to the core and I knew I would have been so lucky to have him. It took some months until our

What is A Suitable Boy about?

Randeep Hooda makes his web series debut in Jio Studios' & Gold Mountain Pictures' cop thriller – in & as Inspector Avinash, based on super cop Avinash Mishra's life, directed by Neerraj Pathak



Jio Studios in association with Gold Mountain Pictures, has roped in versatile actor Randeep Hooda to essay the role of a police officer in its web series – Inspector Avinash, a cop thriller based on real life events of super cop Avinash Mishra. Helmed by Neerraj Pathak and produced by Neeraj and Krishan Chowdhry, the

show also marks Hooda's debut in the web series space. Set in Uttar Pradesh, Hooda's cop avatar will see him in action in a dramatic retelling of the life of the famed cop dealing with criminal activities of the state. The series is all set to hit the floor in December 2020. Taking about the web series, Randeep says, "I look

forward to exploring new challenging roles with each of my characters and Inspector Avinash gives me a fabulous opportunity to do that. It's a highly inspiring and interesting role based on true life events of a super cop. I believe in Neerraj's vision for the show and can't wait to begin filming this thrilling cop drama. This is also my first collaboration with Jio Studios and I am looking forward to this association." "I am very glad Jio Studios believed in my vision and came on board to back the project. Randeep Hooda is ideal for reprising the role of a super cop & will add an interesting dimension to the character, we are very excited to have him play the lead. We commence shooting next month in December", director Neerraj Pathak signs off.

The first look has premiered for the upcoming 2021 film MAJOR.



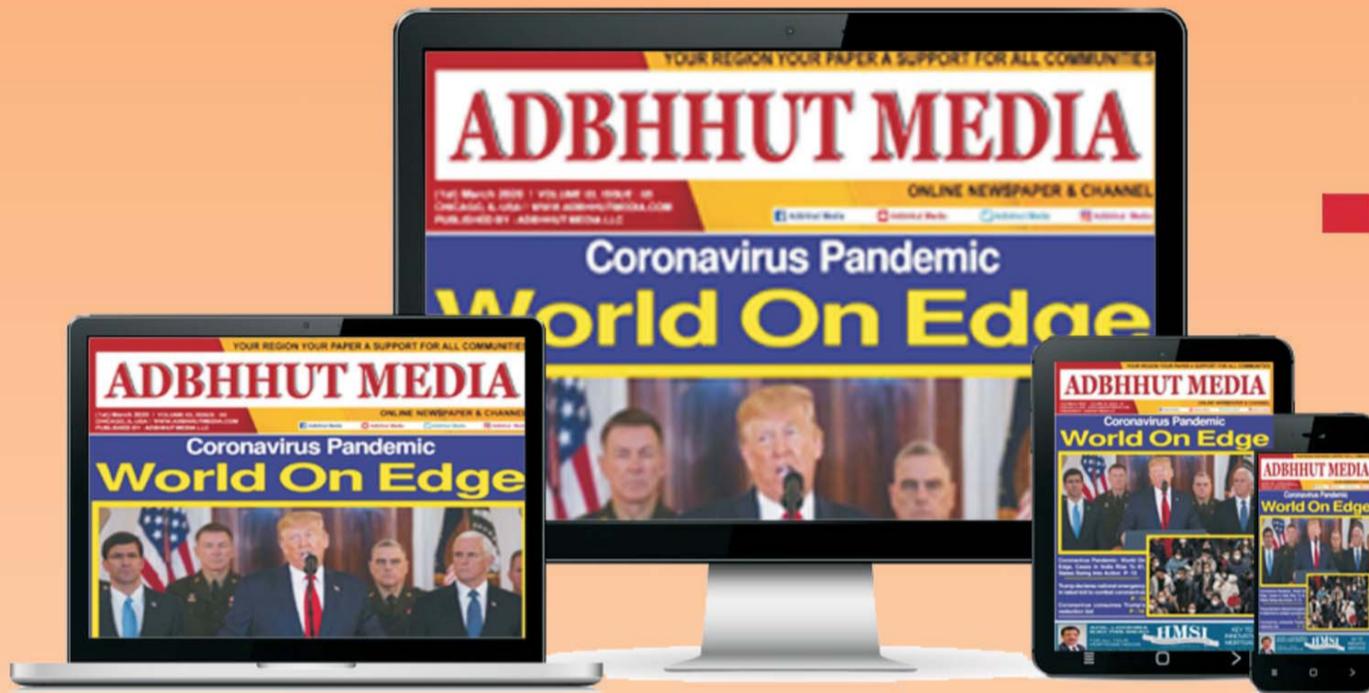
MAJOR is a biopic based on the life of the real-life hero Major Sandeep Unnikrishnan and it talks about his childhood, his personal life, his life in the academy and also shows how this valiant soldier saved the lives of numerous hostages before being martyred by the terrorists who wreaked havoc in the Taj Mahal Palace Mumbai, India on the 26th of November, 2008. 12 years back on 27th November, Major Sandeep lost his life and we take pride in his life, his battles, his daredevilry and his supreme sacrifice. On the death

anniversary of Major Sandeep Unnikrishnan, a new image has been released where you can see an uncanny resemblance between the reel life Adivi Sesh and real life hero Major Sandeep Unnikrishnan. MAJOR, the bilingual Hindi and Telugu film is produced by Sony Pictures Films India in association with GMB Entertainment and A+S Movies. It is directed by acclaimed Telugu director Sashi Kiran Tikka and stars Adivi Sesh (as Major Sandeep Unnikrishnan), Sobhita Dhulipala, Saiee Manjrekar, Prakash Raj and Revathi.

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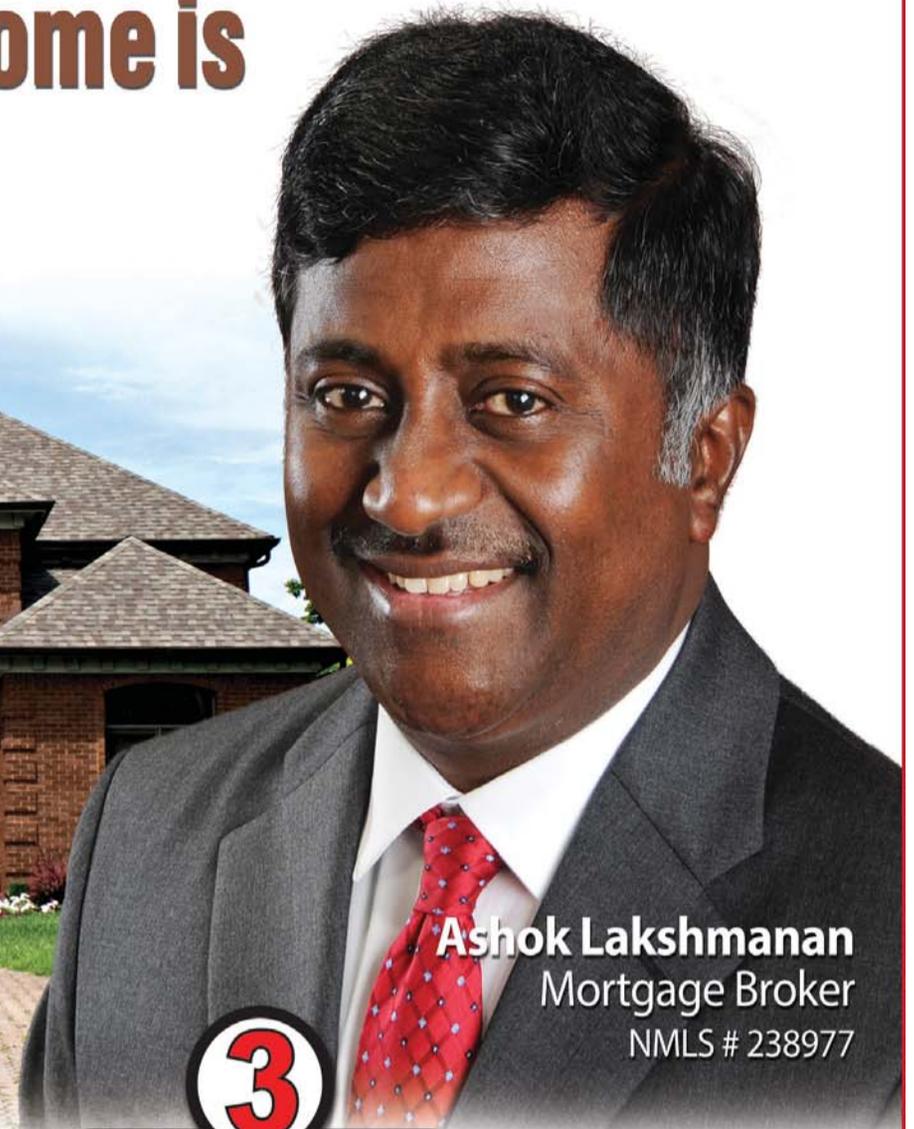
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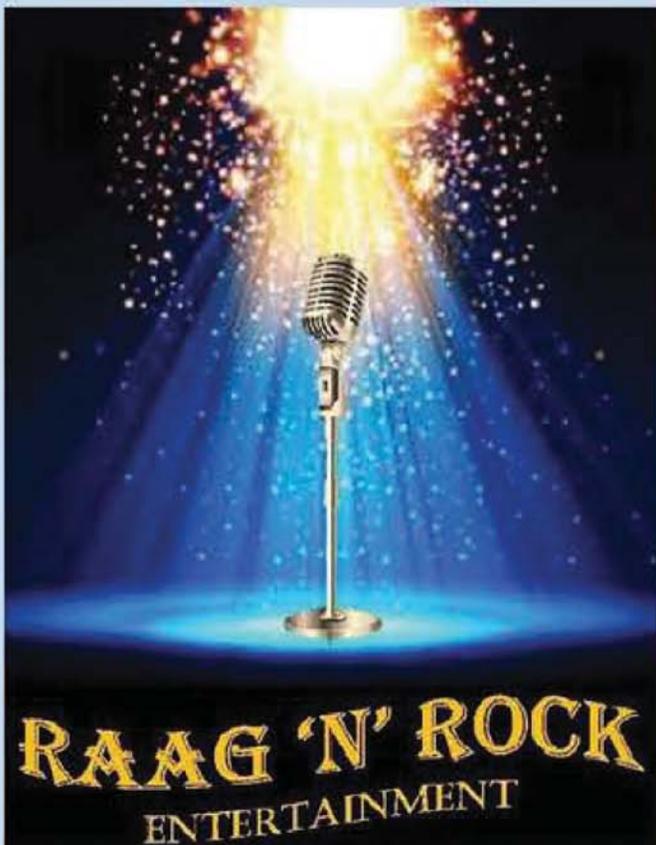
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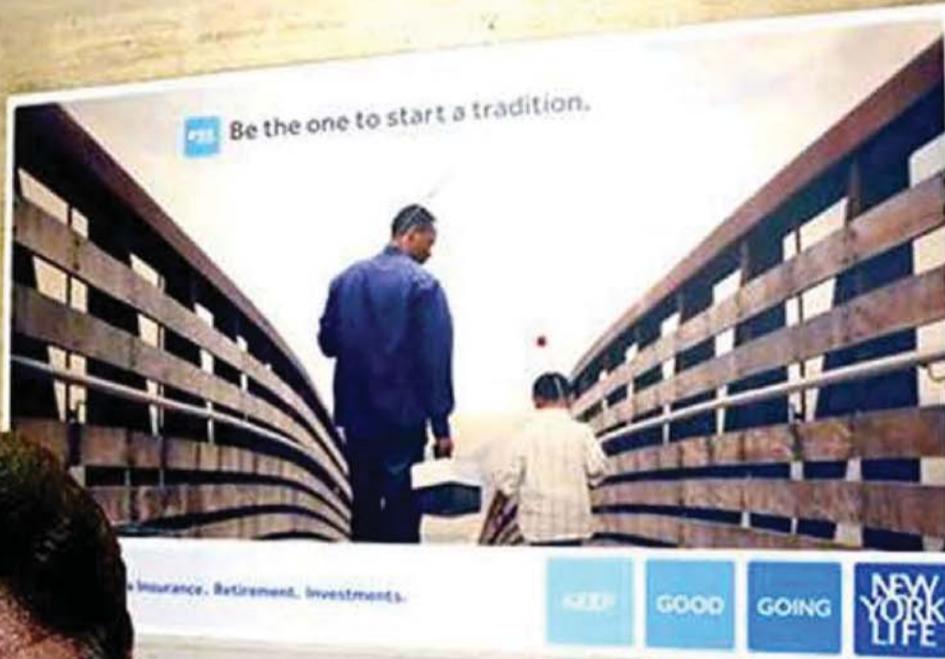
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