

Construction of Ram temple set to begin from today

The construction of the Ram temple in Ayodhya is set to begin today when the first bricks will be laid for its foundation, according to a spokesperson for the head of the temple trust. The event will be marked by prayers to Lord Shiva at the Kuber Tila shrine on the Ram Janmabhoomi site, allocated for the temple in a historic Supreme Court verdict last November. The 16th-century Babri mosque that stood on the disputed site in Ayodhya was demolished in 1992 by kar sevaks claiming that originally there was a Ram temple at the same spot. In its verdict on the Ram Janmabhoomi-Babri Masjid land dispute, the Supreme Court had ruled in favour of construction of a temple at the site. It also ordered that an alternative five-acre plot must be found within Ayodhya for a mosque.

Married couple share German ambassador role

The foreign ministry in Berlin appointed a married couple to share the ambassador's job in Slovenia, an unprecedented arrangement for Germany that allows them to balance work and family life. Natalie Kauter, 45, and Adrian Pollmann, 43, said they will share the post in the capital Ljubljana for four years from August. They have both been working for the ministry since 2005 and foreign assignments are part of the job, but have three children, aged seven, eight and 10, and were keen to find a family-friendly arrangement. They came up with the idea of a job share and put it to Foreign Minister Heiko Maas, who agreed to give it a try. Pollmann will be ambassador for the first eight months and Kauter will then take over for eight months in a rotating system. They have already done a job share once before: as joint deputy ambassadors to Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Part of China's Great Wall not built for war: study



The northern segment of the Great Wall of China was built not to block invading armies but rather to monitor civilian movement, an Israeli archaeologist said yesterday. When researchers fully mapped the Great Wall's 740-kilometre (460-mile) Northern Line for the first time, their findings challenged previous assumptions. "Prior to our research, most people thought the wall's purpose was to stop Genghis Khan's army," said Gideon Shelach-Lavi from Jerusalem's Hebrew University, who led the two-year study. But the Northern Line, lying mostly in Mongolia, winds through valleys, is relatively low in height and close to paths, pointing to non-military functions. "Our conclusion is that it was more about monitoring or blocking the movement of people and livestock, maybe to tax them," Shelach-Lavi said.

SOURCE: AFP, ANN



To Democrat leaders, including Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi, from the House and Senate kneel in silence for eight minutes and 46 seconds to honour George Floyd in the US Capitol Visitors Center in Washington, DC, on Monday. Inset, School alumni and residents participate in a candlelight vigil honoring George Floyd on the football field of Jack Yates High School, Floyd's former school where he played football in Houston, Texas.

PHOTO: AFP

MOST EXPENSIVE CITY FOR EXPATS

Hong Kong tops list, Tokyo third

AFP, Paris

Hong Kong retains its place atop the rankings for a third straight year as the world's most expensive city for expats, according to the latest Mercer annual report yesterday.

The consultancy found Hong Kong, with its sky-high housing costs, was still ahead of 208 other cities while Asia provided six of the top ten -- Turkmen capital Ashgabat notably edging Tokyo out of second spot.

Sixth-placed New York -- up three places -- was the only US entrant to make it into a top ten featuring three Swiss cities -- Zurich (4th), Bern (8th) and Geneva (9th).

Singapore fell meanwhile from third to fifth. Ashgabat is suffering from "an economic crisis which has brought about a dire currency shortage and therefore problems importing," Mercer France head of mobility Jean-Philippe Sarra told AFP, with currency rate fluctuations and inflation further contributory factors.

Mercer's report found the strength of the dollar has forced up costs for expatriates in American cities. After New York, San Francisco was the next US entrant, maintaining its 16th place, while Los Angeles rose one spot to 17th.

In Europe, London rose four places to 19th partly on the back of a relative rise in sterling but Paris slid from 47th to 50th as the euro lost ground against the dollar, against which local currencies are measured for the survey.

The least expensive cities on the list are Karachi, Bishkek, Tashkent, Windhoek and Tunis.

Sarra said the survey was based on the cost of living in February going into March, when "most countries had not yet been affected by the (COVID-19) crisis."

CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC AND GLOBAL ECONOMY

Worst collapse in 150 years

Says World Bank; study says virus may have spread in Wuhan in August

AFP, Washington

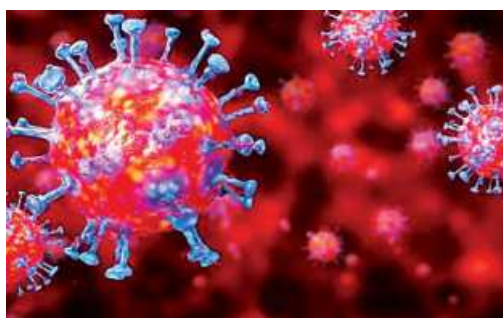
The coronavirus pandemic inflicted a "swift and massive shock" that has caused the broadest collapse of the global economy since 1870 despite unprecedented government support, the World Bank said Monday.

The world economy is expected to contract by 5.2 percent this year -- the worst recession in 80 years -- but the sheer number of countries suffering economic losses means the scale of the downturn is worse than any recession in 150 years, the World Bank said in its latest Global Economic Prospects report.

"This is a deeply sobering outlook, with the crisis likely to leave long-lasting scars and pose major global challenges," said World Bank Group Vice President for Equitable Growth, Finance and Institutions Ceyla Pazarbasioglu.

The depth of the crisis will drive 70 to 100 million people into extreme poverty -- worse than the prior estimate of 60 million, she told reporters.

And while the Washington-based development lender projects a rebound for 2021, there is a risk a second wave of outbreaks could undermine



the recovery and turn the economic crisis into a financial one that will see a "wave of defaults."

China is nearly alone in seeing modest growth this year. However the World Bank warned the depth of the slowdown in the world's second-largest economy will hinder recovery prospects in developing nations, especially commodity exporters.

Though dramatic, the current forecast falls short of the Great Depression, which saw a global contraction of 14.5 percent from 1930 to 1932,

while the post-war downturn in 1945-1946 was 13.8 percent, according to the World Bank.

But because of the pandemic there remain some "exceptionally high" risks to the outlook, particularly if the disease lingers and authorities have to reimpose restrictions -- which could make the downturn as bad as eight percent.

Meanwhile, according to Harvard Medical School research based on satellite images of hospital travel patterns and search engine data, the coronavirus might have been spreading in China as early as August last year.

The research used satellite imagery of hospital parking lots in Wuhan -- where the disease was first identified in late 2019 -- and data for symptom-related queries on search engines for things such as "cough" and "diarrhoea".

Chinese Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying, asked about the research at a daily press briefing on Tuesday, dismissed the findings. "I think it is ridiculous, incredibly ridiculous, to come up with this conclusion based on superficial observations such as traffic volume," she said.

INDIA-CHINA BORDER STANDOFF

Disengagement of troops begins

NDTV ONLINE

Indian and Chinese troops have begun mutual disengagement in some areas of eastern Ladakh ahead of the next round of military talks scheduled tomorrow, Indian government sources said yesterday.

Top military talks are to be held in the 'Hot Springs' area of eastern Ladakh today.

Sources say ahead of that, a "significant" number of Chinese troops has withdrawn but there is no exact number. Except the fingers region in Pangong Tso, Chinese troops have started withdrawing 2 to 3 km, they say.

Talks between the two armies are to be held this week at multiple locations including Patrolling point 14 (Galwan area), Patrolling point 15, and Hot Springs area, ANI quoted Indian government sources as saying.

The sources said to reciprocate the Chinese disengagement, the Indian side also brought back some of its troops and vehicles from these areas.

'MILLION-PEOPLE' MARCH ANNIVERSARY

Scattered protests as China tightens screw on Hong Kong

AFP, Hong Kong

Several thousand demonstrators marched in Hong Kong yesterday evening -- defying authorities a year after huge pro-democracy protests erupted -- as the movement struggles in the face of arrests, coronavirus bans on crowds and a looming national security law.

Seven months of massive and often violent rallies kicked off on June 9 last year when as many as a million people took to the streets to oppose a bill allowing extraditions to mainland China.

As city leaders dug in, battles between police and protesters became routine, leaving the financial hub's reputation for stability in tatters and swathes of the population in open revolt against Beijing's rule.

A year later, protesters are on the back foot with Beijing planning to impose a sweeping law banning subversion, secession, terrorism and foreign interference.

Anti-virus measures also forbid more than eight people gathering in public.

Small rallies still flare up, however.

Defiant crowds a few-thousand strong gathered yesterday evening in the city's

upmarket Central district to march and chant slogans.

Riot police were quick to close in and the crowds quickly dispersed, with scattered arrests made.

Earlier Tuesday, organisers of last year's huge rallies called on the government to lift legitimate protest restrictions on a city now largely free of coronavirus infections.

But city leader Carrie Lam, an unpopular pro-Beijing appointee, said the protests must end.

"Hong Kong cannot afford such chaos," she said, adding residents needed to prove Hong Kong people "are reasonable and sensible citizens of the People's Republic of China" if they want their freedoms and autonomy to continue.

Under a deal signed with Britain ahead of the 1997 handover, China agreed to let Hong Kong keep certain freedoms and autonomy for 50 years.

But protests over the last decade have been fuelled by fears those freedoms are being prematurely curtailed, something Beijing denies.



Pro-democracy demonstrators march holding their phones with flashlights on during a protest to mark the first anniversary of a mass rally against the now-withdrawn extradition bill, in Hong Kong, yesterday. PHOTO: REUTERS

N Korea cuts communication lines to South

AFP, Seoul

North Korea is severing all official communication links with the South, it announced yesterday in a move analysts said was aimed at manufacturing a crisis on the divided peninsula.

Since last week the North has issued a series of vitriolic denunciations of the South over activists sending anti-Pyongyang leaflets over the border -- something defectors do on a regular basis.

In recent days authorities in the North have organised large-scale rallies across the country of citizens pledging their support, with inter-Korean ties at a standstill despite three summits between the North's leader Kim Jong Un and the South's President Moon Jae-in in 2018.

Yesterday's move cuts all official communication links between the two sides, but the immediate effect will be limited -- Pyongyang has refused to engage with Seoul for months, with few if any conversations on the lines aside from test calls.

The latest development comes just three days before the two-year anniversary of a landmark summit between Kim and US President Donald Trump in Singapore.

Negotiations over the North's nuclear programme have been deadlocked since the collapse of a second meeting in Hanoi last year over what the North would be willing to give up in exchange for sanctions relief.

The impasse has left Pyongyang increasingly frustrated over the lack of concessions and analysts say it has taken no substantive steps towards giving up its weapons.

The decision was taken by Kim Yo Jong, the leader's sister and key adviser, and ruling party vice chairman Kim Yong Chol, KCNA said, in an explicit demonstration of the sibling's increasing authority in government.

'We'll be back'

Italy prison escapees writes to guards that they will be back in 15 days

AFP, Rome

Two inmates who escaped from a prison in Rome last week left guards a courtesy note, saying they had business to take care of but would be back shortly, a newspaper reported yesterday.

The two cousins, Davad Zukanovic, 40, and Lil Ahmetovic, 46, broke out of Rebibbia prison overnight on June 2 by scaling a wall using a water hose left in a courtyard.

But before they escaped, they left a note in their cell explaining they had personal reasons for needing to flee, said the Repubblica daily.

"They were driven by 'the need to protect their children from a nasty business they had got themselves into,'" the daily said, paraphrasing the contents of the letter.

The inmates specified that only they could make things right, as their wives were also both in jail.

At the end of the signed note, Zukanovic and Ahmetovic promised to return in about 15 days once everything was sorted, the paper said.

The men were serving sentences until 2029 for non-violent crimes, including fraud and receiving stolen goods.

Mamata will be a 'political refugee' in West Bengal

Warns Amit Shah, says her anti-CAA stance will backfire in state polls

OUR CORRESPONDENT, New Delhi

In a virtual launch of the Bharatiya Janata Party's campaign for next year's assembly elections in West Bengal, Indian Home Minister Amit Shah yesterday raised the issue of amended Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and attacked Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee for her opposition to the law.

Addressing an online rally of party workers, Shah said Mamata had only put up a "token" resistance to the amended CAA and asked her to give a point-by-point elaboration of her stand.

"The people of Bengal will reduce Mamata Banerjee to a political refugee because of her stand on CAA," Shah said.

The amended CAA seeks to give Indian citizenship to Hindu, Buddhist, Christian, Jain, Parsi and Sikh refugees who have migrated from Bangladesh, Afghanistan and Pakistan till 2014.

Mamata-led Trinamool Congress and other opposition parties of India termed the amendment as "discriminatory" to Muslims, a charge denied by the Indian government which maintains that all Muslims who are citizens of India would continue to be so.



The opposition to the amended CAA, passed by both Houses of Indian parliament in December last year, had seen weeks of nationwide street protests, often marred by violence and police action that left scores dead, before the Covid-19 pandemic put a brake on it.

On May 30, Prime Minister Narendra Modi, to mark the completion of one year in power in his second successive stint in the top post, had cited the amended CAA as one of the major achievements of his government, terming it as an "expression of India's compassion and spirit of inclusiveness".

Amit Shah, at yesterday's online rally, said the name "Corona Express" given by Mamata

to trains carrying thousands of migrant workers back to West Bengal from other parts of India post-Covid-19, would become her "exit route" from the state.

"The name 'Corona Express' that you have given, Mamata didi, will become your exit route. You've added salt to the wounds of the migrant workers and they will not forget this," Shah said addressing BJP workers online.

Shah was referring to Mamata Banerjee's criticism of the central government for running migrant special trains amid a surge in coronavirus cases across India.

"They are stuffing the Shramik trains full of people, there is no social distancing, no food, no water, nothing," the Chief Minister had said. "What are they trying to do? Are they running Shramik trains or are they trying to run Corona Express," she had added during a media briefing.

Banerjee and Amit Shah have sparred bitterly throughout the coronavirus crisis and the lockdown accusing the Central government of undermining her state government's efforts.

Shah said the BJP may have won 303 seats in Lok Sabha polls last year "but for me most, the important are 18 seats we pocketed in Bengal."