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Global business, industry...

any way in UT and we as responsive administration will continue to respond to business's concerns", said the Lt Governor. Lieutenant Governor further congratulated Bal Krishen for his commitment and passion to support his home region and thanked him for this grand gesture. Ranjan Thakur, Principal Secretary, Industries and Commerce J&K, stated "Jammu & Kashmir is one of the safest places in India to do business offering the most attractive incentive schemes for investments in the union territory compared to other states in the country." "I have always believed that Jammu & Kashmir has tremendous investment potential and there cannot be a better time than now. Making a significant contribution to my home region has always been my dream and today as I see this dream getting realized, it's immensely gratifying" said Century Financial's owner, Bal Krishen.

The event was held at The Oberoi Dubai, Business Bay.

Snowfall hits traffic...

official said. "The installation of the CAT-II ILS will begin in April 2022 and would be completed by November 2022. Hopefully, we will not face these difficulties next year," he added.

The official advised passengers to reschedule their flights, which, he said, will be done by airlines free of cost. "The passengers are entitled to full refund if they decide to cancel their journey," he said. The air traffic to and from Kashmir has been badly affected over the past few days with a large number of flights getting cancelled due to poor visibility. Srinagar recorded the minimum temperature of 0.2 degrees Celsius last night, the officials said.

Meanwhile, a 37-year-old woman and her minor daughter were rescued by villagers from an avalanche in a remote village in Poonch district on Saturday, officials said. Nasreen and her 11-year-old daughter Zaida Kousar had gone to fetch water from a natural source in their Tarwanja village of Behramgalla in Surankote area when they came under the avalanche, the officials said. They said the villagers acted swiftly and evacuated the two after pulling out the woman and her daughter from the snow. Both of them escaped unhurt in the incident, the officials said. A video, purportedly showing the girl being pulled out by villagers from under the snow, had gone viral on the social media, drawing appreciation from the netizens for saving the two previous lives. Snowfall ranging from a few inches to over five feet was reported from the high-altitude areas of Jammu and Kashmir, while Jammu plains were lashed by incessant rains over the past few days.

Meanwhile, several short videos showing army and BSF personnel patrolling in the knee-deep snow along the Line of Control (LoC) and other forward areas had also gone viral on social media platforms, attracting praises for the brave-hearts for keeping a tight vigil on the borders despite inclement weather.

A few more videos showing the security personnel, local police and CRPF personnel providing assistance to the public and power development department and Public Health Engineering department employees rectifying faults to restore snapped power and water supply amid snowfall are also doing the rounds on social media.

Vaishno Devi experiences...

Banihal-Baramulla Section was also suspended due to the inclement weather conditions, the officials said. They said that about four inches of snowfall was recorded at Vaishno Devi shrine early Saturday, while the high altitude areas including Bhairon Ghati were covered by heavy snowfall. The yatra was going on smoothly but the helicopter service and the battery car service remained suspended due to weather, the officials said, adding it was raining heavily in Katra, the base camp for the pilgrims visiting the shrine, when last reports were received. Senior Superintendent of Police, traffic, Shabir Ahmad Malik said the 270-km Jammu-Srinagar National Highway remained closed since Friday afternoon due to heavy snowfall in Banihal sector and multiple landslides in Ramban district.

The traffic on the highway was restored early Friday after remaining suspended for the past two days due to the inclement weather. However, it was again suspended in the afternoon due to continuous snowfall and rains that triggered landslides at nearly half a dozen places including Karol, Marog, Moum Passi and digdole.

"About 50 light motor vehicles (LMVs) were left stranded due to the closure of the highway. A number of trucks also remained stranded while some 300 trucks carrying essential supplies to Kashmir including fuel and fresh vegetables were cleared," Malik said.

The officials said the stranded passengers including a group of 26 tourists from Gujarat were shifted to community halls in Ramban sector and were provided all necessary assistance including food and blankets during the night.

Due to the heavy snowfall in the valley, the officials said the train service between Banihal and Baramulla sector was suspended as a precautionary measure to avoid any untoward incident. Snowfall ranging between a few inches to over five feet was recorded in most parts of Jammu and Kashmir, while Jammu city and other plains were lashed by heavy rains during the past 24 hours, the officials said.

The hilly areas of Jammu including Kishtwar, Bhaderwah, Doda, Reasi, Poonch and Rajouri experienced major snowfall, disrupting normal life, the officials said.

They said the traffic on the Jammu-Poonch highway was also suspended due to heavy snowfall in several areas in the twin border belts of Poonch and Rajouri.

Head constable Abdul Rashid was injured when an official vehicle of a police officer rolled down into a gorge at Patnitop in Udhampur district Friday evening, the officials said, adding the injured was hospitalised.

The Patnitop hill resort, a star attraction for tourists visiting Jammu region during winters, recorded nearly one feet of snow, the officials said.

According to the Meteorological department, Katra recorded the highest 95.2 mm of rainfall followed by Jammu at 83.5 mm during the past 24 hours, ending 8.30 am Saturday. The department has predicted heavy to very heavy snow and rains across Jammu and Kashmir till January 9.

Clear case of...

fought Khalistani terrorism in eighties. He said the DGP Punjab could have stood on foot, if the political bosses of the state would have desired to scuttle the visit of the chief executive of the country, saying he could not compromise with the security of the Prime Minister, whose threat perception is not hidden. Another participant described the claim of the Punjab Government about having no knowledge of threat to the PM as absurd. He pointed towards the footage showing casualness of the Punjab Police at the protest site, with some personnel sipping tea with the protestors.

The participants were unanimous in expeditious and fair probe to fix the responsibility and dispensing exceptional punishment for laxity so that such incidents do not recur anywhere across the country. This assumes significance in the backdrop of attempts of derailing democracy and weakening the federal structure, earlier in Mamta Banerjee's West Bengal and now in Sonia Gandhi's Punjab. "Mere thought of the backlash across the country in the wake of any untoward incident sends chill in the spine, as the nation would have plunged into unprecedented crisis with enemies across the border taking advantage", he said while expressing relief over the adverse scenario having been averted. Giving their expert opinion on dealing and tackling the Prime Minister's visit to any state, the participants wondered why the Chief Secretary, Home Secretary and the DGP, least to speak of the Chief Minister Punjab having accompanied the cavalcade as the Prime Minister was going to launch several development projects. "The intriguing question remains that their official cars were accompanying the cavalcade with incumbent occupants missing from the scene", an expert said, asking what does it mean and it can't be coincidence.

An Army veteran observed that the security of the Prime Minister should be of paramount importance especially as Narendra Modi is taking on the enemy nations in the neighbourhood firmly and standing tall in the world community by taking bold stand on global issues. He said the nation is blessed with a firm, decisive and bold Prime Minister after years and decades.

Executive magistrate orders...

former deputy speaker of the legislative assembly, and former minister Abdul Rehman Veeri, they said. Hitting out at the administration over the order, Mehbooba tweeted, "Covid 19 restrictions apply only to PDP. Not to BJP's protest in Kashmir yesterday, PMs rally in Punjab or the mass poojas attended by hundreds of people to pray for his safety. Talks volumes about J&K admin's brazen bias against my party." Mehbooba was also part of Friday's gathering but was not named in the order of the executive magistrate. Later, the PDP posted on its Twitter handle the video purportedly showing the deputy commissioner of Anantnag dancing at a gathering where no one is wearing face masks.

"Here DC Anantnag dancing on New Years eve without a mask where crowd ran into thousands but when it comes to PDP, COVID-19 suddenly resurfaces and turns political," the party said.

Kashmir journalist arrested...

case FIR No. 79/2021 U/S 120B, 153B, 505/IPC stands registered against him which is under investigation," he said.

Dar also allegedly uploaded objectionable videos with anti-national slogans raised by some women on the day most-wanted terrorist Saleem Parray was killed in Shalimar, Srinagar, the spokesperson added.

Meanwhile, a UK-based man of Kashmiri-origin has been booked under the UAPA for allegedly carrying out anti-national activities on social media, police said.

A complaint was also lodged by an advocate here against Muzammil Ayyub Thakur for threatening him in public and on social media, a police spokesperson said.

"On Thursday, Police Station Kothibagh reliably learnt that Thakur, through his social media account and other platforms, is indulging in activities which are prejudicial to the sovereignty, integrity and unity of India," the spokesperson said.

He said Thakur, who heads the World Kashmiri Freedom Movement (WKFM), was creating fear and alarm among the masses and inciting them to commit offences which are likely to disturb public order.

"This apart, a proper complaint was lodged by Advocate Syed Zeeshan before Srinagar Police against Muzamil Ayyub Thakur and others. In the complaint, it is alleged by him that Muzammil Ayyub at the behest of ISI and ISPR is threatening, harassing, carrying out criminal intimidation, besides being involved in cyber-crimes against the complainant," the spokesperson said.

He said the complainant also alleged that Thakur has left no stone unturned to malign his image and also threatened him, not only in public, but also on social media platforms.

"Accordingly, cognizance into the matter was taken and a case FIR number 01/2022 U/S 13 UAPA, 153-A(b), 505 (1) (b) IPC has been registered and investigation has been initiated," he said.

India reports 1,41,986...

513, Karnataka 333, Rajasthan 291, Kerala 284 and Gujarat 204.

A total of 1,41,986 new coronavirus infections were reported in a day, the highest in around 222 days. The active Covid cases have increased to 4,72,169, the highest in around 187 days, according to the data.

The death toll has climbed to 4,83,463 with 285 fresh fatalities, it stated.

A total of 1,52,734 new infections were reported on May 31 last year.

The active Covid cases have increased to 4,72,169, comprising 1.34 per cent of the total infections. The national COVID-19 recovery rate has decreased to 97.30 per cent, the health ministry said. An increase of 1,00,806 cases has been recorded in the active COVID-19 caseload in a span of 24 hours, it said. The daily positivity rate was recorded at 9.28 per cent, while the weekly positivity rate was recorded at 5.66 per cent, the ministry said. The number of people who have recuperated from COVID-19 surged to 3,44,12,740, while the case fatality rate was recorded at 1.37 per cent, it said.

The cumulative doses administered in the country so far under the nationwide COVID-19 vaccination drive has exceeded 150.06 crore, the ministry said.

India's COVID-19 tally had crossed the 20-lakh mark on August 7, 2020, 30 lakh on August 23, 40 lakh on September 5 and 50 lakh on September 16. It went past 60 lakh on September 28, 70 lakh on October 11, crossed 80 lakh on October 29, 90 lakh on November 20 and surpassed the one-crore mark on December 19, 2020.

The country crossed the grim milestone of two crore on May 4, 2021, and three crore on June 23 of that year.

The 285 new fatalities included 189 from Kerala and 20 from Maharashtra.

A total of 4,83,463 deaths due to the pandemic have been reported so far in the country, including 1,41,614 from Maharashtra, 49,305 from Kerala, 38,362 from Karnataka, 36,833 from Tamil Nadu, 25,136 from Delhi, 22,918 from Uttar Pradesh and 19,864 from West Bengal.

655 new COVID...

Seventy one patients recovered from the disease bringing down the active cases in the union territory to 241, they said. Of the fresh cases, 36 were reported in Leh and seven in Kargil district, they said. No fresh death was reported in the union territory.

According to the officials, the death toll stands at 221 – 163 fatalities in Leh and 58 in Kargil. The number of active COVID-19 cases in Ladakh has come down to 241 204 in Leh and 37 in Kargil from 269, a day earlier, the officials said. Sixty-four patients were discharged from hospitals in Leh and seven in Kargil, taking the total number of recoveries to 21,951, they said. The officials said the total positivity rate of Ladakh stands at 3.7 per cent.

Security breach: Punjab...

and accountability would be fixed.

The incident triggered a major political row with the BJP alleging that the ruling Congress in Punjab "tried to physically harm" the prime minister, while other parties too attacked the state government over the law and order issue.

The Centre also set up a three-member panel on Thursday to investigate the security breach.

Meanwhile, senior IPS officer Viresh Kumar Bhawra has been appointed as the new Director General of Punjab police, an official order said.

The order came just hours before the announcement of the dates for the assembly elections in five states including Punjab.

Bhawra, who was the DGP of Punjab Home Guards, replaced officiating DGP Siddharth Chattopadhyaya.

Chattopadhyaya along with 13 other police and civil officers appeared on Friday at Ferozepur before a three-member panel formed by the Union Home Ministry to inquire into the "serious lapses" in Prime Minister Narendra Modi's security during his Ferozepur tour.

The Charanjit Singh Channi government selected the 1987 batch officer Bhawra out of a panel of three officers shortlisted by the Union Public Service Commission.

The other two officers in the panel were senior IPS officers Dinkar Gupta and Prabodh Kumar.

On the consideration of the panel received from the UPSC, the Punjab governor is pleased to appoint Viresh Kumar Bhawra, IPS as director general of police, Punjab (Head of Police Force), the order said.

Bhawra term shall be for a minimum period of two years from the date of assumption of office, it added.

Punjab got its third DGP in a span of three months.

A few days back, the UPSC had sent a panel of three IPS officers – Dinkar Gupta, V K Bhawra and Prabodh Kumar for the appointment of a regular director general of police of Punjab.

According to the Supreme Court guidelines, out of the three shortlisted IPS officers by the UPSC, the state government is to finalise the name of one officer for the appointment of a regular DGP.

The Punjab government had sent a list of 10 IPS officers including Siddharth Chattopadhyaya for shortlisting the panel of three officers.

According to the SC guidelines, only an officer who has been left at least six months of service can be considered for the post of DGP.

The UPSC had taken October 5, 2021 as the cut-off date for the selection of the DGP and since Chattopadhyaya was due to retire on March 31, 2022, his name did not find a place in the panel.

After Charanjit Singh Channi took over as the new chief minister last September, the 1988-batch IPS officer Iqbal Preet Singh Sahota was appointed as the officiating DGP replacing Dinkar Gupta who was the state police chief when Amarinder Singh was the chief minister.

But Punjab Congress chief Navjot Singh Sidhu was against the appointment of Sahota. Later after facing pressure from the former cricketer, the state government had appointed 1986-batch IPS officer Siddharth Chattopadhyaya as officiating DGP until a regular DGP is appointed out of a panel of three IPS officers shortlisted by the UPSC.

Five States go...

schedule, some opposition leaders raised concerns that financially-strong BJP has advantage for conducting virtual rallies and digital campaigns and said the poll panel should keep in mind the digital divide, especially in Uttar Pradesh, when it reviews the ban on physical rallies.

Asked about experts predicting the third wave of the Covid pandemic to peak in February, when voting for five of the seven phases of the polls will take place, Chandra said the situation is very dynamic and nobody can predict Covid numbers of future dates.

He also assured voters that all necessary steps are being taken to ensure "Covid safe" elections and said they should come out in large numbers to exercise their franchise as polling booths will be sanitised and polling officers vaccinated.

In all, elections will be held for 690 assembly seats, and 18.3 crore people, including 8.5 crore women, will be eligible to cast their votes in the five states.

Welcoming the announcement of polls, BJP president J P Nadda urged the party workers to participate in this grand festival of democracy with their full strength while adhering to Covid-related and other guidelines.

Home Minister Amit Shah said his party heartily welcomes the decisions taken by the poll body for people's safety and obeying them is the collective responsibility of all parties.

BJP general secretary Tarun Chugh said the party will contest polls in five states with all its "might and energy" and form governments with a big majority.

Asserting that the Congress will contest strongly in these elections, party general secretary and chief spokesperson Randeep Surjewala said this is an opportunity for people to defeat the BJP and put an end to unemployment, price rise and atrocities against women and Dalits.

Samajwadi Party's Akhilesh Yadav said his party would abide by all the conditions laid down by the EC, but appealed to it to ensure that regional parties also get proper space on

digital platforms where he claimed the BJP was dominating.

He urged the poll panel to assist resource-scarred smaller parties infrastructurally to hold virtual rallies during the seven-phase polling in the state.

ATMIM President Asaduddin Owaisi said he hopes that the Election Commission will review its guidelines after January 15 and urged it to mindful of the digital divide in India, especially in Uttar Pradesh.

Responding to a question on EC holding polls amid a surge in Covid cases, the CEC said "caution, not panic" is needed and people and parties have to follow Covid-appropriate behaviour.

He also said people are going to markets and malls and, therefore, should come out to vote exercising caution.

Asked about farmers' agitation and breach in the prime minister's security in Punjab, Chandra said the poll panel has assessed the security and law and order situation and a sufficient number of paramilitary personnel will be deployed in all states.

Responding to a specific question on Punjab regarding farmers' agitation, he said, "No election is same, every election is different, every state is different. EC has assessed wherever there is a threat perception, wherever there are farmers' protests and we have spoken with security agencies of both the state and the Centre and those deployed at international borders before deciding the schedule."

Voting in Western UP and Punjab, the two regions among those covered in the upcoming polls, would take place in the first two phases on February 10 and February 14.

In the politically important Uttar Pradesh, voting will be held in 403 assembly seats, starting from the western region and will move towards the east over seven phases from February 10 to March 7.

The assembly polls are being held at a time when the BJP is facing criticism despite withdrawing the three controversial farm laws.

Welcoming the announcement of the poll schedule, Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath said the BJP will return to power with an "overwhelming majority". BSP president and former chief minister Mayawati on the other hand sought a check on the tendency in the ruling party to violate the model code of conduct.

The Model Code of Conduct has come into effect in the five states with the announcement of the elections.

For Manipur's 60 assembly constituencies, elections will be held in two phases on February 27 and March 3, while polling in Goa (40 seats), Punjab (117 seats) and Uttarakhand (70 seats) will be held on February 14.

"The Commission will not hesitate to bar parties from further rallies if Covid protocol is not followed," Chandra said.

Putting in place stringent Covid guidelines for the polls, the EC has restricted the number of people for door-to-door campaigns to five and has asked political parties to provide masks, hand sanitisers to people attending rallies if they are allowed.

The EC said it has asked chief secretaries of the poll-bound states to expedite the vaccination drive. Some of these states, including Goa, are witnessing a surge in Covid cases.

"More than 15 crores have got the first dose, more than nine crores have got both doses in the five states," Chandra said.

The EC has also doubled the air time on Doordarshan for political parties, he said.

Chandra, who was flanked by election commissioners Rajiv Kumar and Anup Chandra Pandey, said parties and candidates have been advised to conduct their campaigns on virtual and digital modes as much as possible.

He also said the elections are being conducted in seven phases in UP, as against eight-phase polls in West Bengal, and the number of days involved in the entire process has been brought down. The 2017 elections in Uttar Pradesh were also held in seven phases, but there was some criticism when voting was stretched to eight phases for West Bengal in the last round of assembly polls in 2021.

Chandra said there would be zero-tolerance for money power and misuse of the government machinery by any party or candidate, while there would a strict vigil against hate speech and fake news including on social media.

Asked whether the presentation of Union Budget on February 1 and the presidential address to the two houses of Parliament before that would disturb the level-playing field, Chandra said the poll panel would not like to interfere in the budget presentation as it is a scheduled exercise meant for the whole country and not just the five poll-bound states.

The Trinamool Congress, however, felt that the assembly polls will adversely impact the Budget Session of Parliament. The party has launched a massive campaign in Goa, where Aam Aadmi Party is also in the fray making the elections there four-cornered, as against a direct fight last time between BJP and Congress.

If the polls hold significance for what they will bring to BJP, the ruling party at the Centre, they have an added element of political salience for the likely impact their results will have on the opposition camp too, as the Aam Aadmi Party and the Trinamool Congress have mounted an aggressive campaign which is as much directed at the Congress as the BJP.

With the Congress' claim of being the natural spearhead of any united opposition challenge to the BJP in the run-up to the 2024 Lok Sabha polls drawing scrutiny from regional satraps, the election results may force a realignment in the opposition politics, political watchers believe.

In Punjab, BJP is fighting in an alliance with former chief minister Amarinder Singh and an Akali faction to take on the ruling Congress, AAP and SAD-BSP.

'Don't indulge in...

vitiated," he said. His remarks come against the backdrop of a raging controversy over hate speeches at a religious conclave in Haridwar where calls were given for violence against a particular community.

Chandra said all election management related news on all major national and regional news channels during the polls will be monitored vigorously.

"If any untoward incident or violation of any law/rule is noticed, action would be taken immediately. Reports of monitoring would also be forwarded to the CEOs (chief electoral officers) concerned. Office of CEO will ascertain status on each and every item and file ATR (action taken report)/status report," he said.

The commission, in a press note, said keeping in view increasing incidents of misuse of social media and menace of paid news, and as a result of the EC's vigorous persuasion, major social media platforms have agreed to observe voluntary code of ethics formulated by them in March 2019.

"These will be applicable in these elections as well as in other elections," the poll authority said.

'EVM is no...

since 2004 and more than 315 crore voters have used EVM. We feel proud that this country has developed such a machine which gives accurate and faster results," he said.

At least one ballot unit and one control unit make an EVM.

The Election Commission will deploy Voter Verifiable Paper Audit Trail (VVPAT) along with EVM at every polling station in the assembly elections of the five states to increase transparency and credibility of the election process as VVPAT – also called paper trail machines – allows a voter to verify her or his vote.

Arrangements have already been made to ensure availability of adequate number of EVMs and VVPATs for the smooth conduct of elections, the EC statement on the poll schedule said.

Court employees demanding...

the bench observed, adding that the appellant had admitted his guilt.

The top court was hearing a plea filed by the man against the January 2020 order of a division bench of the Patna High Court which had dismissed his plea against the single judge bench verdict.

The single judge had in January 2018 refused to interfere with the punishment imposed upon the man, who was earlier posted in the office of a presiding officer of a court in Aurangabad. During the arguments before the top court, the counsel appearing for the appellant said that the man was dismissed from service in 2014 and the punishment imposed upon him was extremely harsh. Why do you say harsh? It is after inquiry, is it not? the bench observed. The counsel said the appellant was exonerated by the enquiry officer in the first inquiry. He said later, a fresh departmental proceeding was directed to be initiated and the charges were held to be proved against him. "The appellant has admitted his guilt. That is the finding, the bench observed, adding, If you admit your guilt, what else can be done, tell us. When the appellant's counsel argued that if possible, the service be restored, the bench observed there is no question of reinstatement.

Working in court and demanding money, that is unacceptable, the bench orally said. The bench noted that the appellant has been dismissed from service by way of penalty, having admitted his guilt to the charges levelled against him.

After hearing counsel for the parties and keeping in mind the past service record of the appellant, to which our attention was invited to, in our opinion, interest of justice would be subserved by modifying the punishment from dismissal to removal so that the appellant may be able to explore possibility of another employment elsewhere, the court said.

In its order, the division bench of the high court had noted that the man was proceeded against on the charge of having demanded Rs 50,000 for acquittal of the accused persons in a case. It had noted that a preliminary enquiry was made and a report was submitted before the standing committee, which directed the District and Sessions Judge, Aurangabad, to initiate disciplinary proceedings against him.

The high court had also noted that after holding the enquiry, the District and Sessions Judge had submitted his report to the standing committee, which was considered and turned down by it with a direction to initiate disciplinary proceedings against the delinquent afresh in the high court.

In the second enquiry report, the charges were held to be established and proved against the man and accordingly, he was given the punishment of dismissal from service with immediate effect.