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The West Coast is Burning

Nearly 70 active wildfires have burned hundreds of thousands of acres, and are still raging along the US West Coast. These fires have produced the worst air quality on the planet.

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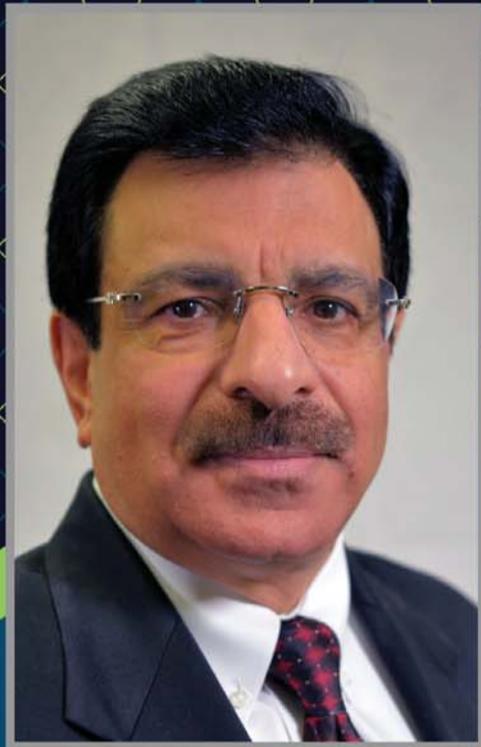


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FRONT PAGE FEATURE



The West Coast is Burning

NASA's images from space show the full, devastating extent of the West Coast wildfires. More than 85 significant wildfires are ripping across the West Coast, burning hundreds of thousands of acres & causing unprecedented burning in Washington and Oregon and exacerbating what has already become California's biggest wildfire season ever.

The fires have killed at least seven people, injured many others, and destroyed buildings in California, Oregon, and Washington. Satellite images of the blazes reveal their astonishing scale.

More than 360,000 acres have burned in Oregon, which has 35 active fires. In Washington, meanwhile, more than 330,000 acres have burned since Monday — more than double the state's total from all of 2019.

In California, multiple large blazes are spreading quickly, including the nearly 176,000-acre Creek Fire in Fresno and Madera counties and the 12,600-acre El Dorado Fire in San Bernardino County, which was ignited by pyrotechnics at a gender-reveal party.

Between Monday and Wednesday, the West Coast fires killed at least seven

people, including a 12-year-old boy and his grandmother in Marion County, Oregon, and a 1-year-old boy in northeastern Washington.

"The geographic scale and intensity of what is transpiring is truly jarring," Daniel Swain, a climate scientist at the University of California, Los Angeles, wrote on Twitter.

Longer, more intense and destructive wildfire seasons like this are linked to climate change: As the planet's temperature rises, dry conditions and heat waves become more common, increasing the likelihood of fires. California's average fire season

now lasts 75 days longer than it did in the early 2000s, according to the state's Department of Forestry and Fire Protection.

"We are essentially living in a mega fire era,". The skies of the Bay Area and Northern California turned a dark orange as 90 major fires burn in the western United States, from San Diego to the Canadian border. At least seven people have died as a result of the fires, which have already burned 2.5 million acres in California alone. Despite heavy coverage in the mainstream media, however, few outlets are highlighting the

link between the blazes and the accelerating climate crisis. "The fact is that TV news is completely abdicating its responsibility when it comes to telling the truth of what the West is dealing with right now," says Leah Stokes, assistant professor of political science at the University of California, Santa Barbara, and a researcher on climate and energy policy. "This is climate change. It's not rocket science. And when will the media start calling it that?" The following images from space, captured by NASA satellites, show the scale of the current blazes.

California fires burn record 2 Million acres

Record set early in the season as firefighters battle to contain several wildfires ahead of forecast hot, dry winds



Wildfires have burned more than 2m acres (809,000 hectares) in California this year, setting a state record even as crews battled dozens of growing blazes in sweltering temperatures Monday that strained the electrical grid and threatened

power outages for millions. The previous high was 1.96m acres (793,184 hectares) burned in 2018. the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection, or Cal Fire, began tracking the numbers in 1987. Lynne Tolmachoff, spokeswoman for Cal Fire,

said the most striking thing about the record was how early it was set, with the most dangerous part of the year ahead.

"It's a little unnerving because September and October are historically our worst months for fires," she said. "It's usually hot, and the fuels really dry out. And we see more of our wind events."

Firefighters struggled to corral several dangerous blazes ahead of dry, hot winds predicted to raise fire danger to critical levels in the coming days. Evacuation orders were expanded to more mountain communities as the largest blaze, the Creek Fire, churned through the Sierra National Forest.

Debra Rios wasn't home when the order came to evacuate her hometown of Auberry, just northeast of Fresno. Sheriff's deputies went to her ranch property to pick up her 92-year-old mother, Shirley MacLean. They reunited at an evacuation center. "I hope like heck the fire doesn't reach my little ranch," Rios said. "It's not looking good right now. It's an awfully big fire."

Mountain roads were filled with cars and trucks leaving the community of about 2,300 people.

Firefighters working in steep terrain saved the tiny town of Shaver Lake from flames that roared down hillsides toward a marina. About 30 houses

were destroyed in the remote hamlet of Big Creek, according to resident Toby Wait.

"About half the private homes in town burned down," he said. "Words cannot even begin to describe the devastation of this community." A school, church, library, historic general store and a major hydroelectric plant were spared in the community of about 200 residents, Wait told the Fresno Bee.

Sheriff's deputies went door to door to make sure residents were complying with orders to leave. Officials hoped to keep the fire from pushing west, possibly toward Yosemite National Park.

FRONT PAGE FEATURE

California fires rage as winds continue and power is shut off

Fire risk is high across California, with two of the three largest fires burning in the San Francisco Bay area.

New wildfires ravaged bone-dry California during a scorching Labor Day weekend trapping campers and prompting the state's largest utility to turn off power to 172,000 customers to try to prevent its power lines and other equipment from sparking more fires.

California is heading into what is traditionally the teeth of the wildfire season, and already it has set a record with two million acres (809,000 hectares) burned this year. The previous record was set just two years ago and included the deadliest wildfire in state history - the Camp Fire that swept through the community of Paradise and killed 85 people.

That fire was started by Pacific Gas & Electric power lines. Liability from billions of dollars in claims from that and other fires forced the utility to seek bankruptcy protection. To guard against new wildfires and new liability, PG&E last year began pre-emptive power shutoffs when conditions are exceptionally dangerous.

That is the situation now in Northern California, where strong and dry winds are expected until Wednesday. PG&E received criticism for its handling of planned outages last year. The utility said it has learned from past problems, "and this year will be making events smaller in size, shorter in length and smarter for customers".

Two of the three largest fires in state history are burning in the San Francisco Bay Area. More than 14,000 firefighters are battling those fires and about two

dozen others around California.

The fire danger is also high in Southern California, where new fires were burning in Los Angeles, San Bernardino and San Diego counties. The US Forest Service on Monday decided to close all eight national forests in the region and to shutter campgrounds statewide.

"The wildfire situation throughout California is dangerous and must be taken seriously," said Randy Moore, regional forester for the Forest Service's Pacific Southwest Region that covers California. "Existing fires are displaying extreme fire behaviour, new fire starts are likely, weather conditions are worsening, and we simply do not have enough resources to fully fight and contain every fire." Lynne Tolmachoff, spokeswoman for the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection, or Cal Fire, said it is "unnerving" to have reached a record for acreage burned when September and October usually are the worst months for fires because vegetation has dried out and high winds are more common.

While the two mammoth Bay Area fires were largely contained after burning for three weeks, firefighters struggled to corral several other major blazes ahead of the expected winds. Evacuation orders were expanded to more mountain

communities on Monday as the largest blaze, the Creek Fire, churned through the Sierra National Forest in Central California.

It was one of many recent major fires that have displayed terrifyingly swift movement. The fire moved 24 kilometres (15 miles) in a single day during the weekend and burned 145.04 square km (56 square miles). Since starting on Friday from an unknown cause, it has burned 549sq km (212sq miles).

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"I hope like heck the fire doesn't reach my little ranch," Rios said. "It's not looking good right now. It's an awfully big fire."

Mountain roads saw a steady stream of cars and trucks leaving the community of about 2,300 on Monday afternoon.

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historic general store and a major hydroelectric plant were spared in the community of about 200 residents, Wait told the Fresno Bee.

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On Monday night, a military helicopter tried but failed to land near Lake Edison to rescue people trapped by the fire, the Fresno Fire Department said on Twitter. The department tweeted: "Military pilots tried valiantly to land but heavy smoke conditions prevented a safe approach, another effort will be made shortly to evacuate the trapped people in Lake Edison and China Peak using night vision."

In Southern California, crews scrambled to douse several fires that roared to life in searing temperatures, including one that closed mountain roads in Angeles

National Forest and forced the evacuation of the historic Mount Wilson Observatory. Late Monday night, the Los Angeles County Fire Department told residents of Duarte, Bradbury and Monrovia near the forest to get ready for a possible evacuation.

Cal Fire said a blaze in San Bernardino County called the El Dorado Fire started Saturday morning and was caused by a smoke-generating pyrotechnic device used by a couple to reveal their unborn baby's gender. In eastern San Diego County, a fire destroyed at least 10 structures after burning 41.44sq km (16sq miles) and prompting evacuations near the remote community of Alpine in the Cleveland National Forest.

California has seen 900 wildfires since August 15, many of them started by an intense series of thousands of lightning strikes in mid-August. There have been eight fire deaths and more than 3,300 structures destroyed.



OP-ED

The breakdown with China

India must hope for accommodation, even as it prepares for confrontation

On Monday night, India repelled - yet again - a possible attempt by China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) to intrude into Indian territory across the Line of Actual Control (LAC). This comes a week after India successfully resisted such attempts, and held on to strategic positions on the southern banks of the Pangong Tso. The escalation in tensions in eastern Ladakh is not surprising. With both armies, mobilised in large numbers and staring at each

other in close proximity, it is but natural that skirmishes will happen - especially when one army, PLA, wants to change the facts on the ground and force India to accept a new reality. It is also natural because over the

past fortnight, there has been a sharp uptick in rhetoric on both sides.

All of this indicates that the India-China relationship has broken down at two levels. The first is with regard to the border management framework that has been in place for close to three decades. It is clear that China no longer sees the advantage of maintaining peace and tranquility on the border - and is keen to maintain this peace only on its terms, after wresting territory over which it has no legitimate claim. This is unacceptable to India, and rightly so. The second is with regard to the broader framework of the relationship. For years, India has convinced itself that the dynamic with China has

both a cooperative and competitive element - and while this was true, it is also now clear that the competitive dynamic is on the ascendant, and is becoming sharply adversarial.

With external affairs minister S Jaishankar scheduled to meet his Chinese counterpart, Wang Yi, in Moscow on Thursday, it is this breakdown that must be the focus of the discussion. Is it the case that China has decided that it is comfortable with a hot LAC, and an outright adversarial relationship with India? If that is so - and the conversation will give the Indian establishment a sense of Beijing's mood - India has no choice but to prepare itself in the military, economic,



diplomatic domains and respond accordingly. Or is it the case that China has read Indian motivations wrong, that apprehensions can be allayed, and Beijing can be persuaded to disengage and de-escalate? If

that is so, it will help tackle the immediate crisis - even though the long-term orientation of the relationship will still be troubled. India must hope for accommodation, even as it prepares for confrontation.

Trump damns himself with his own words

Just two days ago, the Trump campaign blasted an Atlantic story detailing the denigrating language the President allegedly used about fallen American troops for its author's use of anonymous sources. "I think it's pretty clear here that journalism was abandoned," Trump 2020 communications director Erin Perrine said on Fox News, "that journalistic integrity has to be in question here when you have four off-the-record, anonymous sources who are trying to hide their identities instead of standing up to level such disgusting accusations against the President of the United States." Well, there's a new bombshell story out -- about other shocking and consequential remarks from this President -- but there are no "anonymous sources" bogeymen for the President or his campaign to blame. The damning words are recorded, not secondhand, and you can hear them coming from Trump's own mouth.

In excerpts from Bob Woodward's forthcoming new book, "Rage," the famed Washington Post reporter (and associate editor) reveals taped conversations he had with the President himself, on the record, about the seriousness of the coronavirus threat back in February and March. They are,



in a hyphenate, jaw-dropping. "You just breathe the air and that's how it's passed," the President tells Woodward on Feb 7. "And so that's a very tricky one. That's a very delicate one. It's also more deadly than even your strenuous flus."

That admission directly contradicts what he was saying publicly at the time and for weeks after, which is that Covid-19 was no worse than a seasonal flu, that it would soon miraculously disappear, and that masks weren't a necessary precaution. He also told Woodward in March that he purposely misled the public on the severity of the virus, saying, "I wanted to always play

it down. I still like playing it down, because I don't want to create a panic." It's hard, if not impossible, to wrap your mind around this callous and self-serving calculation, wherein the President admits to a journalist -- one with deep credentials, and who has already written a best-selling, behind-the-scenes look at Trump's White House -- that he's actively lying to the American people about a deadly pandemic that will eventually kill, as of this writing, more than 190,000 Americans and counting.

But it takes a special kind of (in the words of Trump's own niece -- a psychologist)

"sociopath" to decide to put protecting his own re-election prospects over the health of thousands and thousands of people -- and then essentially brag to a journalist in real time that he's doing it.

To put that in perspective, according to just one analysis -- from researchers at Columbia University -- the US could have prevented roughly 36,000 Covid deaths and 700,000 infections if social distancing measures had been put in place one week earlier than March 15, when the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention first issued guidance advising against gatherings of 50 people or more.

Other expert analysis suggests that between 70% and 99% of US deaths could have been prevented if those measures had been put in place two weeks earlier. Instead, Trump spent February downplaying the threat, tweeting that "the Coronavirus is very much under control," that "Cryin' Chuck Schumer is complaining" about insufficient funding to combat Covid, and telling a South Carolina rally crowd on Feb. 28 that the pandemic was the Democrats' "new hoax." In March he would push an untested and unproven drug, hydroxychloroquine, to cure Covid, saying, "What have you got to lose?"

In April, he'd float the idea of injecting disinfectant ("sounds interesting"), and promise once again, "it will go away." In May he mocked Vice President Joe Biden for wearing a mask. The sheer stupidity and incompetence is mind-numbing. But when coupled with what we now know, from Trump's own mouth to Bob Woodward's recorder, which is that all of this misdirection and obfuscation was intentional, it's simply too much to bear. I only wish Woodward had shared this revelation six months ago. It's that bad -- and as a well-respected journalist, he should have known better than to save it for a book.

OPINION

Bridging the power gap with China

The old framework of ties has broken down. It is time for India to develop a new approach

Foreign secretary Harsh Shringla said on September 4, "We have an unprecedented situation on the India-China border, we have never had this sort of situation since 1962". He demanded a reversion "to the status quo that existed before such aggressive actions took place". However, neither he nor anyone else in government, nor official statements of military-to-military talks nor of diplomatic engagements has given a comprehensive account of either the "situation" or how the status quo has been broken.

Details that have appeared in the media have been based on off-the-record briefings or leaks. Official statements have been imprecise. For instance, the ministry of defence statement on the defence minister's recent discussions with his Chinese counterpart in Moscow held China responsible for the current difficulties for attempting to unilaterally alter the status quo. Have these attempts succeeded? If not, what is implied by reversion as demanded by the foreign secretary?

While the precise nature of China's territorial transgressions has not been officially clarified, what is clear is that Beijing's actions have "transgressed the territory of trust", as former external affairs minister Jaswant Singh accused Pakistan of doing in violating the Line of Control (LoC) during the Kargil conflict. And, this transgression by China has been enormous and grave.

It follows then that India's China policy, which was put in place in 1988 by Rajiv Gandhi and maintained by all successive governments, is no longer valid for its very premise was trust. That approach rested on a peaceful Line of Actual Control (LAC), finding a solution to the border problem, and uninhibited development of India-China relations in other areas, including trade.

In seeking elements to guide the formulation of a fresh policy, it is essential to admit the great overall power differential between India and China. A comparison,



in the regional context, admittedly crude though not simplistic, is the following: Pakistan is to India what currently India is to China. The crucial word is currently, for while Pakistan's resource potential will remain permanently inferior to that of India, that is not true of India vis-à-vis China. India has a lot to catch up but it has the wherewithal to effectively bridge the gap which has grown over the past four decades. This will require a national consensus, but it can and must be done.

As long the Pakistan-India-China power differentials remain as they are now, it would be useful to consider Pakistan's India policy. It is rooted in permanent confrontation and a

general avoidance of developing cooperative mechanisms including in the commercial and economic spheres. Significantly, in 1996, the then Chinese president Jiang Zemin advised Pakistan to pursue the Sino-Indian model of relations - to normalise and advance relations in other spheres while addressing mutual differences.

Jiang Zemin's views were disregarded because the Pakistan army obviously felt that commercial and economic relations would give India leverage to cause disruptions in case of open hostilities and even otherwise.

Further, such a web of ties would be a disincentive for India to address the Jammu and Kashmir issue. Pakistan decided to continue to rely on essentially a three-pronged approach: The development of nuclear weapons and delivery systems, maintaining an effective military balance along LoC, and the instrument of terror. The overall consequence of its India policy has contributed immensely to Pakistan's impoverishment over the past three decades. It would obviously be necessary to avoid the pitfalls of Pakistan's India policy. Certainly, the use of terror or low-intensity conflict in dealing with a larger neighbour, even if possible, is counterproductive. But there is a need to pay far greater attention to upgrade India's strategic programme to develop manifest deterrence through a triad. The hardening of defences all along LAC to prevent Chinese adventurism has to be undertaken on a priority basis. This will require financial investments but that cannot be avoided despite the current

economic troubles. The other elements of China policy need greater consideration and dexterity. These relate to economic and commercial ties. Currently, India's dependence on some supply chains emanating from China has strategic implications. This applies to a range of industries such as pharmaceuticals. These have to be reduced to a minimum and domestic production, as envisaged in Prime Minister (PM) Narendra Modi's Atmanirbhar (self-reliance) programme, has to be fostered on an urgent basis. Other sources have to be developed even at a greater cost but the trade door should not be shut.

Greater and open cooperation with major countries equally troubled by Chinese aggressiveness and lack of respect for global rules has to be actively cultivated. India must give up its traditional reluctance rooted in ideology, bearing in mind that it is too large to act as any power's subordinate ally.

Finally, the Sino-Pak nexus has to be addressed through working on the vulnerabilities of Pakistan.

When politics dictates law

The Sushant Singh Rajput case has shown the urgency of police reforms again

On Tuesday, the Sushant Singh Rajput case took a new turn with the arrest of actor Rhea Chakraborty in a drug-related case. This newspaper has been critical of the electronic media's coverage of Rajput's suicide - and the nature of the sensationalist conspiracy

theories that have come to dominate a case which should have triggered a discussion on mental health. But it is not just the media which is in the dock; the problem is with India's law enforcement apparatus and police agencies. Irrespective of the merits of the investigation underway, what is increasingly apparent is that all central and state agencies appear to be operating under political

directions, for this case is now clearly linked to politics. On one hand are those who believe that Ms Chakraborty is responsible for Rajput's tragic death. This view seems to have the support, if not the concurrence, of leaders in the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) - and the social media

campaign against her has the sanction of supporters of the party. It is, therefore, not a coincidence that it is central agencies which are at the forefront of implicating Ms Chakraborty in a range of cases. On the other are those who believe that Rajput's



death is being used to target the Mumbai film industry and its leading figures, and there is an attempt to muddy a normal police investigation in the matter. It is not a coincidence that the Maharashtra state administration in general is applying the law against those who it sees as critics. The issue

here is not who is right or wrong. The issue is the complete politicisation of India's premier security agencies, which seem to act not on the basis of evidence but primarily on political directions. India's governance structure, of course, has a framework where the state police in the case of states, and other investigative agencies in the case of the Centre, operate under executive control. Political oversight is important. At the same time, there is a desperate need for autonomy - for as repeated attempts at police reforms have shown, it is when investigative agencies are free of political pressure that they can work fairly. There cannot be any rule of law if those meant to protect and uphold the law cannot do their jobs independently. The Sushant case is yet again proof that India needs to find ways to insulate its legal machinery from political masters. Otherwise, driven by an irresponsible media and partisan political considerations, individual liberty will be at peril.

POINT OF VIEW

We Must Stop Being Witnesses To Manual Scavenging



Vijayasai Reddy

Though India has made significant progress in human development, there exists a community which makes its living by carrying human excreta and is forced to service the community's sanitation needs because of an identity based on their caste. Manual scavenging is an act of manually cleaning and disposing of human and animal excreta from dry latrines, sewers and streets. Manual scavengers by and large belong to the most disadvantaged of the Dalit sub-castes; they face discrimination even within the Dalit community; it's been an age-old daily routine for this community.

Manual scavenging is not just a caste-based but also a gender-based occupation. Of the 1.2

million manual scavengers in India, about 95% of them are women. Households with dry latrines prefer women over men to clean the excreta in part because they are paid less. Most women are paid only as little as ₹ 20 a month along with a meal everyday for cleaning a dry toilet.

Apart from the social stigma, the work of scavenging is poorly paid and causes life-long health risks and problems which can sometimes turn fatal for those who risk entering manholes without proper protection. Manual scavengers are also prone to skin and respiratory tract infections, tuberculosis, malaria, and dengue among various other illnesses. It is estimated that more than 600 sewer workers die every year.

Their families also suffer because of the stigma associated with sanitation work, its health consequences and the losses suffered by the family in the event of death. The children of manual scavengers pay a heavy price. A lot of children who enroll in schools drop out at a very early age, often because they face discrimination in the school premises at the hands of fellow students and sometimes even staff and teachers. There have been countless instances where children are made to sit in a corner in the classrooms with minimal interaction with teachers and fellow students. Some children are made to clean the school toilets instead of attending classes; this leads to manual scavengers' children having no option except to do what their parents have been doing as they do not have the education for other forms of employment. Even when they do possess the qualification to be employed for a better job, they are not considered fit for the same due to their background. Manual scavenging is a form of forced labor because people enter into this practice without their choice and cannot leave easily if they wish to do so. The main reason for the continuance

of this practice is that the manual scavengers depend upon their employers for a lot of resources. Anyone who tries to leave this has to face a lot of threats from the community. This leaves them with no choice but to return to their work. Some of those who are able to find alternate employment also have to face a lot of harassment.

In 1993, the Government of India enacted the "Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) Act" which prohibited the employment of manual scavengers for dry latrines and also provided for the construction of dry toilets, that is, toilets that operate without a flush. It provided for imprisonment of up to one year and a fine. This was followed by the "Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act, 2013", which acknowledged the urgency of rehabilitating manual scavengers. In 2014, the Supreme Court gave directives to end manual scavenging. "In no country, people are sent to gas chambers to die," remarked the Supreme Court of India in September 2019.

The government has to ensure that this form of modern slavery

is eradicated. Movements like Swachh Bharat Abhiyan have consistently attempted to revolutionize the image of sanitation in the country. The government has brought in technology and policy changes to eliminate such demeaning practices. There is still a long way to go as the complete eradication of the practice of manual scavenging requires innovative technology, better financial support to sanitation workers and fool-proof protective gear. This, coupled with rehabilitation programs, will offer alternative employment options. Education and providing requisite training for alternate employment opportunities will uplift the lives of the children belonging to such families. In some states, successful campaigns have effectively ended the practice, empowering a large number of individuals to live healthier, more dignified lives and find work that is more satisfying. Such campaigns should be launched in each state and nationally to highlight the ongoing practice of manual scavenging and to seek the most effective way to end it. Those involved in manual scavenging should be made aware of their rights and advised on how to leave this profession.

India 2nd Worst-Hit By Covid. Air Pollution Could Be Double Whammy



Chetan Bhattacharji

The number of cases in India has rapidly overtaken Brazil. The weekly average today is tens of thousands of cases more than it was on the first of August. Some expect it to cross 6 million cases by the end of this month. But that's not the only way it's going to get worse. Scientists fear a

double whammy once air pollution starts spiraling.

September 7th, the first international day for blue skies day coincidentally saw clean air in Delhi and much of north India, clear enough to see the warning signs. This monsoon has been exceptionally kind to lungs here with the rain and wind removing pollutants. But peak air pollution

season is just weeks away. Research has shown that air pollution could be an important factor that turns a mild Covid-infection into one that requires acute medical care. In a paper out this month, Professor Michael Brauer of the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation summarises the linkages. Short-term increases in air pollution reduces the immune response to respiratory infections. "Emerging research also suggests the air pollution may alter lung cells to increase the number of SARS-CoV-2 virus receptors and increase the likelihood of the virus binding to receptors." Long-term exposure to air pollution can lead to permanent damage in the lung that weakens a person's defences. The study says that an infection that might have mild symptoms in a healthy person has a severe impact in those with chronic lung disease. There is

also the real possibility of air pollution increasing transmission of the coronavirus: air pollution can lead to an infected person coughing or sneezing. While evidence of a direct link between Covid and air pollution is still limited, there are enough studies to establish that air pollution increases susceptibility. Scientists from the U.S.-based Health Effects Institute point to published evidence that air pollution increases susceptibility to tuberculosis and SARS. Air pollution is also linked to conditions such as diabetes, cardiovascular diseases and so on, which are now recognised as co-morbidities worsening the outcome in coronavirus patients. Indian officials have so far not put out any advisories on the Covid-air pollution link. Although notably, the Health Ministry has put out a

warning that smokers are more susceptible to Covid-19. Oddly, it says nothing about the internal damage smoking does to a person and any connection that may have to Covid infections; air pollution in places like Delhi is like smoking a pack of cigarettes a day. It's hard to forecast how bad the air pollution will be in the coming months. But anyone tracking this is likely to expect high levels of pollution just as in the past few years. How that will affect the coronavirus infections is not fully known (not to mention how millions who've survived Covid will be affected by rising pollution now). Air pollution is estimated to reduce life-spans by nine years in Delhi and 10 in Lucknow, and across India by a little of 5 years on an average. Now, the pandemic makes controlling air pollution far more pressing.

INDIAN-CURRENT AFFAIRS

Justice for Sushant? Far From - And This Is Why

By Ashutosh

I assumed that after Rhea Chakraborty's arrest, the madness would end. But I was wrong. A new madness has begun. A portion of Kangana Ranaut's office was demolished and a new drama has been birthed.

There is outrage about much injustice being meted out to Kangana, and about fascism resurrecting itself in Mumbai. The people making these allegations are the same who showed no sympathy for a middle-class girl being hounded for the last two months by three central agencies, added and abetted by blood-thirsty TV channels; these people rejoiced in her arrest as a great victory for nationalistic forces. These are people deluded that they are delivering justice for Sushant. These are people who survive on abuses, bitterness and hate. But today, the narrative has suddenly changed. They have turned victims. They are now demanding democracy and justice. The story of the last few months has been of the news business setting loose bloodhounds ready to kill in the mad race for TRPs. This story

will go down in history as a story of great shame and a dark chapter of motivated, valueless journalism. This saga began after Sushant Singh Rajput's death. Initially, it was the tragic story of a promising life cut short. Suddenly, politicians from Bihar, hiding behind Sushant's family and firing from its shoulder, started weaving conspiracy theories about Sushant having been murdered. All of a sudden, Sushant's family, who earlier seemed satisfied with the Mumbai Police, lodged an FIR in Bihar. Two charges were pressed in the FIR. One, it was insinuated that Rhea and her family may be responsible for Sushant's death. Two, Rhea and her family had siphoned off money from Sushant's bank account. The transacted amount was said to be of 15 crores. Rhea was depicted as a 'vishkanya' who had performed black magic on Sushant. She was the villain, he was the naive hero who fell for her and paid with his life. Three central agencies and the Bihar Police set out to investigate the matter like James Bond with supersonic speed as if the fate of the country hinged upon this case. Let's not forget the vigilante journalists who vowed to correct all the wrongs

done to Sushant and his family and to get them justice in typical Shahenshah fashion.

The coverage by some of these journalists has been an exercise in malice. It was apparent that there was some score to be settled with the Maharashtra Government and the Mumbai Police. And this settling of scores was done in the name of "justice for Sushant". Viewers were fed wrong information and fake news.

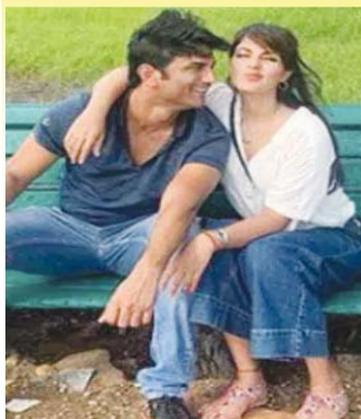
Finally, Rhea and her brother were arrested in connection with on charges of procuring drugs and supplying them to Sushant. It is important to remember that no drug was confiscated from either of them. The case was triggered by WhatsApp chats and then Rhea reportedly told investigators that she had bought drugs for Sushant, allegedly describing him as a "drug addict" for whom she "did everything". The remand copy filed by the Narcotics Control Bureau in court says "During statement present respondent Rhea Chakraborty revealed about her involvement in procurement of drug and financial transaction and also her instructions to Samuel Miranda,



Dipesh Sawant and Showik Chakraborty in this regard. Therefore it is clear from the statement that respondent is an active member of drug syndicate connected with drug supplies. It is also clear from their statement that the present respondent used to procure drugs for Sushant Singh Rajput for consumption purpose." The last line is significant. According to the NCB, Sushant Singh Rajput was consuming drugs and the drugs were procured by Rhea and persons who were working for him at his residence. This busts the myth proposed by Sushant's family and TV channels that Sushant was being manipulated and wronged, a small-town boy brought up with good family values. Another

sentence in the remand copy: "The present respondent used to manage finance for drug procurement along with Sushant Singh Rajput." So then he too was part of a "drug syndicate". It is clear from the remand copy that Rhea is accused of buying drugs for Sushant, not of selling them or using them herself as announced by some TV channels. Now the issue is when a chargesheet is filed by the NCB, will it name him as the main man in this drug syndicate? Is this what Sushant's family wanted? Is this justice for Sushant? In a television interview, Rhea pointed out that Sushant is now being remembered for his demons and not for his promising career or his talent. Maybe think about that.

So, Rhea's Arrested. Take A Good Look At Yourself.



By Vir Sanghvi

By now, we have blamed everyone. Our favourite target has been the TV channels, revelling in their sensationalistic, exaggerated and often totally fabricated coverage of the Sushant Singh Rajput murder case. We have been appalled by the anchors and have been shocked by the way in which TV crews have surrounded and jostled Rhea Chakraborty.

We have blamed the politicians and their agencies as well. We have bemoaned the fact that there is a clear political angle to the way in which the case has been handled. Obviously, our rulers want to play politics to inflame sentiments before the Bihar election. And there is a

second agenda: to do as much damage as possible to the Shiv Sena, the former ally who spurned the BJP. The agencies have done what their masters wanted. Is it normal to launch an Enforcement Directorate investigation into an unsubstantiated allegation that 15 crore may have been transferred from one account to another? (All the evidence now suggests that there was never a payment of Rs 15 crore into Sushant's account anyway.) Does the Narcotics Control Bureau need to launch such a huge inquiry and make arrests in a case that involved (apparently, even this is being disputed) the purchase of 59 grams of marijuana?

All of our indignation is justified. Nobody can deny that. But here's my problem: we tend to blame everybody else except for the principal culprits. Ourselves.

The truth is that the public is enjoying the spectacle and it wants more. One look at the television ratings will tell you how this case is playing it out. Even while anchors on other channels huff and puff about Republic TV, not only has the channel solidified its position as the most-watched English channel, its Hindi counterpart has swept past the established market

leader to also become Number One. Who is watching these channels? It is not some faceless 'them' that we can all blame. It is us. People like you and me. You checked out Twitter recently? Say something vaguely sympathetic about Rhea Chakraborty and the responses will come flooding in. Some will be from bots and paid tweeters. (One of the mysteries of this saga is: who has established the fake accounts used only to tweet about this case? Who is paying so many of the tweeters? Who is picking up the tab for the glove puppets? But a surprisingly large proportion will be ordinary citizens with genuine accounts. Many (but by no means all or perhaps even most) will say, on their bios, that they support the BJP and the Prime Minister. But let's not forget that they are working men and women with jobs, children, homes, families, etc.

And they spout the most vicious hatred of Rhea. They are convinced that Sushant was murdered (Rhea's family will be painted as honey-trapping, drug-peddling, money-grabbing crooks). The suggestion, now substantiated with much evidence, that Sushant had mental

health issues is dismissed as being part of a murderous conspiracy against him. For all the talk of patriarchy and feminism, women are also enthusiastic supporters of our version of the 'Lock Her Up' movement. They smear Rhea's morals and demand that she be punished.

And if you go out of the charmed circle of the chattering classes, you will find that far from being shocked by what is happening, many educated (well, literate, at any rate) people feel that a grave injustice was done to Sushant and that the guilty people are now being punished. What does this tell us about today's India - or at least, the India that watches TV and goes on social media?

It tells us that large sections of the middle class have bought a conspiracy theory of how things function. They believe that India was run by an elite which had money, spoke English, and made the key decisions. They see this elite as being good-looking, sophisticated and worthy of envy. Bollywood fits neatly into this category. So do the other traditional targets of the new, aspirational

middle class: the so-called Lutyens lobby, political dynasts like the Thackerays, and so on. If this sounds bonkers to you, remember that there are many people who are deeply invested in this world-view. And if you disagree with it, they wonder if you are part of the conspiracy too. And secondly, the jubilation over Rhea's arrest tells us how much we have regressed back in time and become a primitive society where the mob rules, even if this time around, it participates by way of smart phone. It is like Romans watching prisoners being torn apart by lions, or like some modern version of bear-bating: a lynching beamed live to our homes and our phones by satellite and by 4G.

The conspiracy theory view of India does not worry me that much. It is not unusual for a new middle class to resent the old and to feel that even though it is just as deserving, it is still not being given a seat at the table. That view changes with demographics. The children of today's angry, first-generation middle class TV viewers will overcome their resentments and feel more at home than their parents did.

SPECIAL FEATURE

Kabul bomb targets VP, kills 10 civilians

(News Agencies)- A bombing in the Afghan capital on Wednesday targeted the convoy of the country's first vice president, who suffered minor injuries in the attack that killed 10 people and wounded at least 31, including several of the vice president's bodyguards, the Interior Ministry said. No one immediately claimed responsibility for the bombing and the Taliban quickly denied they were behind the attack. First Vice President Amrullah Saleh suffered minor burns in the blast. The bomb was hidden in a cart by the roadside and detonated as his convoy passed by.

Saleh, who is also Afghanistan's former intelligence chief, said in his first television appearance immediately after the attack that he was fine and had sustained only slight burns. He appeared in the TV footage with bandages on one hand.

"Me and my younger son who was also with me are fine," Saleh said. "I have slight burns on my face and hand from the wave of the blast. I don't have exact details right now, but I apologize

to those who suffered casualties and those who lost their property in the attack."

His spokesman, Razwan Murad, called the attack a "vicious terrorist attempt" on Saleh's life. The roads in the vicinity of the bombing were closed off.

The Interior Ministry says the bomb went off as Saleh's convoy was passing through a section of Kabul with shops that sell gas cylinders for use in heating homes and cooking. The blast ignited a fire that set ablaze a number of the shops.

The explosion left behind a scene of destruction - at least 10 shops were smoldering in the aftermath of the explosion that had also shattered windows of dozens of nearby homes, some with doors hanging off their hinges. Cars were wrecked and debris was scattered around.

Earlier, the Interior Ministry's spokesman, Tariq Arian, first confirmed to The Associated Press that the bombing targeted Saleh's convoy. Akmal Samsor, spokesman for the Afghan public health ministry, said the 31 wounded were taken to different hospitals for treatment.

Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahed was quick to deny the insurgents were involved in any way, saying that "today's explosion in Kabul has nothing to do with the Mujahedeen of the Islamic Emirate," as the Taliban call themselves.

Mohammad Masoom Stanekzai, head of Afghanistan's negotiating team with the Taliban, condemned the attack in a tweet and urged an end to the killings. "Our people are desperately looking for peace," he said. "It is crucial to put an urgent end to the violence. The time for excuses is over. The killings must end," The U.N. chief's special representative for Afghanistan, Deborah Lyons, said she was "relieved to hear" that Saleh survived the attack. Lyons added that she was shocked by the high number of civilian casualties, mainly bystanders. "Perpetrators must face justice," she added. Both the insurgents and the Islamic State group are active in Kabul where tensions are also high ahead of the expected start of negotiations between an official Afghan delegation and the



Taliban. Washington has been ramping up pressure on both sides to get the talks underway. America's peace envoy Zalmay Khalilzad is in Qatar, where the Taliban maintain a political office, trying to get the negotiations started.

The negotiations, known as intra-Afghan talks, were envisaged as part of a peace deal the U.S. signed with the Taliban in Qatar in February to end America's longest war. At the time, the talks were cast as Afghanistan's best chance at peace after decades of conflict. Kabul's peace negotiation team is waiting in the Afghan capital to

travel to the Qatari capital of Doha for the talks but delays have been relentless. In recent days, Washington, officials in Kabul and the Taliban have all indicated that they could get under way imminently.

The U.S.-Taliban deal allows for the exit of American soldiers from Afghanistan. However, U.S troop pullout, which has already begun, does not hinge on the success of intra-Afghan talks but rather on commitments from the Taliban to fight against other militant groups - such as the Islamic State group - and to prevent Afghanistan from being a staging arena for attacks against the U.S. and its allies.

12 suspects arrested in Lahore motorway gang rape: Punjab govt



(News Agencies)- Punjab government spokesperson Mussarat Cheema on Thursday said police had arrested 12 men suspected of involvement in the alleged gang-rape of a woman on the Lahore-Sialkot motorway.

Two "robbers" allegedly raped the woman at gunpoint in Gujarpura area on Wednesday while she was waiting for help on the motorway after her car developed a fault. A police official said as the woman crossed the toll plaza on the Lahore-Sialkot motorway, her car stalled either due to shortage of petrol or some

fault. Meanwhile, she got a call from a relative in Gujranwala, who asked her to call the police helpline for help while he also left from home to reach her. When he reached the location, he found the woman terrified with her clothes stained with blood. The police official said two armed men found the woman alone, took her and her children to a nearby field at gunpoint and gang-raped her, adding that police had formed teams to trace the culprits. Cheema said in a tweet today that Punjab Police and related departments were "working in close coordination to

capture those involved in [the] painful motorway incident". "So far 12 suspects have been arrested and search is going on," she said. A statement released by the Punjab Police also confirmed the arrests and said that 20 teams of Lahore Police and CIA, headed by the deputy inspector general of police (investigation), had been constituted on the orders of Inspector General Inam Ghani to investigate the case. It said that police were taking all necessary measures, adding that "no stone will be left unturned to provide immediate justice to the victim and her family". The police teams are "working day and night", the statement said, to identify the accused by gathering DNA evidence, geofencing, examining CCTV footage and Nadra records. "More than half of the suspects in the case are being investigated and raids are being carried out to nab dozens of former record holders in such incidents," IGP Ghani was quoted as saying. During a

meeting, Ghani said that command officers should consider it as a test case and bring it to a logical conclusion as early as possible, the statement said. "Irresponsibility would not be tolerated in arresting the social criminals involved in sexual violence and oppression," he said. Prime Minister Imran Khan, in a statement, condemned the sexual assault of the lady in Lahore as well as that of a five-year-old child, who had been murdered and torched after being raped in Karachi, which surfaced on Sunday. He summoned reports of both incidents from the IGs of the provinces. "The protection of women is the government's foremost priority and responsibility. Such brutality and savagery cannot be allowed in any civilised society. Such incidents are against our social values and an ugly stain on our society," the statement released by PM Office said. The prime minister also stressed on the need to strengthen laws for the protection of women and

children. Meanwhile, Minister for Human Rights Shireen Mazari said that the ministry's regional office "immediately asked for an action report from the police". The ministry received the report as well as a copy of the first information report (FIR) of the incident, she added. Punjab Chief Minister Usman Buzdar vowed that justice would be delivered in the case. "Justice will be done in the motorway case no matter what and those who tortured the victim will have to suffer strict punishment!" he tweeted.

He said that the responsibility of providing protection and justice to civilians rested with the state. "Our manifesto is to create a society where, whether it's day or night, women/children would feel safe whether they are alone or with family." Information Minister Shibli Faraz also condemned the incident and vowed that the "wicked characters who committed this heinous act will not escape the law" and will be punished accordingly.

SPECIAL FEATURE



America remembers 9/11, 19 years later

If you are of a certain age you remember exactly where you were on Sept. 11, 2001. You also realize that our country is in a much different place today than it was then.

Back in 2001 I was a newly pinned second lieutenant in the Marine Corps, commanding a platoon at Camp Lejeune, N.C. I was so excited to serve my country.

I didn't realize then that the lessons I learned, particularly about unity and teamwork, would last a lifetime. They seem particularly relevant today, when our country is so divided.

During boot camp, the drill instructors broke us down and built us back up. It didn't matter where we came from, what the color of our skin was, or what political party we supported. We were just Marines.

We were one unit, functioning in unison and depending on each other for everything. When we were judged, it was not on how we looked, because at that point we all looked the same. We had the same uniforms and "high and tight" haircuts.

There's something special about facing an obstacle, struggling and finding victory together. The ultimate challenge was The Crucible, the final test in training that simulated combat situations by emphasizing teamwork under stress.

It was a 54-hour test of

endurance — 48 miles of marching with only two meals and six hours of sleep. We were divided into groups of four and we couldn't complete all our assigned tasks without working together.

The Crucible was one of the most grueling experiences I've ever had. But once it was over — and we received our Marine Corps emblems of an eagle, globe and anchor — I felt a great sense of accomplishment and camaraderie with my team. It's something I'll never forget.

A year after graduation the unthinkable happened. We were playing war games when the first

aircraft hit the North Tower of the World Trade Center in New York City. A Marine yelled for us to come over and check out the TV. When we saw the second aircraft crash into the South Tower, we knew that it was no accident. We were under attack. That day our nation made a decision. We would defend our country against terrorism and we would do it together.

The unity that we felt in 2001 seems almost nonexistent today. We face a common enemy — the coronavirus — just like we did then. But we can't even agree on how big a threat it

poses.

And our racial divisions are even more pronounced. We're blinded by anger, injustice and hatred. Protests and riots have taken place across the country. Some people seem to think that their voices can be heard only if they vandalize businesses or destroy landmarks.

Groups of people have been demonized, and others have been misled into believing false narratives. People aren't treating each other with civility, grace, or love. In times like these, the greatest and most powerful weapon we have is

love. Love never gives up, never loses faith, is always hopeful and endures through every circumstance. I don't ever want to experience another terrorist attack. But don't you wish we could go back to Sept. 12, 2001? The day when flags couldn't be found in stores. People were Americans before they were Black or White, Christian or Jewish, Republican or Democrat. On that day we loved each other and served one another. We didn't care if we ate Chick-fil-A, purchased Goya or wore Nikes. It was all about unity.

America now more vulnerable than at time of Sept. 11 attacks—we need a forward defense

On the morning of September 11, 2001 a dear friend and former CIA colleague of mine was in Manhattan when Al Qaeda terrorists struck our homeland and murdered almost 3,000 innocent people in New York City, the Pentagon and Shanksville, Pa. My friend was standing on the street near the World Trade Center when American Airlines Flight 11 and United Airlines Flight 175 crashed into the North and South Towers.

Witnessing the deadliest terrorist attack in human history had the most significant impact on my former colleague's career. He later told me that the images of innocent victims jumping from the towers to their deaths remain seared in his consciousness. Up to that point he had never served in South Asia. But he would go on to serve

multiple tours in conflict zones there as well as in the Middle East, on the front lines in the fight against terrorism.

Sept. 11, 2001, was transformational for me and my colleagues in the intelligence community, State Department and military — and for our entire nation. I recall my parents' and grandparents' generations, who spoke of remembering exactly where they were when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor and when President John F. Kennedy was assassinated. Today everyone in their late 20s and older remembers exactly where they were on September 11, 2001.

Al Qaeda's horrific act of mass murder demonstrated that our enemies could reach us in spite of the oceans that separated us from Europe, Africa and Asia. We had become accustomed to

sending troops off to foreign lands in wartime. Now the war on terrorism had reached the continental United States. The world is even more interconnected today, including through cyberspace. This makes America even more vulnerable to attack. At the same time, security precautions at airports and federal buildings, in particular, have increased considerably since Sept. 11, 2001.

One of the most critical lessons of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks was that we need a robust forward presence to protect us, especially against threats emanating from ungoverned spaces. This includes intelligence collection, diplomacy and — when justified — military engagement so that we can detect threats and take appropriate action to prevent terrorists from striking us again.

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CELEBRITIES



‘The Hangout’
As the term hangout itself means a place where people sit together and spend time. These days that hangout place is home for everyone because of the lockdown.

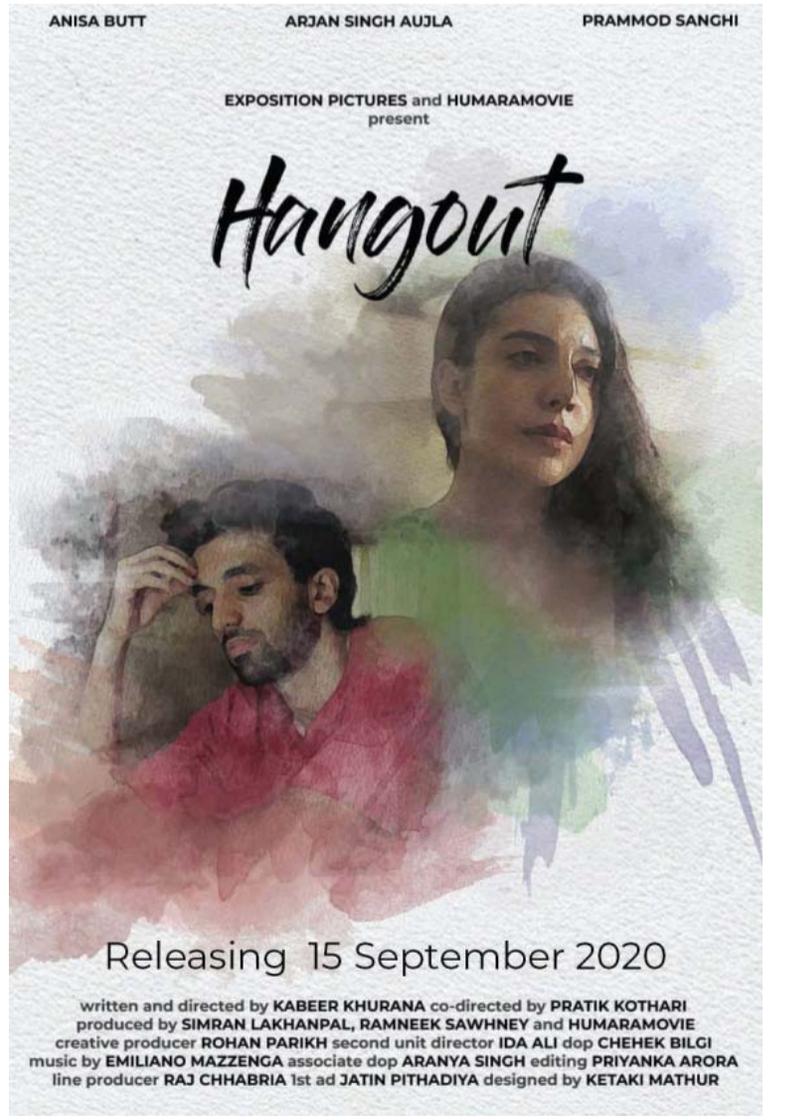
By : Harleen Kaur Grewal
 India - As the term hangout itself means a place where people sit together and spend time. These days that hangout place is home for everyone because of the lockdown. Here group of gems need no introduction including Anisa Butt(a versatile actor featuring Zindagi Na Milegi Dobara and Yeh Jawani Hai Deewani) , Arjan singh Aujla(from My Name Is Khan), under the direction of Kabeer Khurana (five - time international award-winning director), pushed by Simran Lakhnupal, Rohan Parikh a storyteller in his own right, on board as the creative

producer, and has been produced by Exposition Pictures, an up-and-coming production house, Ramneek Sawhney tied into musical knots by Emiliano Mazzenga, brings the actual struggle that every lay man is facing. This short film portrays the actual conflict between thought and actions. Everyone is day dreaming about getting the things on track in this lockdown where everyone is sacked in the homes scaled from even own people. This story actually spoke about a boy and girl who are miles apart but find a tender closeness of emotions and develop a bond through honest and loyal

conversations. Very skillfully written as well as creative narration of story spark a hope in every individual’s life who wants to move on in order to make a rise and difference. Story opens a huge world in front of everyone to live their dreams and reaching out them even in these bounded situations. This story relates to each individual and makes them feel that it is their story. The lead actress Anisa Butt says:”This marvelous script blown away my mind and in a very short span of screen time, Kabeer skillfully managed to capture the way lockdown has affected evry individually life in different

directions. There is a true ray of hope at the end for both the characters. I think Alia, the character, pays actual tribute to the way lot of people are currently feeling in India. The script is so true that in a very smooth flow deals with identity in the current climate, our response to uncertainty but also love, hope and bonding.” Moreover, Ramneek Swaney: co-producer says: life’s pace and strain stop many from finding their true calling. The static

and still lockdown has altered everything .Distance has improved relationships, life is now facing its new meaning”. In addition, Emiliano Mazzenga: music composer says: “It was easy to write the music after feeling myself into Romi’s character. I think every artist being a common men had to deal with the lack of motivation during COVID - 19, still we are looking forward to find a way in order to continue to be inspired and positive.”



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Climate change may cause 26% habitat loss for snow trout in Himalayan rivers: Study

The study -- 'Is There Always Space at The Top'-- was published in the 'Ecological Indicators', a journal of high international reputation based at the Netherlands, on September 6. Snow trout, the iconic cold water fish species found in Himalayan rivers, would lose their habitat by 16 per cent in the next 30 years and by over 26 per cent by 2070, a new climate change study by the government's Wildlife Institute of India has found. The study -- 'Is There Always Space at The Top'-- was published in the 'Ecological Indicators', a journal of high international reputation based at the Netherlands, on September 6. The study indicates that most of the lower altitude streams across the Himalayas would be rendered unsuitable for the existence of snow trout with the rise in temperatures. An ensemble of 72 statistical models across the Himalayas, the study -- authored by Wildlife Institute of India (WII) scientists

Aashna Sharma, Vineet Kumar Dubey, Jeyaraj Antony Johnson, Yogesh Kumar Rawal and Kuppusamy Sivakumar - reveals the vulnerable snow trout would be squeezed into the high-altitude rivers in the Himalayas. "Our empirical findings strongly suggest that snow trout, a prime cold water fish of Himalayan rivers, would suffer a habitat loss in the future and the high-altitude areas would act as only saviours, provided suitable habitat connectivity is offered," senior scientist Kuppusamy Sivakumar told PTI. The study says mountain systems across the globe are conspicuously sensitive to on-going climate alterations and the condition is much more detrimental in the Himalaya, where the rate of warming, and thus the glacier meltdown, is much higher than elsewhere. "The Himalayan coldwater species are concerningly most vulnerable to these changes because of their limited thermal range," it says. Funded by the Department of

Science & Technology (DST), the study is a part of the government's National Mission for Sustaining the Himalayan Ecosystem (NMSHE), which was launched to research the impact of climate change on the Himalayan ecosystem. The study iterates that if the countries across the globe continue their greenhouse emissions as usual (mentioning it as the 'business-as-usual scenario'), "the species (snow trout) would lose a net habitat of 16.29% till the year 2050 which would further increase to 26.56% in the year 2070." "As it stands, the snow trout faces serious threats due to river valley modifications, destructive fishing practices and exotic salmonid introductions," it says. "Due to ongoing threats, its population size has been reduced drastically in Himalayan waters, hence listed as vulnerable in the IUCN Red List," it adds. The fish species has great commercial and recreational value and its sole



presence in the high-altitude cold waters makes it a flagship species to conserve the Himalayan rivers, the study underlines. "Already exposed to numerous anthropogenic stressors, the fate of snow trout population and many co-occurring genera can be considered explicitly at a higher risk in the Himalaya," it adds. The study also flagged the "rampant" damming of the rivers across the Himalayas, saying the presence of dams would definitely obstruct the fish mode of movements to

safer havens, ultimately risking their very survival. "Our results highlight that snow trout would expand their range upwards into the high-altitude streams with a concurrent predominant range contraction in most of their lagging edges, ultimately creating a high-altitude squeeze," the study says. The study recommends some solutions such as persuasive "conservation efforts beyond political boundaries by combined decisions of the policymakers of Himalayan countries".

BUSINESS

Saudi Arabia's financial woes mean it's squeezing cash cow Aramco

Even with crude dropping below \$40 a barrel this week and its cash flow plunging, Saudi Aramco is trying to pay a \$75 billion dividend this year, almost all of it to the state.

The world's biggest oil company is getting squeezed by its main shareholder, the Saudi Arabian government.

Even with crude dropping below \$40 a barrel this week and its cash flow plunging, Saudi Aramco is trying to pay a \$75 billion dividend this year, almost all of it to the state. Concerns are mounting, including among global fund managers who bought into the company during a record initial public offering last December, that Aramco is putting strategic projects on ice and racking up debt too quickly. Aramco has been the country's cash cow for decades. But the pressure it faces has been thrown into sharper relief by the coronavirus-induced collapse in energy demand -- Brent crude fell another 5% on Tuesday -- and now that it's a listed firm with shareholders from New York to Tokyo.

Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, the 35-year-old de facto ruler, has pledged to diversify the kingdom from oil and spend billions developing everything

from futuristic cities to tourism and financial services. For that, he needs Aramco's money.

"The crown prince has basically decided the company is a piggy bank he can raid to fund his other projects," said Jean-Francois Seznec, a senior fellow at the Atlantic Council of Washington's Global Energy Center, and a Middle Eastern specialist. "It will limit how much they can invest in things like maintaining the oil fields and developing new technologies."

Dividend Promise

The government has previously leveraged Aramco's balance sheet to bolster its own finances. But it hasn't happened to this extent for at least 20 years, according to one banker who's worked with the company since the 1990s.

Fitch Ratings Ltd. estimates the Saudi budget deficit will rise to 15% of gross domestic product in 2020, one of the widest levels in the Middle East. The government's revenue fell almost 50% year-on-year in the second quarter. Aramco promised to pay

\$75 billion annually to investors for five years after the IPO. Eager to attract foreign funds and achieve a world record valuation of \$2 trillion, the government even said last year it may forgo its own portion of the dividend and maintain it for others if oil prices fell. Instead, the axe is falling elsewhere. Aramco has slashed capital expenditure by tens of billions of dollars, laid off hundreds of mainly foreign workers and shuffled its top management as part of a plan to sell some assets. It paid a dividend of \$37.5 billion in the first six months of 2020 even as rivals Royal Dutch Shell Plc, BP Plc and Eni SpA cut theirs. The payouts were almost double Aramco's free cash flow of \$21 billion. The dividends -- and a \$69 billion acquisition of chemicals maker Sabic from the Saudi sovereign wealth fund -- have bloated the company's debt levels, though they are still below those of most Big Oil firms. The gearing ratio climbed from -5% at the end of March, meaning Aramco had more cash than



debt, to 20% in June, above its targeted range of 5% to 15%.

Gearing could reach 30% by 2023 if crude prices remain below \$60 a barrel and Aramco doesn't reduce the dividend, according to David Havens, head of energy equity research at SMBC Nikko Securities America.

The market doubts oil will rise to that level anytime soon. Brent crude will average just \$47.50 next year and \$53 in 2022, according to the median forecast of analysts surveyed by Bloomberg.

Aramco "has the lowest upstream costs of any major energy company," a spokesperson said in a statement. "This provides a level of flexibility in our capital spending plans during this downturn, supporting our ability

to maintain dividends."

The Saudi government's Center for International Communication, which fields inquiries from foreign media, did not respond to requests for comment.

Projects on Ice

Executives have shelved several major projects in recent months, including a \$20 billion Red Sea facility to turn crude into chemicals and a liquefied natural gas export terminal in Texas. A \$10 billion refinery in China has also been put on hold, Bloomberg reported, though Aramco said it's still committed to investing in the world's second-largest economy.

Aramco had hatched these plans to gain additional outlets for its crude and weather the global energy transition to cleaner fuels such as gas.

7 Indian-Americans in Forbes' list of richest people in US



Seven Indian-Americans have figured in Forbes' list of richest Americans, topped by Amazon founder Jeff Bezos for the third year in a row. The 2020 Forbes list of 400 Richest People in America has been topped by Bezos, 56 who has a net worth of USD 179 billion and has occupied the spot of the richest person in the US for the third year in a row. Bill Melinda Gates Foundation Cofounder Bill Gates is ranked second on the list with a net worth of USD 111 billion. The richest people in the US saw

their wealth swell despite the coronavirus pandemic's devastated impact on the economy. "Pandemic be damned: America's 400 richest are worth a record USD 3.2 trillion, up USD 240 billion from a year ago, aided by a stock market that has defied the virus... Even in these trying times mega-fortunes are still being minted," Forbes said.

The list has seven Indian-Americans - cybersecurity firm ZScaler CEO Jay Chaudhry, Founder and Chairman of

The 2020 Forbes list of 400 Richest People in America has been topped by Bezos, 56 who has a net worth of USD 179 billion and has occupied the spot of the richest person in the US for the third year in a row.

Symphony Technology Group Romesh Wadhvani, cofounder and CEO of online home goods retailer Wayfair Niraj Shah, Silicon Valley venture capital firm Khosla Ventures founder Vinod Khosla, Managing Partner of Sherpalo Ventures Kavitar Ram Shriram, Airline veteran Rakesh Gangwal and Workday CEO and Cofounder Aneel Bhusri. Rounding out the top five on the list are Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg on the third spot with a net worth of USD 85 billion, Berkshire Hathaway CEO Warren Buffett, ranked 4th and with a net worth of USD 73.5 billion and chairman, chief technology officer and cofounder of software giant Oracle Larry Ellison, ranked 5th with a new worth of USD 72 billion. President Donald Trump is

ranked 339th on the list with a net worth of USD 2.5 billion.

Chaudhry, 61 is ranked 85th on the list with a net worth of USD 6.9 billion. He founded ZScaler in 2008 and the company went public in March 2018. Forbes said in 1996, Chaudhry and his wife, Jyoti, both quit their jobs and put their life savings to start cybersecurity firm SecureIT, his first startup. Wadhvani, 73 has been ranked 238th on the list and has a net worth of USD 3.4 billion. His Symphony Technology Group brings in USD 2.5 billion in annual revenues and Wadhvani combined nine of his companies that were AI-focused into a new group called SymphonyAI in 2017, Forbes said. An alumnus of Indian Institute of Technology and

Carnegie Mellon, Forbes said the serial entrepreneur founded Aspect Development, which i2 Technologies acquired for USD 9.3 billion in stock in 1999. Romesh and his brother, Sunil, founded the Wadhvani Institute of Artificial Intelligence at the University of Mumbai in 2018, committing over USD 30 million.

On the 299th spot is Shah, 46, who has a net worth of USD 2.8 billion. Shah started the business in 2002 with Steve Conine, who is also a billionaire. Wayfair, which now offers more than 18 million products, generated USD 9.1 billion in net revenue in 2019, up 35 per cent from the previous year, Forbes said. Khosla, 65 is ranked 353rd with a net worth of USD 2.4 billion.

ENTERTAINMENT

Kangana Ranaut hits out at 'Fancy feminists, Bollywood activists'

As the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) on Wednesday demolished "illegal alterations" at the Bandra property of actor Kangana Ranaut, she hit back saying 'My Mumbai is PoK now'. The actor has claimed that there were no illegal structures in her home.



Here are the latest updates: **Kangana says she purchased office building from Sharad Pawar's partner**

She wrote in a tweet, "This was not just to me but to entire building and this is not my flat issue but a building issue which builder needs to deal with and this building belongs to Sharad Pawar we bought the flat from his partner so he is answerable for this not me.." Targeting "Fancy feminists, Bollywood activists, candle march groups and award vapsi gang," Kangana wrote that they have all stayed silent on "what High Court said about open murder of law and order in Maharashtra." She wrote in a tweet, "Well done, thank you for proving me right always, you all deserve the treatment you get from me."

Keeping Up With The Kardashians ending after 20 seasons

Keeping Up with the Kardashians, one of the longest-running American reality series, is finally coming to an end. The show, which made Kim Kardashian and Kylie Jenner overnight stars, will conclude in early 2021 after running for 20 seasons.

"It is with heavy hearts that we've made the difficult decision as a family to say goodbye to Keeping Up With the Kardashians," said Kim. "After what will be 14 years, 20 seasons, hundreds of episodes and several spin-off shows, we've decided as a

to end this very special journey. We are beyond grateful to all of you who've watched us for all of these years — through the good times, the bad times, the happiness, the tears, and the many relationships and children," she added.

Kim further said that she will "forever cherish" the wonderful memories she made during her show's run. Keeping Up with the Kardashians, which first aired in 2007, focuses on the personal and professional lives of the Kardashian-Jenner family.

It mainly focused on sisters Kim, Kourtney and Khloe Kardashian and their half-sisters Kendall and Kylie Jenner. The show also featured matriarch of the family, Kris Jenner, and Kourtney's on-off boyfriend Scott Disick. Kris' ex-husband, Bruce (now Caitlyn) Jenner was on the show until their divorce in 2015. Upon its debut, the show was an instant hit among the viewers and became a pop culture sensation. It catapulted the family to fame that helped them venture into fashion and beauty businesses. Kim said that the show, which ran on E!, played an important role in her life. "Without Keeping Up with The Kardashians, I wouldn't be where I am today. I am so incredibly grateful to everyone who has watched and supported me and my family these past 14 incredible years. "This show made us who we are and I will be forever in debt to everyone who played a role in shaping our careers and changing our lives forever," she added.



Sushant Singh Rajput's sister Shweta appalled at demolition of Kangana Ranaut's office: 'What kind of gunda raj is this?'

Shweta Singh Kirti, the sister of late actor Sushant Singh Rajput, expressed shock at the partial demolition of Kangana Ranaut's office in Mumbai by the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC). Shweta came out in support of Kangana and said that such injustice must not be taken lying down.

cannot be a should not be tolerated! Can a President's Rule in Maharashtra be an answer to this Injustice? Let's establish RAM RAJ again. #WeDemandRamRaj," she wrote.

Shweta was replying to a tweet in which Kangana compared the situation to 'being burned at the stake'. "Today they have demolished my house tomorrow it will be yours, governments

come and go when you normalise violent suppression of a voice it becomes the norm, today one person being burned at the stake tomorrow it will be jowhar of thousands, wake up now," the actor had written. On Wednesday morning, the BMC began demolishing Kangana's office for alleged structural violations. However, the Bombay High Court stayed the demolition and said that the action 'prima facie does not appear to be bona fide and smacks of mala fide'. Kangana



claimed that the BMC officials threatened to demolish her office for being critical of the ruling Maharashtra government.

Last week, she criticised the Mumbai Police and compared Mumbai to Pakistan-occupied Kashmir. She shared videos of the



Raveena Tandon hints if Kangana Ranaut and Rhea Chakraborty are 'pawns being used for dirty political vendettas'

Actor Raveena Tandon has expressed her anger at latest developments amid the ongoing investigations into the death of actor Sushant Singh Rajput and asked if two women are being used as mere pawns for political vendetta. While Rhea Chakraborty was arrested on Tuesday afternoon for procurement of drugs in relation with the probe being conducted by Narcotics Control Bureau (NCB), portions of Kangana Ranaut's Mumbai

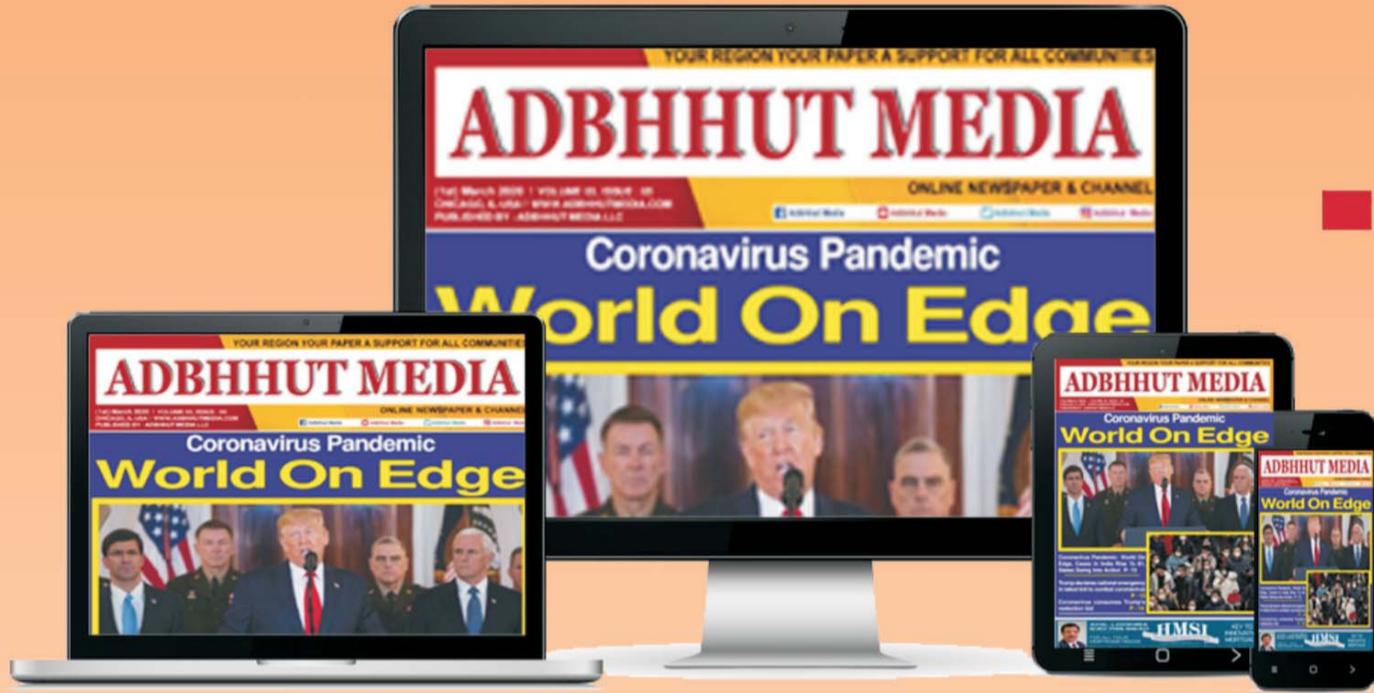
office were demolished by the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) on Wednesday morning. Raveena tweeted Wednesday afternoon, "Crushing, Demolishing, Mayhem. Sad Sad. All that's happening. Two women, Two sides, are they being used as pawns to vent out dirty political vendettas? Murder, Nepotism, Suicide, Family, Grief, Mental Health, Mafia, Vendetta, Cops,

Journalism, Politics, Drugs, Films .#JusticeForSSR shouldn't be diluted." Kangana had called the partial demolition of her office an act of 'fascism' and the 'death of democracy', claiming that she was targeted for speaking against the Maharashtra government. Kangana warned Uddhav in a video message that his 'pride will crumble' soon and compared her situation to the Kashmiri Pandit exodus of 1990.

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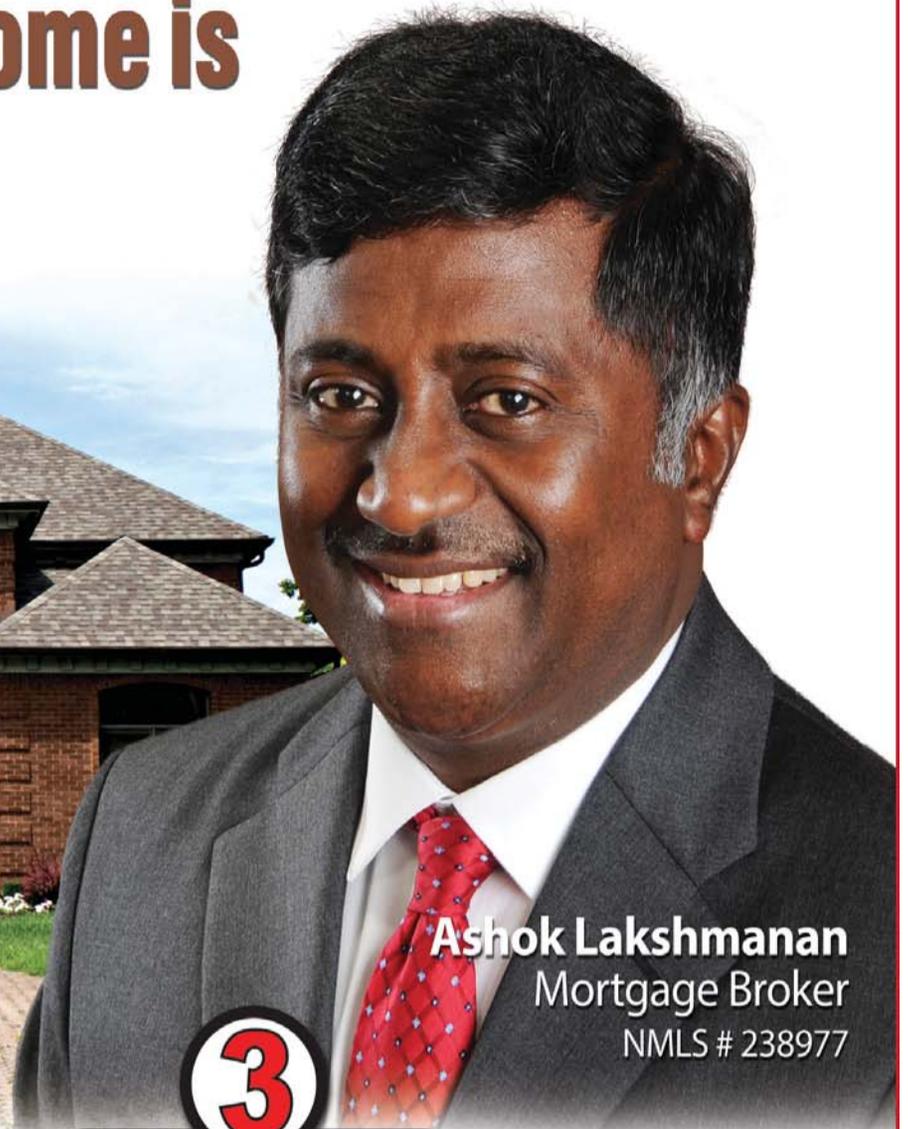
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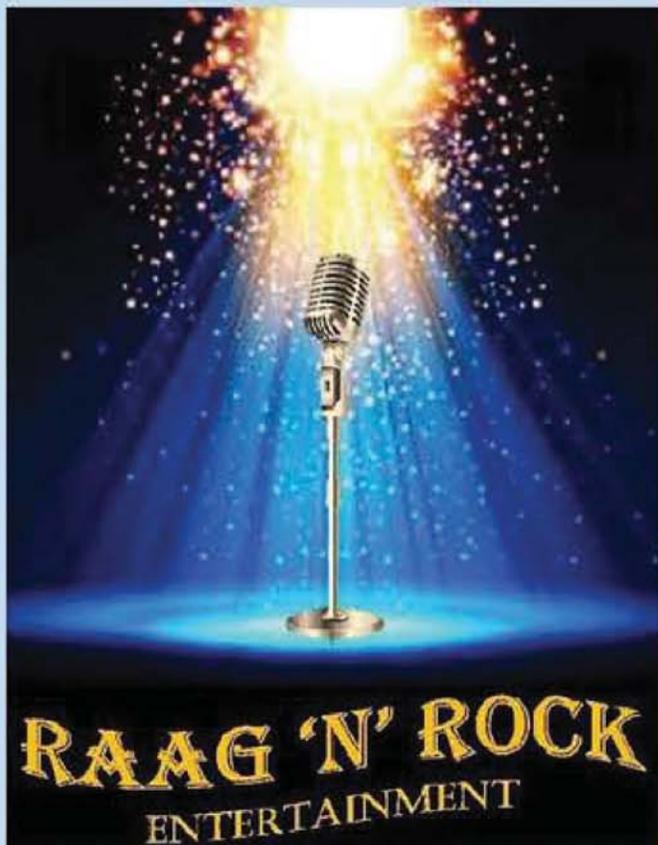
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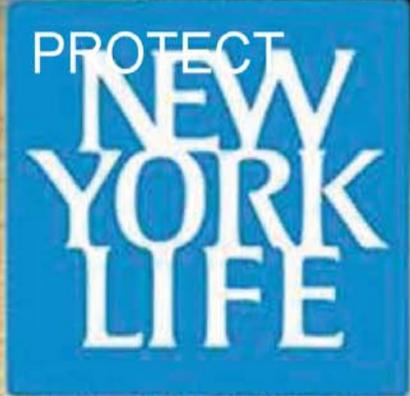
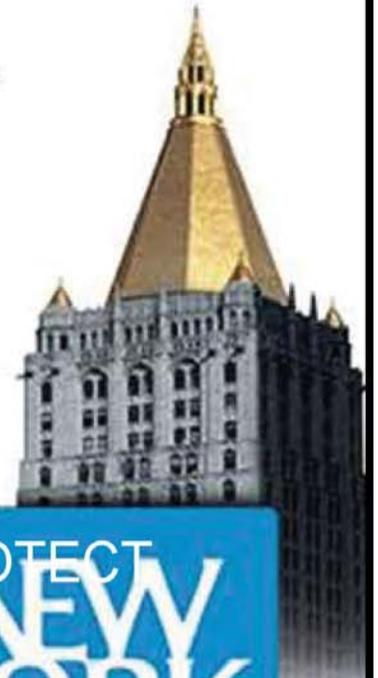
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