

THE DIASPORA BI-WEEKLY



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Photo by: Harsh Jadav

The Tauktae effect

The 'extremely severe' cyclone that hit the western coast of India last week left over 100 dead. Gujarat was the worst affected state. This week, Odisha, West Bengal brace for cyclone Yaas

Read more on Page 5

Of virus, fungus and us Immunity: Our biggest weapon

Alongside Covid-19, India is now grappling with mucormycosis, a rare fungal infection with high mortality. Treatment is not only expensive, but also difficult to access currently. The answer to this complex situation is quite simple. Boost your immunity

If we had to zero in on the word of the year, it would without dispute be "immunity". From the initial emergence of the novel coronavirus to this date, when most of the world continues to grapple with Covid-19, a definite cure is yet to be found. In such a scenario, the most sensible thing to do would be to equip the body itself to put up a strong fight. Governments and health experts across the globe have been emphasizing on the need to develop immunity, either naturally or by assistance (read vaccination).

Why this discussion at this point? Just when it seemed that the acute crisis situation due to Covid-19 had eased a bit, India found itself staring at mucormycosis or the black fungus disease, a rare fungal infection with significant mortality rate. Mucormycosis is caused by molds known as micromycetes. Such is the current prevalence and the threat that Indian government had to tell states to

declare it an epidemic. The infection is mostly affecting Covid-19 patients, those who have either recovered or are still infected. Why is this fungal infection suddenly making a surge?

Fungi are ubiquitous in nature and our body is exposed to them all the time. Our immune system prevents them from causing any harm to the body. However, they are also opportunistic and attack the human body when its immune system has been weakened, either by other infections or medicines.

According to the Indian government, as of May 21, there were at least 8,848 cases of mucormycosis in the country, with Gujarat accounting for the maximum - 2,281. Not only is the treatment expensive, but also difficult to access amid the current shortage of drugs.

Multiple factors at play

In cases of mild infection of Covid-19,

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FIA's Covid heroes answer distress call

When the second wave of Covid-19 began to batter India, members of the Indian diaspora in the US immediately got into action, making contributions, coordinating relief work, offering their expertise to their Indian counterparts. FIA salutes these Covid heroes who rose to the occasion

#New Jersey

The second wave of Covid-19 pandemic in India has been unfortunate. The country reported the maximum fresh cases of Covid-19 in the world. The health infrastructure came under tremendous pressure. The country that had helped many others in their fight against Covid-19 was dialling an SOS to every ally. And, they did not disappoint.

Not just at diplomatic level, efforts were made even at individual and organizational levels to help India through its dark hours. As the gravity of the situation unravelled, several Indians settled in the US realized they could not be mute spectators to their motherland's difficulties. Thus began the mission to help India.

The Federation of Indian Associations (FIA) has pledged its full support to the Indian government. Several members of the community even came forward to help aid efforts.

FIA prez shows the way

Among the benefactors from the diaspora is FIA president Anil Bansal, who has been doing his bit for his motherland in his individual capacity. In the recent months, Bansal has personally and through his foundation 'Bansal Charitable Foundation' donated \$100,000 towards various Covid relief works in India.

He donated \$50,000 towards construction of a gas crematorium in India to help dispose of bodies of deceased Covid patients.

"We just want to do as much as we can. When Covid struck, we decided to ramp up our work. We can imagine what people in India must be going through. We have been contributing to various causes. When BJANA said they



FIA President Anil Bansal

were raising funds for crematoriums, I felt that instead of putting money in multiple works, I could contribute in one place," said

Bansal.

Besides this, Bansal Foundation has been doing food pantries. It has also been supporting FIA's relief work by taking care of peripheral or logistics requirements.

Empowered women of FIA take charge of aid work

"Being a doctor I just could not digest the fact that people are dying without oxygen and medical care," said Dr Uma Rani Madhusudana, a physician of Internal Medicine. She is one of the recipients of the woman's empowerment award presented by FIA this year to women achievers among the Indian diaspora.

Dr Uma Rani got in touch with her physician friends back in India to get an insight into the situation there. "I reached out to the Indian Embassy / Consulate General



Dr Uma Rani Madhusudana

to find out about shipping of oxygen to India." Dr Uma Rani is a member of the American Association of Physicians of Indian Origin (AAPI) and Connecticut Association of Physicians of Indian origin (CAPI).

"As an organization we helped in mobilizing the oxygen concentrators. AAPI helped a lot," she added. Through CAPI, oxygen plants were installed in Delhi with the help of the president of Rotary Club. It may be noted that Delhi hospitals had faced severe oxygen shortage recently amid surge in severe cases of Covid-19, because of which several patients had lost their lives.

Dr Uma Rani is also part of a Covid consult group that has been supporting doctors as well as patients in India with their questions and concerns.

She is not alone. Rashmi Aggarwal, a nurse and active member of Indian Nurses association AAIN-NJ2 for over two years now, too has been actively involved in coordinating for relief material to be sent to India. Like Dr Uma Rani, Rashmi too had been recognized for her achievements by FIA on the International Women's Day this year.

Rashmi proposed that a group be formed to address the needs in India and help for much-needed supplies like oxygen concentrators, masks, sanitizer as well as other forms of PPE. She created



Rashmi Aggarwal

a group to bring resources from all realms to stand together and work towards relief work in India the support and resources gathered from everyone and organized focused activity

She spearheaded the fundraising task to generate monetary support for supplies for smaller hospitals in remote rural areas of India.

Doctors from BJANA offer telemedicine sessions

Dr Avinash Gupta, president of Bihar-Jharkhand Association of North America (BJANA), his wife Dr Geeta Gupta and doctors from Bihar and Jharkhand living in the US have been providing telemedicine sessions to Covid patients and their relatives across the world. They have been offering their services through the BJANA PRAN Covid helpline, led by Dr Dinesh Ranjan.

Through the sessions on Zoom breakout rooms from 7 am to 8:30 am IST every day, the doctors offer medical advice for those who can be cured at home. So far, over 1,000 Covid patients have benefitted from this service.

BJANA-PRAN has also started a Covid Care Center in Patna in collaboration with Aastha charitable & Welfare Society.



Dr Avinash Gupta



Dr. Geeta Gupta

3 decades on, Alabama allows yoga in schools

'Namaste' greeting, chanting, mudras will not be allowed

#Montgomery

Alabama has lifted a nearly 3-decade-old ban on teaching yoga in schools. However, the teaching will have to be limited only to poses and stretching. No chanting or the 'namaste' greeting will be allowed.

The Bill introduced by Democratic Rep Jeremy Gray earlier this year proposed to allow public school students of grades K-12 to take yoga as an elective. "Instruction in yoga shall be an elective activity. Students shall have the option to opt out in favor of alternative activities, which shall be made available," the bill read.

However, those opposing it claimed it would introduce Hinduism in schools. Last week, Gov. Kay Ivey signed the legislation.

According to the Alabama legislature website, all poses, exercise and stretching techniques would have exclusively English descriptive names.

Chanting, mantras, mudras and namaste greeting are prohibited.



Covid Hate Crime Bill is now a law in the US

#Washington

In a reassuring development for communities that have been at the receiving end of hate crimes in the United States, President Joe Biden last week signed the Covid-19 Hate Crime Bill, making it a law that is aimed at curbing the rise in hate crimes against Asian Americans, Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders.

The Democrats and the Republicans came together to support the bill. It was approved by 364-62 votes this week, following the Senate's 94-1 vote in April

"Silence is complicity. And we cannot be complicit. We have to speak out. We have to act. That's what you've done. And I can't thank you enough... I'm proud today that Democrats and Republicans have stood up together to say something," said Biden, ahead of signing the bill.

Under the new law, the Department of Justice will issue clearer guidance for state, city, and tribal, and law enforcement agencies on how to establish online reporting of hate crimes. It will work with the Department of Health and Human Services to raise public awareness of Covid-19 hate crimes that occurred during the pandemic. There will also be a devoted official at the Department of Justice whose sole job is to expedite the review of

Gets overwhelming 364-62 votes as Democrats, Republicans come together to support it; President Joe Biden praises both parties while signing the bill

hate crimes reports.

The law will provide resources to create specialized hate crimes units that will also help states create hotlines for hate crimes at state and local levels.

The White House Initiative on Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (WHIAAPI)



*See Administration's Fact Sheet Actions

Community Policy Briefing

Thursday, May 27, 2021 at 10 a.m. ET

Please register [here](#)

In Celebration of Asian American and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander Heritage Month, the White House Initiative on Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders invites you to a virtual Community Policy Briefing. In March, the Biden-Harris administration released an AAPI fact sheet and announced additional actions to respond to anti-Asian violence, xenophobia and bias. Senior administration officials and staff will be providing an overview and updates related to the actions with participation from AAPI community organizations.

This event is open to the public and will be recorded.

Asian American and Native Hawaiian / Pacific Islander Heritage Month 2021

Plasma therapy off India's Covid treatment

Covid-19 National Task Force removes the much-publicized Convalescent Plasma Therapy from its treatment protocol for infected persons after reports pointing to its ineffectiveness

#New Delhi

Last year, when medicos were struggling to find ways to deal with Covid-19, the convalescent plasma therapy seemed to be an effective answer to early treatment of patients. Now, India has decided to drop this therapy from the treatment protocol for infected persons. Apparently, it has no therapeutic benefits for hospitalized patients.

The decision was taken by the AIIMS-ICMR Covid-19 National Task Force and the health ministry.

The therapy involves extracting the plasma of those who have recovered from Covid-19 with moderate to severe symptoms. This convalescent plasma containing antibodies against the infection would be administered to patients during early days of infection and would provide passive immunity. Previously, it was believed that introducing convalescent plasma therapy in the treatment protocol would make it more effective. It had been approved for off-label use in moderate cases and within the first week of onset of the infection.

Now, however, experts have cited reports that indicate no significant benefits for Covid-19 patients in hospitals. According to them, it is ineffective in halting the progression of the infection. Also, there have been incidents of inappropriate use of the therapy.

The decision by the national task force comes after an open letter by health experts to the Principal Scientific Advisor of AIIMS and



ICMR, citing findings of three international trials to support their claim that CPT has no benefits and should be dropped from treatment protocol.

ICMR, too, had conducted a trial last year – ICMR PLACID trial – which had made a similar observation. It had then warned against the indiscriminate use of CPT.

DRDO launches 1st batch of anti-Covid 2-DG drug

India's Defence Research and Development Organization (DRDO) released the first batch of its anti-Covid drug 2-deoxy-D-glucose (2-DG) which has received emergency approval by the Drug Controller General of India (DGCI). The drug has been hailed as a new ray of hope for India in its fight against the second wave of the pandemic. It is said to reduce the recovery time of hospitalized patients.

Meanwhile, the Defence Institute of Physiology and Allied Sciences (DIPAS), which falls under DRDO, developed an antibody detection-based kit 'DIPCOVAN'.

At least 100 Covid cases on Everest, says guide

Nepal may have denied outbreak of Covid-19 on Mount Everest, but an expert climbing guide has claimed that at least a 100 persons, including climbers and support staff, have been infected on the peak.

Lukas Furtenbach of Austria had halted his Everest expedition due to virus fears a few days back. He told a news agency that one of his foreign guides and six Nepali Sherpa guides have tested positive.

"I think with all the confirmed cases we know now — confirmed from (rescue) pilots, from insurance, from doctors, from expedition leaders — I have the positive tests so we can prove this," Furtenbach told AP in Nepal's capital, Kathmandu.

According to him, the numbers could be around 150 or 200, with at least 100 positive in the base camp.

Nepalese mountaineering officials have denied there are any active cases this season among climbers and support staff at all base camps for the country's Himalayan mountains.

Turn from page 1 ... Immunity: Our biggest weapon

patients are prescribed vitamin supplements and proper diet along with lot of fluids and rest. This boosts the body's own immune system. An anti-biotic or anti-viral course may be prescribed by the doctor if need be. When that is inadequate, steroids are introduced. There have been claims that steroids weaken the immune system, making it vulnerable to fungal attack. However, Dr Pragnesh Vachhrajani, general physician, former president of Ahmedabad Medical Association and secretary of Ahmedabad Family Physicians' Association (Gujarat, India), points out that there are multiple factors at play and steroids or antibiotics by themselves cannot be blamed for the black fungus outbreak.

Prevention is better than cure

"Covid-19 has triggered discussion on immunity and its importance. Until the pandemic struck, we hardly bothered about it. But now, it is getting its due share of attention. Unfortunately, immunity is being treated like fast food that is seen as a quick fix. That's not how things work. You can't expect to boost it overnight," says Dr Vachhrajani.

Explaining mucormycosis, he adds, "Things are not crystal clear as to why mucormycosis has surged right now. The lowered immunity could be a reason. But then, it is never one factor. We have been prescribing steroids to patients for decades, so it would be wrong to say that the cases surged because

of steroid intake. There are multiple factors at play. For instance, uncontrolled diabetes, poor hygiene, immunosuppressants, etc. Under pressure, the immune system collapses and that is when these opportunistic molds strike. The key is to have healthy diet and lifestyle and keep ailments like diabetes under control." Vaccination is another way of enhancing the body's immunity. Countries all over have been racing to immunize their populations.

If there has to be one takeaway from this entire pandemic, it would be that our immune system must get its due share of attention.

Tauktae batters western coast of India

#Ahmedabad

Last week, Cyclone Tauktae hit India, badly affecting the western coast of the country. Gujarat was the worst-hit. In fact, Tauktae was only the second cyclone of 'extremely severe' category to hit the state in 23 years.



The cyclone uprooted several trees, like this one in Ahmedabad

When it made its landfall near Diu on May 17, its speed was between 160-170 km/hr to 185 km/hr.

The cyclone reportedly left 104 people dead, which is higher than the toll from any single cyclone coming from the Arabian Sea in the past one decade. Even after making landfall, the cyclone retained much of its intensity, starting from Lakshadweep and bringing rain to as far as Delhi, Bihar and Nepal. Several people went missing after a barge off the Mumbai coast sank amid the cyclone. The barge, owned by Oil and Natural Gas Corporation (ONGC), was carrying personnel deployed for offshore drilling. Despite their heavy weight, the anchors could not hold the barge and gave way when the cyclone hit. As many as 188 persons were rescued and 51 bodies were recovered, while 21 were still missing.

The 'extremely severe' cyclone left over 100 dead; Gujarat worst affected; Odisha, West Bengal brace for cyclone Yaas

After Tauktae, now Yaas

While Tauktae hit the western coast, another cyclone named Yaas developed in the Bay of Bengal. It was expected to make landfall near Balasore coast in Odisha around noon on May 26. Bengal and Odisha are in the line of the cyclone and likely to bear the maximum brunt. Evacuation work was started in both states. In its revised forecast, the India Meteorological Department has predicted that Yaas is likely to be a 'very severe cyclonic storm' when it makes landfall.

Agencies

Gas crematory for Bihar district, courtesy FIA

#New Jersey/Darbhanga

The mortality rate during the second wave of Covid-19 in India has been quite high. At the peak of the wave, bodies had been piling up at crematories. Realizing



Photo for representation

the need for facilities for quick and clean disposal of bodies, the Federation of Indian Associations decided to fund a gas furnace in Darbhanga, a district in Bihar in northern India.

Alok Kumar, the past president of FIA, got in touch with Kabir Sewa Sansthan (KSS), a voluntary organization that has been assisting with cremation of unclaimed bodies as well as those where families cannot afford a decent cremation.

After understanding the requirement, FIA decided to donate a gas furnace to be installed at Mukti Dham in Bhigo Mohalla of Darbhanga. FIA contacted Darbhanga

The association is funding installation of LPG-powered furnace in Darbhanga district of the Indian state

DM Thyagrajan SM who gave the approval for the work. "The furnace is expected to become operational in the first week of June," Thyagrajan told a national daily. The estimated cost of the project is around Rs 50-60 lakh. FIA will fund the procurement of the equipment. An engineer from Haryana has already visited the proposed site of installation.

WhatsApp won't disable features for now

Responds to Indian govt's letter directing it to withdraw contentious privacy policy

#New Delhi

WhatsApp will not restrict functionality for Indian users who do not accept its privacy policy till the country's proposed personal data protection law comes into effect, it has told the government. The messaging app has been making headlines

because of its contentious privacy policy which it has been urging users to accept.

The Personal Data Protection (PDP) Bill, which is currently with the Joint Parliamentary Committee, is likely to be tabled in the Parliament later this year.

Last week, the government had directed the company to take back the policy, citing harm to the interests of Indian citizens. It had given the company seven days to respond.

"We have responded to the Government of India's letter and assured them that the

privacy of users remains our highest priority. As a reminder, the recent update does not change the privacy of people's personal messages. Its purpose is to provide additional information about how people can interact with businesses if they choose to do so," a WhatsApp spokesperson said in a statement.



Israel, Hamas stop fire after 11 days of bloodshed

#Gaza

Following what was probably their worst fighting in several years, Israel and Hamas agreed to ceasefire that has been largely mediated by Egypt. The fight that went on for 11 days left nearly 250 dead in Gaza in the Israeli bombing.

Last week, both parties agreed to ceasefire and claimed victory as the ceasefire continued.

Regional powers such as Egypt and Qatar, as well as US and the United Nations got involved in the mediation. In fact, Egyptian mediators have been shuttling between Israel and the Gaza Strip, which is ruled by Hamas, to

try to sustain the ceasefire and have also met the Islamist group's rival, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, in the occupied West Bank.

Lynn Hastings, the UN Humanitarian Coordinator for the Palestinian territories, said on Sunday the UN would launch an appeal to repair the damage in densely populated Gaza, where there is a threat of COVID-19 spreading.

Israel has blockaded Gaza since 2007, saying this prevents Hamas bringing in arms. Hastings said the United Nations had long been asking Israel to stop the blockade and would continue doing so.

U.S. President Joe Biden has said

Both claim victory in the fight; nearly 250 killed in bombing; uneasy calm in Gaza strip



The bombing has damaged several buildings and structures in Gaza strip

Washington will work with UN agencies on expediting humanitarian aid for Gaza "in a manner that does not permit Hamas to simply restock its military arsenal".

IMF proposes \$50 billion global vaccination plan

It aims to cover at least 40% of world's population by end of this year

The International Monetary Fund has proposed a \$50 billion global vaccination plan that would cover at least 40 per cent of the global population by the end of 2021 and at least 60 per cent by the first half of 2022, as per a Reuters report

With strong and co-ordinated action now, the world can durably exit this unprecedented health and economic crisis, IMF Managing Director Kristalina Georgieva said in her address to the G20 Health Summit.

"For some time, we have been warning of dangerous divergence of economic

fortunes. It will only worsen as the gap widens between wealthy countries that have access to vaccines and poor countries that do not," she said.

IMF, she said building on the work of the WHO, World Bank, Gavi, African Union and others, has proposed targets, estimates financing requirements, and lays out pragmatic action, which has three broad elements.

"First, vaccinating of at least 40 per cent of the global population by end-2021 and at least 60 per cent by the first half of 2022," she said.



Second, insuring against downside risks such as new variants that may necessitate booster shots. This means investing in additional vaccine production capacity, scaling up genomic surveillance and supply-chain surveillance, and contingency plans to handle virus mutations or supply shocks.

Third, managing the interim period where vaccine supply is limited with widespread testing and tracing, therapeutic and public health measures, and ramping up preparations for vaccine deployment together.

Tokyo Olympic on schedule, says IOC chief



IOC president Thomas Bach

#Tokyo

Despite opposition from a majority of Japanese, the Tokyo Olympics will go ahead as per schedule. The announcement was made by International Olympic Committee (IOC) chief Thomas Bach last week. The games have already been postponed once due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Hosting the Olympics this time will send a strong message that there is still "light at the end of the tunnel", the IOC president said, while

addressing the 47th International Hockey Federation (FIH) Congress held virtually.

Earlier, IOC vice-president John Coates had said that the Tokyo Games would go ahead even if the city was under a state of emergency due to the pandemic. The idea of hosting the Games has been opposed by a majority of Japanese due to the strain it is expected to put on the country's medical infrastructure in the wake of the pandemic. However, the IOC has remained adamant.

Agencies

Post-Tauktae, it's raining losses on Bollywood

Sets of films like Maidaan, Brahmastra, Gangubai Kathiawadi as well as TV shows were damaged in the recent volcano, resulting in losses to the makers

#Mumbai

The extremely severe cyclone Tauktae inflicted a lot of damage on coastal areas and left many dead. Bollywood, too, did not escape the wrath of the cyclone. The strong winds destroyed several sets of films and TV shows.

These included the sets of Boney Kapoor's Ajay Devgn-starrer Maidaan, Salman Khan's Tiger 3, Ranbir Kapoor's Brahmastra and Sanjay Leela Bhansali's Gangubai Kathiawadi, erected at Mumbai's Film City.

Shooting had been halted ahead of the cyclone. According to sources, sets of TV shows too, which were in Film City compound, had been affected.

Already reeling under losses due to the lockdown, film and serial makers have suffered yet another blow in the form of the cyclone, for damaged sets means rise in costs.

"We had started thinking through in advance. The damage could have been more, as there were a lot of trees around the set. Thankfully, we're shooting in Silvassa," JD Majethia, producer of Wagle ki Duniya, has said.

Meanwhile, producer Boney Kapoor



confessed that he had suffered huge losses and that he would have to erect the set of 'Maidaan' for the third time. He had to dismantle it last year due to the lockdown and had later rebuilt it when they decided to begin the shooting. According to him, 70-80% of the set had been destroyed by the cyclone.

Music director Vijay 'Laxman' Patil no more

He was known for his work in films like Maine Pyar Kiya, Hum Apke Hain Kaun and Hum Saath Saath Hain

#Nagpur

Music director Vijay Patil, popularly known as Laxman of the Raam-Laxman fame, passed away last Saturday at his residence. He has provided music for popular films like Maine Pyar Kiya, Hum Apke hain Kaun and Hum Saath Saath Hain under the banner of Rajshri Productions.

Patil and his friend Surender Kadam formed the Raam-Laxman pair. Late on Friday night, he suffered a severe cardiac arrest.



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Amid controversy, more support pours in for Indian Idol-12

After Kumar Sanu and Roop Kumar Rathod, now Anuradha Paudwal and Abhijeet Sawant, too, speak up in defence of the show and its contestants

#Mumbai

Recently, legendary singer Kishore Kumar's son and singer-composer Amit Kumar, who had been invited as a guest judge on the sets of Indian Idol 12, said that he praised the participants because he had been asked to. Later, taking a dig at Amit Kumar, the show's host Aditya Narayan, in a separate episode, asked judge Kumar Sanu if he was praising the contestants because he genuinely liked their performance or he had been told to do so. At that time, Sanu had clarified that he

was under no such compulsion.

Now, veteran singer Anuradha Paudwal and Indian Idol 1 winner Abhijeet Sawant have come out in defence of the show.

"Kishore Kumar was a legendary singer and there can't be any comparison between him and the contestants who are just beginners," Sawant said.

Paudwal, who too had come as a guest judge on the show, said she found the contestants talented and that there was nothing controversial about it.

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