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China approves three-child policy to arrest dip in birth rates

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RBI, IRDAI approval mandatory for FDI in bank-led insurance

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Sathyian and Manika become first Indian duo to win a Pro Tour title

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NEARBY



'Centre rejects panel on oxygen-scarcity deaths'

NEW DELHI  
Deputy CM Manish Sisodia on Friday said the Centre has yet again rejected the high-level committee of medical experts set up by the Delhi government to probe the oxygen-scarcity deaths in the national capital during the second wave of COVID-19.

CITY PAGE 3

Cong. forms panel for coordination in Punjab

CHANDIGARH  
Punjab CM Amarinder Singh and his detractor Navjot Singh Sidhu on Friday agreed to set up a 10-member 'Strategic Policy Group' to expedite implementation of the various government programmes in the State.

NEWS PAGE 8



THE HINDU  
greet its readers on the occasion of  
**ONAM**

## Oppn. leaders call for unity to take on BJP

Statement from 19 parties calls for protests next month

SANDEEP PHUKAN  
NEW DELHI

Top Opposition leaders came together on a virtual platform on Friday to give a call for unity and working together for the "ultimate goal" of defeating the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in the 2024 Lok Sabha election, and providing a government that believes in the values of the freedom movement and the principles enshrined in the Constitution.

The leaders of 19 parties, who participated in the meet, issued a joint statement calling upon "the people of India to rise to the occasion to defend our secular, democratic Republican order" and announced joint protests between September 20 and 30.

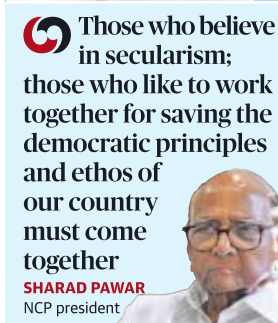
Congress president Sonia Gandhi, who convened the meeting, said the Opposition parties simply had "no alternative to working cohesively together" and needed to rise above "compulsions in the interest of the nation".

Mamata's call

West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee suggested the formation of a core committee to focus on key issues that affect the people, and said parties not aligned to the Congress should also be invited as "every Opposition



The ultimate goal is the 2024 Lok Sabha election... We all have our compulsions, but clearly, a time has come when the interests of our nation demand that we rise above them  
**SONIA GANDHI** Congress president



Those who believe in secularism; those who like to work together for saving the democratic principles and ethos of our country must come together  
**SHARAD PAWAR** NCP president



The new India is a Modi project which is based on destruction of the Constitution. It is a battle for which the time has come to firmly decide where you stand  
**SITARAM YECHURY** CPI(M) leader

party should be brought into the fight against the BJP".

Addressing a key point that often stalls Opposition unity, Ms. Banerjee said parties should "forget who is the leader as the people of India will lead" the fight against the BJP. Maharashtra Chief Minister Uddhav Thackeray endorsed Ms. Banerjee's views and Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M.K. Stalin raised the issue of the Centre "undermining" federalism.

Former Congress chief Rahul Gandhi suggested that the Opposition parties offer an alternative vision to counter the vision offered by the BJP-RSS.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 8

## Reign of terror is never permanent: PM

'Somnath temple the best example and an assurance'

MAHESH LANGA  
AHMEDABAD

At a time when the world is anxiously concerned about the Taliban's seizure of power in Afghanistan, Prime Minister Narendra Modi, on the occasion of launching new projects at the historic Somnath temple on Friday, reminded the world that the reign of terror is always temporary and cannot be permanent.

The Prime Minister, in a subtle message, said "des-



Stories in stone: The Somnath Exhibition Centre that was inaugurated by PM Narendra Modi on Thursday. ANI

tructive and terror forces" may become dominant temporarily but were not permanent, citing the example of Somnath temple, which was

razed and plundered several times in the past and resurrected every time with greater glory.

"Forces that strive for des-

truction and those who follow the ideology of creating empires out of terrorism can dominate for some time, but their existence is never permanent as they cannot suppress humanity forever," he stated. The Somnath temple was the best example and also an assurance to the world. The world is apprehensive of such ideologies, he noted.

"This temple was destroyed, its statues were broken but it was resurrected again as many times as it was razed because terrorism cannot suppress faith," he observed.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 8

## ZycoV-D, first vaccine for those above 12, gets nod

Largest trial shows 66% efficacy

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT  
NEW DELHI

The Drug Controller General has granted emergency approval to the ZycoV-D, a COVID-19 vaccine developed by the Ahmedabad-based Zydus Cadilla group, on Friday, making it the first vaccine in India that can be administered to adults as well as those 12 and above.

It is also the only DNA-based vaccine in the world and can be administered without a needle, purport-

edly minimising chances of reactions.

Interim results from phase-III clinical trials in July, in over 28,000 volunteers, showed a primary efficacy of 66.6% for symptomatic RT-PCR positive cases. "This has been the largest vaccine trial so far in India for COVID-19," the Department of Biotechnology (DBT) said in a statement on Friday.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 8  
J&J SEEKS NOD FOR TRIAL ON ADOLESCENTS PAGE 10

## Delta variant driving infections in India: report

'Vaccination reduces severe disease'

JACOB KOSHY  
NEW DELHI

The Delta variant remains most responsible for the continuing spread of infections in India, according to a weekly update from the India Sars Cov2 Genome Consortium (INSACOG), a repository of labs tasked with monitoring the coronavirus variants.

According to an August 16 report by the consortium, of the 49,867 coronavirus samples analysed for their genetic composition, about

two-thirds – 30,230 – were among the internationally classified variants of concern or variants of interest (VoC/VoI). Of these, nearly 20,000 were the Delta variant (AY.2) and about 5,000 its associated lineages (AY.1 and AY.3).

"The Delta variant is the major VoC in India at this time. Vaccination continues to be very effective in reducing severe disease and death," said an accompanying note.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 8

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# The rumbling hills of Himachal Pradesh

In a State where hydro power projects, dams and construction activities are increasing, landslides too are becoming common. **Vikas Vasudeva** reports on the concerns of the people in the fragile Himalayan region



The landslide in Batseri village in Kinnaur district of Himachal Pradesh on July 25 destroyed a bridge on the Baspa river. (Below): Several youth from the district hold a meeting at Kalpa to voice their concerns to the authorities over the new hydel power projects coming up in and around the district. ■ V.V. KRISHNAN

It was a relatively warm monsoon afternoon on July 25 when Arjun Devi, 65, was sitting outside her house, legs stretched out. Her house is located in the middle of an apple orchard in Batseri village in Kinnaur district of Himachal Pradesh. It was a picture of calm and quiet when suddenly, Devi sprang up in alarm hearing a rumbling noise. She hurried upstairs. From her rooftop she watched transfixed as boulders came rolling down from the steep hilltop at great speed, not too far from her house. They crashed into a mini-bus on Sangla-Chitkul road, killing nine people, all tourists, Devi learned later. The boulders severely damaged the Sangla-Chitkul and Sangla-Batseri link roads. They destroyed a bridge on Baspa river, on the banks of which Batseri is located. Several mature trees that got in their way fell like ninepins. All this happened in just a few minutes.

"I have never seen such a horrific scene in my life," says Devi. "The previous day too, some stones fell down the hill, but July 25 was different. When I heard the loud noise and went to the rooftop, I saw huge rocks come thundering down. They fell some distance away from my house. Only when they stopped falling did I heave a sigh of relief."

This wasn't a one-time calamity. Nature unleashed its fury again on August 11 in Kinnaur, this time in Nigulsari village. Twenty-eight people lost their lives that day when a State transport bus, a truck, and three small vehicles were completely damaged after they were hit by boulders and mud on National Highway 5. Such was the force of the landslide that the bus rolled down several feet towards the Sutlej river, along with the debris.

The residents of Kinnaur are scared, angry and frustrated. Such incidents are becoming common, they say, thanks to the development model adopted by successive governments. Reports urging a rethink of the development model are frequently brought out but they lead to little change. The beautiful Himalayan region is only becoming more fragile and susceptible to disasters, they say.

## A double-edged sword

In the last two months alone, several landslides have been reported in Himachal Pradesh, especially in the tribal districts of Lahaul-Spiti and Kinnaur which have seen incessant rains. From June 13 to August 12, as many as 248 people lost their lives in various incidents relating to heavy rains. Chief Minister Jai Ram Thakur, who visited Nigulsari to oversee the rescue work after the incident, said the State government would conduct a geological survey of the area.

Jai Vijender Negi, 45, an orchardist at Batseri, says development has become a double-edged sword. He urges the go-



vernment to review its policy on hydro power projects. "These incidents are a wake-up call for us. The dams and hydro power projects have brought prosperity to the region, but they have also brought suffering. During the construction of these power projects and dams, the use of rock blasting and heavy machinery in construction sites, besides tree felling, have damaged the fragile hills," he says.

Om Prakash, who has been working at a tourist camping site in Batseri since the late 1990s, says landslides used to occur earlier as well but their number and intensity have increased in recent times. "For the tourism sector to flourish here, road connectivity is key, but I feel that converting single roads into double lanes and more is not a good idea. When roads are constructed, debris is thrown into the valley and falls into the rivers. The government should focus on the maintenance of existing roads instead of opting for unregulated development. Scientific disposal of debris is very important," he says.

These are not mere observations of residents. In its 2012 State Strategy and Action Plan on Climate Change, Himachal Pradesh's Department of Environment, Science and Technology had pointed out that deforestation, landslides, land degradation, desertification and Glacier Lake Outbursts Floods are some of the common but critical environmental issues in the Himalayan region. The environment is facing major challenges given the escalation of such issues due to changes in the atmosphere and interferences by man, it said.

"Himachal Pradesh, though a small Himalayan State, is nevertheless playing a very crucial role in sustaining the livelihoods of downstream areas. The conservation, sustenance of these ecologically fragile regions is the biggest challenge being faced at the moment which can get further aggravated due to financial constraints and limited resources... Therefore, it can be safely stated that climate change will manifest most in Himachal Pradesh," it noted.

The report also stated that warming, erratic rainfall and rainfall changes, floods, and change in precipitation patterns are commonly observed events or

are likely to occur in the region.

## In a state of denial

Urni, a tiny village along National Highway 5 in Kinnaur district, witnessed a major landslide in 2014 which resulted in the erosion of several bighas of agricultural land and cracks in many houses. Ramanand Negi, 77, of Urni village, says the signs of ecology degradation are clearly visible, yet successive governments have been in a state of denial. "The key problem is that the government is quick to declare landslides as natural disasters. But these are man-made disasters. In July 2014, a big portion of our village was destroyed and so were several acres of agricultural and horticultural land including the orchards of over 20 families. The livelihoods of people are at stake," he says. People now live in fear, he adds.

The government gave relief to the affected families, but they have been demanding compensation, Negi says. "The administration maintains that flood irrigation could have triggered the landslide, but we don't have any natural water sources here, so how can we use the method of flood irrigation? Our village is situated right above the intersection of the flushing tunnel, head race tunnel and two Adit tunnels of the 1091 MW Karcham Wangtoo project built on the Sutlej River (commissioned in 2011). These tunnels were constructed using heavy machinery and rock blasting. We used to feel the vibrations when the blasting was done," Negi says. He drops his head in despair as he points to the damaged portion of the hill slope.

Sita Ram, another resident, says he was a sub-contractor on the Karcham Wangtoo project. "During construction, blasting was done for digging tunnels in the mountain. Cracks developed as a result, and the soil got eroded. Later, when heavy rain struck the region, there were landslips," he says.

Manshi Asher, an environmentalist associated with the Himdhara Environ-

ment Research and Action Collective, an advocacy and research group working on issues of environmental justice and forest rights in the Himalayan region, says the climate crisis has exacerbated the frequency and intensity of disasters over the past few decades. "But the most critical factor that gets hidden behind the label of 'natural calamities' is the kind of development model that we have adopted. It has led to deforestation, increased erosion and slope destabilisation which not just trigger more disasters but multiply the damage caused. The State Disaster Management Authority report on Landslide Hazard Risk Assessment 2015 stated that 90% of the State is in the high-risk zone. Areas like Kinnaur, Chamba and Lahaul-Spiti are particularly sensitive. Yet, the focus of policymakers and government departments is on management rather than prevention," she says.

The State's 2015 Landslide Hazard Risk Assessment report, which Asher refers to, reads, "Hilly areas of Himachal Pradesh are vulnerable to landslides due to geological, meteorological and anthropogenic factors. Several devastating landslides have occurred in Himachal Pradesh... The hydro-meteorological conditions and fragile structural fabric of geological strata of Himachal Pradesh increase the possibility of landslides. Anthropogenic factors such as removal of vegetation cover, overloading of slopes by debris also contribute to a great extent. Development activities like construction of roads, tunnels and excavation for hydro projects have further accentuated the problem." The report was prepared by the Disaster Management Cell of the Department of Revenue.

It adds: "Most of the area under... Himachal Pradesh is under threat of landslides. It is the topographical profile of the state and the extreme climatic conditions which makes it susceptible to landslides. Hazard risk map of the state depicts that the area of the state falling

under the three categories of hazard proneness viz. low, medium and high hazard. Most of the area under... Himachal Pradesh is under high hazard."

There are 932 hydropower projects in Himachal Pradesh, which include mini, small, large, and mega projects. Most of these projects are in Kinnaur, Chamba and Shimla districts. Asher says there is plenty of evidence on how these calamities are not natural but such evidence is not fed into policy decisions. This is why governments continue pushing for more hydro power projects and four-lane highways, she says.

## Protests against projects

Several residents of the tribal districts are now up in arms against the setting up of new power projects. Many assert that the projects severely impact the fragile mountain slopes and cause significant loss to life and property. As Kinnaur continues to bear the brunt of catastrophes, a group of youngsters at Kalpa gathered for a meeting on August 10 to craft a strategy to intensify their State-wide campaign of creating awareness against the setting up of new hydro power projects in the district.

"There should be a ban on such projects. Already substantial damage to the fragile ecology is visible, yet the government in the name of national interest is continuing to play with the lives and livelihood of locals. Today, we have gathered here to discuss the proposed construction of the Jangji Thopan Powari hydroelectric project plant of 804 MW capacity near Jangji village. This project, to be built by SJVN, will impact people and natural resources of at least six panchayats - Spillo, Kanan, Moorang, Jangji, Akpa and Rarang. Our purpose is to create awareness in all the villages about this upcoming project and others as well. Any decision on the commissioning of a project should be based on discussions with the gram sabhas," says Sunder Negi, a member of the group.

Negi says the group got in touch with youth clubs of different villages. Through regular meetings, they are conveying these villages of the "ill-effects of power projects". He believes that people should be aware about the impacts of such projects on water, forest and land and should come forward to speak up their mind "before it's too late".

The Jangji Thopan Powari hydroelectric project envisages the construction of a concrete gravity dam of 48-metres high from the level of the riverbed across the river Sutlej near Jangji village and an underground powerhouse on the right bank upstream of Tehsil boundary (Kashang Nallah). It proposes to excavate a circular-shaped head race tunnel of 9.40-m wide and 12-kilometres long using tunnel boring machine. The tentative land requirement for the project is 295.93 ha out of which 270.43 ha

is forest land and 25.5 ha private land. The construction of the dam will result in the submergence of about 156.2917 ha of land of which 143.2093 ha is forest land and 13.0824 ha private land.

Abhishek Wazir, 25, of Moorang village says this is a "fight to save 'Zangti' (golden water) of Sutlej River."

Dinesh Negi, 32, from Kanan village, remarks that this is more than that; it is a fight for survival. "The indigenous pine nuts (chilgoza) trees are under threat here. As transmission lines of hydro projects pass through forests, trees are cut. This impacts not only the environment but our livelihoods too," he says.

"We have to save Kinnaur at any cost, and so we are mobilising the youth. We will make it a mass movement," says Bharat Bhushan, 35, of Kalpa.

Jiya Negi, a Kinnaur-based environmentalist and activist, says the entire stretch of the Sutlej is filled with debris that is thrown into the river from construction sites of power projects, dams and roads. No one, he says, bothers to ensure the scientific disposal of debris.

Deputy Commissioner (Kinnaur) Abid Hussain Sadiq says the administration is always there to look into the concerns of people. "The decision to set up power projects is taken in national interest, but at the same time there's no doubt that the concerns of people are to be understood and addressed. A balance has to be struck between national interest and the concerns of the local people. We are always willing to work towards that," he says.

A power sector expert and head of the Jangji Thopan Powari hydroelectric project, Roshan Negi, asserts that the construction of tunnels does not damage the ecology as the work is done in a scientific manner. "All the necessary precautions are taken while we construct tunnels. If the environment was at risk of damage, the Government of India would have not allowed the setting up of these projects. However, I believe that there should always be a consensus with the locals before setting up a project. The projects that have been set up and the allied activities have given a boost to the local economy and infrastructure. They have benefited the residents over the years," he says.

All these explanations don't make much sense to Devi. She doesn't know why, but she knows that landslides in the Sangla Valley have been increasing over the years. "For some 30 years it used to snow heavily in this area, but in recent years I have seen more rain than snow. At the same time, many dams and roads have come up and landslides have become common. Our rivers are turning muddy as they carry debris. The government must take steps to preserve our mountains. Development is welcome, but not at the cost of human lives," she says.











### Instapick

**India Couture Week:** The 14th edition is here and, for the second year, it is a digital affair. Bollywood favourite, Manish Malhotra, will kickstart the proceedings and 18 of India's finest couturiers will follow during the week-long event. Last year saw these designers present fashion films set in luxury resorts and their own farm houses. Wonder where they will take us this time? August 23-29. fdci.org



### Talking Point

**Afghanistan's protest art:** Amid reports of artists taking their work and chat messages off the internet and the questions asked by director Sahraa Karimi comes this thought-provoking image from Afghanistan's first female street artist, Shamsia Hassani. It is titled 'Death to Darkness'. She took up graffiti and street art in 2010 and gives voice to the experience of Afghan women.

### YARN IT!

# The next hit web series

Reptilian eye muscles and empty closets — if you have them, do apply

JANE DE SUZA

Since our most committed relationships of late have been with web series through the lockdown, surely we're experts at what makes one now?

**Bullet-proof chest:** Everyone else gets shot and killed in every action scene. The hero clings on. The bad men are bad shots. Everyone misses the hero. Worrying about him in any episode is useless because he has to survive till the end of the series. Even if he's killed in the first scene as Ganesh Gaitonde is in *Sacred Games*, he still lives through 16 episodes till that point.

**Reptilian eye muscles:** Before each break, the camera freezes on someone's face. They never blink. Often with tears that never spill. Don't pretend you've never seen Sony *Crime Patrol*. This look is supposed to convey deep meaning. But you suspect the cameraman has

gone for a hygiene break.

**An empty closet:** When a cheating couple is about to get caught, the man hides in a closet where his phone must ring. I don't know which house has a closet not stuffed with wedding saris and gifts to recycle. Mine has clothes I resolve to one day fit back into. I mean — who has an empty closet?

**A second empty closet:** Screen women shower a lot. Whenever the villain enters, the woman must be showering. The villain hides in the empty closet too. If the villain and the cheating man jump into the same closet together, it may turn into quite another story.

**Almost — but never — solve it:** So that your viewers binge-watch themselves into paranoia. After the *Family Man*, hordes of people began to plead to join the Threat And Surveillance Cell of the NIA. When

told it didn't exist, they began to do their own espionage, calling in terrorist threats from old women's grocery bags and pigeon poop on windowsills.

**Feeble family trees:** The actor will be paired with a mother and father who look as different from him as geese from a rhino. Heroes

and heroines could be selling their mother's gold bangles because they are so desperately poor, but you soon suspect that's because they blow it all on designer wardrobes through 10 colourful episodes.

**Less story per story:** If all else fails, do a *Narcos*. Fill each episode with so much violence, orgies,

bloodshed and swear words that you only need five minutes of actual story. Bet we could draw Three Little Pigs into a 3-season 30-episode tearjerker. And given the global-warming effect on the wolf's lungs, he could huff and puff for another 10 episodes without blowing the house down.

**Put a Pankaj Tripathi in.** Even better! He's so good, you won't even need the story.

**A red herring:** The murderer is the only one who has no motive or means, until the last scene where he gets mind-boggling multiples of both. You've watched so many Swedish

noir web series that you now suspect the first one in the first episode who has no means or motive, even if it's the fish in the fishbowl.

I'm opening auditions for my new web series. Those with reptilian eye muscles may apply.

Where Jane De Suza, author of *Flyaway Boy*, pokes her nose into our perfect lives.



ILLUSTRATION: SREEJITH R KUMAR



### Pick of the week

A mix of in-person and online events and workshops

#### Madras Day 2021

While in-person walks might be limited, children can still commemorate the founding of this beloved city by participating in a virtual tour of Marina Beach organised by heritage platform Madras Inherited. August 21, at 5 pm; details at themadrasday.in. In addition, C.P.R. Institute of Indological Research is organising an **online quiz competition**, with cash prizes for winners. August 21, at 11.30 am; details at cprfoundation.org. Also follow @greatmadrastrip on Instagram for a bunch of events.

#### Alternative rakhi

Just in time for the gifting season comes **Jaipur Watch Company's Pichwai Collection**. The unisex watches have intricate dials with lotus, cow, and peacock motifs. Painted by miniature artists in Rajasthan, each design takes over a week to be made. ₹15,000 on jaipur.watch. Pair this with the Delightful Bites Box by **Mad Over Donuts**, launched for Raksha Bandhan. Comprising 18 bite-sized donut variants, from double trouble to blueberry and KitKat. ₹800 onwards. madoverdonuts.com

#### Apurba Nandi's crowds

Raising crucial questions on contemporary urbanism, artist Apurba Nandi's solo show: **A Parade of Uncertain Destinations** is at Palette Art Gallery, New Delhi. Through his art, viewers can 'witness the flow of innumerable human bodies on canvas, concealing the markers of caste and religion'. Till September 11 on paletteartgallery.com. 'Through the Eyes of the Kolis: A reflection on Mumbai's past, present and future', is a **digital photography exhibition** curated by Bombay61 Studio. theheritagelab.in

#### Craft crusaders

After a long gap, over 100 craft groups and artisans have returned to the capital for **Dastkar's 'Comeback Bazaar'**. Aimed at reviving their livelihoods, the event will feature everything from craft and home decor to apparel. Until August 30, at Nature Bazaar. dastkar.org. At The Crafts Council of India, nominations are invited for their annual **Kamala Awards 2021 edition** to 'recognise outstanding merit in the field of traditional Indian handicrafts'. craftscouncilofindia.in

#### Korea calling

If Korea has been on your radar thanks to K-dramas, this course on Korean culture is for you. Courtesy of a collaboration by **Korea Tourism Organization** and international start-up **CulturaGo**, it's for those planning to travel to the country for work, study or travel. Approx ₹2,400. english.visitkorea.or.kr Conclude the **Onam festivities** at the DakshinaChitra Heritage Museum with a virtual conversation on flowers, Mohiniyattam performances, and more. dakshinachitra.net

#### Blooms and gold lamps

Flowy dresses, kaftans, and suits in chiffon and cotton feature in designer Ritu Kumar's Autumn Winter '21 collection, **Vintage Soiree**. The recently-launched outfits in geo-retro prints come in celebratory shades of scarlets, deep blues, mustards, greens and teals. Approx ₹1,700 onwards on aarke.in. In Jaipur, Himanshu Jangid of **Cartist** — that designs furniture using upcycled automobile parts — has launched a new range of table lamps, chairs and decor accessories in 'gold'. cartist.in

#### Tracking diamond routes

To mark World Photography Day (August 19), **De Beers Forevermark** released a set of exclusive photographs from their diamond natural reserves. Seen above is a shot of giraffes at the Venetia Limpopo Nature Reserve, South Africa, which is part of the brand's diamond route. Covering over 32,000 hectares, it belongs to the Mapungubwe National Park. Other images released were of zebras from Jwana Game Park, Botswana, and rough diamonds from Namibia, to name a few. debeers.com



(Clockwise from left) A poster, stills from *Wings of Desire* and *Bridge of Spies* ■ SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

again in many films dealing with the Cold War including recently, Steven Spielberg's *Bridge of Spies* (2015).

This can in no way be a comprehensive look at films set in Berlin, so after a quick hat tip to Wim Wenders' *Wings of Desire* (1987), I'll confine myself now to the various iterations of *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, named after the vast square in the heart of the city. In 1929, Alfred Döblin wrote *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, about a small-time criminal who has just been released from prison after being involved in a murder and finds himself in the big, bad city, and inevitably is drawn to those of his own ilk. The book was adapted as a film as early as 1931. The most comprehensive adaptation of the book is Rainer Werner Fassbinder's sprawling 14-part 1980 television series. In preparation for this trip, I pulled out my hitherto unwatched blu-ray of Burhan Qurbani's 2020 adaptation, which changed the lead character to an illegal immigrant from Bissau, West Africa, lending layers of complexity to an already dense tale. The film is three hours short and is another breath-taking ode to the city that has and will continue to give to cinema.

# Summer in Berlin

Be it Leni Riefenstahl's *Olympia* or Steven Spielberg's *Bridge of Spies*, several films explore the city's history and landmarks

NAMAN RAMACHANDRAN

And so, my peregrinations bring me to Berlin, for the first time in summer. I'd only been here for the justly celebrated Berlin Film Festival, which is held during the winter and the act of rushing from screening to screening keeps you warm at what is truly a miserable time, weather-wise, in this great metropolis. Summer in Berlin, on the other hand, is a glorious time. The sun is shining, Covid is at bay, and vaccinated people are back at cinemas, museums, galleries and restaurants.

Pausing only to meet a few filmmaker friends who are

based in Berlin, I launched into my musings about films set in this magnificent city without much delay. Leni Riefenstahl's *Olympia* (1938) in two parts — *Festival of Nations* and *Festival of Beauty* — her document of the 1936 Berlin Olympics, is correctly derided as Nazi propaganda, and she was subsequently disgraced. However, there is no denying her immense cinematic talent and the films are beautiful to look at, though the politics and underlying social history cannot and should not be denied.

There is of course Sebastian Schipper's pounding *Victoria* (2015), where a young Spanish woman in Berlin is caught up in events beyond her control. Set across one night in the city, *Victoria* is one of those one-shot films featuring non-stop exhilarating action with nary a pause for breath. A dazzling technical achievement which was duly

recognised at the Berlin festival. A key sequence in *Victoria* takes place at Checkpoint Charlie, that hallowed gateway between the erstwhile East and West Berlin which has been referenced in countless novels and movies. I duly visited the place which now also has a harrowing exhibit detailing the history of Berlin from 1933-45. Martin Ritt's *The Spy Who Came in From the Cold* (1965) opens at Checkpoint Charlie, James Bond crosses over in *Octopussy* (1983) and the locale and indeed the Berlin Wall has been featured time and



# Meet Dr Kirby

Actor Christian Slater on playing the medic who tracks down a killer neurosurgeon in the new mini series, *Dr Death*



A still from the show ■ SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

MINI ANTHIKAD CHHIBBER

Whether as the young Franciscan novice Adso, playing Watson to Sean Connery's Baskerville in *The Name of the Rose* (1986) or as straitlaced Riley to wildly grandstanding John Travolta in John Woo's *Broken Arrow* 10 years later, Christian Slater always radiates positive energy in his roles.

That energy is evident as the 51-year-old actor talks about his latest role in *Dr Death* over a video call. The mini-series — based on a podcast that focusses on medical malpractice — was released globally last month and had its India premiere this week. It tells the harrowing true story of a neurosurgeon, Christopher Duntuch (Joshua Jackson), who maimed and killed his patients. Slater plays Dr Kirby who, alongside Dr Henderson (Alec Baldwin), brings down Duntuch.

Slater recalls a scene with Jackson when they were in the operating theatre. "When you are shooting these types of uncomfortable scenes, you tend to find humour. Both Josh and I are so inept as surgeons that I found those moments to be quite humorous," he says.

Though Slater had plans to meet Kirby, COVID-19 made it impossible. For the surgical aspects, he says he spent time with his brother-in-law who is also a vascular surgeon like Kirby. Admitting to playing characters that possess energy and charisma, Slater says he and Kirby are similar in a few ways. "I enjoy life; I have a good time. I do have an energy that I think I need to taper a little bit. In order to play this character, I needed a certain amount of freedom, and I am grateful to Patrick [Macmanus, creator] for allowing me to be creative in the moment. That lent to the type of energy that came across."

Jackson, 43, had to go into some dark spaces as Duntuch. "For a large part of the show he does not know that he is the bad guy. He did not have the ability to see the effect of his actions," says the actor. The show, with criss-crossing timelines and disturbing content, is a gripping one and credit for that goes to Macmanus, he says. "Patrick had the entire show, every image of it catalogued in his mind. He was an unbelievable resource."

*Dr Death is streaming on Lionsgate Play*



INTERVIEW | LISA CURTIS

# 'Both Trump and Biden administrations responsible for Afghan situation'

It was an extremely hasty withdrawal, and the move to pull out 16,000 contractors, all at once, literally pulled the rug out from under the Afghans, says Lisa Curtis

SRIRAM LAKSHMAN

A concerted international commitment is necessary to prevent a humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan, says Lisa Curtis, former South and Central Asia Director of the U.S. National Security Council. Ms. Curtis, who is currently Director of the Indo-Pacific Security Program at the Center for New American Security, discusses what led to the current situation with the Taliban, the U.S.' counterterrorism interests, and the future of U.S.-Pakistan ties. Excerpts from the interview:

I wanted to talk to you about Afghanistan. Very broadly, what went wrong? Could anybody have foreseen that the Afghan security forces would not really fight back?

I think there are several factors that have contributed to the disaster that we're seeing today. And I think both the Trump and the Biden administrations bear responsibility for the way things are playing out. First, there was a very weak agreement that was negotiated with the Taliban during the Trump administration. It undermined the legitimacy of the government, by being weighed very heavily toward the Taliban. The U.S. forced [Afghan President Ashraf] Ghani to release 5,000 Taliban prisoners,

before the Taliban had even really committed to a genuine peace process. So, I think that contributed to undermining the legitimacy of President Ghani, as well as the U.S. negotiator talking about an interim government, of which Ghani would not be a part. So, I think that fuelled the political divisions that were already there among the Afghan political elite. The second factor is the way in which the Biden administration withdrew. It was an extremely hasty withdrawal, and the fact that they thought necessary to withdraw 16,000 contractors, all at once, it literally was pulling the rug out from under the Afghans.

So, I think that there are a lot of things that have contributed.

Not to mention the Taliban safe haven in Pakistan all these years. No U.S. administration – going back four administrations – was ever able to do anything about that safe haven. So, that's certainly contributed to the Taliban's ability to make these rapid military gains.

So there's a combination of factors that have led us to this point. And I think what is important now is that we relocate as many Afghans as possible, resettle them in the U.S. These are people who have helped us, who supported the mission in Afghanistan, we have a moral responsibility to take care of them. Second, we need to prevent a humanitarian disaster. This will require a concerted international commitment to making sure that the people of Afghanistan are fed, that they find places to stay. There's a lot of IDPs, internally displaced people, so that has to be dealt with. And lastly, I don't think that the international community should rush to recognise the Taliban, any diplomatic re-



Taliban safe havens in Pakistan certainly contributed to the insurgents' ability to make these rapid military gains

Cognition should be conditioned on human rights, respect for human rights, women's rights in particular, and counterterrorism. And until we see action, not just words, but action on these issues, they certainly don't deserve international recognition.

The Trump administration was and is being criticised for, by and large, leaving out the Afghan government from its negotiations for a settlement in Afghanistan. It sounds like based on what you're saying, there were

differing voices within the Trump administration. Why did they end up cutting out the Afghan government from those talks and is what we're seeing today a consequence of that?

Well, the decision to hold direct U.S.-Taliban talks and not insist to the Taliban that the Afghan government be there, which is what the U.S. was doing in previous years (the Taliban did not want the Afghan government at the table, said they were illegitimate) – and the U.S. had respected that for many, many years – the decision was made in 2018 by the Trump administration to allow the U.S. to engage directly with the Taliban. The U.S. felt that its hands would forever be tied and it would not be able to reach any kind of political accommodation, without being able to engage directly with the Taliban. The idea was always that eventually the Afghan government would be brought into those talks. And I think there also was an expectation that the U.S. would represent Afghan

interests. But unfortunately this is not what happened. What we saw was a consistent undermining of the Afghan government. It was easier to extract concessions from the Afghan government and give concessions to the Taliban. Unfortunately, there was not a balanced handling of that process, it wasn't a 'peace process'. We didn't get the Taliban actually breaking from al-Qaeda. The only thing the U.S. got out of the Doha Agreement was the fact that Taliban did not shoot at U.S. forces as they were departing the country. So it really should be [called] the Doha Withdrawal Agreement, not the Peace Agreement.

Officials in the Biden administration have said alternatives to the way in which the exit was actually conducted would have come with their own human costs borne largely in these counterfactual situations by American soldiers and their families. What would you have suggested, in terms of an exit?

I personally think that the U.S. could have kept a limited presence. There are some 3,500 troops when Biden took office in January, along with the 7,000 to 8,000 NATO troops. And I think that there are ways to protect those forces. When I engaged with senior military leadership before the decision was made to go to zero, they had assured me that there were capabilities, there were ways to protect U.S. forces, and also to respond. It's not as if the U.S. were sitting ducks – we had ways to respond to the Taliban. So, that would not have been a solution that would defeat the Taliban, it would have largely been a holding position just a way for the U.S. to continue to protect its counterterrorism interests, and give the government, an opportunity to perhaps negotiate a better deal with the Taliban... I think the thinking behind keeping a small CT (counterterrorism) presence there, while not solving the problem completely, it would have at least protected fundamental U.S. national,

counterterrorism interests.

Speaking of safe havens for terrorists, what's unfolding in Afghanistan is a gift of sorts to Pakistan, and PM Imran Khan has not hidden his appreciation for the turn of events. How do you think this is going to impact America's relationship with Pakistan?

Like I said earlier, it's a fundamental failure of U.S. policy that across four administrations, we were not able to deal with the Taliban sanctuary inside Pakistan. The Trump administration had cut security assistance to Pakistan... at least we didn't have U.S. taxpayer money funding a military that was supporting our enemies. I don't foresee any reinvigoration of the relationship or any great efforts made to try to re-establish an alliance with Pakistan. I don't see the relationship plummeting, either. I think it will just probably remain rather stagnant over next several years. (Full version is available at <https://bit.ly/LisaCurtisTH>)

## Reports of targeted Taliban killings spark Afghans' fears

Militants tortured and killed Hazara men in Ghazni province, say eyewitnesses

ASSOCIATED PRESS  
KABUL

Reports of targeted killings in areas overrun by the Taliban mounted on Friday, fuelling fears that they will return Afghanistan to the repressive rule they imposed when they were last in power, even as they urged imams to push a message of unity at Friday's prayers.

Terrified that the militants would commit such abuses and despairing for their country's future, thousands have raced to Kabul's airport and border crossings. Others have taken to the streets to protest the takeover.

An Amnesty International report provided more evidence on Friday that undercut the Taliban's claims they have changed.

The rights group said that



For a way out: Afghans gathering near the airport in Kabul on Friday, hoping to get on a flight to flee the country. AFP

its researchers spoke to eyewitnesses in Ghazni province who recounted how the Taliban killed nine ethnic Hazara men in the village of Mundarakht from July 4 to 6. It said six of the men were shot, and three were tortured to death. Hazaras are Shia Muslims who were previously persecuted by the Taliban and who made major gains in education and social status in recent years.

## China formally passes three-child policy into law

Move is aimed at boosting birth rates

ANANTH KRISHNAN

China's legislature on Friday formally amended the country's family planning rules to allow couples to have three children, also announcing a number of policy measures aimed at boosting declining birth rates.

The Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, or Parliament, passed an amendment to the Population and Family Planning Law, state media said, adding that the amended law calls on the authorities to "take supportive measures, including those in finances, taxes, insurance, education, housing and employment, to reduce families' burdens as well as the cost of raising and educating children."

The ruling Communist Party announced in May that couples in China would for the first time be allowed to have a third child in a relaxation of family planning rules. In 2016, a "two-child policy" was introduced that largely failed to boost birth rates.

China's regulators in recent weeks have taken drastic measures to reduce education costs - cited in many surveys as a main reason why many couples prefer to have only one child - including by overhauling the booming private education industry, which may be ordered to go non-profit according to reports in the

Chinese press. The changes come in the wake of China's once-in-ten year population census that recorded rapidly declining birth rates over the past decade. The National Bureau of Statistics said on May 11 that 12 million babies were born last year, the lowest number since 1961.

## Beijing passes tough online privacy law

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE  
BEIJING

China passed a sweeping privacy law aimed at preventing businesses from collecting sensitive personal data on Friday, as the country faces an uptick in Internet scams and Beijing targets tech giants hoovering up personal data.

Under the new rules, State and private entities handling personal information will be required to reduce data collection and obtain user consent. The Chinese state security apparatus will maintain access to swathes of personal data, however.

## Two killed in suicide attack in Pakistan

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE  
QUETTA

At least two children were killed and a Chinese citizen was wounded in a suicide attack in the port city of Gwadar on Friday, the latest assault targeting Chinese citizens in the country, officials said.

Chinese-funded projects have sparked resentment, particularly among separatists, who say locals see little benefit, with most jobs going to outsiders. Last month, nine Chinese nationals were killed in a suicide attack targeting a bus.

## NATO urges Taliban to allow evacuation

Biden says he couldn't guarantee the final outcome of 'one of the most difficult airlifts'

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE  
BRUSSELS

NATO on Friday called on the Taliban to allow people being evacuated to leave Afghanistan, and vowed that the allies would remain in "close coordination" while operations continue.

The joint declaration by NATO's 30 member countries was made following an emergency video conference of their Foreign Ministers to discuss evacuation efforts and the next steps to

take to resolve the crisis.

"We call on those in positions of authority in Afghanistan to respect and facilitate their safe and orderly departure, including through Hamid Karzai International Airport in Kabul," they said. "As long as evacuation operations continue, we will maintain our close operational coordination through allied military means at the airport."

The U.S. and NATO allies have been flying their citizens, Afghan staff and their families out of Kabul since the weekend, when the Taliban overran the capital and regained power.

While thousands have been evacuated so far, NATO chief Jens Stoltenberg said at the start of the videoconference that foreigners and Afghans were struggling to reach Kabul airport.

President Joe Biden said on Friday he could not guarantee the final outcome of the emergency evacuation

from Kabul's airport, calling it one of the most "difficult" airlift operations ever. "This is one of the largest, most difficult airlifts in history," Mr. Biden said in a televised address from the White House. "I cannot promise what the final outcome will be."

"I don't think anyone of us can see these pictures and not feel that pain on a human level," Mr. Biden said, but "now I'm focused on getting this job done."

ELSEWHERE



### Malaysian King picks ex-Deputy PM as leader

KUALA LUMPUR  
Malaysia's longest-governing political party reclaimed the premiership it lost in a shock 2018 election defeat, after the King on Friday named its candidate, Ismail Sabri Yaakob, as the country's new leader. Mr. Ismail was the deputy Prime Minister under the government of Muhyiddin Yassin, who resigned on Monday. AP

### Japan battles worst wave of COVID-19 infections

TOKYO  
Japan plans to dramatically ramp up daily COVID-19 tests as it battles its worst wave of infections, mainly driven by the Delta variant. New infections exceeded 25,000 on Thursday for the first time, a tally by national broadcaster NHK showed, with the surge mainly among those in their 40s and 50s, most of whom are unvaccinated.

### Merkel asks Putin to free Kremlin critic Navalny

MOSCOW  
German Chancellor Angela Merkel asked Russian President Vladimir Putin to free his jailed opponent Alexei Navalny on the anniversary of a nerve-agent attack on the politician, whose life was saved by Berlin doctors. "I demanded from the Russian leader that he free Navalny," Ms. Merkel said, standing next to Mr. Putin in Moscow. AFP

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