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Parliament paralysed over Pegasus, farm laws

“Our straight forward question is, did you [the government] or did you not use the Pegasus spyware? Trinamool will not let it sweep under the carpet,” Mr O’Brien said, adding, “When the government is using military grade spyware, the supposition that this is a question that the IT Minister can answer is preposterous.”

Unlike the Lok Sabha, the Upper House members get a chance to seek clarification in response to a Minister’s statement, but it was lost in the commotion.

The Lok Sabha too witnessed multiple adjournments before being adjourned for the day as Opposition members protested over the farm laws and the Pegasus spyware.

However, two Bills – Inland Vessels Bill, 2021 and Essential Defence Services Bill, 2021 – were introduced in the House amid the din.

Even before the Lok Sabha proceedings began, Congress members from both Houses, including former party president Rahul Gandhi, protested in front of the Mahatma Gandhi statue on the Parliament complex to express solidarity with farmer organisations that were protesting at Jantar Mantar, barely 500 metres from Parliament.

“They are adamant on falsehood, injustice and arrogance. We are *satyagrahis* standing united and fearlessly. *Jai Kisaan*,” Mr Gandhi tweeted and tagged a photo of himself along with other MPs holding a banner that said “We demand repeal of anti-farmer laws”.

As soon as Lok Sabha

proceedings started at 11 a.m., Opposition members trooped into the well of the House and started raising slogans. Several of them were displaying placards, forcing Speaker Om Birla to take note.

“The House is for discussion and answering questions and if you [protesting Opposition members] want to raise slogans and show placards, you can do so outside the House,” he said before adjourning the House until noon.

The House was adjourned twice after noon, before Biju Janata Dal MP Bartuhari Mahtab adjourned the House for the day at 4 p.m. since the Opposition protests continued.

In between adjournments, Congress’s Lok Sabha leader Adhir Ranjan Chowdhury and Leader of the Opposition in the Rajya Sabha, Mallikarjun Kharge, interacted with the media to put their demands on the farm laws.

“When Ministers stand up, they say they are ready for discussion but when we move motion to adjourn usual business and discuss farm laws, they don’t accept. The government is indulging in the politics of doublespeak. Inside the House, we don’t have the microphones turned on to put across views and even cameras are not allowed to show us,” Mr. Chowdhury alleged.

Pointing out that the farmers have been protesting at Delhi’s borders since November 26 last year, Mr. Kharge said, “We are with the farmers and will keep fighting for them.”

I-T Dept. raids *Dainik Bhaskar* premises

More than 100 officials were involved in the raids on *Dainik Bhaskar*, one of the largest circulating Hindi dailies, that began in the morning.

On its website, the group said the government launched the raids as it was “scared of its coverage of floating dead bodies in the Ganga during the pandemic”.

It added that besides the offices, the I-T officials also raided the residences of key personnel of the group. “The taxmen have seized mobiles of the employees,” it claimed. There were no women in the I-T teams that raided the group’s offices and other premises, it added.

Alleged tax evasions

Sources in the I-T Department maintained that the raids were carried out after the department was tipped-off about alleged tax evasions by the group and its various companies.

Headquartered in Madhya Pradesh, the *Dainik Bhaskar* group has more than 60 editions operating in a dozen States in multiple languages.

Rajasthan Chief Minister Ashok Gehlot, his Delhi counterpart, Arvind Kejriwal, and several other political leaders condemned the raids.

Congress Rajya Sabha member and former Mad-

hya Pradesh Chief Minister Digvijaya Singh tweeted that tax officials “are present” at half a dozen premises of the group, including its office at Press Complex in Bhopal.

‘Stifling democracy’

“The attack on journalists & media houses is yet another BRUTAL attempt to stifle democracy,” West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee tweeted. The *Dainik Bhaskar* group had “bravely” reported the mishandling of the COVID-19 pandemic by the Central government, she said.

“I strongly condemn this vindictive act that aims to suppress voices that bring out the TRUTH. It’s a grave violation that undermines the very principles of democracy,” she added.

CPI(M) general secretary Sitaram Yechury said the “misuse” of Central agencies for intimidation was condemnable. “Modi government’s raid raj won’t work. Trying to scare and muzzle the truth from surfacing. But like the dead bodies floating in the Ganga, Modi government cannot hide,” he tweeted.

The group, senior Congress leader Jairam Ramesh said, was paying the price for exposing a monumental mismanagement of the pandemic. “An Undeclared Emergency as Arun Shourie has said – this is a Modified Emergency,” he tweeted.

Abduction of Afghan envoy’s daughter in Pak. shocking: govt.

India stands beside Afghanistan to ensure its ‘peaceful’ future, says Ministry

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI

The reported abduction of the daughter of the Afghan Ambassador to Pakistan is a “shocking incident”, said an official of the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) on Thursday.

MEA spokesperson Arindam Bagchi reminded that India considered it fair to comment on the issue concerning two other countries as the authorities in Pakistan had dragged India into the incident.

“This is, of course, a shocking incident. This involves two other countries, Afghanistan and Pakistan, and usually we would not comment on it. However, since the Interior Minister of Pakistan has dragged India into it, I would only like to say that even by their standards, Pakistan’s denial of the victim’s account is stooping to a new low,” said Mr. Bagchi, referring to the July 16 incident in Islamabad.

Pakistan has sent out mixed signals on the issue till now. Islamabad initially began an investigation, but later, Interior Minister Sheikh Rashid urged the victim to



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Afghan protest

The issue acquired a serious shape with a strong protest from the Foreign Ministry of Afghanistan.

“Pakistan has sent out mixed signals on the issue till now. Islamabad initially began an investigation, but later, Interior Minister Sheikh Rashid urged the victim to

join the investigation. Afghanistan has since with-drawn the envoy from Islamabad in protest.

Mr. Sheikh Rashid also denied that the incident did not amount to an attempt of abduction and accused India and Afghanistan of “distortion” of facts to defame and destabilise Pakistan.

The MEA spokesperson said India stood beside Afghanistan to ensure the “peaceful” future of the country, which had witnessed a dramatic increase in territorial control by the Taliban in recent weeks as

the U.S. forces were pulling out of the country after the post-9/11 two decades-long mission.

Mr. Bagchi’s comments came in response to reports that Afghanistan has sought military assistance from India.

Backs govt.

“As a contiguous neighbour, India supports the government and the people of Afghanistan in realising their aspirations for a peaceful, democratic and prosperous future where the interests of all sections of Afghan society, including women and minorities, are protected,” said Mr. Bagchi, laying out India’s position on the current situation in Kabul.

India has pulled out personnel from its mission in Kandahar, shutting down operations temporarily. It now operates all Indian visa-related works in Afghanistan through the Indian Embassy in Kabul.

Afghan President calls Danish Siddiqui’s father

He condoles death of photojournalist

KALLOL BHATTACHERJEE
NEW DELHI

Afghan President Ashraf Ghani on Thursday described the death of noted photojournalist Danish Siddiqui as a “great loss to the journalism fraternity”. The Afghan leader conveyed his thoughts regarding the slain, award-winning photojournalist in a telephone call to his family in Delhi. Siddiqui was killed near Kandahar during a fight between the Afghan special forces and the Taliban militants.

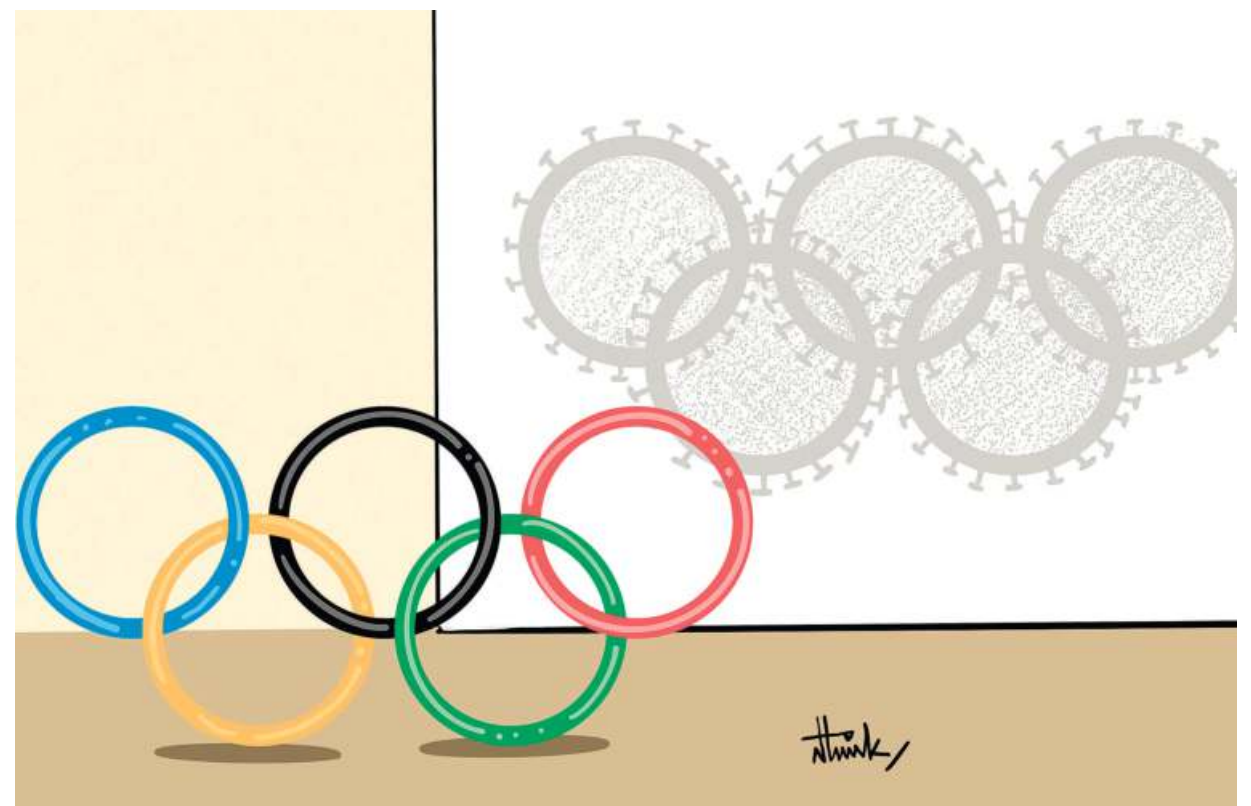
“President Ashraf Ghani called Prof. [Akhtar] Siddiqui, father of Reuters journalist the late Danish Siddiqui, and conveyed his condolences over the death of his son to his family, friends and colleagues. The President termed his death

as a great loss for the journalism fraternity,” said Aziz Amin, Special Secretary to the Afghan President.

The Afghan President was among the first to condole the killing of the Pulitzer Prize winning photojournalist, who was known for his photographic reports of evolving human tragedies like the Rohingya displacement and COVID-19 devastation in India. The precise details of the conversation between the President and Siddiqui’s family is not yet known.

Siddiqui was killed on July 16 in Spin Boldak district of Kandahar, near the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. He was flown back to Delhi to his family home and was buried in the graveyard of Jamia Milia.

On the draw



Amarinder to attend Sidhu’s induction

Punjab CM has been seeking apology from PCC chief for ‘derogatory’ remarks

VIKAS VASUDEVA
CHANDIGARH

Punjab Chief Minister Amarinder Singh will participate in the Congress function on Friday where Navjot Singh Sidhu will take charge as State Congress president along with four working presidents.

Ahead of the function, the Chief Minister has invited all Congress MLAs, MPs and senior party leaders to Punjab Bhavan on Friday, asking them to leave together for the installation of the new Punjab Pradesh Congress Committee team at the party office.

After Mr. Sidhu’s elevation as Punjab Congress chief, Capt. Amarinder has been maintaining that he would not meet the former unless Mr. Sidhu publicly apologised for his personally derogatory social media attacks.

The All India Congress Committee on July 18 appointed Mr. Sidhu president of the Punjab Congress Com-



Busy parleys: Navjot Singh Sidhu arriving to meet Congress leaders in Amritsar on Thursday. • AFP

mittee, along with Sangat Singh Gilzian, Sukhwinder Singh Danny, Pawan Goel, and Kuljit Singh Nagra as working presidents.

Mr. Nagra and Mr. Gilzian extended the invitation to the Chief Minister, which was signed by over 50 legislators, including Mr. Sidhu. The move is being seen as a show of strength and a pressure tactic against the backdrop of Capt. Amarinder’s continued opposition to Mr. Sidhu’s elevation as the party’s State chief.

Congress has a new team for its Uttarakhand unit

The Congress announced a new team for its Uttarakhand unit by appointing Ganesh Gondiyal as the new Uttarakhand Pradesh Congress Committee chief. While there will be four working presidents, former Chief Minister Harish Rawat will be the chairman of the Campaign Committee.

The Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) hit out at the Congress, saying that the Congress high command had already accepted that its government had “failed Punjab miserably” and the party was now trying to wash away its non-performance by bringing about a change of face in its Punjab unit.

Former Minister and SAD leader Daljit Cheema said, “It is a fact that Congress legislators had informed the party high command that they would not be able to en-

ter villages because the State government had not fulfilled any of the promises made to the people. The high command admitted this failure by handing over an 18-point to-do list to the Chief Minister. It simultaneously appointed Navjot Sidhu as the Pradesh Congress president to shift the blame for the party’s non-performance on Capt. Amarinder.”

He said such “cheap political moves” by the party would not work with Punjab.

President-elect of UNGA to meet PM Modi today

Shahid backs Security Council reform

SUHASINI HAIDAR
NEW DELHI

Maldives Foreign Minister Abdullah Shahid, who is also the President-elect of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), will meet Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Minister for External Affairs S. Jaishankar on Friday, ahead of the UNGA session in September, which Mr. Modi is expected to address. After bilateral talks, India and the Maldives will sign a new development partnership agreement (MoU) and review previously announced projects.

Mr. Shahid, who won the election for the President of the next General Assembly in June, had thanked India for being the first to support his candidature publicly in an interview to *The Hindu*, and has made New Delhi his first stop in a string of visits ahead of the session. On Thursday, he met Foreign Secretary Harsh Shringla where, the Ministry of External Affairs said, they discussed his plans for a “Presidency of Hope”, which is



Abdullah Shahid

expected to focus on global post-COVID-19 recovery and equitable distribution of vaccines, and U.N. reforms and countering radicalism and terrorism.

Mr. Shahid said he would support India’s ongoing campaign for U.N. Security Council (UNSC) reform and for a permanent UNSC seat, a process that is stuck at the UNGA in Inter-Governmental Negotiations (IGN) at present.

“Exchanged views on multilateral issues, my priorities for UNGA 76 (2021-22), and India’s priorities as the President of UN Security Council for August,” Mr. Abdullah tweeted.

Analysis by NGO reveals microplastics in Ganga

They are a source of marine pollution

JACOB KOSHY
NEW DELHI

An analysis of the stretches of the river Ganga by a Delhi-based environment NGO, Toxics Link, has revealed pollution by microplastics, defined as synthetic solid particles sized ranging from 1 micrometre to 5 millimetre (mm), which are insoluble in water.

The Ganga flows across five States and has been at the centre of a massive multi-crore undertaking by the Union government, in the form of the National Mission for Clean Ganga, to rid it off contamination.

Microplastics are recognised as a major source of marine pollution. Untreated sewage from many cities along the river’s course, industrial waste and religious offerings wrapped in non-degradable plastics pile pollutants into the river as it flows through several densely populated cities. The plastic products and waste materials released or dumped in the river break down and are eventually broken down into microparticles. The river finally transports significantly large quantities downstream into the ocean, which is the ultimate sink of all plastics being used by humans.

“Essentially, all along microplastics are flowing into the river system. It does reflect or suggest a direct linkage between the poor state of both solid and liquid waste management; hence it is critically important to initiate steps to remediate it,” Priti Mahesh, chief coor-

inator at Toxics Link, said in a statement.

The study, ‘Quantitative analysis of Microplastics along River Ganga’, was based on an analysis of water samples at Haridwar, Kanpur and Varanasi.

The highest concentration of such plastic was found at Varanasi, comprising single-use and secondary plastic products. The water testing was carried out in collaboration with the National Institute of Oceanography (NIO) in Goa. The samples were tested to identify the exact type or resin core and the results show the presence of at least 40 different kinds of polymers as microplastics.

The shapes and nature of the observed resins ranged from fibres to fragments, films and beads. Fragments were the predominant shape in all locations, followed by film and fibre.

Microbeads were observed in Varanasi and Kanpur, while no beads were found in Haridwar. “The most frequent size range observed in all the samples was <300 micrometre,” said Dr. Mahua Saha, the lead researcher from NIO.

“We need to address the threat of plastic on aquatic life more realistically and with a futuristic eye. Various stakeholders, including industries, governments and civil society organisations, need to join hands for improving plastic waste management and the reduction in microplastic pollution,” said Satish Sinha, associate director at Toxics Link.

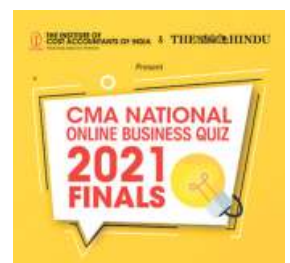
Eight students to match wits in CMA online quiz

Event organised by the ICAI in association with *The Hindu*; finals on July 25

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT
CHENNAI

Eight students will battle it out in the grand finale of the CMA Online Business Quiz 2021, organised by The Institute of Cost Accountants of India (ICAI) in association with *The Hindu*. The finals of the all-India quiz will be held on July 25 from 11 a.m. onwards.

The eight participants who made it to the finals are



Sanvedi Rane, Bhagyashri Taparia, Edde Nikil Kumar Reddy, T.P. Rakesh, Priyanka

Surana, Amandeep Singh, Riya Chandak and Yash Kansal. The finalists were selected from the 263 students who made it to the qualifying round. More than 10,000 students participated in the preliminary round. ICAI president Biswarup Basu, vice-president P. Raju Iyer

and Chairman of Placement Committee Balwinder Singh, would be the special guests for the final round. Debasish Mitra, Chairman Board of Advanced Studies and Research, will be the quizmaster, said a release. Visitors can register for the event at <https://bit.ly/THICAIIE> or by scanning the QR code.



HC notice to Centre on plea against IT Rules

STAFF REPORTER
NEW DELHI

The Delhi High Court on Thursday issued notice to the Union government on a fresh petition filed by advocate Uday Bedi by September 13, the next date of hearing. Mr. Bedi has challenged Rules 3 and 4 of the Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, 2021.

A Bench of Chief Justice D.N. Patel and Justice Jyoti Singh asked the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology to reply to the petition filed by advocate Uday Bedi by September 13, the next date of hearing. Mr. Bedi has challenged Rules 3 and 4 of the Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, 2021.