

Hike in POL prices likely F.P. Report

ISLAMABAD: The federal government is expected to announce a hike in petroleum prices on the first day of the new year, bringing significant news for the public regarding petrol prices. According to details, there is a likelihood of an increase in the prices of petroleum products, with diesel prices expected to rise by more than Rs4 per liter.



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Three of a family burnt F.P. Report

ISLAMABAD: A powerful explosion caused by a gas leakage ripped through the Anda Mor area of North Karachi on Saturday, inflicting severe burn injuries on a husband, wife and their young daughter. The devastating explosion that rocked North Karachi's Anda Mor area had a catastrophic impact, injuring three members of a family and causing extensive damage to surrounding buildings.

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PM directs steps to overcome power theft

Saqib Mushtaq

ISLAMABAD: Prime Minister Muhammad Shehbaz Sharif on Saturday directed to complete the installation of smart meters as soon as possible to ensure transparency in the billing system and called for concrete steps to prevent electricity theft.

The prime minister chaired a review meeting on the performance of Electricity Distribution Companies (DISCOs). The deliberations centered on the affairs of Lahore Electric Supply Company (LESCO), Peshawar Electric Supply Company (PESCO) and Faisalabad Electric Supply Company (FESCO). PM Office Media Wing said in a press release.

During the meeting, the prime minister said that the overbilling was unacceptable and strict action would be taken against officers involved in such practices. He expressed concern over the delay in the appointment process of Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) of the distribution companies

and directed for ensuring CEOs' appointments through a highly transparent process and asked for its completion at the earliest.

Recruitment of workforce in distribution companies should be merit-based, with no compromise on transparency, he further added. The prime minister said that all the available resources should be utilized to meet the targets of NEPRA.

Minister for Economic Affairs Ahsan Iqbal, Minister for Power Division Sardar Owais Ahmad Khan Leghari, Minister of State for Information Technology and Telecommunication Shaza Fatima, Minister of State for Finance and Revenue Ali Pervaz Malik, Prime Minister's Coordinator Rana Ahsan Afzal and senior government officials attended the meeting. The meeting was given a detailed briefing on the achievement of targets which included recovery rates (up to November of FY 2024-25): LESCO: 96.82 percent, PESCO: 87.98 percent and FESCO: 97.57 percent.

Transmission and distribution loss- es (up to November of FY 2024-25) in these companies remained at: LESCO: 13.04 percent, PESCO: 33 percent and FESCO: 6.01 percent. The meeting was also apprised of the smart meter installation progress:- LESCO: Out of 223,365 three-phase smart meters, 49,470 had been installed. PESCO: Out of 152,559 smart meters, 51,173 have been installed. FESCO: Out of 192,311 smart meters, 11,276 have been installed. LESCO, PESCO and FESCO offered consumers' facilities for complaint resolution and other services via call centers, emails, websites, interactive voice response (IVR) systems, and NEPRA's mobile and web services.

Moreover, free access to the 118 helpline from all mobile operators was being ensured for complaints related to electricity transmission, it was further added. The complaint resolution (up to November) stood at: LESCO: 99.2 percent, PESCO: 99.9 percent and FESCO: 99.7 percent.



ISLAMABAD: Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif chairing a review meeting on performance of electricity distribution companies.

No leniency for May 9 violence in PTI negotiations: Tarar

F.P. Report

GUJRANWALA: Federal Minister for Information, Broadcasting, National Heritage, and Culture Attaullah Tarar categorically stated on Saturday that the events of May 9 are unpardonable and will not be compromised or forgiven due to ongoing negotiations with the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI).

During a media interaction in Rahwali, Gujranwala, the minister stressed that overlooking PTI's anti-state activities would be tantamount to opening the gates of jails (and releasing the culprits). Letting PTI's anti-state activities go unpunished would render the country's jails meaningless. While acknowledging the seriousness of the crimes, the government is negotiating with PTI to prioritize national stability.

Criticizing PTI, he said the party was promoting an incomprehensible false narrative about military court convictions, often changing its stance with remarks like "Are we slaves?" He stressed the importance of adhering to the correct narrative and avoiding politicization of state affairs, particularly in matters of international relations. PTI often makes statements and then reverses its position.

Tarar stated that 85 PTI activities responsible for the violence on May 9 were convicted by military courts following a thorough legal process. The evidence proving their involvement in the attacks on army installations was considered irrefutable. While the cases of the remaining individuals involved in sabotage activities were being processed in various anti-terrorism courts.

Negotiations among political parties were crucial for addressing the country's pressing issues. Referring to the ISPR DG's recent press conference as comprehensive, Tarar stated that the DG addressed topics including the May 9 violence, the war on terrorism, and the military trials of miscreants. He noted that trying individuals who attack military installations in military courts is a common global practice.

He stated that those convicted for the May 9 violence were given a fair trial, the right to appeal within military and high courts, access to case records, contact with their families, and were not tried in absentia.

The Federal Information Minister explained that, just as drug cases are handled by Anti-Narcotics Force (ANF) courts, terrorism cases by Anti-Terrorism Courts (ATCs), mega corruption cases by NAB and attacks on railway facilities by the Railway Police, attacks on military installations are prosecuted in military courts. He said the convictions were not rushed, taking two years to reach verdicts against the culprits. All were prosecuted in accordance with relevant laws, and stressed the need to prosecute the planners and masterminds behind the May 9 violence.

He said that even the harshest opponents of government were acknowledging the economy was on the right track, exports were rising, foreign currency reserves were increasing, and the rupee was stable against the dollar. He acknowledged PTI's role in the passage of the 26th Amendment, working together with JUI-F chief Maulana Fazlur Rehman to have various clauses removed from the draft amendment package.

Infiltration attempt at Pak-Afghan border

Security forces kill 15 Khorasan faction terrorists

F.P. Report

RAWALPINDI: Security forces thwarted an infiltration attempt by the Khorasan faction of the Khawarij terrorists at the Pakistan-Afghanistan border.

According to sources, 20 to 25 Khawarij terrorists attempted to infiltrate into Pakistan from two locations in Kurram and North Waziristan on the night between Dec 27 and 28, using Afghan Taliban border posts. Pakistani security forces acted promptly and foiled the infiltration attempt.

Sources revealed that on the morning of Dec 28, the Khawarij and Afghan Taliban jointly opened fire on Pakistani posts with heavy weapons without provocation.

Pakistani security forces responded swiftly and forcefully to the firing. According to sources, initial reports indicate significant losses on the Afghan side. Effective retaliatory

fire led to the death of over 15 Khawarij and Afghan Taliban fighters, with several others injured. Due to the effective counter-action and shelling, Afghan Taliban forces fled, abandoning six posts.

Security sources stated that Pakistan had repeatedly urged the interim Afghan government to prevent the Khorasan faction of the Khawarij from using Afghan soil against Pakistan. Instead of controlling the Khawarij, the Afghan Taliban continues to support these terrorist elements.

Sources further mentioned that the Khorasan faction of the Khawarij operates freely in Afghanistan and is exploiting Afghan territory for anti-Pakistan terrorist activities. Pakistani security forces are fully capable of giving a befitting response to any act of aggression.

Meanwhile, Pakistan's armed forces are taking several initiatives to further

enhance the security management at country's western borders.

According to a report on Saturday, under the Western Border Management regime, 98% of the Pakistan-Afghanistan Border work has been completed, and 91% of the Pakistan-Iran Border work is finished, covering a total of 3,217 Kilometers.

To prevent the movement of terrorists along the western border, ninety two percent of the forts along the Pakistan-Afghan Border and forty percent of the forts on the Pakistan-Iran Border have been completed.

Likewise, the fencing work covering 3,100 kilometers of the Western Border has been completed. The completion of the fencing will significantly strengthen national security. Additionally, 72% of the tribal areas have been cleared of mines, and unexploded ordnance has been recovered.

Kurram Jirga: Peace pact reached between parties

F.P. Report

PESHAWAR: A peace agreement has been finalised between the parties in the Grand Jirga aimed at restoring peace in Kurram District, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. As per the agreement, parties involved in the use of weapons in Kurram would face fines.

Additionally, the 2008 Murree Agreement would be implemented, and all parties would be required to surrender their weapons. The Jirga had been ongoing for three weeks to address the district's security challenges.

The agreement signing, delayed due to incomplete attendance of Jirga members, has now been successfully concluded with consensus on all points. Yesterday's session, held at Kohat Fort under the leadership of Commissioner Kohat Muatasim Billah, involved extensive discussions on various issues. The administration has expressed concerns over reopening roads while heavy weapons remain in the area, deeming it a significant risk. In the meantime, helicopter services are ongoing to deliver essential supplies, including medicines, to Kurram District.

Karachi faces massive traffic jams

F.P. Report

KARACHI: As Majlis-e-Wahdat-ul-Muslimeen's (MWM) widespread protests continued in several parts of Karachi including Numaish Chowargi and Shahrah-e-Faisal, many arteries of the city have been experiencing significant traffic jams.

MWM has spread its sit-ins from Numaish Chowranghi to across Karachi to protest against Parachinar situation. The protests have resulted in the closure of several major roads, including MA Jinnah Road, which is closed for traffic at Numaish Chowranghi. Abul Hasan Ispahani Road is also closed on both sides near Abbas Town.

Additionally, Five-Star Chowranghi is completely closed while University Road is also closed from Metro Shopping Center to Nipa Chowranghi. Main Shahrah-e-Faisal is closed from Kala Pul to Malir Road, while National Highway is closed on both roads near Malir 15 Bridge.

To manage the traffic flow, diversions have been made. Traffic from Malir, Korangi Industrial Area, and Clifton Defence can use the route from Sanghar Chowranghi to Shah Faisal Colony, Rita Plot, Shama Shopping Center, and Shah Faisal Colony Bridge to reach the airport, according to Karachi Traffic Police.

Traffic from Pehlwan Goth to the airport can use the route via Karsaz, Drig Road, Millennium, and Johar Chowranghi.

Bilawal urges PML-N to take decisions with consensus

F.P. Report

LARKANA: Chairman Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) Bilawal Bhutto Zardari has expressed dissatisfaction with the fulfillment of promises made by the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) to his party, saying that the government does not have the mandate to make unilateral decisions.

While speaking to the media in Ratodero, Chairman PPP said the massive turnout at the grand public gathering in Garhi Khuda Bakhsh clearly shows that even after 17 years, the people continue to stand firmly with the ideology of Shaheed Mohtarma Benazir Bhutto. He emphasized that resolving public issues remains his top priority, and despite limited resources, he strives to address as many problems as possible through hard work.

Chairman Bilawal Bhutto Zardari lamented that whether the PPP is in government or in opposition, the federal attitude toward smaller provinces has remained the same. He said that while PPP had supported the government to the extent of voting for the Prime Minister and had agreed that provinces should get their due rights, the agreed-upon commitments, such as forming a collective Public Sector Development Program (PSDP) for all provinces, were not fulfilled.

The PPP Chairman further mentioned that his party had established a committee with the federal government and PML-N to address key issues before presenting a report to the Central Executive Committee (CEC).

However, meaningful progress was not made, and the commitments made on a political basis were not implemented effectively.

Chairman stressed that the federal government needs to work collaboratively with the provinces to ensure they receive their rights. He expressed hope that PPP's grievances would be taken seriously and that constructive dialogue could help resolve provincial objections and fulfill political promises.

Responding to a question, Chairman Bilawal Bhutto Zardari said that the government does not have the mandate to make unilateral decisions, nor does it hold a two-thirds majority in Parliament akin to the 1990s. "They might think they don't need to consult anyone, but the ground reality is different. They have the mandate to make collective decisions with political stakeholders, not unilateral ones, especially on critical issues like water rights, which violate the 1991 water pact."

He urged the government to adopt an inclusive approach for the success of any project. "Ignoring objections and proceeding unilaterally will only make projects controversial. Collaborative planning, after understanding everyone's perspective, is key to success. Otherwise, as with the Kalabagh Dam project, unilateral decisions will fail."

Chairman Bilawal Bhutto Zardari stated that it is his responsibility to ensure access to clean drinking water for his people, despite not receiving a fair share under the NFC Award. Highlighting the PPP's innovative solutions, he said the party has pio-

neered public-private partnerships in the region to address public needs despite resource constraints.

Regarding economic improvement and inflation, Chairman welcomed positive developments but emphasized that economic progress must be felt by the public. He pointed out the government's ambitious goal of making Pakistan a trillion-dollar economy and questioned its feasibility without leveraging the agriculture sector, which he described as the backbone of Pakistan's economy.

Chairman Bilawal Bhutto Zardari criticized the government's approach to the internet and IT sector, urging them to enhance connectivity rather than restrict it. "Instead of slowing internet speeds or citing absurd excuses like cables being eaten by sea creatures, the government should focus on extending internet access to underserved areas."

He highlighted the importance of digital stability for a youthful population, with 70% under the age of 30, and criticized unilateral decisions to disrupt internet access. "If the government had engaged stakeholders and addressed concerns like disinformation or the misuse of digital platforms by extremist organizations, we would have been willing to collaborate. But making decisions in isolation alienates the population, particularly the youth, which we cannot support."

Chairman Bilawal Bhutto Zardari emphasized that public wants political stability and security, urging the government to adopt a collaborative approach in addressing national challenges.

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KARACHI: Members casting votes in Karachi Press Club Elections 2025. —APP Photo

Wahab: No more disturbances in the name of protests

KARACHI (PPI): Mayor Karachi Barrister Murtaza Wahab said that no one would be allowed to disturb the public under the guise of protests. The government of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa is responsible for Parachinar incident, but the people of Karachi and the Sindh government are suffering the consequences.

According to a statement issued today, he mentioned that an FIR had been filed against those wasting water, and he would soon disclose the names of individuals who are causing harm to the city. He also promised a comprehensive press conference in one to two days about the Karachi Water & Sewerage Corporation. The administration of Trans Karachi has assured him that the Red Line project will be completed as soon as possible.

He said Barrister Murtaza Wahab has give hope to the people in 2024 and that they have made the Karachi Metropolitan Corporation financially stable. He added that he shares a long-standing relationship with Sindh Governor Kamran Tessori, but he believes that problems cannot be solved in the style of "Maula Jatt." He mentioned that Karachi's first fruit farm had been established in Aziz Bhatti Park and that a changing Karachi can be seen.

Mayor Karachi Barrister Murtaza Wahab expressed these views while talking to the media after inauguration of fruit and vegetable farm and urban forest in the Aziz Bhatti park on Saturday. Deputy Mayor Karachi Salman Abdullah Murad and KMC officials were also present on this occasion. Mayor Karachi said on December 27, the anniversary of Shaheed Benazir Bhutto was observed, and today, trees were planted in Aziz Bhatti Park as a tribute to the martyrs, People's Party's ideology is that public spaces should belong to the public.

He said that the Malir Expressway would be opened to the public from Shah Faisal Colony to Qayumabad in the next few days, and the remaining portion of the Baloch Colony Expressway would also be completed soon. Work is also ongoing on the Korangi Causeway bridge. Barrister Wahab also promised to update the public about the financial resources of KMC. He stated that recent tenders published in newspapers and other ongoing works would bring relief to the citizens of Karachi. He emphasized that Karachi would move forward and not step back.

He added that if an educational institution like a school were to be built on the site of a sports complex, the

NAB would ask questions. The Mayor emphasized that it is better to build essential infrastructure rather than allow illegal constructions like "China Cutting" and wedding halls. He also suggested that Jamaat-e-Islami's funds should be audited and questioned where they get their money from. He remarked that if Jamaat-e-Islami is given the charge of water corporation, it would only benefit their areas. He criticized them for saying they have no funds while claiming that exemplary work is being done in their towns. He pointed out that work on roads in New Karachi was being undone by road cutting, and questioned who allowed it.

He also stated that negotiations are ongoing with the protesters and that he had spoken with Provincial Minister Nasar Hussain Shah about it. Barrister Wahab mentioned that during the meeting of Trans Karachi on December 26, staff shortage issues were addressed. He also expressed that he would advise Governor Kamran Tessori to guide MQM members to support the idea of heavy traffic on the Lyari Expressway as it would ease traffic congestion. He highlighted the importance of regulating dumper trucks by the traffic department to prevent accidents, as many deaths have occurred due to dumper-related incidents.

IG orders tight security on New Year's Eve

LAHORE (APP): On the instructions of Inspector General of Police Punjab, Dr. Usman Anwar, the Punjab Police has completed the security plan to ensure law & order and maintain peace across the province. IG Punjab has issued orders to increase security across Lahore and the province on new year night.

A Punjab Police spokesman said that on the New Year Night, 395 Inspectors, 1125 Sub-Inspectors, 2060 ASIs, 1310 Head Constables, and 18,759 constables and other personnel will perform security duties. Over 5,000 officers and personnel will be assigned security duties in Lahore.

In Lahore and across the province, all activities will be monitored with the help of Safe City and CCTV cameras. The IG Punjab has instructed the police to remain on high alert and keep a strict watch on anti-national elements, emphasizing that no tolerance will be shown for one-wheeling, aerial firing, and mischief. Miscreants who harass women and citizens will be sent to the lock-up.

The IG Punjab also directed the supervisory officers to ensure coordinated traffic arrangements on new year night. He directed that Dolphin Squad, PRU, Elite Force, and PHP teams should increase patrolling on roads and highways. Search and sweep operations will continue regularly across Lahore and all cities. Surety bonds will be obtained from last year's convicted one-wheelers and those involved in aerial firing.

He further mentioned that the CCPO Lahore, RPOs, and DPOs should personally supervise all arrangements to maintain peace and order.

Non-Muslim cannot inherit the property of Muslim relative: LHC rules

LAHORE (INP): The Lahore High Court has ruled that a non-Muslim cannot inherit the property of their Muslim relative under Islamic law.

According to reports, Justice Chaudhry Muhammad Iqbal issued the decision while upholding the verdicts of two lower courts regarding the transfer of agricultural land in Toba Tek Singh's

Tehsil Gojra.

According to details, the deceased landlord was a Muslim, and after his death, his property was transferred to his three sons and two daughters. However, one of the deceased's grandsons challenged the transfer in favour of one of his uncles, claiming that the uncle was an Ahmadi and, therefore, not eligible to inherit property under Islamic inheritance laws.

ance laws.

The courts ruled in favour of the grandson, nullifying the property transfer. During the proceedings, another heir, the son of the non-Muslim uncle, testified that his father was an Ahmadi.

The Lahore High Court reaffirmed that Islamic principles do not allow a non-Muslim to inherit from the property of a Muslim relative.

Punjab govt sets new standards in health facilities: CM

LAHORE (APP): Punjab Chief Minister Maryam Nawaz Sharif has highlighted the current government's exemplary achievements in public health, describing them as milestones in welfare-driven governance.

In a statement issued on Saturday, she emphasized that public health is a top priority, and the government will ensure that no shortage of resources hinders progress. "We aim to provide a better environment in public hospitals compared to private clinics," the Chief Minister asserted. She further stated, "Our goal is to improve every hospital so that every patient receives free treatment and medicine."

The Punjab government has launched several pioneering health initiatives, including Nawaz Sharif Cancer Hospital: Introducing China's advanced methods, "No-

Chemotherapy, No-Surgery," for cancer treatment, Cardiology Institute Sargodha which is nearing completion as the first heart care institute in the region, Clinic-on-Wheel and Field Hospitals are providing benefits to over 6.8 million patients and providing essential healthcare services to urban and rural populations. Punjab has become the first province in Pakistan to formally launch the lifesaving service of Air Ambulance, transforming Basic Health Units (BHUs) across Punjab in Maryam Health clinics, ensuring access to modern healthcare in rural areas.

Over 2,800 hospitals have been revamped across Punjab. Field hospitals treated 950,000 patients, conducted 60,000 X-rays, and performed 135,000 lab tests while providing facilities for ultrasound, first aid, and maternal and child health. Clinic-on-Wheel

services reached 6.7 million patients in urban areas with a team of doctors, LHVs, vaccination staff, and ultrasound services.

The government has introduced a special package to address the shortage of specialist doctors in district hospitals. Plans are underway to establish cath labs and cardiology centers step-by-step in district hospitals.

Under the Chief Minister's Children's Heart Surgery Program, free treatment and surgeries for children with heart diseases have been initiated, reflecting the government's commitment to the welfare of vulnerable populations.

Chief Minister Maryam Nawaz Sharif reiterated that the government's efforts are aimed at ensuring that public hospitals offer services superior to private clinics, bringing free and quality healthcare to every citizen of Punjab.

Speakers call for reconnecting with Quaid-i-Azam's vision

F.P. Report

ISLAMABAD: As Pakistan nears its centennial year of independence, engaging in thoughtful discussions to envision a prosperous future becomes imperative. In this regard the Centre for Aerospace & Security Studies (CASS), Islamabad in collaboration with Air University organized a guest lecture under its Catalyst Conversation Series on 'Steering through Storms: Quaid-i-Azam's Leadership in the Time of Crisis', which aimed to facilitate such discourse.

Moderated by CASS Research Assistant Shaheer Ahmad, the discussion explored Quaid-i-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah's leadership style and decision-making during turbulent times, drawing lessons for modern governance.

The keynote was guided by insights of Prof. Dr Dushka H. Saiyid, Editor Youlin Magazine & Former Chairperson, Department of History, Quaid-i-Azam University.



In her Keynote Address, Prof. Dr Dushka H. Saiyid discussed the enduring legacy of Quaid-i-Azam focusing on his leadership qualities and his advocacy for women's empowerment.

The speaker reflected on Jinnah's visionary approach to governance and his unwavering commitment to constitutional principles.

Highlighting Jinnah's legislative achievements, the speaker noted his instrumental role in championing women's rights, including his support for inheritance laws through the Shariat Bill of 1937, which secured fixed prop-

erty shares for women.

Jinnah's leadership in mobilising women for political and social causes was underscored, as was his belief in the vital role of women in nation-building. Prof. Dr Dushka H. Saiyid's address served as a powerful reminder of Jinnah's foresight and inclusivity, urging today's leaders to draw inspiration from his example in promoting equity and progressive governance.

In his Concluding Remarks, Air Marshal Farooq Habib (Retd), Senior Director at CASS, underscored the significance of Quaid-i-Azam's

vision in shaping Pakistan's identity and future. He urged the young generation to honour Jinnah's legacy as a guiding principle for progress and unity. "Without Quaid's vision, the Muslims of the subcontinent would have had no identity. It is crucial for us to reconnect with this legacy to shape a prosperous future," said Air Marshal Habib. He emphasised Jinnah's dream of an inclusive state with an impartial government, where all citizens could live freely and with dignity.

Delivering his Vote of Thanks, President of CASS, Islamabad, Air Marshal Javaid Ahmed (Retd), thanked Prof. Dr Dushka H. Saiyid for her thought-provoking address and expressed gratitude to the administration of Air University for their cooperation in organising the Catalyst Conversation at their institution. The lecture was followed by an interactive Question and Answer session with students and faculty of the university.

Sindh narcotics control recovers 10,300 grams of ketamine

KARACHI (APP): The Sindh Narcotics Control Department has claimed to have recovered 10,300 grams of ketamine and arrested two suspects in a second major operation at Korangi Crossing on a tip-off during a week.

The Deputy Director Narcotics Control Karachi Lakhmi Chand and

District In-charge Korangi Sohail Abbas along with other officials while holding a press conference at the office of the Director General Narcotics Control Sindh, claimed that the current price of ketamine per kilogram in the international market is about 1 million rupees, which makes the total price more

than 10 million rupees.

He claimed that a case has been registered against the arrested accused Zahid Iqbal son of Fazal Elahi and Zulfiqar son of Din Muhammad, while according to initial information, the accused belong to an inter-provincial gang involved in drug

smuggling, who smuggle ketamine from Quetta to Karachi.

The Narcotics Control Department's officials said that further investigations are underway against the accused and raids are also being conducted at various places in search of other accomplices of the accused.

Parliamentary secretary visits Sialkot jail

LAHORE (APP): Parliamentary Secretary for Human Rights and Minority Affairs, Sonia Ashir, visited District Sialkot Jail on Saturday, where she shared the joy of Christmas with Christian prisoners by distributing cakes and gifts. She also presented the prisoners with a Holy Bible as a token of spiritual solace and encouragement.

During her visit, Sonia Asher met with the prisoners and listened to their concerns. The prisoners shared their issues and needs, upon which the Parliamentary Secretary immediately instructed the relevant

authorities to address these matters and assured them of their resolution.

She emphasized that the government is committed to safeguarding the rights of the minority community, and such meetings are a testament to the government's concern for their welfare and well-being. She further stated that this visit reflects the Punjab government's commitment to the protection of minority rights and the implementation of humanitarian principles.

Sonia Ashir also remarked that Christmas is an occasion to share

messages of love and respect with everyone, and she assured the prisoners that they are an integral part of the societal welfare. She assured that the government will continue to take such measures to provide a better environment for the reform and well-being of all prisoners.

Accompanying Sonia Ashir on this visit were Pastor Arif Yusuf, Pastor Sonita Arif, Nadeem James, Zulfiqar Ghoori (former Member of Punjab Assembly), Naem Qaiser, Wajiba Qaiser, Pastor Saifraz Bhatti, and Mohammad Faisal from the Human Rights Department.

NICVD treats over 1.3 million patients free of cost in 2024

F.P. Report

KARACHI: The National Institute of Cardiovascular Diseases (NICVD) has proudly announced its operational statistics for the year 2024, solidifying its position as the world's largest facility providing free cardiac care, including surgeries and primary percutaneous coronary interventions (PCIs). In the year 2024 alone, NICVD Karachi treated over 1.3 million patients, offering state-of-the-art cardiac care entirely free of cost to patients from across the country.

The statistics highlight the institution's exceptional performance and unwavering commitment to healthcare: Primary Angioplasties: 9,857, Early and Elective Angioplasties: round 4,500, Angiographies: 18,000, Pediatric Catheterizations and Interventions: 2,020, Percutaneous Transvenous Mitral Commissurotomy (PTMC): 299, Transcatheter Aortic Valve Implantation (TAVI) Procedures: 30, Open Heart Surgeries for Adults: 1,702, Open Heart Surgeries for Pediatrics:

1,450, Outpatient Consultations (Adults and Pediatrics): 333,761, Hospital Admissions: 54,347, Stroke Interventions: 75, Temporary Pacemaker Implantations (TPM): 1,202, Permanent Pacemaker Implantations (PPM): 998, Echocardiograms: more than 90,000.

A significant portion of these services was extended to patients from provinces and regions outside Sindh. A total of 160,427 patients from other provinces and territories availed of NICVD's free and advanced cardiac care: Punjab: 35,251 patients, Balochistan: 107,392 patients, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa: 16,004 patients, Azad Jammu & Kashmir: 1,260 patients, Gilgit-Baltistan: 520 patients.

In addition, NICVD extended its specialized cardiac care to underserved regions by establishing free pediatric cardiac services in Quetta in collaboration with the Sheikh Mohamed Bin Zayed Al Nahyan Institute of Cardiology. This initiative, launched in February

2024, has achieved remarkable outcomes: 45 pediatric cardiac surgeries and 102 interventions successfully performed, 101 CT Angios conducted, Over 4,500 pediatric patients attended in OPD, 750 complex cases referred to NICVD Karachi for advanced treatments.

This initiative extends life-saving cardiac care to underserved children in Balochistan at no cost, ensuring access to specialized treatments previously unavailable in the region.

Professor Tahir Saghir, Executive Director of NICVD, reaffirmed the institution's dedication to equitable healthcare, stating, "Our motto at NICVD

is to provide state-of-the-art cardiac treatment to every patient, regardless of their background or financial situation, entirely free of cost. We take pride in serving people from across the country without discrimination and ensuring access to the latest, often life-saving, cardiac treatments."

The NICVD's achievements in 2024 underscore its role as a global leader in free cardiac healthcare, made possible through the generous support of the Government of Sindh, unwavering dedication of NICVD's staff, and the institution's commitment to excellence.



LAHORE: A vendor preparing upper parts of the traditional smoking Hookah at his shop in the Provincial Capital. —APP Photo

Rasm-e-Qul

Former Chief Secretary Rustam Shah Mohmand Rasm-e-Qul will be held at 124 Double Road New Shami Road, Peshawar Cantt from 11 am onwards



Strengthening DRCs: UNDP, PJN collaborate with police for justice reform

F.P. Report

PESHAWAR: The Peace & Justice Network (PJN), in partnership with UNDP Pakistan and the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Police, organized a divisional consultative workshop in Peshawar to develop an action plan aimed at empowering Dispute Resolution Councils (DRCs) in the region. The workshop, held under the EU-funded Deliver Justice Project, brought together key stakeholders, including DRC members, judiciary representatives, law enforcement, civil society, and legal experts.

The workshop addressed challenges faced by DRCs and sought to enhance their capacity as effective mechanisms for resolving disputes and ensuring equitable access to justice. Participants emphasized the need to make DRCs more inclusive, with a focus on increasing the participation of women, transgender individuals, religious minorities, and persons with disabilities.

Participants highlighted the importance of strengthening DRCs to make justice more accessible and reduce the burden on formal courts. SSP Coordination Peshawar, Muhammad Waqas Khan, emphasized that DRCs play a crucial role in maintaining social harmony at the community level.

The action plan includes recommendations to improve legal frameworks, provide technical training for DRC members, enhance coordination with formal justice institutions, and raise public awareness of DRC services. The workshop concluded with a strong commitment from CCPO Peshawar, Mr. Qasim Ali Khan, to further support DRCs in strengthening their role as alternative dispute resolution mechanisms.

The initiative aims to ensure timely, fair, and inclusive resolution of community disputes, contributing to broader social stability and access to justice in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

Transgender to get training on skill development and digital marketing

PESHAWAR (APP): Krafters, a tech based platform engaged in business establishment and business development services for home based workers and SMEs, has decided to extend its outreach to highly marginalized transgender community by offering them training on skill development and digital marketing.

The decision emerged from a meeting between Syed Zahid Ali Shah, CEO of Krafters, and Katrina, a transgender rights activist and head of the vocational institute REST (Rehabilitation, Education, Skill Development, Training Awareness).

According to a press release issued here, Krafters has committed to providing equal opportunities for the transgender community to learn various skills, including embroidery, stitching, beautician training, and cooking.

These individuals will also be trained in e-commerce to enable them to continue and expand their businesses as home-based workers.

During the meeting, both parties agreed to formalize their collaboration by signing a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU).

This agreement will pave the way for launching skill-training programs specifically designed for the transgender community in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

Katrina was requested to share data of community members to facilitate their inclusion in Krafters' app, developed under the Pakistan Innovation Fund (PIF), supports digital financial inclusion for home-based workers and SMEs.

Krafters has already developed a network of over 9,000 artisans, focusing on enhancing the development of micro, small, and medium enterprises.

By including transgender artisans in this network, the community will benefit from business establishment and development support, financial inclusion, and connections with key players in the business value chain.

CEO Zahid Ali Shah emphasized the importance of linking skilled transgender individuals with relevant stakeholders for product production and marketing.

He highlighted that Krafters' initiative aims to integrate the transgender community into productive activities, offering them an opportunity to earn a dignified livelihood.

"This program seeks to empower a highly marginalized and vulnerable segment of society by providing training in modern e-commerce and digital marketing," Zahid noted.

He added that the initiative underscores Krafters' commitment to fostering inclusivity and equal opportunities.

By addressing economic challenges and promoting skill development, this initiative aspires to transform the lives of transgender individuals, enabling them to contribute meaningfully to society.

The selected vs rejected fellowships awardees

Dr Waseem Hassan

Several prestigious global fellowships are well-known for supporting academic, research, and professional growth. These include the Fulbright Program, Japan Society for the Promotion of Science (JSPS) Fellowship, the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD), the Rhodes Scholarship, the Commonwealth Scholarship, Endeavour and TWAS to name a few. These fellowships have very tough selection processes and offer awardees unmatched opportunities to advance their careers and research.

However, there's an important question that deserves attention: Do these global fellowship organizations track the progress of their awardees after they complete their studies? And do they evaluate the performance of top candidates who were rejected for the fellowship?

This question raises concerns about the real impact of these fellowships on the careers of awardees and the ones who were not selected. For example, what if an awardee, despite receiving a prestigious fellowship, shows little research progress compared to someone who wasn't selected but continues to excel by winning research grants, publishing papers, and supervising students? What does this say about the fellowship's selection process?

I met an applicant (who wishes to remain anonymous) who was rejected but has shown great progress since, securing grants, publishing in top journals, and supervising PhD students.

This raises a big question: Why was this person rejected, and how did they achieve such success without the fellowship?

On the other hand, there are awardees who, after completing their fellowship, show less progress in their careers. This could be due to a variety of reasons, such as poor infrastructure, lack of financial support, or personal issues etc. But do the global fellowship organizations track their progress? It's possible that they do, but these evaluations may not always be shared publicly. Or they can better comment on this.

Given these concerns, it might be worth considering a follow-up evaluation of fellowship awardees a few years after they complete the program. This would provide insights into the factors that contribute to success or failure and help improve the selection process for future fellows. Evaluating the progress of those who were rejected could also provide useful feedback on how they can be better supported in the future.

In conclusion, while the selection of fellowship awardees is based on rigorous criteria, evaluating their progress over time could help make these prestigious programs even more effective. It could also ensure that future fellows receive the support they need to maximize their research and career potential.

In the same vein, if the research performance of Nobel Laureates can be presented by different research performance indicators, why not the global fellowship awardees?

This intriguing question emerges from a recent study conducted by Professor Roland Seifert from the prestigious Medical School of Hannover, Germany. Professor Seifert, also the Editor-in-Chief of a high-impact scientific journal, published an analysis of 55 Nobel Prize winners in Physiology, Medicine, and Chemistry, awarded between 2006 and 2022.

Rejection, while challenging, often carries deeper meanings than we might initially perceive. It is important to remember that selection processes are not just about merit but also about organizational needs, dynamics, and priorities. Being "not selected" does not diminish anyone's value, accomplishments, or potential.

This brings to mind an interesting case. I once met an applicant who had been shortlisted for a prestigious fellowship interview a few years ago (possibly in 2018 or 2019). During the process, one of the interview panel members commented that the applicant was "over-qualified." Years later, this individual shared their mixed feelings—wondering whether to take pride in the "over-qualified" label or to feel disappointed at the missed opportunity.

This story holds a valuable lesson: outstanding applicants, or those deemed "over-qualified," should not feel disheartened. Instead, they can take it as recognition that they have reached a level where the organization believes they may not require further investment. It is not a reflection of inadequacy but rather an acknowledgment of their exceptional standing.

Similarly, for those who have been selected, it is essential to remain humble and recognize the trust placed in them by the organization to grow and excel further. The selection often reflects the organization's aim to invest in individuals who can benefit most from the opportunity at that particular stage of their journey.

In this way, selection and non-selection are not measures of worth but reflections of alignment with the opportunity at hand. Every experience, whether acceptance or rejection, is a stepping stone to greater achievements.



PESHAWAR: A man eating pomegranate from roadside vendor at Ashraf Road.

NAB KP to hold Khuli Kacheri on Dec 30

PESHAWAR (APP): In compliance of direction of the Chairman National Accountability Bureau (NAB), Lieutenant General (R) Nazir Ahmad Butt, the NAB KP Director General would hold an open court (khuli kacheri) on December 30 (Monday) at NAB KP Headquarters Office Hayatabad to address public complaints.

The khuli kacheri would be attended by Director General NAB KP, Waqar Ahmad Chuhani and concerned officials from 2pm to 4pm at NAB KP Office PDA building Phase-V Hayatabad Peshawar.

According to NAB KP statement here Saturday, complaints relating to corruption, embezzlement, making assets beyond known resources, irregularities in government contracts, public deceit and acquiring money through illegal land allotment would be heard in the khuli kachery.

The complainants are advised to bring complaints written on affidavit with copy of original CNIC on the day.

The Director General NAB KP has assured transparent action on the complaints and strict action against the corrupt elements.

PESHAWAR (APP): A sensitization session on the rising public health risks associated with newer tobacco products, such as nicotine pouches and e-cigarettes, has made a clarion call for urgent and aggressive policy making to regulate use of these products.

The session, organized by Blue Veins, a Peshawar-based non-governmental organization, on Saturday highlighted the growing threat posed by these products, which are increasingly infiltrating markets due to the absence of robust regulatory frameworks.

"Traditional smoking is becoming outdated, but newer tobacco products like vapes, e-cigarettes, nicotine pouches, and heated tobacco items are creating significant health risks. We must adopt an aggressive approach to counter these threats," remarked Hassina Khan, Assistant Commissioner and Focal Person for the Enforcement of Tobacco Control Laws.

She stressed importance of raising public awareness about the dangers of these products, which are often perceived as harmless flavor chemicals.

"Ingesting such chemicals having carcinogenic effects is highly hazardous for human body. Educating the public about these risks is essential," she added.

Hassina also pointed out the technical and legal challenges in enforcing laws against the sale and misuse of these products, emphasizing the need for a comprehensive policy framework. Despite these challenges, she noted that district administrations are actively working to ensure the implementation of relevant laws, particularly those aimed at protecting young people.

Qamar Naseem, Programme Manager of Blue Veins, informed the participants that the Law and Health Departments of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa were aware of the dangers posed by these products and were drafting legislation to regulate their use. "Khyber Pakhtunkhwa is the first

province in Pakistan to impose an interim ban on the sale of e-cigarettes to individuals under 21 years old and near educational institutions," he said.

Qamar added that the proposed law would cover all new tobacco products, including nicotine pouches, shisha, e-cigarettes and naswar, categorizing them as smokeless tobacco products.

He also revealed a concerning development about holding of a national-level 'Vape Expo' scheduled to be held in Lahore in early 2025, where 38 e-cigarette brands plan to showcase their products, primarily targeting youth.

Ajmal Shah, Coordinator of the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Tobacco Control Cell, highlighted the province's leadership in enforcing tobacco control laws.

He noted that an interim ban on tobacco products has been enforced in the Peshawar Valley for nine months and in the Hazara Division for six months.

Malaria, dengue fever on rise in KP: Report

PESHAWAR (APP): Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Health Department reported a significant increase in mosquito-borne diseases current year.

In a report issued here Saturday, malaria cases have risen by 13 percent with 271,344 patients admitted to hospitals while only 239,902 patients affected by malaria fever last year.

Compared to last year, 31,442 more cases of malaria have been reported in the province, which is 13 percent more.

Furthermore, a dramatic 176 percent increase in dengue cases has been observed. A total of 5,477 patients were hospitalized this year. However, a total of 1,980 cases were reported during year 2023.

Governor expresses condolence over death of Haji Mirza

PESHAWAR (APP): The Governor Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Faisal Karim Kundi, on Saturday expressed heartfelt condolences over the death of Haji Mirza Khan, the father of Adil Safi, the President of the Peoples Youth Organization Peshawar.

In his message, the Governor extended his condolences to Adil Safi and other family members, offering them prayers for patience and strength during this difficult time.

He prayed to Allah Almighty to rest the departed soul in eternal peace and grant courage to bereaved family members to bear this irripable lose with fortitude.

Aggressive policy measures urged — to regulate use of tobacco products

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Appeal for donations to save daughter's life

F.P Report

PESHAWAR:My twenty four years old daughter has been suffering from liver disease for four years, and I have spent all my savings on her treatment.

This was expressed by Munir Khan, a fifty-year-old resident of Nothia Jadeed Peshawar, while sharing his story with Frontier Post. He stated that he has admitted his daughter to various hospitals across the country for her recovery, including Lady Reading Hospital, Khyber Teaching Hospital, and Islamabad Complex.

After receiving the complete reports, the doctors have advised a liver transplant. I am a poor and helpless man living in a rented house, and I have exhausted all my savings. According to the doctors, the cost of a liver transplant is sixty lakh rupees, which is beyond my reach.

He has appealed for assistance from philanthropists and the Chief Minister of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa for the patient's liver transplant. They can be contacted at the following mobile number: +92 301 8861396.

Quaid's life – A guiding force for youth

PESHAWAR (APP): As we celebrated another birth anniversary of founder of Pakistan Quaid-e-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah on Wednesday, his philosophy of life and messages especially for students are beacon of light for our youth.

The architect of Pakistan, Jinnah always stood tall among 20th-century leaders receiving accolades both from friends and rivals with world leaders and writers praising his undeterred courage and struggle for creating a separate homeland for Muslims of the sub-continent.

Stanley Wolpert, a renowned US historian validly praised the Quaid in his book 'Jinnah of Pakistan' published in 1948 saying "few individuals significantly alter the course of history and fewer modify the world map. Hardly anyone can be credited with creating a nation-state. Muhammad Ali Jinnah did all three."

Vijay Lakshmi Pundit, a prominent figure of India and Nehru's sister remarked, "If the Muslim League had 100 Gandhis and 200 Azads and Congress had only one Jinnah, then India would have not been divided."

Not only these two but numerous other writers and historians praised Quaid for bravely fighting the case of Muslim nationhood in India and created a separate homeland for them on August 14, 1947, within seven years of the adoption of Pakistan Resolution at Lahore on March 23, 1940.

The legendary leader had reorganized the All India Muslim League (AIML) through repeated visits to all Muslims majority provinces of British India including NWFP (now Khyber Pukhtunkhwa) to mobilize people and students.

Besides other destinations, his visits to historic Islamia College, Peshawar (ICP) in 1936, 1945 and 1948 speak highly of Quaid's affiliation with youth and students.

"Quaid and Islamia College are inseparable. In 1945, Quaid had received a discipline, character, solid academic background and devote themselves to studies for dispensing their collective responsibilities with dedication, commitment and sincerity," Dr Younas recalled.

Dr Younas said, the Quaid's speech to students of ICP was historic where he had stated, "you must concentrate on gaining knowledge and education. It is your foremost responsibility. You must be aware of international events and environment. Education is a matter of life and death for our country."

Quaid-e-Azam had always laid emphasis on education as he remarked on another occasion, "without education it is complete darkness and with education it is light. Education is a matter of life and death to our nation. The world is moving so fast that if you do not educate yourselves you will be not only completely left behind but will be finished up."

Addressing a Punjabi-Muslim Students Federation gathering at Lahore in October 1947, the Quaid had advised them, "Pakistan is proud of its youth, particularly students who had always been on forefront in hour of trial and need. You are nation's leaders of tomorrow and you must fully equip yourself with discipline, education and training for the arduous task lying ahead."

Quaid-i-Azam did not see students as bookworm, rather future leaders and builders of nation. He was an avid believer of training youth through educational reforms as without proper training and skill-based modern education, it was hard to produce visionary leaders.

The First Education Conference held in November 1947 was the true depiction of Quaid's educational vision where he had stated, "the future of our state will and must accordingly depend upon the type of education we give to our children and the way we bring them up as future citizens of Pakistan."

Realizing importance of technical and scientific education for students to shoulder heavy responsibilities of modern age, the Quaid addressing annual convocation of Islamia College, Lahore in March 1946 had advised, "thousands' of young men return from colleges and universities, counting on nothing but government service, clerkship and other routine jobs. I ask you to seek fresh avenues like commerce and industry, being the very foundations of a nation. Besides, scientific and technical knowledge are very essential in this age.... You should now train yourselves in this direction."

Mohammad Ali Jinnah, the most charismatic leader and refined gentleman was known as man of principle, man of letters and man of words. He was absolutely certain of his conviction and demand for separate Muslim state.

We are honored to have a man of wisdom as our leader – a true constitutionalist who used discipline, unity, equality and faith as a tool in hand to complete his mission.

His character, cherished personality and commitment to Pakistan Movement had won him due respect of a great leader across the world and it is obligatory upon us to follow his footsteps to make Pakistan prosperous, impregnable and a worth appreciation country.



In brief

Six of a family burnt Syed Waliullah Shah

NEWSHERA: Almost two separate incidents of fire were reported in Nowshera. The first incident occurred in Zakirin Mohallah, Khattakaley, where a gas leakage caused a fire, resulting in severe burns to six persons of a family. The incident occurred at the residence of Jawad, son of Shamsuddin, where Jawad, his wife, and their four children, including six-year-old Ashi, three-year-old Muskan, one-year-old Aniba, and four-year-old Fawad Khan, were severely burned. The victims were initially taken to Qazi Medical Complex in Nowshera, but due to the burn unit being closed, they were transferred to Peshawar. The condition of the burn victims is reported to be out of danger. The cause of the fire was reportedly due to a gas leakage, which was caused by a gas load shedding issue, resulting in the gas stove being left open, and the family's use of a lantern. The second incident occurred in Akora Khattak, where a fire broke out at a private petrol pump, causing significant damage to nearby shops. The cause of the fire is unknown. Reports indicate that a motorcycle was also burned in the incident at the Akora Khattak petrol pump.

Crackdown on unhygienic food

SHEIKHUPURA (INP): Punjab Food Authority (PFA) has launched a crackdown on unhygienic food businesses in Sheikhupura on the instructions of Chief Minister Punjab Maryam Nawaz Sharif to ensure the supply of quality food of citizens. According to Deputy Commissioner (DC) office, 98 food-related businesses were inspected across the district, resulting in a fine of over Rs 178,000 imposed on violators of hygiene rules and poor sanitation arrangements. The food safety teams, checked 42,660 liters of milk in different areas of Sheikhupura district. 15 liters of milk were destroyed on the spot for failing to meet quality standards. Additionally, 455 kilograms of expired food items and other bakery products were also destroyed. The PFA's enforcement actions included registering a case against one food point and issuing corrective notices to several others. Deputy Commissioner Sheikhupura Shahid Imran Marth emphasized that providing clean food to the public is the top priority of the Punjab Food Authority. This crackdown is part of the PFA's ongoing efforts to ensure that food businesses in Punjab adhere to strict quality and hygiene standards. Similar actions have been taken in other districts, including the sealing of food points and imposition of fines on violators.

Adulterated red chilli disposed off

MUZAFFARGARH (INP): Punjab food Authority (PFA) disposed 2000kg adulterated red chilli after checking two spices production units operating. According to a spokesperson, PFA team led by Director Operation South, Shahzad Magassi inspected the two spices production units working at Noor Shah Talai Road, Kot Addu and seized 2000 kg spices with 37 kg packaging material for further inquiry. DG Food Authority, Muhammad Asim Javed in statement to this regard informed that the two spices production unit were checked where the spices were being packed in boxes of famous brands.

RPO orders tight security for foreign engineers

F.P. Report

LOWER DIR: The regional police officer Malakand division Sher Akbar Khan along with district police officer Salim Abbas Kulachi on Saturday visited the under-construction Koto Hydel Power station and reviewed the overall security arrangements



taken for the Chinese engineers.

According to the project authorities, over 95 percent work on the Rs 13998.89 million project has been completed. The powerhouse will generate 40.8 MW of electricity that would be added to the national grid. Several dates for completion were announced earlier by the concerned authorities, but the project was yet to be completed, mostly due to security threats to foreign engineers.

The RPO instructed the supervisory officers to further improve the security of the project and ensure the safety of sensitive places at all times. He ordered that

the data of all the people living around the power project should be collected and registered in the relevant police stations.

The security staff was further directed to conduct a joint mock exercise to deal with any emergency situation. He said that search and strike operations against suspects liv-

ing around the power station should be carried out in order to ensure security of the foreign engineers. The RPO said the Koto Hydropower Project was an important national project and no compromise would be made on the security of sensitive places including it. He directed all the officers to discharge their responsibilities efficiently and give top priority to the security of the project.

Meanwhile the RPO Sher Akbar Khan awarded four police officials of the Lower Dir police with commendation certificates and cash prizes for arresting a killer with arm on the spot at the Munda bazaar here

Man deprived of money: A drug seller, Muhibullah, a resident of Samarbagh on Saturday complained that he was deprived of Rs 1 million through a digital robbery by unknown fraudsters who transferred the money from his bank account. Talking to local journalists he said that despite filing a complaint with the FIA, and bank authorities the looted money could not be returned.

He said that his nephew stayed in Italy for labor, someone had created a fake account in his name on Facebook. He said that he got a message from him on Facebook Messenger, saying that his nephew had been arrested who wanted his agent to be paid Rs 1 million for his release. Mohibullah said that after hearing about his nephew's arrest, he transferred Rs. 990,000 to him from his bank app in one night without thinking about the consequences. He said that it was very unfortunate that despite knowing the bank, bank account and the branch, he was unable to get his money back. He demanded that the senior officials of the police and FIA should help him in this regard.

All set for finale of winter sports gala on Shandur Top

F.P. Report

CHITRAL: The finale of the Shandur Ice Sports Challenge would be held among the teams from Gilgit-Baltistan at the Shandur Top today. Organised by the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Tourism Authority (KPCTA), Winter Sports Federation, District Administration Upper Chitral, and Chitral Scouts, the event earlier showcased the ice hockey, curling and speed skating competitions in Harchin.

A total of 119, including 46 female players, from Lower Chitral and Upper Chitral districts participated. On this occasion, KPCTA Director General Tasheen Haider was the

chief guest. He was accompanied by Upper Chitral Deputy Commissioner Haseebur Rahman, KPCTA Director Admin and Finance Umar Arshad Khan, vice chairman of Harchin Village Council and a large number of local residents attended the event.

Matches of ice hockey, speed skating and curling were played among male and female participants. Tasheen Haider said that they were, for the first time in history, organising ice hockey, curling, and speed skating competitions on the frozen lake of Shandur Top.

He expressed his happiness at the large number of participant from Chitral, saying that efforts will be

made to hold these competitions on an even wider scale next year. For the past three years, the KPCTA in collaboration with the Winter Sports Federation has not only been providing equipment for winter sports activities but also organising training sessions and regular games for these athletes.

The organisers said that actually, Shandur ground was internationally famous for the Shandur Polo Festival held in the summer, but this was the first time in the province's history that ice hockey, curling, and speed skating competitions were being held on the frozen Shandur Lake during the ongoing winter.



QUETTA: Chairman of grand health alliance Balochistan, Dr. Bahadar Shah addressing a press conference.

Bajaur sports festival concluded

F.P. Report

KHAR: The two-day Bajaur Festival kicked off at the Bajaur Sports Complex in Khar on Saturday. Jointly organised by the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Culture and Tourism Authority (KPCTA), Tourism Wing of Merged Districts, and the district administration, the festival showcases various sports competitions such as cycling races, kabaddi, tug-of-war, and martial arts.

Similarly, magic shows, poetry recital sessions, local music, traditional Attan dance, comedy skits, and a play area for children are also part of the gala besides food and handicraft stalls. Bajaur Scouts 172 Wing and Bajaur Police are also collaborating to make the festival a success.



On the first day, the festival featured tableaux by schoolchildren, kabaddi, martial art competitions, comedy skits, poetry sessions, and traditional music performances while a musical evening was held. On the second day, the festival would host the final rounds of the cycling race and martial art competitions along with cultural dance perform-

ances, local band performances, comedy shows, and poetry readings by local poets.

The event is aimed at promoting sports and healthy activities in the merged districts of the province to boost tourism, engage youth in constructive activities, and convey a positive message about Bajaur to the world.



QUETTA: Jamiat Lawyers Forum provincial president, Mali k Khalil Ur Rehman along with Senator Kamran Murtaza addressing a press conference.

DPO directs safe recovery of missing persons

F.P. Report

LAKKI MARWAT: Karak District Police Officer Shahbaz Elahi has asked the police and intelligence officials to use all available resources to trace the missing persons and reunite them with their families.

Chairing a meeting of the Joint Investigation Committee at his office on Friday, he said that it was the responsibility of all concerned institutions to collect more and accurate information about the whereabouts of missing people so that they could be reunited with their families. Among others, SP investigation, DSP, DSP CTD and officials of the intelligence agencies were in attendance.

The meeting took up for discussion matters pertaining to the cases of missing persons and reviewed the progress in this regard. DPO asked the officials to spare no efforts to reunite the missing persons with their families.

Meanwhile, police arrested seven suspects including drug peddlers during a search and strike operation. A police official said that the operation was launched on the directives of DPO Shahbaz Elahi who had received credible information about the presence of anti-social elements in the area.

He said that the cops captured a suspect identified as Umarul and seized 1850 gram hashish from him. He said that six other outlaws were also arrested and an AK 47 assault rifle, a repeater shotgun and bullets were recovered from them during the operation.

Public services delivery top priority

F.P. Report

MARDAN: A Khuli Khachari was held in the Government Higher Secondary School Sharqi Sikandar under the chairmanship of Assistant Commissioner (AC) Mardan Kamran Khan and Additional Assistant Commissioner (AAC) Noman Pervez, done Officers of TMO and other various departments were also present on this occasion.

In the Khuli Khachari the traders and the business class were given an opportunity to present their problems directly to the authorities. Issues that were resolved on the spot were dealt with by immediate orders of the Assistant Commissioners, while other issues were referred to the officers of the concerned departments. The main objective of this initiative was to facilitate the traders and business community and solve their problems on priority basis. Legitimate problems and complaints will be resolved immediately within the legal framework.

The Assistant Commissioner said that this initiative will not only help in solving the problems of the traders but will also build trust and cooperation between the government and the business community. Will be promoted. According to him, such gatherings will play an important role in facilitating business activities and developing the economy. He emphasized that the aim of the administration is to provide the public and businessmen with an environment that meets their business needs and creates opportunities for growth.

Healthcare top priority of Punjab govt: Saira

F.P. Report

HAF8ZABAD: Chief Minister's Coordinator for Population Welfare Department, Punjab and Former Federal Minister Saira Afzal Tarar said that provision of education, health, communication and other basic facilities is top priority of the present Punjab government led by Chief Minister Punjab Maryam Nawaz Sharif.

While addressing the meeting of District Development Coordination Committee Hafizabad, she said that the Punjab government was focusing on completion of development projects for upgrading living standard of the people.

She directed the officers of concerned departments to ensure use of quality material in execution of ongoing development projects as well as completion development projects at the earliest so that people could get benefits of government measures soon as soon possible. Deputy Commissioner Abdul Razzaq, ex-MPA Mian Intisar Hussain Bhatti and officers of different departments attended the meeting. Pace on development projects, Suthra Punjab Campaign, Master Plan of Solid Waste Management and performance of different departments were reviewed in the meeting.

Meanwhile, DC Abdul Razzaq visited Pindi Bhattian, Sukheki, Kaleki, Rasulpur Tarar and Chak Chattah to check progress on Suthra Punjab Campaign. He also inspected Rural Health Centre Sukheki Mandi and different Basic Health Units and reviewed availability of medicines and other treatment facilities availability to patients.

During his visit, he directed the officers and officials of local government to focus on cleanliness under Suthra Punjab Campaign for providing health atmosphere to people in rural and urban areas. While inspecting under construction Hafizabad-Sheikhupura Road, he warned that use of substandard material in development projects would not be tolerated at all.

Meanwhile, the 17th death anniversary of the martyrdom of Shaheed Mohtarma Benazir Bhutto was celebrated with national enthusiasm. In this regard, the main event was held at Fawara Chowk. It was presided over by the district leader of the People's Party, former President Bar Muhammad Arshad Mehind Advocate and the District President of People's Party Women, former President Bar Madam

Khalida Shahid. A large number of workers were also present on the occasion to pay tribute to their great leader.

District Leader of People's Party Muhammad Arshad Mehind Advocate while addressing the event said that Shaheed Mohtarma Benazir Bhutto was a bright democratic face of Pakistan. With the tragic martyrdom of Benazir Bhutto, Pakistan lost a great leader. It was undoubtedly an irreparable national tragedy. She was the symbol of the Federation of Pakistan and the manifestation of the aspirations of the people, every Pakistani shed tears and expressed grief on her martyrdom. Benazir Bhutto's peaceful political vision will always highlight the importance of tolerance, tolerance and reconciliation in Pakistan's politics. Shaheed Mohtarma Benazir Bhutto believed in reconciliation by covering the clash of civilizations. She was always serious about solving the problems faced by the people and was a bearer of high moral values in the field of politics.

He said that the international community, especially the United States, Europe and various institutions of Western countries, in their reports, still acknowledge Shaheed Mohtarma Benazir Bhutto's services for democratic values, human rights and stability of the economy. She wanted to eradicate poverty and poverty from Pakistan and make the country a cradle of peace and development. She was a world-class personality, she achieved her high position due to her political acumen, continuous struggle, tireless effort, pioneering style and great leadership skills.

Speaking at the event, District President of People's Party Women Madam Khalida Shahid Advocate said that as a woman Prime Minister Shaheed Mohtarma Benazir Bhutto took special measures for the welfare of women during her tenure. Establishment of First Women's Bank and Women's Police Station, establishment of Women's Study Centers in 5 higher educational institutions of Karachi, Quetta, Lahore, Peshawar and Islamabad, 5% quota for women in government jobs, Lady Health Workers Programme, Federal Women's Development Programme Initiatives like establishment of the ministry, establishment of lady computer centers and issuance of loans for women are proof of her leadership skills. At the end of the ceremony, a special prayer was also offered for the elevation of Shaheed Mohtarma Benazir Bhutto and the integrity of the country.

Orakzai press club elects new cabinet

F.P. Report

KALAYA: Elections of the District Press Club Orakzai and Orakzai Union of Journalists for the year 2025-26 at Orakzai Press Club office have successfully been completed under the supervision of the Orakzai Bar Association President Abid Ali Advocate, District Administration Representative Insaf Ali Advocate and political leader Malik Mumtaz Khan.

Khan Zaman Orakzai was elected the joint chairman of the Press Club and the Union of Journalists, while Shaheed Khan was elected as the president of the press Club and Malik Farhan Sajid was the vice president, Isarul Haq General Secretary, Khan Zaman Finance Secretary, Anwar Gul Joint Secretary



and Sakhi Marjan as its Office Secretary.

Similarly, Anwar Gul was elected as President of Union of Journalists, Azmat Hussain Vice President, Ismatullah General Secretary, Moez Khan Joint Secretary, Muhammad Ismail Finance Secretary and Muhammad Osama as its Office Secretary.

Furthermore, Hazratullah, Muhammad Nawaz, Muhammad Jameel, Shahabuddin and Ghafoor Khan were elected as executive members. On this

occasion, newly elected Office Bearers Shaheed Khan, Anwar Gul and others said that they will work day and night for the welfare of Orakzai Press Club and journalists.

Inshallah, steps will be taken to solve the problems of journalists at every level. They further said that Orakzai is the only press club in which there are no differences. As before we will work together for the welfare of the journalists of the Orakzai Press Club, they concluded.

Deaf, dumb girl raped by two

PATTOKI (INP): Two young men raped a deaf and dumb girl in village Khariipar Sharif of Pattok. Police have registered a first information report (FIR) on behalf of victim's uncle, Asif.

In the FIR, girl's uncle Asif stated that his niece was outside her house to bring some water from a tab but suddenly accused Adil and Husnain intercepted her and forcibly took Mahnoor to a nearby vacated house.

Both accused raped the girl turn by turn and also made the video of their

heinous crime. After listening to the girl's screaming some local residents barged into the house and rescued her. Both accused fled away leaving the victim in naked condition behind. Later the girl told about the accused in her sign language, while on the other hand, the residents who entered into the house after the incident also identified the accused persons. SHO Saddar Pattoki Mohammad Amin said that police arrested one accused and started investigation. Residents of the area

appealed to DPO Pattoki to take notice of this incident and award exemplary punishment to the culprits. The body of a young girl was found from the Masri Miani area of ??Ladhiwala Warraich police station in Gujranwala.

According to police, the girl was killed by hitting her head with a sharp instrument and bricks. After killing her, the accused threw her body into the pool of a tube well, police said. The police shifted the body to the hospital for postmortem.



An uneasy calm settles over Syrian city of Homs

HOMS (AP): Syria's new security forces checked IDs and searched cars in the central city of Homs, a day after protests by members of the Alawite minority erupted in gunfire and stirred fears that the country's fragile peace could break down. A tense calm prevailed after checkpoints were set up throughout the country's third-largest city, which has a mixed population of Sunni and Shia Muslims, Alawites and Christians.

The security forces are controlled by the former insurgent group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, which led the charge that unseated former President Bashar Assad. On the road from Damascus, security teams at the checkpoints waved cars through perfunctorily, but in Homs they checked IDs and opened the trunk of each car to look for weapons. Armed men blocked the road leading to the square formerly named for Assad's father, Hafez Assad, where one foot was all that remained of a statue of him that once stood in the center of the traffic roundabout. The square has been renamed Freedom Square, although some call it "the donkey's square," referring to Assad. Protests erupted there among Alawites - the minority sect to which the Assad family belongs - after a video circulated showing an Alawite shrine in Aleppo being vandalized. Government officials later issued a statement saying that the video was old.

Protests began peacefully, said Alaa Amran, the newly installed police chief of Homs, but then "some suspicious parties ... related to the former regime opened fire on both security forces and demonstra-

tors, and there were some injuries." Security forces flooded the area and imposed a curfew to restore order, he said. Mohammad Ali Hajj Younes, an electrician who has a shop next to the square, said the people who instigated the violence are "the same shabiha who used to come into my shop and rob me, and I couldn't say anything," using a term referring to pro-Assad militia members.

The protests were part of a larger flare-up of violence. Pro-Assad militants attacked members of the new security forces near the coastal town of Tartous, killing 14 and wounding 10, according to the Interior Ministry in the transitional government. In response, security forces launched raids "pursuing the remnants of Assad's militias," state media reported. The state-run SANA news agency reported that clashes broke out in the village of Balqasa in a rural part of Homs province.

The unrest left many people fearful that the relatively peaceful conditions that have prevailed since Assad's fall could break down into sectarian fighting as the country begins to recover following nearly 14 years of civil war. Those who instigated the violence "are supported by parties that may be external that want strife for Syria to return it to square one, the square of sectarianism," Amran said. Ahmad al-Bayyaa, an Alawite in the al-Zahra neighborhood of Homs, said he and his wife and three daughters fled to the coastal town of Baniyas when insurgent forces first arrived, but came back a day later after hearing from neighbors that the fighters had not harmed civilians.

"We had been given the idea that there would be slaughter and killing based on our identity, and nothing like that happened," he said. "We came back, and nobody asked to see my ID from the coast to Homs." Before Assad's fall, al-Bayyaa said, he spent 10 years in hiding to avoid a call-up for reserve army service and was afraid to cross a checkpoint in his own neighborhood. After the former Syrian army collapsed in the face of the HTS-led advance, residents of the neighborhood set up a fruit and vegetable stand on an abandoned tank in a gesture of mockery.

In the predominantly Christian Homs suburb of Fayrouzeh, a group of teenage girls took each other's pictures next to a giant cutout of Santa Claus with a Christmas tree in the town square.

Residents of the area said their initial fears that the country's new rulers would target religious minorities were quickly laid to rest. HTS was once aligned with al-Qaida, but its leader, Ahmad al-Sharaa, formerly known as Abu Mohammed al-Golani, has cut ties with the group and since coming to power has preached religious coexistence. "We had a very beautiful holiday even though there was some anxiety before it," said Fayrouzeh resident Sarab Kashi. "The guys from HTS volunteered and stood as guards on the door of the churches." The city's Sunni majority, meanwhile, welcomed the new administration. Many of the young men now guarding its streets were originally from Homs and were evacuated to opposition-held Idlib when Assad's forces solidified control of their areas years ago.

Three killed in bus crash in Norway

OSLO (BBC): At least three people have died in a bus crash in Norway, police say. The accident happened at around 13:30 local time (12:30GMT) in the Hadsel district on the country's north-western coast. The bus came off the road and ended up partially in the Asvatnet lake, the authorities said in a press release.

It is thought to have been carrying 58 people at the time of the crash - many of whom, police say, are foreign nationals. As well as the fatalities, police said four people had been seriously injured. Three people have been taken to Stokmarknes Hospital by rescue helicopter, while other passengers have been taken to a nearby school. Everyone has now been removed from the vehicle, according to local media. The Norwegian Red Cross said on social media that it was sending teams to help with a "serious bus accident" on the E10 road.

Fire, ambulance and police teams have also been working at the scene. There have been reports of heavy snowdrifts and strong winds in the area, which has made rescue efforts difficult. Public broadcaster NRK reported that the bus had been travelling from the town of Narvik to the Lofoten archipelago. The mayor of the nearby Vågan district, Vidar Thom Benjaminsen, said a "crisis team" had been set up, and that a local hotel had been allocated for family members and as a reception centre. Prime Minister Jonas Gahr Store said the crash was "a very serious situation" and that his thoughts were with everyone affected.

Panama's president calls Trump

PANAMA (BBC): Panamanian President José Raúl Mulino has denied claims by US president-elect Donald Trump that there are Chinese soldiers stationed at the Panama Canal. In recent days Trump has threatened to take the canal back into US control, accusing Panama of "ripping off" the US by charging high shipping rates.

In a message posted to his Truth Social account, Trump wrote: "Merry Christmas to all, including to the wonderful soldiers of China, who are lovingly, but illegally, operating the Panama Canal". Mulino called the claim "nonsense" and said that there is "absolutely no Chinese interference". "There is not a single Chinese soldier in the canal," he told reporters in Panama City. Mulino also rejected the possibility of reducing tolls for US ships or ceding control of the canal, a major shipping channel which connects the Atlantic and Pacific oceans. "The canal is Panamanian and belongs to Panamanians. There's no possibility of opening any kind of conversation around this reality," he said.

After breaking ties with Taiwan, Panama established diplomatic ties with China in 2017, and Mulino said relations between the two countries were "respectful, well-managed ... in terms of what is in the interest of both countries." His comments came a day after Trump said he would nominate a Florida lawmaker to be his ambassador to Panama. Kevin Marino Cabrera, a Republican commissioner in Miami-Dade County, worked for Trump's 2020 campaign and this year was Florida's representative to the Republican National Committee. Announcing his pick in a Christmas Day post on his Truth Social network, Trump said Cabrera "will do a fantastic job representing our Nation's interests in Panama!".

The president-elect also repeated claims that Panama is "ripping us off". Trump told a crowd of conservative activists: "The fees being charged by Panama are ridiculous, highly unfair." If shipping rates are not lowered, Trump said, "we will demand that the Panama Canal be returned to us, in full, quickly and without question". Trump has also said he did not want the Panama Canal "falling into the wrong hands" and specifically cited China. China is the second-largest user of the Panama Canal after the US, according to data, and also has major investments in the central American country. On Christmas Day, Trump fired off dozens of messages defending his policies and nominations, and repeated suggestions that the US annex Greenland and Canada.



GAZA STRIP: A Palestinian child runs to shelter from the rain at a camp for internally displaced on the beach near the Nuseirat refugee camp.

Workers at China's BYD site victims of human trafficking

RIO DE JANEIRO/SHANGHAI (Reuters): Chinese workers at a construction site in Brazil for a factory owned by China's electric vehicle producer BYD are victims of human trafficking, Brazilian labor authorities said in a growing controversy in BYD's biggest overseas market.

BYD and contractor Jinjiang Group have agreed to assist and house the 163 workers in hotels until a deal to end their contracts is reached, Brazil's Labor Prosecutor's Office said in a statement after meeting representatives from both firms. The brief statement did not provide details on how prosecutors had reached their conclusion.

BYD and Jinjiang did not immediately respond to requests for comment. Jinjiang rejected the Brazilian authorities' assessment that the workers at the site in the eastern state of Bahia were operating under "slavery-like conditions". Jinjiang said, in a social media post reposted by a BYD spokesperson, that the portrayal of the workers as "enslaved" was inaccurate and that there were translation misunderstandings. BYD initially said it had cut ties with Jinjiang, but a BYD executive later accused "foreign forces" and some Chinese media of "deliberately smearing Chinese brands and the country and undermining the relationship between China and Brazil".

China's foreign ministry said its embassy in Brazil was communicating with the Brazilian government to verify and address the situation. The ministry did not immediately respond to a request for comment on the trafficking claim. The Brazil prosecutors said they would meet again with the companies on Jan. 7 and propose a deal. A deal could

clear BYD and Jinjiang from an investigation by labor prosecutors, but they could still face scrutiny from labor inspectors and from federal prosecutors, who have requested the sharing of evidence so that "measures can be adopted in the criminal sphere", the statement said. BYD has been building the factory to produce 150,000 cars initially as part of plans to start production in Brazil early next year. Nearly one in five cars BYD sold outside China in the first 11 months of 2024 was in Brazil. The factory has become a symbol of China's growing influence in Brazil and an example of a closer relationship between both countries. BYD has invested \$620 million to set up the Bahia factory complex alone.

The reports of irregularities in Bahia could prove to be a major sticking point in bilateral relations. Brazil has long sought more Chinese investment. But China's model of taking Chinese workers to the countries where it invests presents a challenge to local job creation, a priority for President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva. The investigation also brings unwelcome attention to BYD when it is seeking to expand globally after having gained dominance in China, the world's largest auto market, where it now takes up more than a third of the market of EVs and plug-in hybrids. BYD, poised to outsell Ford and Honda globally this year, has been on an extraordinary expansion at home and abroad, growing capacity and undertaking a massive hiring spree. The company had nearly 1 million employees as of September. While it still makes more than 90% of its sales in China, BYD has been building pas-

senger vehicle factories in Hungary, Mexico, Thailand, Uzbekistan and Brazil to serve its major overseas markets and increasing investments in marketing abroad.

Jinjiang also does construction for BYD in China, according to records on the Chinese companies information database Tianyancha. The case has triggered a rare backlash on Chinese social media against BYD, opening a discussion over worker rights, with several internet users saying living conditions for the workers in Brazil were typical of those found on construction sites in China. Brazilian prosecutors released videos of the workers' living quarters that showed bunk beds without mattresses. They said the workers labored for excessively long hours, sometimes seven days a week, in conditions the authorities called degrading. In Brazil, "slavery-like conditions" include forced labor but also degrading work conditions, long hours that pose a risk to workers' health, debt bondage and any work that violates human dignity.

Prominent Chinese commentator Hu Xijin, a former editor of the Communist Party tabloid Global Times, echoed Jinjiang in saying there could be misunderstandings but said Chinese construction companies should improve the living conditions of their employees. For BYD, the case shows how it is likely to encounter more controversies in future as it emerges as China's most powerful EV brand, Hu said. "The only thing BYD can do is to raise its own requirements and match its growing influence in all directions. This is not easy, but BYD should be able to do it."

Russia says it foils Ukrainian plots to kill senior officers

MOSCOW (Reuters): Russia's Federal Security Service said it had foiled several plots by Ukrainian intelligence services to kill high-ranking Russian officers and their families in Moscow using bombs disguised as power banks or document folders.

On Dec. 17, Ukraine's SBU intelligence service killed Lieutenant General Kirillov, chief of Russia's Nuclear, Biological and Chemical Protection Troops, in Moscow outside his apartment building by detonating a bomb attached to an electric scooter. An SBU source confirmed to Reuters that the Ukrainian intelligence services. One of the men retrieved a bomb disguised as a portable charger in Moscow that was to be attached with magnets to the car of one of the Defence Ministry's top officials, the FSB

"The Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation has prevented a series of assassination attempts on high-ranking military personnel of the Defence Ministry," the FSB said. "Four Russian citizens involved in the preparation of these attacks have been detained," it said in a statement. Ukraine's SBU did not immediately respond to a Reuters request for comment.

The FSB, the main successor to the Soviet-era KGB, said that the Russian citizens had been recruited by the Ukrainian intelligence services. One of the men retrieved a bomb disguised as a portable charger in Moscow that was to be attached with magnets to the car of one of the Defence Ministry's top officials, the FSB

said. Another Russian man was tasked with reconnaissance of senior Russian defence officials, it said, with one plot involving the delivery of a bomb disguised as a document folder. "An explosive device disguised as a portable charger (power bank), with magnets attached, had to be placed under the official car of one of the senior leaders of the Russian Defence Ministry," it said. The exact date of the planned attacks was unclear though one of the suspects said he had retrieved a bomb on Dec. 23, according to the FSB.

Russian state TV showed what it said was footage of some of the suspects who admitted to being recruited by Ukrainian intelligence for bombings against Russian

defence ministry officials. Moscow holds Ukraine responsible for a string of high-profile assassinations on its soil designed to weaken morale - and says the West is supporting a "terrorist regime" in Kyiv. Ukraine, which says Russia's war against it poses an existential threat to the Ukrainian state, has made clear it regards such targeted killings as a legitimate tool.

Darya Dugina, the 29-year-old daughter of a prominent Russian nationalist, was killed in August 2022 near Moscow. The New York Times reported that US intelligence agencies believe parts of the Ukrainian government authorised the killing. US officials later admonished Ukrainian officials over the assassination, the Times said. Ukraine denied it killed Dugina.

Japan Cabinet OKs record defense budget

TOKYO (AP): The Japanese Cabinet approved a record 8.7 trillion yen (\$55 billion) defense budget for 2025 as Japan accelerates building up its strike-back capability with long-range cruise missiles and starts deploying Tomahawks to fortify itself against growing threats from China, North Korea and Russia.

The Cabinet-endorsed draft defense budget marks the third year of Japan's ongoing five-year military buildup under the national security strategy adopted in 2022. The defense spending is part of the more than 115 trillion yen (\$730 billion) national budget bill - also a record - that requires parliamentary approval by March to be enacted.

Japan is preparing to deploy US-made Tomahawks late in the fiscal year 2025 as part of its ongoing effort to acquire strike-back capability with long-range missiles that can hit distant targets. The budget allocates 940 billion yen (\$6 billion) for the so-called "standoff" defense system that also includes long-range missiles, satellite constellation and other arsenals. The cost includes 1.8 billion yen (\$11.4 million) for the purchase and addition of equipment to

launch Tomahawks from an Aegis-class destroyers.

In order to reinforce its missile defense system, Japan plans to spend another 533 billion yen (\$3.37 billion) that includes purchases of interceptors and a mobile reconnaissance radar to be placed on Okinawa, where more than half of about 50,000 American troops are based. Under the defense strategy, Japan aims to eventually double its annual military spending to around 10 trillion yen (\$63 billion), making it the world's No. 3 military spender after the United States and China. As part of the military buildup, Japan is pushing to strengthen its largely domestic defense industry by participating in joint development and promoting foreign sales.

For 2025, Japan plans to spend 314.8 billion yen (\$2 billion) to build three 4,800-ton new multi-purpose compact destroyers, or FFM, that require 90 crew members, less than half the crew size currently needed as a result of automation and labor-saving design - the platform Japan wants Australia to choose for their future frigates. They are upgraded Mogami-class destroyers equipped with long-range missiles, rein-

forced anti-submarine warfare functions and high stealth performance, officials say. The destroyers built by the Mitsubishi Heavy Industries is one of two candidates shortlisted by Australia for its Sea 3000 frigate project and is competing against Germany's MEKO A-200 offered by Thyssenkrupp Marine Systems. Japan would jointly develop and produce frigates for the Australian Navy. The project not only serves to further deepen cooperation between Japan and Australia but contributes to enhancing Japan's warship capabilities, Defense Minister Gen Nakatani said last month. Japan, whose only treaty ally is the United States, has developed close ties with Australia and considers it a semi-ally as they face China's growing threat in the region. Japan is desperate to win the deal after it lost to France in the 2016 submarine deal with Australia. Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba's Cabinet has already approved foreign sales of Mogami-class FFM to Australia in hopes it is selected, and set up a joint panel of government and industrial officials to step up its campaign drive to Canberra.

China launches amphibious assault ship

BANGKOK (AP): China launched a new amphibious assault ship, capable of launching fighter jets and designed to strengthen the navy's combat ability in distant seas. The Sichuan, the first ship of the 076 type, is China's largest such ship yet, displacing 40,000 tons and equipped with an electromagnetic catapult which will allow fighter jets to launch directly off its deck, according to the official Xinhua news agency.

The ship is designed to launch ground troops in landing crafts and provide them with air support. Developed by Chinese researchers, it's also equipped with an "arrestor

technology" which allows fighter jets to land on its deck. China's first amphibious assault ships, the type 075, launched in 2019.

China's People's Liberation Army Navy, or PLAN, has been working on modernizing its forces for more than a decade, with the aim of being able to operate globally rather than being restricted to waters near the Chinese mainland. China first managed to launch fighter jets with the new electromagnetic technology on its indigenously made aircraft carrier, the Fujian, which launched two years ago. Chinese military expert Song Zhongping compared the Sichuan to a

"light aircraft carrier," according to the Global Times.

The ship will undergo further testing, including sea trials. China has the largest navy in the world and is consistently trying to upgrade its fleet. Recently, researchers found that the country is working on designing a nuclear-powered aircraft carrier, which would allow it to deploy its ships in distant waters without needing a base to refuel. The US currently has 11 aircraft carriers, all nuclear powered, allowing it to keep multiple strike groups deployed around the world at all times, including in the Asia-Pacific.

Trial of man accused in Trump assassination attempt pushed back

ORLANDO, Fla. (AP): A man accused of attempting to assassinate President-elect Donald Trump in South Florida won't be tried until September 2025, a federal judge ruled this week. Ryan Routh's trial will begin Sept. 8 instead of the previously scheduled Feb. 10, 2025 start date, US District Judge Aileen Cannon said in an order released.

Routh, 58, a Hawaii resident, has pleaded not guilty. Routh's attorneys had asked the judge to delay the trial until no earlier than next December, saying they needed more time to review the evidence against him and decide whether to mount an insanity defense. Routh

owned 17 cellphones and numerous other electronic devices, and there are hundreds of hours of police body camera and surveillance videos that have been provided to the defense, Routh's attorneys argued during a hearing two weeks ago in Fort Pierce, Florida.

In her order, Cannon said she wanted to err on the side of providing more time given the seriousness of the allegations, but that starting the trial no earlier than December would be an excessive amount. A September trial date didn't amount to an "unreasonable delay," she said. The judge said that any insanity defense or any request related to Routh's mental

competency must be made by early February. Any visit to the scene of the assassination attempt must be made by the end of February.

Prosecutors say Routh methodically plotted to kill Trump for weeks before aiming a rifle through the shrubbery as Trump played golf on Sept. 15, 2024 at his West Palm Beach country club. Before Trump came into view, Routh was spotted by a Secret Service agent. Routh allegedly aimed his rifle at the agent, who opened fire, causing Routh to drop his weapon and flee without firing a shot. Prosecutors say he left behind a note describing his intentions. He was

arrested a short time later driving on a nearby interstate. Routh's charge of attempted assassination of a major presidential candidate carries a potential life sentence in the event of a conviction. Other charges include assaulting a federal officer and three firearms counts. He is being held without bail at the federal jail in Miami. Routh's arrest came two months after Trump was shot and wounded in the ear in an assassination attempt during a campaign rally in Pennsylvania. The Secret Service acknowledged failings leading up to that shooting but has said security worked as it should have to thwart the potential Florida attack.

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Syrian refugees in a post-Assad era

THE Syrian refugee crisis is one of the most harrowing humanitarian catastrophes of the 21st century. Triggered by a civil war that erupted in 2011, the conflict displaced more than 13 million Syrians, half of the country's pre-war population. Among these, approximately 6.8 million sought refuge abroad, primarily in neighboring countries such as Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan, as well as in Europe and beyond. Their plight became a symbol of human suffering, resilience, and the challenges of global solidarity. Now, with the fall of Bashar Assad, some Western countries have initiated efforts to repatriate Syrian refugees, citing changing conditions on the ground. However, the complexities of Syria's devastated economy, crumbled infrastructure, and societal scars warrant a more cautious approach to repatriation.

During the civil war, many Syrians risked perilous journeys across the Mediterranean to seek safety in Europe. Images of overcrowded boats and tragic drownings stirred global attention, yet responses varied widely. Some countries opened their doors, while others closed borders or erected barriers to limit the influx. The refugee crisis underscored profound challenges: the strain on host countries' resources; the difficulty of integrating large refugee populations; and the enduring trauma faced by those who fled. Syrians struggled to find stable employment, access to healthcare, and secure education for their children. Despite these hardships, many often clung to the hope of returning home.

While the fall of Assad marks a significant turning point, Syria appears to be far from ready to accommodate the return of millions of its displaced citizens. The war's toll on the country's economy and infrastructure is staggering. Entire cities lie in ruins, with essential services like water, electricity, and healthcare severely compromised. According to estimates, rebuilding Syria could take hundreds of billions of dollars and decades of effort. Roads, schools, hospitals and homes must be reconstructed before large-scale returns can be viable. The economic landscape is equally dire. Syria's GDP has contracted sharply since the war began, and industries that once provided livelihoods for millions have collapsed. Agriculture, a cornerstone of the pre-war economy, has been devastated by conflict and climate change. Many factories and businesses have been destroyed or abandoned, leaving a vacuum of employment opportunities. Inflation and currency devaluation have rendered basic goods unaffordable for much of the population.

For those who do return, the challenges are formidable. Housing is one of the most immediate and pressing issues. Many refugees' homes have been destroyed, seized, or occupied by others. Legal disputes over property rights are likely to be widespread, particularly in a country where documentation was lost or destroyed during the war. Economic reintegration poses another major hurdle. With high unemployment and limited job opportunities, returnees may struggle to support themselves and their families. Skilled workers may find that their professions are no longer viable due to the destruction of infrastructure or shifts in the economy. Farmers returning to rural areas may face land that has been rendered infertile by neglect or conflict. In urban areas, small businesses that once thrived may no longer have a customer base or the resources to restart operations. Access to basic services is another significant concern. Healthcare facilities are scarce and overwhelmed, with shortages of staff, equipment, and medicine. Schools have been destroyed or repurposed. Refugees returning to such conditions may find that their quality of life is no better - and perhaps worse - than in the countries where they sought asylum.

In addition, the psychological toll of return cannot be overlooked. Many refugees have endured profound trauma, from witnessing violence to losing loved ones. Returning to a country that still bears the scars of war may exacerbate these mental health challenges. Support systems, such as counseling and community networks, are limited or non-existent in many parts of Syria. Despite these challenges, many Syrians hope that Syria can one day reclaim stability, security, and prosperity. After 13 years of relentless conflict, the prospect of peace may offer a glimmer of possibility for millions of Syrians longing for normalcy. With time, the reconstruction of infrastructure, the revival of the economy, and the healing of societal divisions can hopefully pave the way for a brighter future.

The rebuilding of Syria's infrastructure will be a monumental task, but it is essential for enabling refugees to return and rebuild their lives. Roads, bridges, and public services must be restored to connect communities and facilitate economic activity. Schools and hospitals must be reconstructed to provide education and healthcare, laying the foundation for a healthier and more prosperous society. Investments in renewable energy and modern technology could help Syria leapfrog some development challenges, creating opportunities for innovation and growth. As stability takes hold, the Syrian economy has the potential to recover and even thrive. Agriculture can be revitalized through investment in irrigation and sustainable practices. Industries such as manufacturing and construction can provide jobs and drive economic growth. Tourism, once a major contributor to Syria's economy, could gradually rebound as historical sites are restored and security improves. The entrepreneurial spirit of the Syrian people, evident in the diaspora, can play a crucial role in rebuilding the nation.

Social healing will be equally important. Programs aimed at reconciliation and community building can help bridge divides and foster a sense of unity. Education will be key to equipping the next generation with the skills and knowledge needed to rebuild their country. Cultural and artistic initiatives can celebrate Syria's rich heritage and inspire a sense of shared identity. While the road ahead is long and fraught with challenges, the resilience of the Syrian people offers hope. For those who have endured unimaginable hardship, the dream of returning to a safe and thriving homeland is a powerful motivator. With patience and perseverance, many Syrians hope that their country can rise from the ashes of war, offering its citizens the security, stability, and opportunities they deserve. The international community will undoubtedly watch as the Syrian people work toward their hope of a brighter future, determined to rebuild their lives and their nation.

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Bilawal to protect Npower...



A new Iranian approach to regional security, prosperity

Mohammad Javad Zarif

MWADA invites all core Muslim countries in West Asia-Bahrain, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, (the future government of) Syria, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates and Yemen to engage in comprehensive negotiations. Relevant envoys from the United Nations can take part too. This initiative should be grounded in the sublime values of our common religion, Islam, and on the principles of sovereignty, territorial integrity, non-intervention and collective security. MWADA, meaning "amity" in Arabic-the language of our collective prayers-ought to aim to foster peaceful coexistence and equitable partnerships.

A key priority is the establishment of immediate sustainable, permanent ceasefires in Gaza, Lebanon, Syria and Yemen. A non-aggression pact among MWADA states, coupled with collective regional monitoring, will help institutionalize stability and protect the region from external interference as well as from internal strife.

Economic integration is also central to the vision. The lack of interdependence within West Asia stems from fragmented trade networks, insufficient attention to the development of intra-regional banking and payment mechanisms, political rivalries and a reliance on external markets.

A proposed MWADA Development Fund can finance critical infrastructure projects, particularly in devastated post-conflict areas. Additionally, governance reforms in Syria-as a basis for economic assistance-will promote accountability and lay the groundwork for a safe and stable country where women and minorities can thrive.

Post-Assad Syria presents a major challenge to us all. Unbridled Israeli aggression disregarding Syrian sovereignty, foreign interference undermining Syrian territorial integrity, horrifying scenes of violence and brutality reminiscent of Islamic State savagery, and ethnic and sectarian violence-which may lead to an all-out civil war-

require the immediate attention of the proposed MWADA.

The humanitarian disaster in Palestine also remains critical for regional stability. MWADA must prioritize Palestinian self-determination and support just solutions while fully respecting the aspirations of the people. This involves not just political solutions but also economic opportunities and

security expertise, is uniquely positioned to contribute to the security of waterways like the Strait of Hormuz. Others can play a leading role in securing Suez and Bab al-Mandab. The Hormuz Peace Endeavor or HOPE-introduced by Iran nearly five years ago represented a significant example of a regional initiative aimed at fostering peace and stability

just without foreign assistance, but in spite of pressure from extra-regional powers. The widely believed perception of Iran losing its arms in the region stems from a wrong assumption that Iran has had proxy-patron relationships with resistance forces. Resistance has its roots in Israel's occupation of Arab lands and desecration of Islamic holy sites, apartheid, genocide and constant aggression against its neighbors. It existed before the Iranian revolution in 1979 and will continue as long as its root causes persist. Trying to attribute it to Iran may serve a public relations campaign but will obstruct any resolution.

Like other participants, Iran would play an indispensable role. Over the past 45 years, my country has demonstrated remarkable resilience and self-sufficiency in security and defense, managing to survive and even thrive; not just without foreign assistance, but in spite of pressure from extra-regional powers.

Like all nations, Iran has faced its share of challenges and missteps. The Iranian people, having endured significant sacrifices, are now prepared with resilience and confidence to take bold steps. This shift from a threat-centered perspective to an opportunity-driven one aligns with the vision outlined by President Pezeshkian (and myself) during last summer's presidential campaign in Iran.

MWADA challenges us to re-imagine the region not as a battleground but as a hub of mwada, amity and empathy, characterized by the pursuit of shared opportunities and collective prosperity. It is essential to engage in meaningful-and indeed frank-conversations that will allow us to craft a future defined by co-operation, shared and sustainable development, social justice and welfare, and renewed hope.

Transforming West Asia into a beacon of peace and collaboration is not just an idealistic aspiration; it is both a strategic imperative and an achievable goal that requires only commitment, dialogue and a shared vision. MWADA can be the transformation platform. Let us embrace this opportunity to build a stable, prosperous, and peaceful West Asia, one where empathy, understanding and collaboration replace discord and division. Those of us in the respective governments of our states must seize the opportunity to start looking toward the future rather than remaining prisoners of the past. The time to act is now.

IRNA

Trump's '5 percent down' plan for Europe

Mark Toth & Jonathan Sweet

FIVE and dime stores are now a thing of the past in the US But if the Financial Times is accurate, President-elect Trump is signaling to NATO member-states that they must spend 5 percent of their gross domestic product (GDP) annually on defense if they want US support.

That is a big ask. As of June 2024, of the 32 NATO countries, eight were still far short of the 2 percent of GDP threshold. Only Poland exceeds 4 percent. That may be sufficient in peacetime, but Russia and its Axis of Evil allies are knocking on the door. What's more, the European continent is already engaged in an active hybrid war with Russia involving espionage, sabotage, cyber-attacks, assassinations and disinformation.

Nor is it adequate for what is likely to come in the next decade. The Kremlin is rapidly preparing an even larger kinetic war against Europe.

Andrei Belousov, the Russian defense chief, underscored the urgency of the latter point when he announced earlier this month that Russia must be ready for a direct "military conflict with NATO in the next ten years."

To get there and to win the war in Ukraine, Moscow announced in September that it was raising defense spending by 25 percent in 2025, to 6.3 percent of its GDP. That is 1.5 times current US defense spending as a share of GDP, and three times NATO's present median. Russia is on a war footing, but many NATO countries remain in denial of what lies ahead - or, as in the case of Slovakia and Hungary, they are prioritizing economic security over long-term national security.

Canada, a key NORAD partner, currently only spends 1.4 percent of its GDP on defense. Belgium, home to NATO's headquarters, is even worse, spending only 1.1 percent. Consequently,

Europe is vulnerable. That goes double if Russia, in its eventual war with NATO, weaponizes European civilians by intentionally attacking hospitals, energy grids, schools and historic cultural sites, as he has all across Ukraine.

Leaked NATO reports from last May are alarming. Brussels is estimating that NATO member-states are currently only "able to provide less than 5 percent of air defense capacities deemed necessary to protect its members in central and eastern Europe against a full-scale attack." The area where the Russian military has been most successful is in targeting Ukrainian population centers and energy infrastructure with missiles and drones. The exposure to a future Europe at war is very real.

Israel's wars against Hamas, Hezbollah and Iran must be informative as well. Especially in regard to elec-

tronic warfare given the proliferation of kinetic drones being used to interdict troops, armor and artillery - as well as constructing a layered and integrated air defense system along the lines of the Iron Dome. Air defense is only the beginning. In contrast, Trump's demand for 5 percent down in the here and now is exponentially cheaper. And in reality, from a national security standpoint, it is also far more prudent and strategic for NATO's European member-states. Training is key as well. NATO's ground defense is predicated upon rapid response - and that means being able to mobilize and reinforce forward-deployed NATO battle-groups in Bulgaria, Estonia, Hungary, Lithuania, Poland, Romania and Slovakia.

That entails training soldiers from the ground up. First at the national level, then as part of a NATO Joint/Combined team forged

by joint exercises and training. Spending 5 percent now on their development and training is what will save many of their lives in the future if war with Russia erupts in the next decade. Russian President Vladimir Putin is not making this same investment in his army - and it is partly why his casualty rates in Ukraine are so high.

You cannot put a uniform on just anyone, provide a weapon, and expect him or her to be a soldier in two weeks. Yet, that is exactly what Putin is doing. NATO, in contrast, spends years developing and training its fighting men and women. NATO must also be prepared to fight future kinetic wars in new and innovative ways. Artificial intelligence is already transforming the battlefields in Ukraine - and the intelligence gathering and assessment process. Ukraine's military has collected more than 2 million hours of video from the battlefield and is using it "to

identify targets [by] scanning images far quicker than a human." Overlays of the images detect changes and flag humans for action.

None of this will be easy. Europe long invested in its comprehensive social programs is facing a stark set of choices: national security or the ideal social state. Finding the political will to change that will not be easy. But Trump is laying the gauntlet. Pay now by putting 5 percent down, or risk losing future US support of NATO.

Europe failed that same kind of choice in the 1930s, and World War II ensued. Today, Putin has made his position clear. Last Friday, he bluntly announced that the world has declared war on Russia, and that in response, "Russian world has declared war." The only remaining question now is Europe willing to listen to Trump and make the 5 percent GDP investment, or to Putin, who is betting they will not.

The Hill

What next for Lebanon?

Dr. Dania Koleilat Khatib

THIS has been a terrible year for Lebanon. Many of the country's problems had been accumulating for years; they most notably started with the financial crash in 2019, followed by the Beirut port explosion in August 2020 and then the deadlock in electing a president since 2022. The Gaza war has also had a spillover effect on Lebanon, as skirmishes erupted between Hezbollah and Israel on Oct. 8, 2023. In September, however, the dynamic of the conflict changed and Israel began an all-out war on Lebanon, targeting all areas of the country, not just Hezbollah strongholds. Lebanon has reached the abyss. The question now is: will there be a way out in 2025?

This year has been mainly marked by a political deadlock, which reflects a highly polarized society, and by the Israeli war. When the mandate of President Michel Aoun expired at the end of October 2022, the political class could not agree on a replacement. Hezbollah insisted on their candidate, Suleiman Frangieh, while the anti-Hezbollah camp categorically rejected him. As a result, no president was elected and the country was run by a caretaker government. One year later, the Gaza war started and Hezbollah opened a "support front." The group found in this conflict another excuse to defer the issue of electing a president.

The war in Gaza was a threat to Hezbollah. It knew that, if Israel was successful, it would be next. This is why Hezbollah opened its support front. While it was portrayed as a war of solidarity, for the group it was a security need. Prior to the war on Gaza, the group was under scrutiny for not abiding by UN Security Council Resolution 1701. The international community was exerting a lot of pressure to push the group to comply with it. The solidarity front was a gamble that Hezbollah took.

The bet was on an early ceasefire, which the group could use to claim victory and cash in on it politically. In September, however, the tide of the conflict changed. It is likely Israel had been preparing for this war for years. In its 2006 war on Lebanon, Israel realized the deficiency it had on the intelligence front. So, it started focusing on gathering intelligence.

Hezbollah also became a business empire, from having its own bank to multiple other businesses. It has also been accused of being involved in the Captagon trade. The group became porous. Top Hezbollah commanders became known to Israel. Tel Aviv used sophisticated technology to identify and target them. This led the group to rely on pagers, which are more basic and hence more difficult to trace. Then came September's attack on Hezbollah's pagers. This attack changed the tide of the war. In a highly effective operation, Israel was able to tamper with the pagers used by Hezbollah members. It was able to target important operatives in the group. Afterward, Israel went on a bombing and assassination spree in Lebanon. All this was happening while Lebanon had no president and no real government or any effective diplomacy. In the 2006 war, Lebanese diplomacy worked to find an end to the war, with then-Prime Minister Fouad Siniara dispatching

the highly qualified Dr. Tarek Mitri. Today, Lebanese diplomacy is at best numb.

On Nov. 22, Lebanon marked its worst independence day since the civil war. Four days later, a ceasefire deal was signed. Can Lebanon now resurrect itself or will it linger as a failing state for the next 30 years? Which option is more likely? The renowned Emirati academic Abdulkhaleq Abdulla asked me two days before writing this piece: What is next for Lebanon, is it scenario one or scenario two? I personally think the situation will improve. It might get worse before it gets better. But it cannot get much worse because, as I said, we have reached the abyss. A quarter of the buildings in the south of Lebanon have been damaged or destroyed.

So, what is next? What should happen so that we can have a better future? Unlike 2006, when Arab countries donated money for the country's reconstruction with no strings attached, this time any aid will be conditional on three elements. Firstly, the Arab states and the wider international community will not accept the dominance of an armed faction in Lebanon. Secondly, they will want a credible government to handle the reconstruction process. Thirdly, they will want a transparent process. They will not compromise on good governance for the sake of stability like they did before.

Hence, Hezbollah will, on Jan. 9, be pushed to elect a consensual president, who will then appoint a credible government that can garner the trust of the Arab world and the international community. This credible government will probably be a government of technocrats that is focused on elevating Lebanon. This is unlike previous governments, in which the different ministers were busy dividing the pie among the various members of the political class. The donor community should insist on a government of technocrats that is focused on governance, not political polarization. The good news is that there is a nucleus of good governance. The calamity that has been inflicted on Lebanon has brought with it an opportunity: the country established a government emergency committee that came up with a transparent, efficient and effective process to handle 1.2 million displaced people. This process includes the management and monitoring of aid deliveries. It could be replicated in different government departments and developed to manage Lebanon's recovery and reconstruction.

The other positive element is the fact that Lebanon is a small country. A few billion dollars would be enough to rebuild infrastructure and jumpstart the economy. The country has human capital and the Lebanese are known for their entrepreneurial spirit. Recovery can happen quicker than we might expect. Also, members of the diaspora will come back and invest if they see that there is a credible government and that the country is stable and no longer controlled by a corrupt political class. However, this is all speculation and maybe my analysis has been influenced by my own wishful thinking. However, deep down, I have a conviction that my country, like the phoenix, will rise from the ashes.

Arab News

China-India rivalry will define the future of Asia

Brahma Chellaney

CHINA and India have sought in recent weeks to ease a tense military standoff along their mountainous frontier. The drawn-out standoff, triggered by China's fierce encroachments on the icy borderlands of India's Ladakh region in 2020, has fostered rival military buildups and intermittent clashes along the Himalayas.

An Oct. 23 meeting between Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Chinese President Xi Jinping on the sidelines of a BRICS summit highlighted mutual interest in improving relations between the Asian giants. Indeed, an agreement was reached for reciprocal steps toward defusing the military standoff and ensuring peace along their disputed frontier, which is one of the world's longest land borders.

But can a potential thaw in the icy hostility marking bilateral relations blunt the Sino-Indian strategic rivalry, which is defining Asian geopolitics? The origins of the tensions go back to the early 1950s, when China imposed itself as India's neighbor by occupying the then-autonomous Tibet, a large region that historically served as a buffer between the Chinese and Indian civilizations. That annexation led to China's 1962 border war with India. After Mao Zedong's death in 1976, the two countries restored diplomatic ties, but, despite efforts to establish a *modus vivendi*, mutual suspicions and antagonisms never disappeared.

In recent years, India is tasting the bitter fruits of Modi's initial efforts to appease China. The 2020 Chinese territorial encroachments caught India

unawares at a time when the country was preoccupied with enforcing one of the world's strictest lockdowns in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Modi came to office in 2014 as a foreign policy novice. He thought that, by resetting the relationship with Beijing, he could help weaken China's strategic alliance with Pakistan. Pakistan, like China, is a revisionist state that lays claims to sizable swaths of Indian territory. But Pakistan also has employed cross-border terrorism as an instrument of foreign policy.

The China-Pakistan axis has long generated high security costs for India, including raising the specter of a two-front war. Through a "defensive wedge strategy," in which the status quo power seeks to split a revisionist alliance so as to focus capabilities on the more threatening challenger, India has long sought - unsuccessfully - to break the Sino-Pakistan axis. The first prime minister from Modi's Bharatiya Janata (Indian People's) Party, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, tried to win over Pakistan, famously going there by bus in 1999. Modi, by contrast, focused on befriending China after coming to power, including hosting Xi before any other world leader and opening up the Indian economy for Chinese businesses by delisting China as a "country of concern."

But Modi's peace overtures spectacularly backfired. Xi visited India in 2014 bearing an unusual gift - a deep Chinese military incursion into an Indian borderland. This was followed by a bigger Sino-Indian military confrontation in 2017 on the

Doklam Plateau, located at the Bhutan-Tibet-India trijunction. And the 2020 Chinese encroachments occurred despite 18 meetings between Modi and Xi over the previous five years. After taking India on a rollercoaster ride on China, Modi has been injecting greater realism into his policy, including prioritizing military modernization and bolstering border defenses.

As the military standoff has underscored, India, by locking horns with China despite the risk of a full-scale war, openly challenged Chinese capability and power in a way no other power has done in this century. In fact, Xi seriously miscalculated that China would be able to impose the changed status quo on India as a fait accompli without inviting a robust military response. The standoff has only highlighted Xi's strategic shortsightedness in turning a once-conciliatory India into a foe that seems determined to forestall a Sino-centric Asia. With Xi accusing the US of "containment from all directions, encirclement and suppression against us," the last thing China needed to do was to make an enemy of its largest neighbor.

This is similar to how Xi's muscular revisionism has impelled major shifts in the strategic postures of two other leading Indo-Pacific powers. Japan, by deciding to double its defense spending by 2027, is effectively abandoning its pacifist postwar security policy, and Australia has ended hedging by joining the US-led, anti-China AUKUS alliance. Today, the Sino-Indian efforts to reduce tensions and pull back forces massed along the common fron-

tier are being driven by different geopolitical factors.

For India, one consideration is to gain greater maneuverability in foreign policy at a time when the once-blossoming strategic partnership with the US has begun to fray, despite President Biden acknowledging that this relationship is "among the most consequential in the world." China, for its part, is facing increasing Western pushback against its expansionism. With its economy already sputtering, China is running into long-term growth constraints, including a shrinking and rapidly aging population and slowing productivity increase. By contrast, India - which has one of the world's most youthful populations with a median age of 28.4 - appears poised to reap a demographic dividend. While India's economy remains smaller than China's, it is now growing faster than any other important economy.

Whereas the People's Liberation Army of China largely relies on conscripts who ostensibly "volunteer" for two years of service at age of 18, India's all-volunteer military is considered the world's most experienced force in hybrid mountain warfare. India's military edge in the high-altitude Himalayan environment, however, could be blunted by China's superior air power capabilities, including missile prowess. Against this backdrop, Xi and Modi have sought to defuse the Himalayan military crisis without losing face. While deescalating tensions along the frontier makes eminent sense for both leaders, the Sino-Indian rivalry is unlikely to weaken. In fact, this rivalry promises to shape the Asian and global balance of power.

Who can lead Sudan out of its crisis?

THE coexistence of the SAF and RSF within Sudan's political landscape seems increasingly untenable. As the Sudanese people endure relentless bombing, destruction and displacement, the prospect of a peace agreement or ceasefire appears increasingly remote.

Sudan, a nation with a complex history of colonial legacy, ethnic diversity, and political instability, is now facing one of the gravest crises in its history. The ongoing power struggle between the Sudanese Armed Forces and the Rapid Support Forces has turned what was meant to be a political transition into a full-blown humanitarian disaster. With hundreds of thousands displaced, cities devastated, and the social fabric torn apart, the critical question remains: Who can solve Sudan's crisis? Can the army or the RSF lead the country to peace, or does the solution lie in moving beyond their influence entirely?

The conflict between the SAF, led by Gen. Abdel Fattah Al-Burhan, and the RSF, commanded by Gen. Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo (known as Hemedti), erupted in April 2023. Although the two sides were allies during the transitional period following the ousting of President Omar Bashir in 2019, their rivalry over power strained their relationship to breaking point. The SAF represents Sudan's traditional military institution, historically tied to the country's political elite and shaped by the ideological leanings of those in power. The RSF, on the other hand, evolved from the infamous Janjaweed militias into a semi-independent force with extensive economic interests and a reputation for violence. Their power struggle is not merely a battle for control but reflects deeper issues of governance, legitimacy, and Sudan's future.

Who can lead Sudan out of its crisis? This question defines the current phase of Sudan's turmoil. Is the SAF, which sees itself as the country's legitimate authority, the answer? Or is it the RSF, portraying itself as the savior of the Sudanese people? Perhaps a third force, likely external, could emerge as the driving and guaranteeing entity for a resolution. Exploring these forces and their potential solutions sheds light on the challenges ahead. Historically, the SAF has played a dominant role in Sudanese politics, frequently intervening in civilian governance through coups. While it portrays itself as a defender of Sudan's sovereignty, much of its history is marred by corruption, mismanagement, and human rights abuses.

Despite these flaws, the SAF holds certain advantages. It boasts experience, organization, and a hierarchical structure capable of maintaining order. Internationally, it retains a measure of recognition as Sudan's "official" military force, lending it some legitimacy among regional and global actors. However, the SAF faces significant challenges. Public trust has been eroded after decades of authoritarian rule and repression. Internal divisions within the army weaken its capacity to govern effectively. Moreover, civilian opposition views the SAF as a barrier to democratic transition and reform.

The RSF wields considerable influence, thanks to its decentralized structure, economic resources, and aggressive tactics. Hemedti has sought to portray the RSF as a popular force defending marginalized communities, particularly in Darfur. The RSF's strengths lie in its flexibility and resources. Its decentralized structure enables it to maintain a strong presence across various regions of Sudan. It has also garnered support in marginalized areas such as Darfur by presenting itself as an alternative to Khartoum's political elite. Furthermore, the RSF has built international networks through its control of mining sectors and mercenary services.

Nonetheless, the RSF faces critical challenges. Accusations of human rights violations, particularly in Darfur, severely undermine its legitimacy. The RSF also lacks institutional depth, as it does not possess the bureaucratic frameworks needed to govern effectively. Additionally, its predominantly Arab composition exacerbates ethnic tensions in a diverse country. Can peace be achieved with both forces in power? The coexistence of the SAF and RSF within Sudan's political landscape seems increasingly untenable. Previous attempts at power-sharing, such as the transitional government that collapsed in 2021, have repeatedly failed. Both Al-Burhan and Hemedti remain resolute in their positions, rejecting ceasefires and negotiations.

This mutual hostility underscores the barriers to a joint solution. Chief among these is the profound lack of trust between the two factions, each viewing the other as an existential threat. The complex political landscape, involving civilian actors, tribal alliances, and international pressures, further complicates any potential settlement. Regional powers backing the rival factions only deepen the conflict and hinder peace efforts. Despite

these obstacles, some hope lies in the possibility of international and regional pressure leading to a short-term peace agreement. Such an accord might involve power-sharing arrangements that limit mutual influence. Security sector reforms, including the integration of the RSF into the SAF, could form part of this framework, as advocated by the international community. Including civilian actors as mediators might also ease tensions.

However, these scenarios require genuine political will and commitment - qualities that appear absent at present. Achieving such a solution feels more like a distant dream. As the conflict drags on, some argue that the only path to peace and stability in Sudan lies in the removal of one faction. If the RSF were to defeat the SAF, it might bring an end to the armed conflict, but it would leave Sudan under a regime lacking legitimacy and institutional capacity. Such a scenario could entrench militia rule, making the country vulnerable to unregulated military and economic networks.

Conversely, if the SAF were to eliminate the RSF, it could restore centralized state control. However, this would come at a high social cost, deepening divides among Sudan's communities. It might also lead to a return to absolute military rule, sidelining civilian forces. Given the current trajectory, Sudan faces several potential outcomes. Firstly there is the real danger of an escalating civil war with continued fighting leading to further destruction, displacement, and the emergence of new armed groups, complicating the crisis.

Secondly, international intervention could take place with global powers stepping in militarily or politically to impose a settlement, though such interventions carry long-term risks. Thirdly, a partition of the country is possible, but this could deepen divisions resulting in Sudan fragmenting into multiple territories controlled by different factions.

Fourthly, a revival of the peace process, the most difficult yet hopeful scenario, which would involve intense international pressure and mutual concessions. Sudan stands at a pivotal moment in its history. The conflict between the SAF and RSF reflects deeper crises stemming from decades of unstable governance. While a resolution seems elusive, the country's future depends on the ability of Sudanese, regional, and international actors to devise a political formula that prevents further collapse and paves the way for stability and development.

How press freedoms could fare under the second Trump administration

Gabe Rottman

WITH Donald Trump set to return to the White House next year, there's much speculation on how his second administration will affect press freedom. The short answer is that we don't know, but prognosticators do have the benefit of an important dataset: his first term.

And, if that record is any indication, national security "leaks" to the press may be an area of tension between journalists and the new leadership at the Justice Department. If there is a chilling effect on sources coming forward with newsworthy information in the public interest, Americans will be less informed and the American government will be held less accountable. Things have been quiet on that front for the last four years, but the first Trump administration inherited and expanded the Obama administration's aggressive pursuit of sources who disclosed government secrets to the press.

And President-elect Trump has often decried national security leaks and called for aggressively investigating and prosecuting them. It would be foolish for press advocates to discount the possibility of a repeat of his first term, and perhaps an escalation. There are several federal laws that can be read to criminalize the public disclosure of national security secrets. The most prominent is the Espionage Act of 1917, a World War I-era law that was initially used against domestic opponents of the war but applies to the act of communicating, delivering or transmitting "information relating to the

national defense," a broad term, to anyone not entitled to receive it.

In other words, if someone were to anonymously slip a manila envelope under a reporter's door with government secrets - even secrets that the public has a clear interest in knowing, such as the warrantless domestic wiretapping by the George W. Bush administration - the Justice Department has consistently claimed the authority to investigate and prosecute the source, as well as the journalist, under the Espionage Act. There is no "public interest" defense. Historically, it hasn't been used that way. For about 90 years, the Espionage Act was deployed against actual spies, not journalists' sources. There are a few exceptions - most prominently the Pentagon Papers case, in which the government launched a failed prosecution against Daniel Ellsberg and Anthony Russo - but source cases are in the single digits. And, while there were investigations involving journalists, no reporter or news outlet was ultimately prosecuted under the Espionage Act in that period. The reason is simple. When the reporting is in the public interest, taking the leaker or journalist to court would be a "political firestorm," as a federal appeals court judge put it in one of those few exceptions, a 1980s case involving a leak of classified photographs.

But the Bush and Obama administrations marked a shift in practice. Under President George W. Bush, the Justice Department brought the first Espionage Act case other than

Russo against individuals outside government, who had not sworn to protect government secrets. The Bush administration also featured the Valerie Plame case, which started as a leak investigation, in which Judith Miller of the New York Times spent 85 days in jail for refusing to identify a confidential source from her reporting about the run-up to the Iraq war. And the Bush Justice Department issued a subpoena in 2008 to force the New York Times' James Risen to identify his source in another leak case, which the Obama administration pursued until 2015. Then the Obama administration started to bring Espionage Act prosecutions against journalists' sources in earnest. Depending on how you count, his administration brought 10 such cases. That is more than all other presidents combined.

Trump's first term followed that trend. The Justice Department brought eight cases against journalist sources, including two under bank secrecy laws, as well as the Julian Assange case. The Assange case is complicated, but he was charged in part under the novel and dangerous legal theory that publishing secrets is a crime. These cases can involve secret government demands for reporters' notes; phone, email and text records; and correspondence with sources. That kind of snooping can reveal the constellation of a journalist's sources beyond just the investigation in question and can give the government visibility into other stories the newsroom is investigating, including stories

about the government. As Miller said when facing jail time: "If journalists cannot be trusted to keep confidences, then journalists cannot function and there cannot be a free press." The Justice Department during Trump's first term turbocharged Obama-era approaches. In addition to seizing years of records from reporter Ali Watkins' phone and email providers, a Customs and Border Protection agent threatened to reveal private information unless she identified her sources. Watkins was a reporter at Politico at the time of the questioning and was at the New York Times when she learned of the records seizure.

Then, in the early days of the Biden administration, we learned that the Justice Department in the last days of the Trump administration had authorized demands for phone and email records for eight reporters at CNN, the New York Times and the Washington Post in three separate leak investigations. It did so without notifying those outlets in advance - to give them a chance to negotiate or challenge the demands - and the CNN and New York Times demands came with a gag order preventing newsroom lawyers from even alerting the reporters that they had been targeted. The history of leak investigations under Presidents Bush, Obama and Trump shows that the threat to the free flow of information is bipartisan and spans administrations. President Biden's term has been a notable exception, but a reprise may be coming.

The Los Angeles Times

Putin's press conference showed he is committed to depravity

Alexander J. Motyl

VLADIMIR Putin's recent end-of-the-year press conference was mostly a self-congratulatory snooze, but there were several moments that revealed the depths of depravity and unreality to which the Russian dictator has sunk. For starters, Putin's minions unfurled the banner of the 155th Marine Brigade of the Pacific Fleet during the press conference. Putin thanked them and then said, "this banner represents all the combat banners of our soldiers, who are fighting for Russia, for the Motherland, along the entire line of contact." What Putin failed to say was that the 155th Marine Brigade was responsible for committing war crimes and massacring hundreds of Ukrainian civilians in three cities north of Kyiv - Bucha, Irpin and Hostomel - in the early days of the invasion

Needless to say, Putin was endorsing the unit's - and by extension the entire Russian army's - genocidal actions. He was also signaling to the West that he would continue employing genocide as a legitimate means of waging war - whether in Ukraine, Finland, the Baltic states or Poland. Finally, Putin was declaring that he was completely nonplussed by being an accused war criminal, challenging Russians with a conscience to dare speak out against his having implicated all of Russia in his crimes. As if in confirmation of his belief in Russians' bloodthirstiness, Putin had this to say about his people: "You know, when everything with us is calm, measured, and stable, we get

bored. Stagnation. We want action. As soon as the action starts, everything starts whistling past our temples: both seconds and bullets. Unfortunately, bullets are also whistling now. Yes, we are scared, 'horror-horror.' Well, 'horror.' But not 'horror-horror-horror.'"

Judge for yourself what that six-fold repetition of the word "horror" means, but given the context it seems to imply that his people's love of action produces some fear, but not too much. Russians appear to revel in the whistling of bullets, presumably aimed, as his praise of the 155th Brigade suggests, at innocent Ukrainian civilians. Then there's the following statement: "I believe that Russia has become significantly stronger in the past two or three years. Why? Because we are becoming a truly sovereign country, and we barely depend on anybody. ... [Russia] has grown stronger and become a truly sovereign state, and we will make decisions without looking at other people's opinions, only with our national interests in mind."

As evidence, Putin cites what he considers to be a strong economy and a strong military. By any measure, both have gotten weaker over the last three years. No one except Putin would say they've actually gotten stronger. He is right to say that the economy, military and his decision-making "barely depend on anybody." Russia has become more isolated, more self-enclosed and less dependent on "other people's opinions." But few would claim that not depending

on anybody means you've gotten stronger. It may mean that you've enhanced your sovereignty, except that Putin fails to say that he's traded Russia's former involvement with the global economy and international relations for colonial dependence on the big brother in China and the little brother in North Korea. Indeed, it's arguably the case that Russia's sovereignty has actually decreased in the last three years.

Is Putin delusional? Not quite. He is doing what he's done for the last 25 years: identifying Russia with himself. As the personification of the Russian state, Putin can rightly claim that, since his dictatorial powers have increased since the war began, it follows that so too have Russia's. The scary part is his evidently sincere belief that he and Russia are one and the same. The scarier part is the fact that many Russians appear to agree. But there was one especially lucid section toward the end of the press conference. Putin was asked if he would have done things differently in February 2022. Here's his answer. Reading it is a challenge, but pay attention to what's missing:

"If it were possible to look at the situation in 2022, knowing what's happening now, what would I think? That such a decision, which was made at the beginning of 2022, should have been made earlier... "Knowing this, it was necessary to simply start preparing for these events, including the Special Military Operation. After all, the Crimean events, they were simply sponta-

neous, and we also started the events of 2022 without any special preparation for them. But why did we start? Because it was no longer possible to stand still and endure, and wait for the situation to worsen for us... "The Kyiv authorities announced that they would not implement the Minsk agreements. They said so directly, declared their claims to some weapons of mass destruction. We saw that we were deceived about the Minsk agreements, the war and slaughter, the destruction of people in the Donbas have been going on for eight years... "

"And what's more, we saw that the military development of these territories has begun, with the parallel destruction of everything connected with Russia. It was no longer possible to remain in the state we were in. They forced us to take these actions." What's missing here? Any mention of NATO and its supposed plans to invade Ukraine. Instead, Putin puts the blame squarely on the Ukrainians and what they did or failed to do. Agree or disagree with his assessment, but recognize that Putin has effectively destroyed whatever plausibility the "NATO-threat" thesis may still have among poorly informed policymakers and analysts. Unfortunately, none of these conclusions should surprise or shock us. Putin is being true to himself; indeed, he's proud of being a genocidaire and warmonger. He thrives on death and destruction - and believes Russians do too. Negotiating with Putin won't be about ending war and introducing peace. It'll be about the timing and extent of genocide and war.

In 2025, adversity may yet be Europe's wake-up call

Giles Merritt

THE winds of change are blowing hard around the world, and European Union (EU) policymakers in Brussels are divided over whether Europe should prepare for a particularly icy blast, or can still hope for gentler breezes. Economic forecasters suggest the former, while political analysts are somewhat more optimistic. Broadly, the divide is between those diplomats and senior officials who look to the European Union as a skillful helmsman capable of steering the EU's 27 member countries towards calmer waters, and more independent commentators who fear the European ship of state risks being holed beneath the waterline by growing political turmoil, notably but not solely in France and Germany.

True believers in the strengths of EU unity point to Ursula von der Leyen's deft assembly of her second European Commission without losing any nominees in the European Parliament's confirmation hearings. The result is a "business as usual" atmosphere in Brussels as her new team prepares to face the challenges of 2025. This mood of quiet confidence is reinforced by the knowledge that von der Leyen has eclipsed her grey-suited male predecessors to become a globally recognized figure, thanks in part to her charismatic look and brightly colored jackets.

Von der Leyen is thus seen by many as an adroit leader who handled the COVID-19 pandemic well, and in addition to rallying support for Ukraine is responding to the economic challenges confronting Europe. Others say

her "dictatorial" style risks fracturing the EU's member governments and is unwelcome inside the commission itself.

Opinion may be divided over the EU's ability to weather the coming year's gathering storm, but there can be no doubt that 2025 is set to be far more testing than years past. As well as the widely-debated "Trump factor" on whether he will dare to imperil American investors' trillion-dollar stake in European assets, there's also a sense of fast-narrowing options for rescuing the EU's stagnating economy.

The second half of 2024 has seen two authoritative studies of what ails European business and industry, although both have been more explicit in their analyses than in credible action plans. Mario Draghi, the eurozone's central banker whose "whatever it takes" pledge defused the 2012 sovereign debt crisis, summed up Europe's economic outlook succinctly. He warned of a vicious cycle of weak domestic demand, insufficient macroeconomic stimulus, depressed investment, and low productivity. These symptoms aren't susceptible to any miracle cures. Nor are the ailments detailed by fellow Italian ex-Prime Minister Enrico Letta. His parallel report looked at the unfinished state of the EU's vaunted single market, and concluded that an enormous act of collective political will is now needed. Above all, he singles out the absence of a unified capital market to kick-start more high-tech innovation.

The good news, then, is that Europe is heading into

2025 and beyond with a far sharper focus on its own potentially crippling structural weaknesses. The bad news is that the political muscle to fashion and introduce solutions is no longer available.

Roughly one in four of the MEPs elected in June to the European Parliament is to some degree or other a euro-sceptic. Europe's politics have been re-landscaped by right-wing political parties, some of them outright populists with radically nationalist agendas, others of a more conventionally conservative nature but unlikely to hand more autonomous new powers to the EU. From outright xenophobic to mildly euro-sceptic, the EU's member governments can no longer be counted on by Brussels to support expensive and far-sighted economic strategies. How the crises that in 2024 engulfed the French and German governments will eventually play out remains to be seen. But with the populist Rassemblement National and Alternatif für Deutschland parties snapping at their heels, it's hard to see a return of the Franco-German "locomotive" that pulled the project of European integration out of doldrums in the 1980s.

That's the big picture. It isn't bright, but many European commentators reassure themselves that it's far less dark than that of the other major pillar of the liberal Western world - the United States. Only time will reveal the disruption and chaos to be wreaked by the second Trump Administration, but many in Europe comfort themselves with the thought that greater EU unity has always been born out of adversity.



In brief

Ronaldo breaks silence over Vinicius Jr snub

PARIS (INP): Portuguese football legend Cristiano Ronaldo said it was "unfair" that Real Madrid's Vinicius Junior missed out on this year's award. The five-time Ballon d'Or award winner's remarks come months after Manchester City midfielder Rodri took the prestigious prize in October with favourite Vinicius in second place. Rodri helped City to a fourth straight Premier League title and Spain to Euro 2024 while attacker Vinicius guided Madrid to a record-extending 15th Champions League. This year's ceremony in Paris was clouded by controversy after Vinicius' Madrid boycotted the event. "In my opinion he deserved to win the golden ball. It was unfair, I say it here in front of everybody," former Madrid attacker Ronaldo said at the ceremony of the Global Soccer Awards. "They gave it to Rodri, he deserved it too but I think they should have given it to Vinicius because he won a Champions League," the 39-year-old Portugal captain added. Only Argentina superstar Lionel Messi with his eight successes has won the Ballon d'Or more times than Ronaldo. The winner of the Ballon d'Or is chosen from the short-list by an international jury of 100 specialist journalists.

Diallo wants to make 'history' with struggling Man Utd

LONDON (AFP): Amad Diallo has vowed to "make history" with Manchester United despite his struggling club's dismal slide down the Premier League. United have lost five of new manager Ruben Amorim's 10 games in all competitions since he arrived from Sporting Lisbon to replace the sacked Erik ten Hag. Dismal defeats to Wolves, Bournemouth and Tottenham in their last three matches have increased the pressure on Amorim ahead of Newcastle's visit to Old Trafford on Monday. United are languishing in 14th place in the Premier League, just eight points above the relegation zone. But Diallo has been one of United's few bright spots, highlighted by his late winner in the derby against Manchester City recently. The 22-year-old Ivory Coast forward has scored two goals and added six assists in the league this season. Alongside United's other young players, Diallo has his sights set on taking United back to the top. "We are part of the project, we have so many young players for this club, especially Garna (Alejandro Garnacho), Kobbie (Mainoo), Joshua (Zirkzee), Rasmus (Hojlund), me, we are young players who want to make history for this club," Diallo told MUTV. "We want to do our best every game. Sometimes it cannot work, but you can see in the pitch we are very focused to do our best for this club, because we want to bring back this club to the level it was before. "So, for the young lads, we just have to keep going, work hard and the most important thing is to listen to the old men, the old players, learn every day. "We have now a new manager, he likes to work with young players, and he brings a new system, so we just have to follow it and try to do our best every game." Diallo has proved his versatility in the early days of Amorim's reign, featuring both at right wing-back and in more attacking roles.



CENTURION: Khurram Shahzad is pumped up after Pakistan get Ryan Rickelton via DRS, South Africa vs Pakistan, 1st Test day 3.

Duffy bowls New Zealand to T20 victory over Sri Lanka

MOUNT MAUNGANUI (AFP): A late bowling fightback sparked by Jacob Duffy produced a remarkable eight-run victory for New Zealand against Sri Lanka at Mount Maunganui on Saturday. Sri Lanka, with openers Pathum Nissanka and Kusal Mendis in sparkling form, were cruising towards the 173-run target when they reached 95 without loss at the halfway stage. But in the 14th over, with Sri Lanka 121-0, Duffy changed the game with three wickets in four balls, all caught behind by Mitchell Hay, beginning with the dismissal of Mendis for 46 off 36 deliveries. Nissanka went on to make 90 off 60, which included seven fours and three sixes for his highest Twenty20 score, while no other Sri Lankan reached double figures. "We should have done

better," was the succinct summary from Sri Lankan captain Charith Asalanka who was out for three and also dropped a catch. "Pathum and Kusal batted well, the rest including me should take responsibility for this loss." New Zealand captain Mitchell Santner said Duffy changed the game with his 3-21 after the home side reached 172-8 in their 20 overs with the innings propped up by a century stand by Daryl Mitchell and Michael Bracewell. The pair came together in the 10th over with New Zealand struggling at 65-5 and put on 105 before both were dismissed in the final over. Mitchell was stumped for 62 off 42 deliveries while Bracewell was caught behind for 59 off 33. "It was a massive partnership for us, the way they went about it, they

soaked it up for a bit then put the pressure back on to put up a pretty good score," Santner said. Binura Fernando, who removed both New Zealand openers in his second over, finished with 2-22. Tim Robinson was caught and bowled for 11 when he drove a short-pitched delivery straight back to the bowler. Three balls later Rachin Ravindra, on eight, nicked an outswinger and was caught behind. Mark Chapman, dropped on four, reached 15 before he was caught on the boundary by Kamindu Mendis off the bowling of Matheesha Pathirana. Glenn Phillips had made eight off nine deliveries when he was trapped in front and Mitchell Hay went first ball when he played and missed at a delivery drifting into the pads.

Coaching Camp entered its sixth day across Sindh

NAWABSHAH (APP): Winter Sports Coaching Camp organized by The Sindh Sports and Youth Affairs Department entered into its sixth day across Sindh. Players up to the age of 16 years are receiving training in various games under the supervision of the best national and international coaches. In this regard, sports training camps are also being organized in Nawabshah under the auspices of the District Sports Office Shaheed Benazirabad where international and national level coaches are imparting training to the players with great effort and dedication. District Sports Officer Shaheed Benazirabad Abdul Rahim Rajput visited the training camp and met with the coaches and players to get detailed progress of the training. In addition, a grand closing ceremony would be organized on the last day of the Winter Coaching Camp on Monday, December 30 at Bilawal Sports Complex. The special guest of the event would be Commissioner/Deputy Commissioner Shaheed Benazirabad Shehryar Gul Memon.

Kickboxing C'ship celebrated Quaid-e-Azam Day

ISLAMABAD (APP): The Islamabad Kickboxing Association and the Islamabad Full Contact Martial Arts Association hosted a Kickboxing Championship at the Amir Khan Boxing Hall in the Pakistan Sports Complex to honor Quaid-e-Azam Day, On Saturday. According to the press release, more than 100 participants, including boys and girls from Lahore, Jhelum, Azad Kashmir, Gilgit, Haripur, Rawalpindi and Islamabad showcased their skills in competitions held according to Kickboxing rules. Attendees praised the event for bringing together martial artists from various disciplines, including Taekwondo, Shotokan, Kyokushin Kai and Kickboxing. The Islamabad team emerged victorious, securing first place while Punjab took second. The Deputy Director General of the Pakistan Sports Board, Shahid Islam along with notable guests including Zafar Bakhtawari, Shabbir Babar and Asghar Ali Shah from the Islamabad Chamber of Commerce, congratulated the organizers Shaukat Khan, Akhtar Khan, and Qamar Nadeem for their efforts in making the event a success.

Monney takes maiden WC win in Bormio downhill

BORMIO (AFP): Alexis Monney claimed the first World Cup win of his career on Saturday after downhill success on a Bormio piste which was heavily criticised following Cyprien Sarrazin's harrowing training crash. Swiss Monney, 24, had never even taken a podium finish before Saturday but clocked one minute, 53.43 seconds in northern Italy, 0.24sec ahead of his countryman Franjo von Allmen, with Canada's Cameron Alexander finishing third. "I dont know what to say, I can't find the words, I am just happy, I came to the start with a plan and I stuck to it," said Monney. Reigning downhill and overall World Cup champion Marco Odermatt still leads the discipline standings despite finishing 0.80sec off the pace in fifth. Odermatt also extended his lead at the top of the general standings to 116 points over Henrik Kristoffersen, who did not compete on Saturday. "I'm not really disappointed, I'm mostly relieved because I had a big scare halfway through," said Odermatt. "I'm happy to have reached the finish, not to be injured and to have scored big points in the general classification." Monney's shock win was



overshadowed by several practice crashes on the Stelvio piste which will host alpine skiing events at the 2026 Winter Olympics, the worst befalling France's Sarrazin. The French ski federation said Saturday that Sarrazin underwent successful surgery to treat a subdural haematoma following his heavy crash on Friday's training run. The 30-year-old lost control of his skis and slammed into the snow before sliding into protective netting, while Italy's Pietro Zazzi also required after suffering a double leg fracture. Sarrazin enjoyed his best campaign on the World Cup circuit last season, with four victories including a downhill win at Bormio, but is yet to win in 2024/25. The crashes led to a wave

of criticism of the piste, with Frenchman Nils Allegre raging to Eurosport that "they don't deserve to have the Olympic Games here". But race director Markus Waldner hit back at the athletes, saying that there was criticism of course preparations "every week" and that weather conditions ahead of training had affected the snow. "The problem is that on Christmas Day there was a lot of wind, and we know what wind does," said Waldner. "It dried the snow from the bottom towards the top, which explains why the snow was not uniform on the three-kilometre run, which is impossible to make uniform." Bormio will host a super-G on Sunday, the last of a mini-run of festive season alpine skiing events in Italy.

'Stupid, stupid, stupid' - Gavaskar criticises Pant's shot selection

NEW DELHI (INP): Former India captain Sunil Gavaskar has criticised Rishabh Pant's unorthodox shot, which led to his dismissal on the third morning of the MCG Test between Australia and India. Pant looked fluent as he got to 28 off 37 balls after Ravindra Jadeja and he resumed India's reply from the overnight 164 for 5, and the two of them had nearly seen through the first hour of play. That's when Pant attempted a scoop from outside off to the leg side off Scott Boland, but handed a straightforward catch to deep third off the leading edge.

"I think earlier on, when there had been no fielders around, that's when he's attempted these shots, that is understandable because you're taking a very good chance," Gavaskar said on Star Sports during the lunch break. "That [the shot] was supposed to go to the leg side, that went to the off side, it actually tells you maybe [there was] a little bit of bad luck involved, but terrible selection of a shot to play at that particular point with two fielders down at deep square-leg and deep point." Pant had tried an identical shot on the previous ball too, in the 56th over,

off Boland, but had inside-edged it on to his body as he lost his balance. He connected only slightly better the next ball, hit the ground again, but hotted out to Nathan Lyon. India were 191 for 5 before he fell, still trailing by 283, although with Nitish Kumar Reddy and Washington Sundar leading the charge, they got into a good position as the day wore on. Pant does score a lot of his runs through unorthodox and attacking shots. Gavaskar pointed out that with two fielders waiting in the deep exactly that kind of shot, Pant should have been more judicious.

Abbas, Shahzad rock South Africa at start of chase

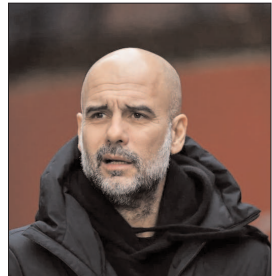
CENTURION (AFP): Pakistan opening bowlers Mohammad Abbas and Khurram Shahzad struck three blows late on the third afternoon as South Africa set out in pursuit of 148 runs to win the first Test at SuperSport Park on Saturday. South Africa were reeling at 27 for three at the close, 121 runs short of a victory which would clinch them a place in the World Test championship final in England next June. Abbas took two wickets for three runs in four immaculate overs of swing bowling, dismissing Tony de Zorzi and Tristan Stubbs, while Shahzad trapped Ryan Rickelton. Aiden Markram, South Africa's top scorer in the first innings, was unbeaten on 22 going into what could be a nervy fourth

day for the hosts. All three wickets were leg before wicket decisions – and all three were reviewed. De Zorzi batted outside his crease in an attempt to counter the swing which undid him in the first innings – but Abbas beat his inside edge and he was given out. He reviewed umpire Alex Wharf's decision but replays showed the impact was "umpire's call", with the ball going on to hit the stumps, and he had to go for two runs. Rickelton failed to score before he was trapped by Shahzad and Stubbs made one before falling to Abbas – with Pakistan successfully reviewing on both occasions after the batsmen were initially given not out.

It was a dramatic end to a day on which the start was delayed by three hours because of rain. South Africa seemed well on target for victory when Pakistan were bowled out for 237, with left-arm fast bowler Marco Jansen taking six for 52. Saud Shakeel made 84 for Pakistan. Resuming at 88 for three, Babar Azam and the left-handed Shakeel batted confidently, adding another 65 runs in 14.5 overs. Babar made 50, his first half-century in 19 Test innings, before Jansen had a burst of three wickets in 14 balls, starting when Babar slapped a short ball from Jansen to deep point. Shakeel was ninth man out when he missed a full toss from Jansen after hitting 10 fours and a six in a 113-ball innings.

Guardiola won't quit troubled Man City

LONDON (AFP): Pep Guardiola insists he will not walk out on troubled Manchester City as he strives to stop the champions' stunning decline. Guardiola only recently signed a two-year contract extension but City's dismal form has raised questions about his future at the Etihad Stadium. A nightmarish run of nine defeats in 13 games, with just one win in that woeful spell, triggered suggestions the City boss could decide to quit if he cannot find an answer to his team's problems. But, having led City to six Premier League titles in the past seven seasons, Guardiola is adamant he still has the hunger to turn the situation around. "I will try, I will keep going. Sometimes you think the bad run will be ended earlier or it would be easier to fix it, but it takes more time," he said. "I will not give up. I want to be here. I want to do it and, with the situation that we have, we have to do it. "Of course I want it, everyone wants it. I don't want to disappoint my people in terms of the club, the fans, the people who love



this club. "I think all of us in our job want to do it well and please the people. That is undeniable, not a question mark. "The biggest test is to come back again, but we have done that before." Injuries have been a major factor in City's demise, leaving them languishing in seventh place in the Premier League. Ballon d'Or winner Rodri is recovering from a long-term knee injury, while Ruben Dias, John Stones, Ederson, Kyle Walker, Jack Grealish and Matheus Nunes all missed the 1-1 draw with Everton on Boxing Day. The usually prolific Erling Haaland missed a penalty that could have sealed a City win against Everton, extending his erratic form in an inconsistent season.

Haaland has scored just once in his last seven games, but Guardiola refused to blame the Norway striker or any of his team-mates. "I don't have it in my education to start complaining, to point at people. It's happened, it's life, it's football, so let's try it again," he said. "That's why we have had success, because always it is never enough, we will try it again and again and again. That's why we won a lot of titles. "Every three days it was a game and win, win, win for many, many months and years. Now we have to do the same when results are not good." City still have doubts over the fitness of a number of players as they bid to get back to winning ways at struggling Leicester on Sunday. "Sometimes you have injuries," Guardiola said. "For how many years we were incredibly consistent but now, yes, we're a little bit down and the main reason is having so many important players injured. "But I saw the team spirit, how we trained this week, how focused they are, how they try to practise."

De Minaur wins but Australia crash to Argentina

SYDNEY (AFP): Alex de Minaur swept past Tomas Martin Etcheverry to win his first match of the season Saturday but it was not enough to prevent Argentina upsetting hosts Australia at the United Cup, while Switzerland beat France. The world number nine crushed his opponent 6-1, 6-4 to level the tie after teammate Olivia Gadecki crashed to Nadia Podoroska 6-2, 6-4 in the women's singles rubber at Ken Rosewall Arena in Sydney. But the home side couldn't lift in the deciding mixed doubles with Etcheverry returning to partner Maria Carle and beat Matt Ebdon and Ellen Perez 6-2, 6-4. Despite losing the tie, De Minaur was happy with his early-season form. "I've been putting in some great work in the pre-season," he said. "I felt comfortable with the way I was playing before the tournament, so I just told myself to back myself and play the type of tennis I wanted to play." Former Olympic gold medalist Belinda Bencic won her first tour-level match since the 2023 US Open to help Switzerland beat France. The 27-year-old, a one-time world number four who is now ranked 487, took down Chloe Paquet 6-3, 6-1, winning 10 of the last 11 games. While she tentatively returned to the court at low-key events in November after having a baby in April, it was her first win at tour-level since her third-round victory at the 2023 US Open. Her teammate Dominic Stricker slumped 6-3, 7-5 to Ugo Humbert in their singles clash to send the tie to the mixed doubles. Bencic fronted up again alongside



Stricker to down Edouard Roger-Vasselin and Elixane Lechemia 6-1, 7-6 (7/4) and earn Switzerland the win. Trust "I'm really excited to be back, of course," said Bencic, who won Olympic gold at the 2021 Tokyo Games and has eight career WTA titles to her name. "I had a little bit of nerves at the start and a little bit of rust, so I'm happy I kind of accepted that and tried to fight through it. "And after, I felt like it went smoother, I became a little bit more calm, and kind of was more able to focus on my tennis." In Perth, Canada bounced back after Felix Auger-Aliassime lost his singles rubber to prevail 2-1 over Croatia. The Canadian win over Croatia came thanks to a 6-3, 6-4 mixed doubles victory from Auger-Aliassime and Leylah Fernandez against Lucija Ciric Bagaric and Ivan Dodig. "It was all about trusting each other and not trying to go for too much," Auger-Aliassime said. "We stuck to the game plan and it worked out well." After 2021 US Open finalist Fernandez easily dispatched Donna Vekic 6-4, 6-3 to start the tie, Auger-Aliassime got into trouble against Borna Coric, crashing 0-6, 6-4, 6-4. Former top 10 players Maria Sakkari and Stefanos Tsitsipas relied on a mixed

doubles win to complete the 2-1 Greek win over Spain, which knocked the Iberians out of the competition after they lost to Kazakhstan on Friday. Sakkari, who once stood third in the WTA ranking, showed signs of rustiness after playing her first official match since quitting injured in the US Open first round. She was beaten 6-2, 6-1 in singles by Jessica Bouzas Maneiro, who produced the statement win of her career a day after losing to former Wimbledon champion Elena Rybakina. The 11th-ranked Tsitsipas levelled the evening one match apiece with a defeat of Pablo Carreno Busta 6-4, 4-6, 6-3, coming from a break down in the final set. The deciding mixed doubles rubber was tight, with the Greek pair taking victory over Yvonne Cavallere-Reimers and Sergio Martos Gornes 4-6, 6-3, 10-6 as Sakkari set up victory with three match points. "There's no Greek night without some drama," Tsitsipas said. "I'm glad to have her as my partner in crime, I like to have a fighter alongside me. "She delivered at the very end." Sakkari added: "We came through when we had to, the tiebreak set was very good from our side. There were some quite good moments." The 18-nation mixed-team United Cup is being played in Perth and Sydney. Each team features three men and three women, with ties comprising one men's and one women's singles and an often decisive mixed-doubles clash. The tournament began on Friday with Spain crashing 2-1 to Kazakhstan, while China swept past Brazil 3-0.



In brief

Car lifter killed in encounter

RAWALPINDI (APP): An inter-district car lifter was killed in an encounter with the Cantt police here on Friday night and his accomplice managed to escape from the scene while firing. According to a police spokesman, the car lifters opened fire on a police party late Friday night in an area in the jurisdiction of Cantt Police Station. A Suzuki Khyber car stolen from Karachi company, Islamabad a few days ago was recovered during the operation. In the ensuing exchange of fire, an accused, identified as Asad, who was involved in dozens of car theft cases in the twin cities, Rawalpindi and Islamabad and Attock was shot dead while his accomplice managed to flee leaving behind the stolen car. A fire of the car lifters hit on the chest of a constable namely Aqeel but, he remained safe due to bulletproof jacket. The spokesman informed that when the police party signaled a car to stop during a snap check, the accused opened fire on the police and tried to escape. When the police chased the car, the accused tried to escape while firing and leaving the car. Senior police officers reached the spot on receiving information about the incident. City Police Officer (CPO), Rawalpindi, Syed Khalid Hamdani, Superintendent of Police, Potohar and DSP Cantt appreciated the police party for bravely fighting despite firing of the accused. Those who attack the lives and property of citizens and the police cannot escape the clutches of the law, the CPO said.

Islamabad beautification plan reviewed

ISLAMABAD (APP): Capital Development Authority (CDA) is set to transform Islamabad into a model city of urban planning and aesthetics. In a high-level meeting chaired by CDA Chairman Muhammad Ali Randhawa on Saturday, multiple projects aimed at enhancing the capital's beauty were reviewed. Senior officials from various departments, including the Environment Wing, DMA, and Metropolitan Corporation Islamabad (MCI), were in attendance. The Chairman directed the installation of permanent modern lighting, building upon the measures introduced during the SCO Summit. The first phase will prioritize Constitution Avenue, Club Road, and key thoroughfares, with collaboration from the Baku team to extend these improvements to Saidpur Village, Melody Market, and Srinagar Highway. The Chairman emphasized maintaining the high standards of lighting showcased during the summit and called for corporate sector involvement through CSR initiatives. To further enhance the city's infrastructure, Chairman Randhawa instructed the immediate installation of SMD screens outside the Jinnah Convention Centre. He also directed the placement of digital streamers and boards across strategic locations in the city. In line with the Prime Minister's directives, plans for a state-of-the-art nursery in Islamabad were also unveiled. The nursery will collaborate with horticulture experts from other major cities to exchange knowledge and resources. The Environment Wing has been tasked with developing business models for the nursery and proposing flower shops to market bouquets and floral arrangements.



ISLAMABAD: PML-N's Raja Zafar ul Haq addressing a book launching ceremony during the opening ceremony of "Kashmir Janat Nazeer" 2-day Kashmir kay Rung Festival. —APP Photo

Senator Afnan pledges to support 'Digital Rights Bill'

ISLAMABAD (APP): Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) Senator and member Senate Standing Committee on IT Afnan Ullah Saturday pledged to support PPP Chairman Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari's digital rights bill, acknowledging the significant role of PPP in backing PML-N's interests.

In an exclusive interview with a private news channel, Senator Afnan Ullah Khan stated that the PML-N would support the PPP's digital rights bill, underscoring the significance of their coalition partnership and commitment to advancing Nawaz Sharif's Digital Pakistan initiative.

Senator Afnan Ullah Khan highlighted PML-N's past achievements in IT development and expressed commitment to continuing these efforts in

line with Nawaz Sharif's vision of transforming Pakistan into a digital hub. "I am pleased to announce that internet users in Pakistan will soon experience faster internet speeds, he said, adding, the PTA chairman and IT minister are collectively addressing this issue and we have introduced multiple bills that will yield fruitful results in the coming months."

Senator Afnan emphasized that Pakistan was actively working towards transforming into a digitalized nation, with a focus on providing high-speed internet facilities to its citizens. This initiative is part of the government's efforts to enhance connectivity, improve digital infrastructure and increase investment in digital skills, he added.

Our goal is to create a

knowledge-based economy, driven by innovation and entrepreneurship, which will ultimately spur economic growth, he said, adding, to achieve this, the Ministry of IT and Telecom has been launching programs to build a network of National Incubation Centers and inducting over promising start-ups. With the support of initiatives like the Digital Pakistan program, Pakistan is poised to become a leading player in the global digital landscape, he added.

Responding to a query, Senator Afnan Ullah Khan also acknowledged that Pakistan was facing challenges in its digital transformation journey, however, he assured that these challenges were being addressed and would be resolved soon.

IGP to resolve public grievances on priority

ISLAMABAD (APP): Inspector General of Police (IGP) Islamabad, Syed Ali Nasir Rizvi, reaffirmed his commitment to addressing public grievances during a Khuli Katchery (open court) held at the Central Police Office, on Saturday.

A public relation officer told APP that during the khuli katchery, IG listened the issues of citizens and police officers and issued directives to senior police officers on the spot for timely resolution of their concerns.

IG Rizvi said that resolv-

ing citizens' issues on merit is our top priority. Negligence and carelessness in duties will not be tolerated. Citizens facing any issue related to the police can come to the Khuli Katchery. My office is always open for my citizens, he said.

Rizvi further directed the officers to resolve the citizen grievances on merit within the stipulated time frame and report back to the Central Police Office. He directed all SDPOs and SHOs to adhere to the des-

igned office hours and prioritize resolving citizens' issues.

On this occasion, the IG Rizvi said that the Islamabad Police are taking various measures for the facilitation of citizens. The daily holding of Khuli Katchery helps in resolving issues on a priority basis, he added.

Moreover, all zonal officers and SHOs are directed to meet citizens during the designated office hours and resolve their issues promptly and on merit.

10 drug peddlers, illegal weapon holders netted

RAWALPINDI (APP): Rawalpindi police in an action against suspected drug peddlers, bootleggers, illegal weapon holders and other lawbreakers here on Saturday arrested 10 accused besides recovering charras, liquor, weapons and other items from their possession, said a police spokesman.

He informed that Waris Khan police held an accused namely Ahsan for having 580 grams charras and Suleman for possessing five liters liquor. Airport police rounded up Arslan for having five liters liquor and

Faisal with five liters liquor. Civil Lines police in their operation arrested Waqas for carrying a 9mm pistol while Rawat police netted Zulfiqar and recovered a 30 bore pistol from his possession. Sadiqabad police nabbed a proclaimed offender namely Shahzaib who had killed a citizen over a petty issue.

Three accomplices of the accused had been sent behind the bars earlier, he added. The spokesman further informed that Naseerabad police conducted a raid and arrested Amir

Haider who was involved in making a bogus call on Police-15 for giving fake information about a dacoity/street crime incident.

Pirwadhai police managed to arrest an accused wanted in a case of harassing and threatening a woman and her daughter.

The spokesman said that Gujar Khan police arrested a kite seller and recovered 65 kites and a kite flying string roll from his possession. Cases have been registered against all the accused while further investigations are underway.

RDA removes encroachments from Bostan Khan Road

RAWALPINDI (APP): Rawalpindi Development Authority (RDA), Enforcement Squad on the directives of the Director General (DG) Kinza Murtaza has removed encroachments from Bostan Khan Road.

According to a RDA spokesman, in order to ensure smooth flow of traffic on Bostan Khan Road, an anti-encroachment operation was launched and encroachments were removed.

The operation was carried out by the RDA Enforcement Squad, which demolished and removed illegal structures, including sheds, kiosks, tandoors, and

huts along Bostan Khan Road, from Gulraiz Chowki to Car Chowk.

RDA Enforcement Squad including Director Land Ghazanfar Ali Awan, Director Building Control, Atif Muhammad Chaudhry, Building Surveyors, Aamir Mahmood Malik, Asim Khokhar, and other RDA officials took part in the operation which was launched aimed at improving road accessibility, and ensuring a safe environment for the pedestrians and commuters.

DG RDA, Kinza Murtaza said, "This initiative is part of our ongoing efforts to restore

the city's infrastructure and ensure all roads are clean and safe for general public use. Encroachments not only cause traffic congestion but also pose significant safety risks for the citizens. RDA is committed to maintaining the integrity of Rawalpindi's urban spaces."

The removal of the illegal structures is expected to improve traffic flow significantly and contribute to a cleaner, more organized urban environment, she added. She further said that similar operations would be conducted on other major roads throughout Rawalpindi.

ANF seizes 100 kg drugs in 5 operations

RAWALPINDI (APP): Anti-Narcotics Force (ANF) in five operations recovered 100 kg drugs worth over Rs 74.9 million and arrested eight accused including two women, said an ANF Headquarters spokesman here on Saturday.

He informed that 650 intoxicated tablets were recovered from the possession of a motorcycle-rider netted near a university located on Jhang Road, Faisalabad. The arrested accused confessed to selling drugs to the students of educational institutions.

In another operation, Three accused including two women who were leaving for Jeddah were arrested at Islamabad International Airport. A total of 140 heroin-filled capsules were recovered from the stomachs of the accused.

In an operation, 13.2 kg hashish was recovered from a vehicle intercepted on Srinagar Highway, Islamabad and two accused were arrested during the operation. In fourth operation, 33.6 kg opium and 14.4 kg hashish were recovered from a vehicle near Sector G-15, Islamabad and two accused were arrested.

In fifth operation, 37 kg heroin hidden for smuggling was recovered from an uninhabited area of Dasht in Mastung, Balochistan. Cases have been registered against the arrested accused under the Narcotics Control Act and further investigations are under process.

IRSA releases 33,100 cusecs water

ISLAMABAD (APP): Indus River System Authority (IRSA) on Saturday released 33,100 cusecs water from various rim stations with inflow of 39,200 cusecs. According to the data released by IRSA, water level in River Indus at Tarbela Dam was 1471.32 feet and was 73.32 feet higher than its dead level of 1,398 feet. Water inflow and outflow in the dam was recorded as 17,500 cusecs and 13,000 cusecs respectively.

The water level in River Jhelum at Mangla Dam was 1132.45 feet, which was 83.45 feet higher than its dead level of 1,050 feet. The inflow and outflow of water was recorded 5,600 cusecs and 4,000 cusecs respectively. The release of water at Kalabagh, Taunsa, Guddu and Sukkur was recorded as 22,200, 22,200, 18,900 and 1,100 cusecs respectively.

Similarly, from River Kabul, a total of 10,300 cusecs of water released at Nowshera and 5,800 cusecs released from River Chenab at Marala.

'Bond between Pakistan & Kashmir is unbreakable'; Engr Muqam says

ISLAMABAD (APP): Federal Minister for States and Frontier Regions (SAFRON), Kashmir and Gilgit Baltistan Affairs, Engr Amir Muqam here Saturday said that the bond between Pakistan and Kashmir was unbreakable and Kashmiri people were the guardians of Pakistan's borders.

He expressed these views while addressing at the inaugural ceremony of a two-day Kashmir Jannat Nazeer event titled "Kashmir: Paradise on Earth" organized by the Federal Ministry of Education and Professional Training at Islamabad Model College for Girls, F-8/1 where he was invited as a chief guest. He proposed that essentials like electricity and flour should be provided free of cost for Kashmiri people.

He shed a light on the sacrifices of the Kashmiri people which played a pivotal role in safeguarding Pakistan's borders. He lauded the ministry's efforts in showcasing the culture and beauty of Kashmir through this vibrant event and festival.

He praised Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif's courageous stance on the Kashmir issue, describing it as a reflection of Pakistan's unwavering commitment to the cause and desire for a just and peaceful resolution to the longstanding dispute.

The minister extended congratulations on behalf of himself and the Prime Minister for organizing a successful event, and appreciated the efforts of the Federal Secretary of Education and his team.

Engineer Amir Muqam expressed his pride in being part of an event held in the heart of Islamabad that cel-

brates Kashmiri culture and heritage, showcasing solidarity with Kashmiri brothers and sisters.

"The event provides an opportunity to experience the richness of Kashmiri culture, art, and history, which embodies a unique blend of Buddhist, Hindu, and Islamic traditions," he pointed out. He acknowledged the immense challenges faced by the Kashmiri people. "Despite these adversities, the resilience and determination of the Kashmiri people are evident in their continuous efforts to preserve and promote their cultural heritage," he noted.

The minister lamented the decades-long Indian occupation of Kashmir, which has caused significant damage to the region's social, cultural, and economic fabric. He underscored that repeated strikes and shutdowns have severely impacted the region's economy, while the ongoing Indian terrorism and extremism have turned the lives of Kashmiris into a nightmare.

Despite these challenges, he commended the Kashmiri people for keeping their traditions alive and preserving their cultural identity. He recalled that the Kashmiri Muslims had ideologically aligned their future with Pakistan even before its creation, and Pakistan has never abandoned the Kashmiri people during difficult times.

"Pakistan and Kashmir are inseparable," he remarked. The minister strongly condemned the grave human rights violations committed by Indian forces in occupied Kashmir, urging the international

community to hold India accountable and ensure the implementation of UN resolutions on the issue.

He stressed that despite numerous challenges, Pakistan has consistently advocated for the just cause of the Kashmiri people on the global stage. Events like this, he said, serve as a beacon of hope and emphasize the need for continued efforts to address the challenges faced by the Kashmiri community while underscoring the importance of cultural preservation.

The event also featured an address by Federal Secretary for Education Mohiuddin Ahmed Wani, who highlighted various aspects of the two-day event and warmly welcomed the minister.

The book 'Baramulla Se Barham Tak' by the late Kashmiri leader and author Professor Nazir Ahmad Shawl was also launched during the event.

Senior PML-N leader Raja Zafar-ul-Haq, APHC Convener Ghulam Muhammad Safi, President of PML-N Azad Jammu and Kashmir Shah Ghulam Qadir, Federal Secretary for Education Mohiuddin Wani, and other prominent political figures and All Parties Hurriyat Conference leaders were also present along with Engr Amir Muqam during the book launching ceremony.

Earlier, the federal minister was received with great enthusiasm, penned a message, and toured the exhibition stalls. He appreciated the exhibitors for their efforts. The event witnessed a large turnout of students, teachers, and individuals from various walks of life.

CTP issue 848,000 challans in 2024

RAWALPINDI (APP): In order to ensure smooth flow of traffic on city roads, City Traffic Police (CTP) Rawalpindi are utilizing all available resources and taking action in accordance with the law against the traffic rules violators while 848,000 challans slips were issued in 2024.

According to City Traffic Officer (CTO) Rawalpindi, Beenish Fatima, uninterrupted flow of traffic and facilitation of the road users are top priorities of CTP.

She further said that bad treatment with the citizens by the traffic wardens and resistance by the citizens to the wardens, both are unacceptable and strict legal action would be taken against those found guilty.

Talking about the performance of CTP during 2024, she said that Traffic Police issued a total of more than 848,000 challans on violations of traffic rules and imposed fines of amounting to Rs 490 million, while 2,874 cases were also registered on severe traffic rules violations.

The CTO while giving the annual performance figures said that during 2024, over 17,654 challans were issued on one-way violations, 56,314 for negligent and careless driving, 48,226 on disrupting the flow of traffic, 68,507 on lane violation, 162,982 for driving without licenses and 15,813 challans were issued to smoke emitting vehicles.

163 vehicles were impounded in different police stations, 22,149 underage drivers were penalized, 49,591 bikers were imposed fines for driving without safety helmets and 162,982 for driving without licenses. Similarly, 49,591 two-wheelers were imposed fines for one wheeling and 6,552 for wrong parking.

Over 46,751 vehicles parked in no parking areas were removed by lifters, 76,012 vehicles were challaned for using unauthorized number plates, 3,480 school vans were challaned and 179 impounded in different police stations under the ongoing campaign regarding school van safety.

Beenish Fatima informed that 40,985 challans were issued in 2024 under a special campaign launched against unfit public service vehicles, while 1,811 underage drivers were also detained in different police stations.

She urged the citizens to follow the traffic rules which would help ensure smooth flow of traffic on city roads and reduction of road accidents.

The CTO said that the education wing of CTP is fully active and trying to create awareness among the public about traffic rules.

Throughout the year, 22,000 pamphlets were distributed, 280 awareness lectures were organized besides 38 traffic walks. 190 FM radio awareness

programs were also aired and 295 awareness banners were also displayed at different places.

In 2024, over 2796 citizens including 1258 female and 1538 male were given training in the City Traffic Police Driving School, while 112 women also got training to drive bikes and scooters under the Women on Wheels Program.

In addition to purchasing 4 new bike/scooters for the women on Wheels Program in 2024, the CTP Rawalpindi also appointed female instructors for the first time in the driving training school, she added.

The City Traffic Police Rawalpindi issued 108,796 new licenses while providing 310,340 licensing and related services to the citizens, the CTO informed adding, over 174,744 driving learning permits were also issued in 2024.

She further said that 22,261 old licenses were renewed besides issuing 3,421 international driving licenses. 952 endorsement licenses and 166 duplicate licenses were also made.

Regarding the faulty traffic signals in the city, she said that the installation/repair of traffic signals is responsibility of the departments concerned in cantonment and city areas, but the CTP also installed various awareness signboards within the Cantonment and Municipal Corporation limits to facilitate the citizens.



ISLAMABAD: President IPP & Federal Minister Abdul Aleem Khan offered Fateha for father of Fiaz ul Hassan Chohan. —APP Photo

Earthquake shakes Kandahar

KANDAHAR (Khaama Press): NDMA reported on Saturday that a 4.7 magnitude earthquake struck Kandahar and its surrounding areas last night at around 3:09 AM. The authority stated that the epicenter of the earthquake was located 41 km northeast of Spin Boldak, at a depth of 10 kilometers beneath the earth's surface. The Kandahar Provincial Disaster Management Authority reported that there were no casualties or significant damage in the city center or nearby areas.

IEA unveiled rail project

KABUL (BNA): Spokesperson IEA Mawlawi Zabihullah Mujahid has unveiled the first domestically produced railway in Afghanistan. Mawlawi Mujahid showcased this significant achievement, stating that the railway was manufactured by the National Development Corporation (NDC) within Afghanistan. NDC has unveiled several notable projects over the past three years, with this railway being a major milestone in the country's developmental efforts.

IEA condemns Israeli attacks on Gaza hospital

KABUL (Ariana News): The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA) strongly condemned Israel's recent attacks on Kamal Adwan Hospital in Gaza, calling it a deliberate act of destruction.

In a statement issued on Saturday, the ministry condemned the bombing of the hospital, the burning of its facilities, the disruption of essential medical services, the forced expulsion of patients, and the disrespect shown toward medical

staff.

The statement also expressed deep concern over the silence of powerful nations around the world, describing it as "deeply concerning" in light of the ongoing atrocities.

"The Israeli regime is systematically and intentionally targeting the few remaining health facilities in Gaza, which continue to provide critical medical services to the besieged population," the statement noted.

The IEA further empha-

sized that Israel's actions, which are part of a broader pattern of violence, constitute a flagrant violation of international law and ethical standards, with the regime continuing its genocidal campaign against Palestinians.

"While the occupying regime persists in its ongoing genocide, blatantly violating all laws of war and ethical norms, the failure of influential countries to act is an alarming and unacceptable stance," the Ministry's statement concluded.

Uzbekistan pledges expertise to Afghanistan



KABUL (BNA): Uzbekistan has pledged to transfer laboratory expertise for soil analysis and identification to Afghanistan.

As part of this commitment, laboratory machinery capable of analyzing and identifying 20 types of soil will be provided to the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. Additionally, Uzbekistan has promised to dispatch 200 agricultural

experts to train Afghan personnel.

The Media Office of the Ministry of Industry and Commerce shared this news with Bakhtar Agency, stating that the pledge was made during the second joint commission meeting between Uzbekistan and Afghanistan.

The meeting, which included sub-committees, was held via video confer-

ence between a delegation of the Islamic Emirate led by Deputy Minister of Industry and Commerce, Mawlawi Ahmadullah Zahid, and an Uzbek delegation headed by the Deputy Minister of Energy of Uzbekistan.

The discussions during the session also focused on trade, economy, energy, mining and geology, transportation and logistics, agriculture, and customs.

Muttaqi holds phone talks with Syrian counterpart

KABUL (BNA): Mawlawi Amir Khan Muttaqi, the Acting Minister of Foreign Affairs of Afghanistan, held a telephone conversation with Assad Hassan Al-Shaybani, the Foreign Minister of Syria's Transitional Government.

During the call, Mawlawi Muttaqi congratulated his Syrian counterpart on their recent victory and extended best wishes to the Transitional Government of Syria for success in their endeavors.

He also specifically congratulated Al-Shaybani on his appointment as the Foreign Minister and

wished him a successful tenure.

The Acting Foreign Minister of Afghanistan praised Syria's declaration of general amnesty and its constructive governance approach, expressing hope that Afghanistan and Syria could establish strong and structured diplomatic relations.

Mawlawi Muttaqi noted that Afghans, having endured decades of conflict and challenges, deeply understand Syria's current situation.

In response, Al-Shaybani expressed gratitude for the phone call and

acknowledged Afghanistan's two-decade struggle against foreign usurpation, describing it as a significant experience from which valuable lessons could be drawn.

The Syrian Foreign Minister also highlighted the hardships endured by Syrians over nearly fifty years, emphasizing the disorder left behind by the previous regime. He expressed hope for strengthened relations between Damascus and Kabul and suggested opportunities for further interactions and cooperation between the leadership of both nations.

Explosion near MOI in Kabul injures four



KABUL (Khaama Press): Residents of Kabul reported on Saturday, about an explosion near the Ministry of the Interior of the Taliban in Kabul.

Khalid Zadrán, spokesman for the Taliban Police Command in Kabul, confirmed that at least four people were injured in the explosion on the road leading to Kabul Airport.

Zadrán told the media that the explosion occurred near Sheikh Zayed Hospital. He mentioned that the injured individuals were transferred to a hospital and that investigations are underway regarding the incident.

Residents of Kabul described the explosion as "massive" and had feared heavy casualties. However, the Taliban has reported that no one sustained significant injuries in the blast.

So far, no group has claimed responsibility for the attack, and there is no information available regarding the nature of the explosion.

This explosion highlights ongoing security challenges in Kabul, particularly in areas near key government institutions.

The incident also raises concerns about the safety of civilian areas in Kabul and the vulnerability of critical infrastructure to

attacks.

This comes after the recent airstrikes conducted by Pakistani jets on Paktika province have further intensified the security concerns in the region. These airstrikes, which have been aimed at what Pakistan claims to be militant targets, have also resulted in civilian casualties and property damage, sparking a wave of protests and international criticism.

The recurring nature of these strikes highlights the ongoing tensions between Afghanistan and Pakistan, particularly over border security and the presence of militant groups operating along the border.

MOF denies budget deficit claims

KABUL (BNA): The Ministry of Finance of Afghanistan has dismissed reports of a national budget deficit, affirming that employees' salaries are being paid without any issues.

Some media outlets had claimed that the ministry is facing a budget shortfall, rendering it unable to pay the salaries of government employees for the last three months of the year.

In response, the Ministry of Finance of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan released a statement rejecting these reports as false. It clarified that all regular and development expenses of Afghanistan are being disbursed as planned without any disruption.

The statement further noted that the ministry is currently implementing a decree from Amir-ul-Mu'mineen (may Allah protect him) regarding the payment of three years' worth of pensions for retired government employees.

Licenses given to women entrepreneurs

KABUL (TOLONews): In the past three years, nearly 10,000 licenses have been issued to women entrepreneurs by the Ministry of Industry and Commerce.

The spokesperson for the Ministry of Economy stated that more opportunities are now available for women entrepreneurs across the country in the fields of small businesses and investment.

Abdul Rahman Habib, the spokesperson for the Ministry of Economy, said: "Currently, women are working in both governmental and private institutions. Facilities have been created for economic and commercial activities, with special attention given to small businesses and handicrafts."

However, some women entrepreneurs complain about reduced income and the diminishing scope of their businesses, urging authorities to create more opportunities for women's employment.

Zainab, the head of a tailoring workshop, said that rising raw material costs and a decline in customers have caused a slowdown in her business.

She said that she initially aimed to provide jobs for around 30 women through her workshop, but due to economic challenges, the number of her employees has now decreased to 12.

Zainab explained: "At first, I had 30 trainees, but now only 10 to 12 people are working. The store's income has significantly dropped, although we started with minimal costs initially."

Meanwhile, some workers at the workshop are calling on the Islamic Emirate for greater support.

Samiya, one of the workshop's employees, said: "We expect the authorities to support us. We are facing many challenges, and girls are also being deprived of education and learning opportunities."

Zahra, another employee, added: "We want opportunities to be created for women so that they can support themselves and their families."

After the Islamic Emirate regained power in Afghanistan, women have sought to establish small businesses to create income sources for themselves. However, many of these women continue to face extensive economic, social, and restrictive challenges.

‘Afghanistan responsible for safeguarding its people, territory and sovereignty’



KABUL (Ariana News): The Presidential Palace (Arg) issued a statement on Saturday highlighting the Islamic Emirate's firm stance on Afghanistan's right to self-defense.

The Political Commission, led by the Deputy

Prime Minister for Political Affairs Mawlawi Abdul Kabir, emphasized that, as an independent nation, Afghanistan is responsible for safeguarding its people, territory, and sovereignty.

The statement further underlined the IEA's com-

mitment to regional stability and peace, stressing that actions that escalate tensions or threaten stability must be actively prevented.

In addition, the meeting covered a range of topics, including Afghanistan's relations with neighboring cou-

ntries, efforts to expand diplomatic and economic cooperation with select nations, and recent developments both within Afghanistan and in the broader region. Decisive resolutions were adopted in accordance with the outlined priorities.

Residents of Badakhshan call for infrastructure and services

BADAKHSHAN (TOLONews): Several residents in the Shahr-e-Bozorg district of Badakhshan province stated that due to lack of access to healthcare centers, telecommunications networks and internet services, electricity, and proper roads, they are facing various challenges.

They call on the caretaker government to address these issues.

"Our roads are in bad condition, the bridge over the Kokcha River is damaged, we don't have proper healthcare centers, and our people are facing many problems," said Aminullah, a resident of Shahr-e-Bozorg.

Rahimullah, another res-

ident of this district, said: "In past governments, no attention was paid to our district. Our people do not have electricity, and telecommunications networks are absent in many villages. This situation has caused significant difficulties for the people."

Shahr-e-Bozorg, with a population of over 67,000, is one of the districts of Badakhshan province, located 45 kilometers from Faizabad, the provincial capital.

Some other residents of this district say that if the government takes steps to provide electricity, it can be easily achieved due to the district's proximity to Tajikistan.

Abdul Shakoor, a resident of Shahr-e-Bozorg, said: "We are close to Tajikistan, and bringing electricity here would be very easy. We ask the authorities to equip our healthcare centers with doctors and medicine."

Mohammad Shakoor, another resident, shared his demand: "Our request to the Islamic Emirate government is to address our problems, build roads, and establish healthcare centers." Local officials say that graveling work on the main road in Shahr-e-Bozorg has begun and efforts to solve other problems are ongoing.

Mahfoozullah Hamdard, the district governor of

Shahr-e-Bozorg, stated: "Alhamdulillah, we have started leveling and graveling the Shahr-e-Bozorg road, and this work is ongoing. We are trying to address people's problems in other areas, including clinics and telecommunications networks."

Badakhshan, in northeastern Afghanistan, is one of the provinces where many of its districts face widespread issues such as road damage, lack of healthcare centers, and shortages in telecommunications and internet services. The people of this province have repeatedly called on authorities to take serious measures to resolve these problems.

Balkh firewood sellers complain about sluggish market

MAZAR-I-SHARIF (Pajhwok): A number of fuel suppliers in northern Balkh province complain about a sluggish firewood and coal market and say they have lost most of their customers.

The fuel suppliers also pointed to the surge in fuel prices compared to the past as a reason behind sluggish market. They said people have become poorer due to unemployment and harsh economic conditions.

Ahmad Zulmai, a firewood seller in ninth district of Mazar-i-Sharif city, told Pajhwok Afghan News they run a lucrative business in the past, but the residents of the city were unable to purchase fuel for themselves this year. The residents could purchase up to 1,400 kilogram of firewood and coal for winter season in the past, but they cannot afford that much fuel for winter, Shah Reza another fuel seller of Balkh said.

Reza Shah said: "The residents of this city would buy around 700-1,400 kilograms of firewood and coal in the past, but what they can afford now is only 14 kilograms of firewood only during the extreme cold



winter." Reza Shan named widespread poverty, unemployment and dire economic condition of the people as main reasons of their sluggish market.

However, a number of Balkh residents pointed to fuel prices in the market compared to the past and said they witnessed no change in the prices and this unable to purchase it.

One of them, Habibullah, told Pajhwok each seven kilograms of firewood was sold for 70 afis last year, the prices have not changed and they are the same this year.

"What is evident is that people cannot purchase firewood this year," Habibullah said. He called on the government and other humanitarian organizations to help the poor people.

Qiamuddin, a laborer who runs his life from his business on his cart, spent 650 afis on firewood. It was the money he could make during the past few days.

Qiamuddin said he would burn the wood during the next few days and try to make more money for this purpose.

Ahmad Mayar, an official of the provincial

municipality, admitted what the residents said, but assured the municipality would control the prices in fuel market.

Mayar said: "Most of the people in this country are grappling with dire economic conditions, they cannot buy firewood and coal for winter, the municipality price-control teams will control the prices."

Previously, a number of international aid organizations had expressed concern about the decrease in aid and increasing needs of the Afghan people with the arrival of winter.

Afghan migrants in Iran face harassment

KABUL (TOLONews): Some Afghan migrants in Iran say they are currently facing various challenges, including harassment by the country's police. They are calling on Afghanistan's interim government to address the challenges faced by migrants in host countries.

"Most Iranian security forces try to humiliate or insult Afghans in some way and even extort money from them," said Mehdi Alizadah, an Afghan migrant in Iran.

"Afghan migrants face numerous problems, including economic, social, legal, and rights-related

issues," said Asadullah, another migrant in Iran.

Meanwhile, Iran's deputy police chief Brigadier General Qasem Rezaei announced that the presence of migrants without residency documents in Iran is considered a crime.

"The presence of undocumented foreigners in any country, including Iran and neighboring states, is considered a crime. Unfortunately, some undocumented individuals have entered Iran posing as documented migrants. They have been instructed to return to their countries, and if they wish to re-enter

Iran, they must do so legally," Rezaei said as quoted by Iranian media.

Although officials of the Islamic Emirate have not recently commented on this matter, they previously stated that they are addressing the challenges faced by migrants.

Mohammad Khan Mohammadzai a migrant rights activist, said: "International organizations and the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan should negotiate with the Iranian government to delay the deportation of undocumented migrants."

Another activist in the field of migration, Nazar Nazari, suggested:

"The interim government of Afghanistan should establish a joint committee between Afghanistan, Iran, and the United Nations to address the challenges faced by migrants and use diplomatic and consular engagements to secure international cooperation."

Earlier, Nader Farahmadi, head of the Center for Foreign Nationals and Migrants Affairs, announced that the presence of migrants has been restricted in provinces such as East Azerbaijan, East Azerbaijan, West Azerbaijan, Zanjan, Sistan and Baluchistan, and Mazandaran.

Justice Mansoor calls for setup of a new 'Judicial Silk Road'

E.P. Report

ISLAMABAD: Speaking at a consultative roundtable titled 'A Holistic Assessment of Legislative Reform, Investment Protection, and Dispute Resolution under CPEC, co-organized by the Institute of Regional Studies (IRS) and the Centre for Chinese Legal Studies at LUMS, Honourable justice Mansoor Ali Shah called for the establishment of a Judicial Silk Route between China and South Asia to strengthen legal collaboration and create effective dispute resolution mechanisms under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).

Justice Shah emphasized the significance of adopting advanced legal frameworks inspired by Chinese practices. He underscored the need to establish BRI commercial mediation centers and develop domestic commercial courts to facilitate investment protection and dispute settlement in Pakistan. He added that such measures would not only address Pakistan's reliance on litigation but also make the country more investor-friendly.

Honourable Justice Jawad Hassan emphasized Pakistan's legal and constitutional advancements supporting the implementation of CPEC, now approaching its third phase. He praised the formation of the Special Investment Facilitation Council

(SIFC) as a crucial measure to boost investor confidence. Justice Hassan underscored the importance of arbitration and mediation in efficiently resolving legal challenges, especially in large-scale projects like CPEC. He also commended Pakistan's recent accession to the Singapore Convention on Mediation, describing it as a progressive step that reinforces the country's commitment to alternative dispute resolution practices.

Ambassador Jauhar Saleem, President of IRS, highlighted concerns regarding the lack of institutional capacity to handle complex legal contracts for large-scale infrastructure projects. He emphasized the urgent need to enhance Pakistan's legal and institutional frameworks to eliminate ambiguities and ensure effective implementation of CPEC initiatives.

Dr. Sikander Ahmed Shah, Associate Professor and Director of the Centre for Chinese Legal Studies at LUMS, highlighted the need to build mutual trust and understanding between Pakistan and China. He noted that their partnership extends beyond infrastructure projects, symbolizing friendship and shared objectives. He asserted that the lasting nature of this relationship should underpin collaborative efforts to tackle legal and policy challenges, ensuring the partnership's long-term success.

Khalid Taimoor Akram, Executive Director Pakistan Research Centre

for A Community with Shared Future, pointed out that Pakistan's strategic location makes it a vital transit route for China and landlocked Central Asian states, however, he noted, the absence of a comprehensive legal framework to govern these projects effectively. Drawing attention to the region's limited ADR facilities, with Kazakhstan hosting the only such center, Akram urged Pakistan to establish its own ADR mechanisms to address disputes efficiently. Dr. Tariq Mahmood, Barrister and Arbitrator, discussed international arbitration standards and the integration of ADR practices to meet the demands of cross-border investments. Ms. Rifat Inam Butt, Secretary of the Law and Justice Commission of Pakistan, stressed judicial efficiency and policy alignment to facilitate investment security and sustainable growth.

Other notable contributions included Mr. Aziz Qazi, Advocate Supreme Court and Vice Chairman of the Islamabad Bar Council, Mr. Muzaffar Ahmed Mirza, Chief Prosecutor and Head of Legal Affairs at the Securities and Exchange Commission of Pakistan (SECP), Mr. Ashfaq Ahmad Khan, Deputy Inspector General of Police and Commandant of Police College Sihala (PCS). The event brought together judges, policymakers, legal scholars, media professionals, and industry leaders to discuss the strategic direction of CPEC Phase II.

N Koreans die in droves: Ukraine

KYIV: Ukrainian forces have killed or wounded more than 1,000 North Korean troops Russia has sent to fight them, according to Kyiv and officials in South Korea. "According to preliminary data, the number of killed and wounded North Korean soldiers in the Kursk region already exceeds 3,000 people," Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said in his evening address on December 23.

South Korean intelligence put the North Korean dead and wounded at 1,100, and said the North was preparing to send more troops. North Korea sent 11,000 troops to fight in the Russian region of Kursk, which Ukraine counter-invaded in August. North Korean troops were evidently untrained in dealing with Ukrainian drones, which took a high toll. In one instance, Ukrainian drone operators recorded how a North Korean soldier accidentally shot his comrade as they tried to shoot down the drone that was filming them.

They may have been trying to execute a tactic described in a notebook recovered from the body of a North Korean soldier. "When detecting a drone, you need to create a trio, where the one who lures the drone keeps a distance of seven metres, and those who shoot it, 10-12 metres," it read. "If the one who is luring stands still, the drone will also stop its movement. At this moment, the one who is shooting will eliminate the drone."

Ukraine's Special Operations Forces said on Telegram their 8th regiment had killed 77 North Koreans in Kursk and wounded 40 over three days, without specifying the location. A video collage released by the regiment showed drones bearing down on individual enemy troops. Their signal cuts out at point-blank range, indicating the moment when the drones detonate. Russian President Vladimir Putin has been embarrassed by the first capture of Russian land since World War II and had initially pledged to push Ukrainian forces out by October 1.

As the deadline drew near, his spokesman changed the Kremlin position, saying Ukraine's forces would be ejected "in a timely manner". Putin reinforced that vagueness in an annual news conference on December 19. "I cannot and do not want to name a specific date when they will be knocked out," he said. Some analysts suggested this could indicate a change in the Kremlin's priorities, but Russia also seemed to make a concerted effort to improve its tactics on Christmas Eve.

Oleg Chaus, a Ukrainian sergeant fighting in Kursk, said that whereas for the past month, the Russian assaults were "chaotic" and "disorganised", three units attacked in an organised manner and with air support on December 24. — Aljazeera

Dialogue only way to move forward in politics: Kh Asif

E.P. Report

LAHORE: Federal Defence Minister Khawaja Muhammad Asif, while paying tribute to the late Khawaja Muhammad Rafique, said on Saturday that he was brave and seasoned politician.

Speaking at the seminar held at 52nd death anniversary of Khawaja Muhammad Rafique at a local hotel, he said that dialogue was the only way to move forward in politics, adding that the PML-N had always supported dialogue process.

Khawaja Asif said, "If we look at past few years, it is PML-N which made efforts for dialogue." He said it was evident from history that Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf founder was not sincere with anyone. The minister termed tenure of PTI government a black chapter in the country's history. He said that in the past, there had been dif-

ferences between the PPP and the PML-N but Mian Nawaz Sharif and Shaheed Benazir Bhutto signed the charter of democracy very sincerely.

National Assembly Speaker Sardar Ayaz Sadiq said that security forces were protectors of the country's boundaries. He said that a lot of sacrifices were rendered in operation Zarb-e-Azb and operation Radd-ul-Fasaad and with the grace of Allah Almighty, efforts to curb terrorism yielded positive results. He said that on May 9, protests were held at military installations and an effort was made to weaken Pakistan. He said that the opposition was not stopped from speaking on the floor of National Assembly.

Prime Minister's Advisor on Political Affairs Rana Sanaullah said that the PML-N saved the country from default, adding that political solutions could be

derived only through dialogue. He said that in politics national interests should be a priority, adding that political sacrifices play vital role for ensuring stability in the country. He said that false cases were made against the PML-N during the PTI government. Rana Sanaullah said intolerant attitude was very harmful for the country.

Former federal minister Khawaja Saad Rafique said dialogue should be unconditional, adding that despite criticism there should be seriousness in dialogue. He said, "We are worried about situation in Parachinar and Balochistan, but seriousness of provincial government is missing there."

Senior journalist and analyst Sohail Warraich and others also spoke. All speakers paid glowing tribute to the late Khawaja Muhammad Rafique for his services in the field of politics.

PPC elects M Riaz as President, Tayyab as GS

E.P. Report

PESHAWAR: The Peshawar Press Club held its annual elections for the year 2025 on Saturday, under the supervision of an election committee led by Chairman Shahid Hamid. The Unity Democratic Group dominated the polls, achieving a clean sweep across all positions.

M. Riaz, representing the Unity Democratic Group, was elected President with an overwhelming 350 votes, defeating Nasir Hussain of the Progressive Journalists Group, who received 97 votes.

Key positions were also secured by the Unity Democratic Group, with Irfan Khan winning Vice President with 314 votes and Tayyab Usman elected



as General Secretary. Gulzar Muhammad claimed the Joint Secretary seat with 310 votes, while Ahtesham Khan was elected as Finance Secretary with 312 votes.

In the Governing Body elections, Irshad Ali led with 316 votes, followed by Irfan Musa Zai (312), Shamim Shahid (284), Imran Ayaz (279), Shakeel

Siddiqui (277), Tariq Waheed (276), Bilawal Arab (268), Zahid MeroKhail (228), Sardar Mahmood-ul-Hassan (219), and Fareedullah (214).

The elections saw enthusiastic participation from the press club members, solidifying the Unity Democratic Group's stronghold and marking a decisive victory.

Plane crash: Putin apologises to Azerbaijan

MOSCOW (AFP): Russia's Vladimir Putin on Saturday apologised to Azerbaijan's President Ilham Aliyev for a "tragic incident" which happened in Russian airspace involving an Azerbaijan Airlines passenger plane that crashed on Wednesday. Putin called Aliyev as speculation grew that Russian air defence may have accidentally shot down the plane, which crashed in western Kazakhstan, killing 38 people while 28 survived.

Flight J2-8243 crashed in a ball of fire near the city of Aktau in Kazakhstan after diverting from southern Russia where Ukrainian drones were reported to be attacking several cities. The Russian leader did not claim responsibility for crash, while apologising to Aliyev that the incident

took place in Russian airspace.

"(President) Vladimir Putin apologised for the tragic incident that occurred in Russian airspace and once again expressed his deep and sincere condolences to the families of the victims and wished a speedy recovery to the injured," the Kremlin said in a statement. "It was noted in the conversation that the Azerbaijani passenger aircraft, which was travelling according to its schedule, repeatedly tried to land at Grozny airport. At that time, Grozny, Mozdok and Vladikavkaz were being attacked by Ukrainian unmanned aerial vehicles, and Russian air defense systems repelled these attacks," the Kremlin said.

The Kremlin said the

call took place at Putin's request. Azerbaijan's president had noted that the plane had been "subjected to external physical and technical interference in Russian airspace, resulting in a complete loss of control and redirection to the Kazakh city of Aktau," according to Azerbaijan's presidential office. The Embraer EMBR3.SA passenger jet had flown from Azerbaijan's capital Baku to Grozny, in Russia's southern Chechnya region, before veering off hundreds of miles across the Caspian Sea.

Statements by Azerbaijani officials suggest Baku believes the plane was hit mid-air, while the US has said it had "early indications" Russian air defence may have been responsible for the crash.



SUKKUR: President Asif Ali Zardari in a group photo at inauguration ceremony of Dr. Ziauddin Hospital Sukkur campus.

Iran: 2025 'important year' for nuclear issue

TEHRAN (Reuters): Iran, bracing for a possible re-imposition of incoming US president Donald Trump's "maximum pressure" policy, said on Saturday that 2025 would be an important year for its nuclear issue. In 2018, Trump reneged on a deal struck by his predecessor Barack Obama in 2015 in which Iran agreed to curb uranium enrichment, which can yield material for nuclear weapons, in return for the relaxation of US and UN economic sanctions.

Foreign Minister Abbas Araqchi told reporters in Beijing, "2025 will be an important year regarding Iran's nuclear issue," adding in remarks aired by Iran's state TV that he had discussed the issue in talks with his Chinese counterpart. He did not mention Trump by name, however, or spell out how the year might be significant.

Iranian leaders' main concern may be that Trump could empower Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to attack Iran's nuclear sites, while further tightening US sanctions on its crucial oil industry. The Iranian rial on Saturday hit a new all-time low against the US dollar amid uncertainty about Trump's arrival in the White House on January 20.

The rial plunged to 820,500 to the dollar on the unofficial market, compared to 808,500 rials on Friday, according to Bonbast.com, which reports exchange rates. The bazar360.com website also said the dollar was being sold for about 820,500 rials. Also facing an inflation rate officially put at about 35 per cent, Iranians seeking to shelter their savings have been buying dollars, other hard currencies, gold or cryptocurrencies, and the rial has dropped about 18pc in all since Trump was elected in November.

Gaza hospital director detained

GAZA (AFP): An Israeli military raid targeting Hamas militants has forced a major hospital in northern Gaza out of service and led to the detention of its director, the WHO and health officials said Saturday. The assault on Kamal Adwan Hospital has rendered the facility "useless," further worsening Gaza's severe health crisis, the Palestinian territory's health officials said.

The World Health Organization said the operation had put the "last major health facility in north Gaza out of service." "Initial reports indicate that some key departments were severely burnt and destroyed during the raid," it added in a statement on X. The WHO said 60 health workers and 25 patients in critical condition, including some on ventilators, reportedly remained in the hospital.

Patients in moderate to severe condition were forced to evacuate to the destroyed, non-functioning Indonesian Hospital, the UN health agency said, adding it was "deeply concerned for their safety." Hamas-run Gaza's health ministry reported that Israeli forces had detained Kamal Adwan's director, Hossam Abu Safiyeh, along with several medical staff members. AFP was unable to independently verify whether Abu Safiyeh had been detained, but multiple attempts to reach him were unsuccessful.

President vows to uphold Bhutto family's legacy

E.P. Report

SUKKUR: President Asif Ali Zardari on Saturday vowed to keep up the Bhutto family's legacy of public service, dedicated to improving the socio-economic well-being of the nation. He hailed the establishment of Dr Ziauddin Hospital Sukkur Campus, adding that it will provide quality healthcare services to the people of Sukkur.

The President expressed these views while addressing the inauguration of Ziauddin Hospital in Sukkur on Saturday. Chief Minister Sindh Syed Murad Ali Shah, Chief Minister Balochistan Mir Sarfaraz Ahmed Bugti, Dr Asim Hussain, Sindh provincial ministers, MNAs, MPAs, hospital establishment, and people from different walks of life attended the event.

Speaking at the event, President Asif Ali Zardari hailed the inauguration of the state-of-the-art hospital as a transformative moment

for Sukkur and its surrounding areas. He praised Dr Asim Hussain and the Ziauddin Hospital management for their efforts in establishing a facility equipped with cutting-edge technology and a team of highly skilled professionals.

The President reflected on his personal involvement in encouraging Ziauddin Hospital to invest in Sukkur, highlighting the need for such initiatives to uplift healthcare standards in underserved areas. He said that the Government of Sindh would also bear the expenses for the establishment of a university at the Ziauddin Hospital Sukkur Campus. He stated that he had also donated his personal land for establishing Dr Ziauddin Hospital's campus in Hyderabad.

The President also highlighted that Rohri canal was being lined from its beginning and Rs 15 billion would be spent annually in this regard. He said that the

funds generated from the trading of carbon credits in the international market were being used for the lining of the Rohri Canal project.

The President said that the hospital exemplified Dr Asim Hussain and his family's unwavering commitment to providing quality healthcare services to the people. He highlighted that Dr Ziauddin was a member of the Central Legislative Assembly before Pakistan's independence and an associate of Quaid-i-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah, and now his family was carrying forward his legacy.

President Asif Ali Zardari highlighted the significance of the university campus, where medical students can pursue higher education. He emphasized that providing top-notch healthcare facilities to the public was a top priority and reiterated his commitment to ensuring that the people of Pakistan have access to quality medical care.

FIA raids fake visa factory, arrests 2 human smugglers

E.P. Report

GUJRANWALA: The Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) has arrested two human smugglers during a raid on a fake visa factory in Gujranwala. FIA Composite Circle Gujranwala raided Shadman Colony and arrested two accused named Ziaur Rehman and Ijaz Ahmed. The accused were providing fake visas to citizens with the help of agents in different parts of Pakistan.

The accused are involved in making and selling fake passports, visa stickers and other travel documents. The accused used to defraud innocent citizens through fake documents. The accused used to provide fake documents by receiving huge amounts of money. The accused are part of international networks involved in human trafficking. During the raid, 20 Pakistani and 31 foreign passports, large number of fake visa stickers were

recovered from the accused. The machines used in the production of fake visa stickers were also recovered from the accused.

As many as 96 fake visa stickers of Europe, 18 of China, 41 of the UK and 12 of the US were recovered from the accused. Fake visa stickers from Brazil, Indonesia, Turkey, Serbia, Greece, Sweden, Malta, Croatia, Spain, Portugal, and the UAE were also recovered from the accused. Moreover, 95 fake stamps, bank deposit slips, 13 fake residence cards and immigration stamps, lamination sheets and other travel documents were seized from the accused.

Fake Chamber of Commerce cards, student cards, mobile phones, lamination machines, typing machines were also recovered from the accused. The organized network of the arrested accused worked in collaboration with various

agents. The accused and their agents used to trap innocent citizens from all over the country. The accused used to give fake visa stickers to innocent citizens after receiving huge amounts of money. The accused used to send innocent citizens abroad on visit visas or Umrah visas.

Using fake visa stickers, the accused tried to send citizens to Europe from Dubai, Azerbaijan and other countries. The accused were arrested and investigation started. Raids are being conducted to arrest other accused. Director FIA Gujranwala Zone Abdul Qadir Qamar said crackdown against elements involved in human trafficking is underway. Intelligence-based raid teams are raiding on organized gangs, he said. He said that special raid teams have been formed to arrest human traffickers. All resources are being utilized to arrest the accused, Abdul Qadir Qamar said.

India mourns Manmohan Singh in state funeral

NEW DELHI (AFP): The mortal remains of Manmohan Singh, the former Indian prime minister whose death has sparked outpourings of grief at home and accolades from abroad, was cremated on Saturday on the banks of the Yamuna River in New Delhi with full state honours.

The funeral was conducted in the Sikh tradition as priests chanted hymns, after Singh's body, draped in the Indian flag, was carried through the capital on a flower-decked carriage pulled by a ceremonial army truck. The flag was removed and the body covered with a saffron cloth before it was placed on the pyre.

Since Singh died on Thursday at 92, many have taken up his comment near the end of his 10-year rule that "history will be kinder to me than the contemporary media". He was referring to a perception of weak leadership as he headed a coalition government facing numerous charges of corruption, which was thrown out of office in the 2014 election won by his successor Narendra Modi.

Modi, who called Singh one of the nation's "most distinguished leaders" after his death, attended the funeral, along with President Droupadi Murmu and representatives of various coun-

tries. Modi's government has decided to allocate land for Singh's memorial. Singh, considered the architect of India's economic liberalisation, had criticised Modi's economic policies such as demonetisation and introducing a goods and services tax.

Singh is survived by his wife and three daughters. Congress Leader Rahul Gandhi accompanied Singh's family on the truck to the Nigambodh Ghat cremation site after the procession from party headquarters in New Delhi, where people joined Congress party leaders and members to pay their last respects. The leaders of the US, Canada, France, Sri Lanka, China and Pakistan were among those expressing grief at Singh's death and highlighting his international contributions.

Gandhi said he had lost "a mentor and guide", adding that Singh had "led India with immense wisdom and integrity". US President Joe Biden called Singh a "true statesman", saying that he "charted pathbreaking progress that will continue to strengthen our nations — and the world — for generations to come". Born in 1932 in the mud-house village of Gah near Chakwal in what is now Pakistan and was then British-ruled Indian sub-con-

tinued, Singh studied economics to find a way to eradicate poverty in the vast nation.

He won scholarships to attend both Cambridge, where he obtained a first in economics, and Oxford, where he completed his doctorate. Singh worked in a string of senior civil service posts, served as a central bank governor and also held various jobs with global agencies including the United Nations. He was tapped in 1991 by then Congress prime minister PV Narasimha Rao to serve as finance minister and reel India back from the worst financial crisis in its modern history.

Though he had never held an elected post, he was declared the National Congress's candidate for the highest office in 2004. In his first term, Singh steered the economy through a period of nine percent growth, lending India the international clout it had long sought. He also sealed a landmark nuclear deal with the United States that he said would help India meet its growing energy needs. President Droupadi Murmu said that Singh would "always be remembered for his service to the nation, his unblemished political life and his utmost humility".