



Islamabad POST

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Turkish elections will send a firm message to West

Detailed News On Page-07

Joining NATO won't solve all our problems

Detailed News On Page-07

Ex-AJK PM's plea to stay verdict rejected

Detailed News On Page-08



Clipping CJP powers

Apex court halts implementation on the legislation

There won't be any action on the bill even if the President signs it off, rules the Supreme Court



Ruling alliance rejects bench

NEWS DESK

ISLAMABAD: The ruling alliance on Thursday rejected the eight-member bench constituted to hear petitions challenging the Supreme Court (Practice and Procedure) Bill 2023, deepening the rifts between the coalition government and the superior judiciary. With only a few hours left for the proceedings to begin, the coalition government released a statement rejecting the bench and terming the eight-member bench "controversial". The coalition partners – according to the statement – vowed to resist attempts to take away parliament's authority and to interfere in its constitutional scope. Terming the development "unprecedented" as the pleas were admitted even before the completion of the legislative process. They further added that this move was equivalent to sabotaging the credibility of the country's highest court, making the constitutional process of justice "meaningless". "This bench itself is a testament to the division of the SC, which once again supports the earlier stated position of the ruling parties," the statement read, adding that the ruling alliance considers this as an "attack" on the parliament and its authority.

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT

ISLAMABAD: In a major development, an eight-member larger bench of the Supreme Court (SC) on Thursday ordered that even if the Supreme Court (Practice and Procedure) Bill 2023 received the assent of the president, the bill would not be acted upon in any manner till further order. The top court's eight-member larger bench – headed by Chief Justice of Pakistan (CJP) Umar Ata Bandial and comprising Justice Ijaz ul Ahsan, Justice Munib Akhtar, Justice Sayyed Mazhar Ali Akbar Naqvi, Justice Muhammad Ali Mazhar, Justice Ayesha A Malik, Justice Syed Hasan Azhar Rizvi and Justice Shahid Waheed – issued its eight-page ruling on three petitions challenging the SC bill. "The moment that the Bill receives the assent of the President or (as the case may be) it is deemed that such assent has been given, then from that very moment onwards and till further orders,

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ISLAMABAD: Ambassador of United Arab Emirates (UAE) Hamad Obaid Ibrahim Salem Al-Zaabi delivering an invitation to the Prime Minister from the UAE leadership to attend COP28. – DNA

Invitation to attend COP28

PM all praise for 'fraternal' Pak-UAE relationship

Expresses gratitude for support in relief efforts post devastating floods

SHUJAAT HAMZA

PM for boosting Pak-Iran ties

KHAYAM ABBASI

ISLAMABAD: Prime Minister received the Ambassador of United Arab Emirates (UAE) to Pakistan, Hamad Obaid Ibrahim Salem Al-Zaabi, on Thursday. The Ambassador delivered an invitation to the Prime Minister from the UAE leadership inviting him to attend COP28, which is scheduled to be held in Dubai from 30 November to 12 December 2023. Prime Minister thanked the UAE leadership for the invitation. He also expressed his gratitude for their support in relief efforts in the wake of devastating floods in Pakistan last year. Prime Minister appreciated UAE's role in combating climate change and expressed the hope that UAE's stewardship of COP28 would yield meaningful outcomes for countries like Pakistan, which are most vulnerable to climate change. Recalling his

ISLAMABAD: Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif has reiterated Pakistan's commitment to strengthening bilateral relations with Iran in all areas of mutual interest, particularly trade, energy cooperation, security and regional stability. During a telephonic conversation with the Iranian President Seyed Ebrahim Raisi on Thursday, he expressed satisfaction on the recent operationalization of Polan-Gabb Electricity Transmission Line and appreciated the Iranian Government's cooperation in that regard. The Prime Minister also

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Briefs

Economic situation improving

DNA

ISLAMABAD: Minister for Information and Broadcasting Marriyum Aurangzeb has said the economic situation has been improving with gradual reduction in trade and current account deficits. In a series of tweets, she said when PDM assumed responsibility of the government, the country had the 'largest trade deficit of 49 billion dollars and current account deficit of 17.5 billion dollars.

Hina meets Russian FM

DNA

ISLAMABAD: Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, Hina Rabhani Khar held a meeting with Foreign Minister of Sergey Lavrov, on the sidelines of 4th Neighbouring Countries of Afghanistan meeting in Samarkand. Views were exchanged on the entire scope of bilateral relations as well as on regional and global issues. FM Sergey Lavrov and MoS Hina Rabhani Khar agreed on the importance of high-level exchanges for the mutually benefit of the two countries.

Sehr, Iftar Timing



Ramazan 23, 1444
Sehr: 04:11 am
Iftar: 06:42 pm
Fiqa-e-Jafria
Sehr: 04:01 am
Iftar: 06:52 pm

Economic crises PTI developing 'viable' strategy

Imran Khan says whatever we do, we look ahead

BUREAU REPORT

LAHORE: PTI Chairman Imran Khan said his party is developing a strategy of saving the country from default if he comes to power by negotiating with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) on a "viable way of being able to pay our debts", it emerged on Thursday. In an interview, the former premier said: "We're sitting with our economists [on] how to come up with a plan with which we can sit with the IMF and give them a viable way of being able to pay our debts. "But at the same time, our economy should not be choked so that our ability to pay debt goes down." In his interview, Imran said, "Whatever we do, when we look ahead, the debt is growing, our economy is slowly shrinking. [...] From my party's point of view, we've started thinking

that we're stuck." Criticising the government for not being able to take the country out of the current economic crisis, he said it "needed to break out of borrowing cycles that have held back developing economies". Saying that Pakistan will struggle to break out of a cycle of debilitating debt repayments without reform, he asserted his party would prioritise domestic reforms over seeking debt relief and ruled out a default if his party returned to power.

The outlet quoted him explaining that his plans to revive the economy after coming to power included restructuring loss-making state-owned enterprises and boosting the tax base. "Is the answer getting more loans, or is the answer to restructure the way we run the country?" he asked rhetorically. "We have to conduct surgery in Pakistan in the way we run our government," the PTI chief told.

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Russian team in Pakistan to finalise oil deal

DNA

ISLAMABAD: Pakistan moved a step closer to sealing its loan deal with Russia as the team has arrived in Karachi to fine-tune the deal on crude oil with counterparts in Pakistan State Oil (PSO), media reported citing a senior official privy to the development. "This time, we are expecting all the hurdles will be removed in importing crude oil from Russia," the official said. However, the Energy Ministry is tight-lipped over the mode of payment and discount on crude oil prices. It should be noted that last month the technical

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Asif warns of striking terrorists in Afghanistan

Says he had reminded Taliban administration to live up to its cross-border security commitments

CENTRELINE REPORT

ISLAMABAD: Defence Minister Khawaja Asif has warned Afghanistan's Taliban rulers that Islamabad will strike terrorist hideouts inside the neighbouring country if the latter were unable to rein in anti-Pakistan militants. The minister made the remarks in an interview. Asif's comments come on the back of his earlier statement that the banned Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) were using Afghan soil for carrying out attacks in Pakistan. The defence minister said that in his visit to Afghanistan in late-February, he reminded the Taliban administration to live up to their cross-border security commitments forbidding terrorists from using Afghan soil to plan and conduct attacks on Pakistan or Islamabad will take action. "We have communicated to Kabul during our last visit that please, as our neighbours and brothers, whatever is emanating from Afghan soil is your responsibility," he said.



3 terrorists killed in Turbat IBO

DNA

RAWALPINDI: At least three terrorists were killed during an intelligence-based operation (IBO) in the Turbat area of Balochistan, the military's media affairs wing said on Thursday. In a statement, the Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) said that the IBO was initiated to clear a hideout of terrorists allegedly involved in firing incidents on the security forces and civilians besides planting of improvised explosive devices on Turbat – Hoshab Road in general area of Gishkore. "As a result of continuous intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) of the area, a location of terrorists was identified and security

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Weakening response encouraging Israeli, Indian aggression

DNA

ISLAMABAD: A weakening global response due to systemic failures in global governance - under the UN's umbrella - is emboldening Israel and India to carry out aggression and human rights violations with impunity. This is clearly illustrated by the latest Israeli assaults on Palestinians in the Al-Aqsa Mosque compound which have failed to elicit any firm response beyond the routine statements of condemnation from OIC, Arab League and a few countries. These views were expressed during an international webinar titled 'Israeli Actions in the Middle East: Normalizing Aggression and Weakening Response' organized by Institute of Policy Studies (IPS). The forum was chaired by Ambassador (r) Syed Abrar Hussain, Vice Chairman, IPS, while the speakers included Dr. Hatem Bazian, chair, Islamophobia Research & Documentation Project, USA; Dr. Zeenat Adam, Deputy Executive Director, Afro-Middle East Centre, South Africa; Dr. Chandra Muzaffar, president, JUST, Malaysia; Dr. Ali Hossain Zadeh, Al-Mustafa Uni-

versity, Iran; Nazir Hussain, former dean, Faculty of Social Sciences, QAU; and Dr. Junaid S. Ahmed, professor at College of William & Mary, USA. The speakers observed that Israel thrives on conflict and war, which have been fundamental elements of its creation, consolidation and expansion. Israel claims to be a democratic state but harbors colonial ambitions and wants to colonize the remaining Palestinian lands. Israel has been working on Judaization of Jerusalem since 1967. The Judaization project is still underway which envisions demographic superiority to consolidate hold of the Jewish state in the occupied lands. As such the Arabs in Israel have been relegated to the status of second-class citizens irrespective of their religion as the Christians are also facing restrictions on carrying out their religious activities. This is happening because Israel is moving away from the essence of the Oslo Accords and has no intention of giving the Palestinians their due rights. The Zionist actions of the Jewish state are being mirrored in Modi's Hindutva-fervered India where the religion and culture

of the minorities, especially Muslims, are being increasingly targeted. The speakers were of the view that the International Criminal Court and International Court of Justice are unlikely to entertain cases against Israeli and Indian violation of international humanitarian law due to US pressure. The speakers maintained that though issues like Palestine and Kashmir are local or regional but require a global response. As such the international civil society needs to play a meaningful role to highlight the aggression and atrocities perpetrated by Israel and India in the occupied lands. They also censured the deafening silence of the international community, and particularly most of the Muslim countries, which give precedence to geo-economic aspects and national interests rather than taking a stand for justice and human dignity. The speakers suggested that the major Muslim countries such as Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Iran should raise this issue at every possible international forum.



ISLAMABAD: A vendor displayed car winds screen shades along the road to attract customers at Sector H-8 in Federal Capital. —Online

Yum e Ali AS observed in Attock

QAZI SHOAB KHAN

ATTOCK: Eminent religious scholar Khateeb Ahle Mohammad Allama Murtaza Mehdi of Lahore on Thursday while highlighting the excellent qualities of Hazrat Ali (AS) before the mourners in Attock said that the status of Sher e Khuda, Molud e Kabha was only reserved for Hazrat Ali who was subjected to severe torture by the anti muslim powers. Speaking on the occasion, he said that the excellent religious qualities were being concealed from the Muslim world due to the constant fear of Banu umayyad but facts cannot be denied. Allama Murtaza Mehdi urged upon the Muslims to open their eyes and see that Hazrat Ali (AS) laid his life for Allah Almighty asking his companions to offer sweet drink to his killer Abdul Rehman bin e Muljum. He said Ali (AS) fought against anti Muslims rulers and succeeded with bravery for the sake of Islam. He reminded his son Imam Hassan the promise of his grand maternal father Hazrat Mohammad (PBUH) saying that he would never sustain and sacrifice his life on 21st Ramadan ulMubrak leaving a message for the entire Muslims not to bow before the unlawful rulers at all costs. Earlier, hundreds of faithful mourners from different parts of district Attock on Thursday have also taken out their condolence procession to commemorate the tragic martyrdom of Imam Hazrat Ali (AS) with religious reverence and fervour under the aegis.

SCCI demands to restore scanning process of cargo goods at Torkham border

PESHAWAR: President of Sarhad Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Muhammad Ishaq has expressed serious concern over the suspension of the scanning process of Afghan transit trade and export cargo vehicles at the Torkham border. The SCCI chief urged the relevant authorities and senior officials to take notice and issue directives for the restoration of the scanning process so that traders and Pak-Afghan transit trade and exports can be saved from loss. In a press statement on Thursday, Sarhad Chamber President Muhammad Ishaq said that around 2,500 Pak-Afghan Transit and Pakistan Export

trucks, including perishable goods have stuck up at the Torkham borders due to the suspension of the scanning process, which has adversely affected the trade and export process. Ishaq said that according to reliable sources, the scanning process of Pak-Afghan Transit Trade and export cargo vehicles was stopped due to the ongoing construction work on a terminal. The chamber president urged besides the construction of the terminal, initiatives should be taken to ensure the smooth passage of Pak-Afghan transit and export because the further decline in bilateral trade and exports is not in the best interest of

Pakistan's economy and business community. Ishaq said the scanning process should be restored before Eid so that the business community could be saved from financial losses due to halting and demurrage charges. The SCCI chief appealed to the Inspector General FC Frontier Corps and other authorities concerned to take immediate notice of the stopping of thousands of cargo vehicles and issue orders to start the scanning process as soon as possible so that mutual trade and exports can be increased so that would put the country's economy on the path of stability and development.—APP

Country's experts signed off curriculum for grade 1 to 12



ISLAMABAD: For the first time in the country's history, a core curriculum from Grades 1-12 and Early Years has been signed off by subject experts from federal and all provinces during a meeting at National Curriculum Council (NCC) Secretariat here Thursday. The meeting was called to discuss the recent agreement of provincial experts on National Curriculum standards for Grades 9-12, marking a monumental milestone for Pakistan. The meeting was chaired by the Minister of Federal Education and Profession-

al Training, Rana Tanveer Hussain and was attended by Federal Minister for Information Marriyum Aurangzeb, Parliamentary Secretary Ms. Zeb Jaffar, Chairman Council of Islamic Ideology Dr. Qibla Ayaz, provincial education ministers, senior parliamentarians, Secretary Federal Education and Professional Training, Waseem Ajmal Chaudhry, Curriculum Department Directors from Punjab, Sindh, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan, religious scholars, social workers and education experts.

In respect of the 18th Amendment of the Constitution, standards for Grades 9-12 will go through provincial review and formal legal approval before being notified at their respective provincial levels. However, standards for Grades 1-8 and Early Years are already underway for implementation at varying levels in all provinces across the country. Federal Minister Rana Tanveer Hussain lauded the National Curriculum Council for upholding the cause of quality education for all children of the nation by championing international standards in

curriculum reforms. He specifically noted the integration of the study of the Constitution of Pakistan and coding in the curriculum, anticipating that this would not only inform students of their rights and responsibilities but also equip them with the technological skills required in today's fast world. The development of the National Curriculum of Pakistan was a nationwide collaborative process, with each province actively involved and their feedback gathered and incorporated through a comprehensive process.

GIZ donates 100 wheelchairs, 100 walkers to KP Health Dept

PESHAWAR: German donor agency (GIZ) donated 100 wheelchairs and 100 walkers to the Health Department of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. In this connection, a function was held here in the Conference Room of the Health Department here on Thursday. Besides, Advisor to KP Caretaker CM on Health, Dr. Abid Jameel, Secretary Health Mahmood Aslam and Director General (DG) Health, Dr. Shaikat Ali, the representatives of GIZ SAARC Project were also present on the occasion.—APP

Special Assistant for comprehensive reforms

DNA

PESHAWAR: Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Special Assistant for Prisons Hidayatullah Afridi visited the Central Jail Peshawar and expressed concern over the recent incidents in the jail, stating that temporary control is not enough and a permanent solution is needed through positive reforms and a comprehensive strategy. He emphasized the need to control illegal elements and criminals

inside the prisons and to take action to prevent the large-scale recovery of mobile phones from prisoners. During the visit, Afridi inspected various facilities and expressed appreciation for the construction of a bullet-proof wall on the main road side. He also promised to provide more resources, including an X-ray machine for incarcerated patients, installation of more jammers, and paving the road inside the jail gate. Afridi also

visited the prison hospital and library, where he suggested adding books and novels of Rehman Baba and Khushal Khan Khattak. Afridi expressed happiness over the Literacy Center for Adult Education and appreciated the items made by skilled inmates, which he promised to promote on social media. He also visited the Jail Control Room and promised to install 1200 more cameras and provide games and toys for children. In addition, he visited the special juve-

nile barracks and directed the court to release children involved in minor cases. This visit highlights the need for comprehensive reforms and increased resources to address the challenges faced by prisons in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The government's efforts to improve facilities and provide educational opportunities for prisoners are commendable, and further initiatives may be necessary to ensure effective rehabilitation and prevention of criminal activities within the prison system.

Chief Commissioner RTO to form Tax Advisory Committee

DNA

ISLAMABAD: Khurshid Ahmed Khan Marwat, Chief Commissioner, Regional Tax Office Islamabad said that he would provide all possible cooperation to facilitate the taxpayers in tax compliance and announced to form a Tax Advisory Committee (TAC) comprising representatives of ICCI and RTO to address the issues of taxpayers. He said that TAC would hold monthly meetings to facilitate the taxpayers. He said this while addressing the business community during his visit to Islamabad Chamber of Commerce and Industry. Freedun Akram Shaik and Said Munaf Commissioners RTO accompanied him at the occasion. Khurshid Ahmed Khan Marwat said that POS would stay and said that ICCI should cooperate in expanding its coverage to



bring new taxpayers in this system. He said that ICCI should prepare budget proposals and share them with RTO Islamabad that would be forwarded to FBR for consideration and implementation. He said that he wants to register new taxpayers and said that ICCI and market associations should cooperate in this drive to ensure equal distribution of tax burden on all sectors. Speaking at the occasion, Ahsan Zafar Bakhtawari, President, Islamabad Chamber of Com-

merce & Industry briefed the Chief Commissioner RTO about the tax issues of the business community. He welcomed the formation of ATC as it would help address hardships of taxpayers. He said that FBR should provide a level-playing field for integration of businesses with POS. Otherwise, the survival of POS integrated businesses would be in danger. He said that FBR should introduce incentives for taxpayers in proportion to their tax contribution that would help


promote tax culture. He said that FBR should focus on new taxpayers instead of putting more burden on the existing taxpayers. He said that RTO had set up a facilitation camp in the F-10 market to register traders in tax net and help them in filing of tax returns but the camp has been closed. He said that such camps should be set up in all major markets to facilitate traders in tax registration. The Chief Commissioner assured that he would look into this issue. Faad Waheed, Senior



Vice President ICCI highlighted the high tax rate on rental income and input issues of steel industry and said that FBR should address these issues. He said that FBR should promote a friendly taxation system that should help promote business activities and improve tax revenue. Engr. Muhammad Azhar ul Islam Zafar, Vice President ICCI said that RTO the practice of issuing notices to taxpayers should be avoided and RTO should take ICCI on board before taking action against any taxpayers to resolve such issues amicably. Mian Muhammad Ramzan Convener ICCI Tax Committee, Zahid Hussain Chairman Pakistan Furniture Association, Mian Waqas Masud, Khalid Chaudhry and others also highlighted tax issues of various sectors and gave proposals to simplify the tax system.

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National Days and Armed Forces Days

APRIL

April 04/Senegal
National Day
 April 07/W. H. O.
World Health Day
 April 12/Somalia
Armed Forces Day
 April 15/DPR Korea
The Day of the Sun
 April 16/Denmark
National Day
 April 17/Iran
Army Day
 April 17/Syria
Independence Day
 April 18/Zimbabwe
Independence Day
 April 24/Holy See
**Anniversary of His Pa-
 pacy of his Pontificate**
 April 25/DPR Korea
Armed Forces Day
 April 26/Tanzania
National Day
 April 27/Sierra Leone
Independence Day
 April 27/South Africa
Freedom Day
 April 30/Sweden
Birth of His Majesty
 April 30/Netherlands
Birth of Queen



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 Islamabad.....1122 & 16
 Emergency Ambulance.1122
 & Rescue Services.4451122
 Motorway Police.....9266044
 Motorway Police.9270601-20
 Women Police Stations
 Islamabad.....9222596
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 Railway Exchange 9270831-5
 WASA Rawalpindi.....5555489



Hospitals

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 MH.....5611116
 Cantt Hospital.....9270907-11
 DHQ.....5556311-4
 RGH.....9290301-7
 Holy Family.....9290322-7
 PIMS.....9261170-79
 Polyclinic.....9218300-09
 Shifa International 4603666



Departments

CDA.....9221334-43
 CDA.....9208301-04
 Met Office.....9250360-6
 RDA.....5555864
 TMA.....5770886
 Cantonment Board 9270151-3

Islamabad Metropolitan

Corporation.....9209224
 Potohar Town.....9209224
 Rawal Town.....5773343

Water Tank

Islamabad.....0321-5744480



ISLAMABAD: Wives of diplomats posing for picture on the occasion of iftaar dinner hosted by CEO Monal Luqman Ali Afzal.-DNA

Acting British HC hosts interfaith Iftar dinner

STAFF REPORT

ISLAMABAD: Acting British High Commissioner, Andrew Dalgleish, hosted an Iftar dinner at the British High Commission for leading members of different religious communities from across Pakistan to celebrate

the country's rich cultural diversity. At the event, religious leaders broke fast together and discussed issues surrounding tolerance, acceptance and inclusion amongst the multi-faith and multi-cultural groups of Pakistan said a news release issued by the embassy here on Thursday. The Acting British High Com-

missioner, Andrew Dalgleish, said the following, "This is my first Ramadan in Pakistan and I am struck by how people from across communities have come together to support each other. As I get to know Pakistan better, I have come to appreciate the diversity of its population; Pakistan is home to a rich range of

cultures, faiths, and traditions. Religion and faith remind us that we need to come closer together, to be ek saath and to share understanding and respect." Those who attended the iftar dinner included, Federal Minister for Human Rights, Mian Riaz Hussain Pirzada, Chairman One Man's Commission for Minority

Rights Dr Shoaib Suddle, Grand Imam of Badshahi Mosque Maulana Abdul Khabir Azad, Head of Prime Minister's Taskforce on Minorities, Dr Ramesh Kumar Vankwani, and President and Moderator of the Church of Pakistan, Bishop Azad Marshall, among many other religious and cultural leaders from across Pakistan.

Parliament can't be stopped from legislation: Kaira

Regarding the apex court's original jurisdiction, the bill said that any matter invoking the use of Article 184(3) would first be placed before the committee

DNA

ISLAMABAD: Advisor to the Prime Minister on Kashmir Affairs and Gilgit-Baltistan Qamar Zaman Kaira on Thursday said that nobody could prevent the parliament from using its authority and incumbent government would not compromise or accept it. "Do you want to prevent the parliament from using its authority? We will not accept it and not compromise on it," Kaira emphasised. Addressing a press conference here, he said that the Supreme Court (Practice and Procedure) Bill, 2023 is with the parliament and hasn't been signed by the president yet but the Supreme Court has taken up the pleas against it. The ruling alliance on Thursday rejected the eight-member bench constituted to hear petitions challenging the Supreme Court (Practice and Procedure) Bill 2023, deepening the rifts between the coalition government and the superior judiciary. The coalition partners vowed to resist attempts to take away parliament's au-

thority and to interfere in its constitutional scope. Earlier this week, the bill was passed by a joint sitting of parliament after President Dr Arif Alvi returned it. Subsequently, four separate petitions were filed by Raja Amer Khan, Chaudhry Ghulam Hussain, Mohammad Shafay Munir, and Khwaja Tariq Rahim among others, under Article 184(3) of the Constitution, asking the top court to set aside the bill. Shedding light on the constitution of the bench, the PPP leader said that the parties do not agree with this method. He said that the rifts among institutions are leading the country towards a bad situation. "We only want the benches to be constituted in a balanced and proper manner," he added. The Supreme Court (Practice and Procedure) Bill, 2023 aims to give the power of taking suo motu notice to a three-member committee comprising senior judges, including the chief justice. It also aims to have transparent proceedings in the

apex court and includes the right to appeal. Regarding the formation of benches, the bill states that every cause, matter or appeal before the apex court would be heard and disposed of by a bench constituted by a committee comprising the CJP and the two senior-most judges. It added that the decisions of the committee would be taken by a majority. Regarding the apex court's original jurisdiction, the bill said that any matter invoking the use of Article 184(3) would first be placed before the committee. The bill says that if the committee is of the view that a question of public importance with reference to the enforcement of any of the fundamental rights conferred by Chapter I of Part II of the Constitution is involved, it shall constitute a bench comprising not less than three judges of the SC which may also include the members of the committee, for adjudication of the matter.

AIOU to hold conference on May 3

ISLAMABAD: Allama Iqbal Open University (AIOU) in collaboration with Turkiye's Yunus Emre Institute will organize a one-day international conference titled "Pakistan-Turkiye relations" on May 3. "The conference will be presided over by the Vice Chancellor (VC) of AIOU Prof. Dr Nasir Mahmood, while the Ambassador of Turkiye in Pakistan Mehmet Pachaji will be the chief guest of the opening ceremony," said a press release here on Thursday. "Renowned personalities from Turkiye and Pakistan will express their views on Pakistan-Turkey relations, language, culture, Khilafat Movement as well as Allama Iqbal, Maulana Rumi, and Yunus Emre. Allama Iqbal Open University invited Academicians and experts from various fields to attend and present papers at this conference." "The Education Attaché will discuss the Turkiye education system and teacher training." The coordinator of Yunus Emre Institute for Pakistan Dr Halil Tokar will talk about the cooperation between Allama Iqbal Open University and Yunus Emre Institute. It added. The calligraphy of Turkish calligraphers on Asmaullah Al Husna will also be exhibited on the premises of the conference hall of AIOU. The university has appointed Dr Muhammad Arif as the coordinator of the conference. - AP

CASS hosts virtual book launch

ISLAMABAD: The Centre for Aerospace & Security Studies (CASS) here on Thursday hosted a virtual book launch for the co-edited volume 'Activist Retail Investors and the Future of Financial Markets' by CASS Advisor on Economic Affairs & National Development Dr Usman W Chohan and Prof. Sven Van Kerckhoven, published by Routledge, UK. The event was attended by CASS team and researchers and was well-received as the culmination of a successful project that spanned 14 authors from five continents from various disciplines including economics, information technology, sociology, law, cultural studies, public administration, and others. The resulting volume of 14 chapters reflected, in the speakers' opinion, a comprehensive analysis of the subject from multiple perspectives that would likely stand as a lasting text on the subject of activist retail investors, said a news release. Six authors from the book participated in the event as speakers, including Dr Usman W. Chohan (Pakistan), Prof. Sven Van Kerckhoven (Belgium), Prof. Sean O'Dubhghaill (Ireland), Dr Ilker Alsan (Switzerland), Dr Scott Timcke (South Africa), and Prof. Nizan Packin (United States). The editors of the volume highlighted that the global scope of the contributing authors, although challenging, provided an opportunity for rich international collaboration; and the book's multidisciplinary approach was a powerful contribution to the literature. An important lesson from the book was that activist retail investors are likely to remain a lasting feature in global financial markets, and recent events such as the Banking Crisis of 2023 help cement the editors' vision about the emergence of retail investors as a force in the digital age. Several chapters of the book are already serving policy purposes in regulation (e.g., child protection), while others are reinvigorating existing debates through new analysis (e.g., anti-system politics, financial counter-hegemony). Therefore, the edited volume offers a rich contribution to several kinds of literature, as well as policy inputs for specialized audiences. President CASS Air Marshal (R) Farhat Hussain Khan lauded the contributions of the authors in the edited volume and credited Dr Chohan and Dr Van Kerckhoven for their collaborative editorial vision for a project of this scope. - APP

RDA holds first meeting of CSC

RAWALPINDI: Rawalpindi Development Authority (RDA) on Thursday held first meeting of Consultant Selection Committee (CSC) for the project of "Outsourcing of Field Inspections of construction activities in the jurisdiction of RDA" under the chairmanship of Director General RDA, Muhammad Saif Anwar Jappa. The meeting was attended by the members of CSC including Director Land Use & Building Control, Jamshaid Aftab, Representative from Housing, Urban Development & Public Health Engineering Department, Muhammad Saleem Ashraf, Representative from Finance Department, Muhammad Javed and Representative from P&D. The RDA spokesman informed that the pre-qualification documents were opened by the Committee. Four firms participated in the project including NE-SPAK, TechGIS & Shersersaz, Urban Community Housing and MESA. Moreover, the Sub-Committee for technical evaluation under the chairmanship of Director Land Use and Building Control, Jamshaid Aftab, Deputy Director Engineering Waqas, Deputy Director Building Control, Ali Raza and Financial Specialist (PMU), Ring Road, Rawalpindi, Zeeshan participated in the meeting. The sub-committee would submit its recommendations after the detailed examination as per PPRAs rules within a week, the spokesman added. - APP

H-8 College holds awareness lecture

DNA

ISLAMABAD: Model Post-graduate College H-8 organised a lecture on emerging trends in drugs with an objective to create awareness against the drug abuse and its harmful effects. Professor Nadeem Ghalib, a National Trainer of the United Nations Office on Drug and Crime (UNODC) who was also a clinical psychologist was the resource person. He gave a one hour presentation on the topic of "Methamphetamines /Crystal/ICE Dependence: An emerging Brain Disease". The presentation covered the disease concept, national epidemiology, its clinical effects, withdrawals, comorbidities, and psychopharmacological treatment. With the help of the audio-visual support the participants got a clear understanding about the abuse of methamphetamines (Meth). He said that the Meth is illegally smuggled in Pakistan and its abuse became massively increased due to low cost, odorless and high potential effects amongst the teens and university colleges' adults. The lecture was attended by college students and teachers. The lecture was followed by an interactive session with the students wherein they posed many questions related to drug abuse.

MNA seeks special radio programmes on minorities' culture

ISLAMABAD: Member of the National Assembly (MNA) Salahuddin on Thursday demanded the Information and Broadcasting Division to initiate special programmes alongwith its regional and provincial language programmes on culture and special occasions of the minorities of different faiths inhabiting in the country. While raising a supplementary query to his question taken by the House, the MQM-P MNA underlined that the Pakistan Broadcasting Corporation (PBC) used to broadcast 300 programmes per day in provincial and regional languages but there was no representation of the minorities who were having equal rights in the country. Salahuddin said the country has a beautiful collection of colorful languages and traditions whereas there is lack of proper representation of the minorities namely Christians, Sikhs, Hindus, Parsis and others. e underlined that the minorities were the reality of the society and should be given proper representation on media to express interfaith harmony. Parliamentary Secretary for Information and Broadcasting, Ch. Shahbaz Babar responded that there were no minorities rather equal citizens of the country and brethren of the Muslims. He argued that out of the total 300 programmes in regional and provincial languages, the minorities of different faiths were given representation and there was no discrimination in this regard. However, he suggested the member that any innovative idea or recommendation in this regard should be shared with him for implementation. Later, MNA Saira Bano of Grand Democratic Alliance regretted that the Cabinet Ministers were not performing their functions diligently as many times, the responses to her queries were not received from the respective divisions. She also requested the Prime Minister while mentioning him to take note of the issue. - APP

Canadian envoy calls on NDMA chairman

DNA

ISLAMABAD: Canadian High Commissioner Leslie Scanlon on Thursday called on NDMA Chairman Lt Gen Inam Haider Malik and discussed various aspects of possible mutual cooperation and areas where Pakistan needs immediate assistance for a proactive approach to mitigate and manage future disasters. As apprised by the Authority's chief of lessons learnt from devastating Floods 2022. The NDMA chairman informed the envoy about coordination with Pakistan foreign missions for humanitarian assistance on need basis. He also highlighted remodelling of the National Emergency Operations Centre (NEOC) as Digital Hub to connect all disaster management stakeholders for generating a common operating picture for Pakistan. "This will also incorporate humanitarian agencies and international partners," he added. Pa-

kistan required cooperation of international community for developing an avant-grade early warning system, which could predict changing weather patterns well before disaster strikes, he said. The NDMA chairman also laid stress on local requirement based assessment during pre-disaster phase, strengthening of the District Disaster Management Authorities (DDMAs) and preparing the vulnerable communities about the adverse impacts of looming disasters through public awareness campaigns. He also highlighted upgraded National Institute of Disaster Management (NIDM) as Think Tank to connect Pakistani universities with world academia and learn from global good practices and replicate same as per Pakistan's requirements. The Canadian envoy appreciated the envisioned NEOC and endorsed the need for developing such a high-tech crisis response centre in Paki-

stan, which had been continuously hit by intense/erratic changing climatic behavior. She briefed that the Government of Canada had committed

to assist flood affectees of Pakistan through funded-projects which would focus on recovery, reconstruction and resilience. She assured to discuss the

further assistance requirements for futuristic NEOC and restocking of disaster management reserves in upcoming official meeting back in Canada.



Briefs

DC directs
RWMC to
eliminate
dengue

RAWALPINDI: Deputy Commissioner Hassan Waqar Cheema on Thursday directed the officials of the Rawalpindi Waste Management Company (RWMC) to ensure the de-silting of drains, and empty plots, sprinkling the lime to eliminate dengue and germs in the city.

He expressed these views during a surprise visit to the 6th Road Metro Station. On the occasion, RWMC's Chief Executive Officer Rana Sajid Safdar gave a detailed briefing to the DC about the anti-dengue campaign and the overall sanitation situation of the city.

Later, the communication team of Rawalpindi Waste Management Company organized an anti-dengue awareness seminar in the conference room of the head office. The seminar aimed to create awareness among the staff and the general public about anti-dengue measures. CEO RWMC Rana Sajid Safdar said that efforts were underway to provide a hygienic environment to the city's residents. In addition, he said that today, the communication teams distributed waste bags and pamphlets in various areas of all tehsils of the district to highlight the importance of cleanliness and dengue prevention.

To eradicate dengue larvae, he added that comprehensive Standing Operating Procedures (SOPs) and an action plan were being followed, and weekly reports were being submitted to the city district government and the government of Punjab. Furthermore, he urged the residents to keep an eye on junkyards, schools and under-construction buildings, which led to the spread of dengue larvae and left no place wet or stagnant water.

In case of any complaint, citizens were asked to register their complaints on helpline number 1139, which would be rectified immediately, he added.—APP

RDA
demolishes
3 illegal site
offices

RAWALPINDI: Rawalpindi Development Authority (RDA) on the directives of Director General (DG) Muhammad Saif Anwar Jappa here on Thursday launched an operation and demolished sites of three illegal housing schemes namely Islamabad Marina City Mouza Garbal, Pakistan Employees Cooperative Housing Society Mouza Mohri Khatran and Garbal and Seven Enclave Housing Society at Mauza Garbal Fateh Jang Road.

According to RDA spokesman, the enforcement squad of RDA was taking strict action against illegal housing schemes.

He informed that notices were also issued to the owners of illegal housing schemes. The enforcement squad including Incharge/Assistant Director Building Control, Deputy Incharge, Superintendent Scheme and others took part in the operation and demolished the site office, main gates and road infrastructure. The housing societies were running illegal booking offices in violation of the rules, he added.—APP

Benazir
Hospital being
renovated at Rs
140 mln

RAWALPINDI: Medical Superintendent (MS) Benazir Bhutto Hospital Dr Tahir Rizvi has said that Rs 140 million are being spent on the renovation of the BBH to improve the infrastructure. Giving details of the work, he informed APP that the Emergency department was being renovated at the cost of Rs 40 mln while the remaining amount would be utilized to redo the Gynecology, Orthopedic, medical and surgery departments. Dr Rizvi added that the main operation theatre would be refurbished entirely. At the same time 26 new washrooms will be constructed in the Gyne department, adding Orthopedic wards will also have eight new bathrooms. The MS said the sum of Rs 120 mln was being spent by the Building department.—APP

Iran's Ambassador bids farewell call to speaker

Unity among Muslim
countries imperative

DNA

ISLAMABAD: Speaker of the National Assembly Raja Pervaiz Ashraf on Thursday said that unity among Islamic countries was imperative to resolve issues confronted by the Muslim Ummah. During a meeting with Iran's Ambassador to Pakistan Seyed Mohammad Ali, Raja Pervaiz Ashraf also discussed matters of mutual interest, including strengthening the bilateral cooperation in various fields, promoting regional peace and security, and enhancing trade and economic ties between Pakistan and Iran. The Speaker congratulated Seyed Mohammad Ali on his successful diplomatic assignment in Pakistan and appreciated his contributions in further strengthening the brotherly ties between the two countries, said a news release.

He expressed gratitude to the Supreme Leader Ayatullah Ali Khamenei and President Raisi for their continued support to the Kashmir cause and assured Iran of Pakistan's support on its core issues, including the JCPOA and human rights issues.

The speaker felicitated the Iranian Ambassador on the revival of Iran and



Saudi Arab diplomatic relations. Underscoring Pakistan's close fraternal relations with Iran and Saudi Arabia, he termed it as a positive step that would lead to improving regional peace and stability as well as increasing cooperation among Muslim countries to overcome the current challenges faced by Muslim Ummah. The two sides reiterated their commitment to fighting terrorism, which poses a common threat

to both Iran and Pakistan, through joint concerted efforts. They also acknowledged the positive trajectory in bilateral relations, including enhanced engagement at multiple levels and frequent exchange of visits and telephone calls between the leadership on all matters of significance. Both sides also agreed to hold an Iranian art/photo exhibition at the Parliament displaying rare manuscripts of Holy Quran and other sacred documents. The event would be in continuation of golden jubilee celebratory activities of the Constitution of Pakistan passed in 1973. The Speaker concluded by thanking Seyed Mohammad Ali for his productive and fruitful tenure in Pakistan and wished him all the best for his next diplomatic assignment. —

Earlier that day Iranian Ambassador to Pakistan, Seyed Mohammad Ali Hosseini, called on Federal Minister for Commerce Syed Naveed Qamar to bid farewell on completion of his tenure. The Minister appreciated the ambassador's efforts to enhance bilateral trade and economic relations between Iran and Pakistan. During the meeting, the minister pointed out high tariff imposed by Iran on Textiles, Surgical and Sports goods and remarked that reduction in tariff on exports from Pakistan would be a

positive development for congenial trade ties. The minister said both countries were not only neighbors but also have brotherhood relations, however trade volume did not match with actual potential, we had to make mechanism to find the ways instead of allowing smuggling, he added. Naveed Qamar said non trade barriers such as visa fees for Pakistani drivers and business community, attestation fee, road tax, load tax and other charges imposed by Iranian consulate on truck are hampering trade. Later, Commerce Minister extended best wishes to the ambassador's future endeavors.

Iranian ambassador expressed his appreciation for the minister's support and cooperation extended to him during his tenure in Pakistan, which resulted in 15% bilateral trade increase between the two countries for the first time.

Ambassador Hosseini hoped that the Mandi-Pishin border market, which is scheduled to be inaugurated on May 2nd, will boost trade between Iran and Pakistan. The meeting ended on a positive note, with both sides expressing their commitment to further enhance trade and economic ties between the two countries.

Woman harassing case
President upholds 'dismissal
from service' penalty

ISLAMABAD: President Dr Arif Alvi has upheld the penalty of dismissal from service on the Assistant Vice President of the Zarai Taraqati Bank Limited (ZTBL) after it was proven beyond doubt that he had sexually harassed a female employee of the bank.

The President also enhanced the fine of Rs 500,000, imposed by the Federal Ombudsman for Protection against Harassment of Women at Workplace (FOSPAP), to Rs 600,000 on the accused considering the serious mental trauma he must have caused to the victim. The President gave this decision while rejecting a representation filed by an Assistant Vice President

ZTBL (the accused) against the decision of FOSPAP. He also rejected the representation filed by ZTBL in this case on account of the bank having no locus standi, said a press release issued by the President's Secretariat.

In his decision, the President stated that the accused had failed to point out any irregularity in the proceedings conducted by FOSPAP which were based on the true appraisal of evidence. "In Pakistan, the message of the constitution, the law, and its implementation is loud and clear that we want to ensure a society where women are free to work and have a safe environment in all public places that allows them to become fully partic-

ipating members of society", he added.

The President also upheld the order that since the complainant had been terminated from service in utter violation of the law and rules i.e., conducting no regular inquiry against her and providing no opportunity of hearing to her, the termination order of the victim was quite illegal and unlawful and could not stand intact. He further upheld FOSPAP's direction that it would be deemed as if no order of termination was made and the complainant was still a bank employee, and she would be entitled to all her benefits till today.

The President rejected the representation by stating that the accused failed to cross-examine the com-

plainant on vital aspects of the matter i.e., the allegation of sexual harassment and hence for that matter the said allegations were presumed to be admitted and proved on the record. He noted that the evidence produced by the complainant seemed credible and confidence-inspiring, whereas the accused had been unable to shatter or discredit the evidence adduced by the complainant. He held that the Ombudsman had rightly observed in the impugned order that admittedly other male staff was also working in the branch but none of them had been charged by the complainant for any sexual harassment and there seemed no reason to falsely charge the accused.—APP

IESCO starts
energy conservation
awareness campaign

Chief Executive Officer IESCO Dr. Muhammad Khan also said that the economy of any country depends on the availability of electricity and if electricity is available the economy will boost up and make progress

ISLAMABAD: Islamabad Electric Supply Company (IESCO) has started a comprehensive campaign to create awareness about the conservation of energy among consumers in light of directives of the government and the Ministry of Power Division. Chairman Board of Directors (BODs) IESCO Engineer Qamar ul Islam Raja urged the consumers that we should avoid unnecessary use of electricity and also teach our kids regarding energy conservation and its benefits to the county and economy. Islam also teaches us to keep our requirements in limits, he added. Chief Executive Officer IESCO Dr. Muhammad Khan also said that the economy of any country depends on the availability of electricity and if electricity is available the economy will boost up and make progress. He requested to avoid the use of iron, air conditioner and heavy electronic appliances from 6pm to 10pm. He also directed all IESCO officers and staff to develop energy conservation habits and try to avoid unnecessary use of electricity in offices and homes and play their role towards the development of the country.—APP

Philanthropists
arranged thousands
iftaar 'Dastarkhaws'
during Ramadan

ISLAMABAD: The most fortunate twin cities have long upheld a tradition of setting up thousands of 'Iftaar dastarkhaws' at various spots in the holy month of Ramadan. According to a private news channel, more than 5,000 dastarkhaws have been set up in twin cities this Ramadan, serving an estimated 2.5 million to 3 million people observing the fast every day of the month.

Talking to a private news channel, A representative for the Saylani Welfare Trust said the organization had currently arranged iftaar at more than 150 locations.

A philanthropist Anwar Mehmood said, "Such iftars are arranged by well-to-do individuals on a personal basis, welfare organizations partake in the activity as well, allowing those not super rich to indirectly fund these noble initiatives through charitable contributions.

Another philanthropist Inaam ul Haq said in addition to such dastarkhaws, many well-to-do individuals had also arranged for iftaar boxes for underprivileged people observing fast. "The boxes, which are prepared for Rs100 to Rs200, contain pieces of seasonal fruits, dates, a slice of cake, a samosa or fried roll, and a portion of dahi barhay, choley or fruit chaat, or on occasion, biryani, and are served with either a chilled water bottle or another drink," he added.—APP

OGDCL, PARCO join hands
to explore new ventures

ISLAMABAD: Oil & Gas Development Company Limited (OGDCL) and PARCO inked MOU for new projects, as part of business diversification and energy transition

strategy. This MOU was signed for collaboration and Joint Venture Opportunities in the Energy Sector including Oil & Gas infrastructure projects, said a press

release issued on Thursday. Both sides will constitute joint working groups to evaluate opportunities, undertake feasibility studies and establish joint ventures for commercially, technically

and economically feasible projects. OGDCL & PARCO have joined hands to explore opportunities of business growth to ensure term sustainability and for enhancing shareholders value. In the 1st phase world class consultants would be engaged for the identification and evaluation of new opportunities. Both companies have also identified certain specific projects and areas of cooperation, which will help in materializing tangible progress on a fast track basis. The companies were represented by Ahmed Hayat Lak-MD/CEO OGDCL and Shahid Mahmood Khan-MD PARCO, and witnessed by Senior Management of both the companies.

Chinese company to establish breeding farms

DNA

ISLAMABAD: A Chinese company Hangeng Trading, specialized in animal husbandry, livestock and Aloe Vera is establishing breeding research centers and health units across Pakistan to improve the country's agriculture and livestock industry, Gwadar Pro reported on Thursday quoting China Overseas Port Holding Company (COPHC). In an interview with Gwadar Pro, Ali Bukhari, Coordinator of COPHC, said that the company has signed MOUs with the federal and provincial governments in animal husbandry and livestock, as they are interested in in-

vesting in these sectors to develop breeding farms and animal health units. He said that the Chinese expert team of professors will bring breeding technology and animal vaccines to Pakistan. They will hold workshops and seminars to educate students and farmers. The animal vaccine will be easily accessible to local farmers and because of the vaccine the farmers can keep their animals safe from the effects of climate change. Bukhari said that agreements will be signed with universities of each province. In Rahim Yar Khan, Punjab the construction of a breeding farm along with an animal health care unit is already under construction while KPK

breeding farm will start soon. Khawaja Fareed University of Engineering and Information Technology, Rahim

Yar Khan (KFUEIT) and HanGeng will jointly establish a breeding research center at KFUEIT which will work on livestock farm-

ing, breeding center, student training programs and research on different varieties of Aloe Vera, he added. The representative of

COPHC said that MOUs have also been signed with some other Pakistani universities including Lasbella University, Balochistan and University of Agriculture, Faisalabad. These joint agreements between the two countries will improve agriculture and livestock breeding practices in Pakistan. Ali Bukhari believed that with Pakistan having significant potential in these sectors, the transfer of advanced technologies and expertise could potentially help enhance productivity, efficiency, and overall output.

The Chinese animal vaccines can prevent the spread of diseases and improve the health of livestock.

Commissioner
visits SSC
exam center

RAWALPINDI: Commissioner Rawalpindi Division, Liaquat Ali Chatta here on Thursday visited Sir Syed Science School, Tippu Road, center of Secondary School Certificate (SSC) annual examination and reviewed the arrangements made by Board of Intermediate and Secondary Education Rawalpindi.

The Commissioner visited various examination halls, rooms and inspected the arrangements and the exams holding process.

The Commissioner also checked attendance sheets of the staff and students, roll number slips, seating plan, lights and fans. Strict action in accordance with the law was being taken against cheating mafia and no one would be allowed to violate the rules, he said and informed that separate raiding teams had been formed to make the monitoring system more effective.

He directed the monitoring teams to perform their professional duties without any discrimination.

The Commissioner informed that sealed question paper envelopes are opened in front of CCTV cameras. "Transparent examination is the first responsibility of all of us," he said adding, there would be no compromise on the transparency of the examination system.

He directed the authorities concerned to ensure transparency in the examination process. Deputy Commissioners, Additional Commissioners and Assistant Commissioners of all the districts were monitoring all the examination centers on daily basis, he informed. The Commissioner also reviewed the security arrangements made for the examination centre.

Police arrest
7 over illegal
weapons

RAWALPINDI: Rawalpindi district police on the directives of Senior Superintendent of Police, Operations Rawalpindi Capt. @ Muhammad Amir Khan conducted raids in different areas and arrested seven accused for possessing illegal weapons. According to a police spokesman, Rattaamral, R.A.Bazar, Taxila, Gujjar Khan, Rawat and Kalar Syedan police rounded up seven namely Haroon, Ali, Ghulam Abbas, Shan Mehmood, Atif, Murad and Tahir and recovered six 30 bore pistols and ammunition from their possession. The SSP said that strict action in accordance with the law was being taken against the lawbreakers and operations against aerial firing and illegal weapon holders would continue.—APP

8 FIRs
registered
against
Murad Saeed

ISLAMABAD: The Islamabad High Court (IHC) on Thursday disposed of the petition of Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf leader Murad Saeed after the Capital Police and the FIA submitted their reports regarding cases against him. The Islamabad Police informed the court that eight first information reports (FIRs) were registered against the petitioner, while the Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) said no case against Murad Saeed was pending with it. Justice Arbab Muhammad Tahir disposed of the case after the reports were submitted to the bench.—APP

Rana Sana
visits POF
Wah

WAH CANTT: Minister for Interior Rana Sanullah on Thursday visited the Pakistan Ordnance Factories (POF) Wah Cantt, where he was given a briefing on its production capabilities. POF Chairman Lt. Gen Ali Amir Awan informed the minister that the consisted of 14 production units and 19 subsidiaries, in which 26,000 employees were serving. "The POF has been catering to the defence requirements of Pakistan Armed Forces, and it is also exporting arms and ammunition to more than 40 Countries to earn foreign exchange," he added. The minister appreciated the POF's production capabilities and its role in fulfilling the armed forces' defence requirements with state of the art arms and ammunition, besides those of the law enforcement agencies. — APP

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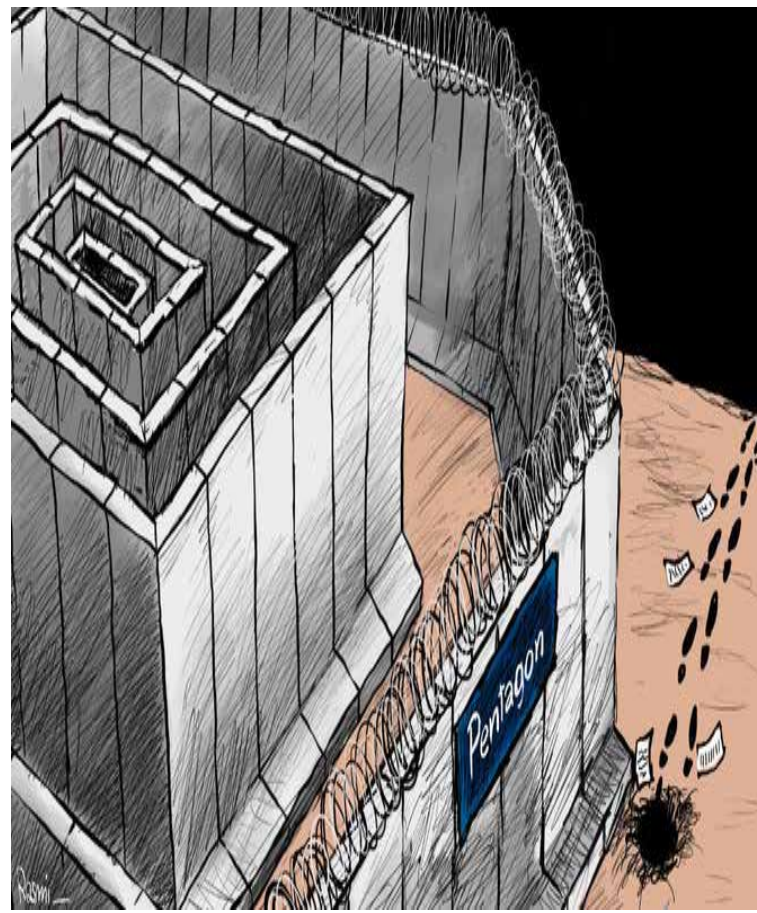
Helping hand to Afghanistan

The situation in Afghanistan has gained a sense of urgency given the fact the country's economy is still on the brink of collapse after the Taliban retook control of the country in 2021, with the United Nations warning that 1 million children are in danger of starving and 90 percent of Afghans live below the poverty line of \$1.9 a day. That China is qualified, and welcomed, to lead the international effort at helping the Afghan people achieve long-term peace and stable development is based on the fact that the country has never interfered in Afghanistan's internal affairs, never pursued selfish interests in Afghanistan, and never sought to create a so-called sphere of influence, as its position paper on the Afghan issue states. The document, which China released on Wednesday, underscores the constructive role that it seeks to play in the reconstruction and development of Afghanistan, which has been devastated by wars and turmoil.

The 11-point paper, released by the Foreign Ministry, covers such issues as counterterrorism cooperation, humanitarian and refugee assistance, as well as combating narcotics. Actually, as "a good neighbor, a good brother and a good partner", China has cherished the traditional friendship between the two countries and is always ready to provide assistance to the Afghan people within its capacity. Apart from providing tens of millions of dollars in humanitarian aid to Afghanistan, China has in recent years worked to strengthen practical trade and economic cooperation between the two countries.

To benefit the livelihoods of the Afghan people, China has opened an "air corridor" to expand the import of high-quality agricultural products from the country such as pine nuts, and has given duty-free preferential treatment to 98 percent of the goods imported from Afghanistan. It is also coordinating with Afghanistan's other neighboring countries in an effort to push for a political settlement in the country and help it achieve peace, stability, and economic recovery. State Councilor and Foreign Minister Qin Gang is in Samarkand, Uzbekistan, for the fourth ministerial conference of Afghanistan's neighboring countries which started on Thursday. China hosted the third meeting of foreign ministers of Afghanistan's neighbors in Tunxi, Anhui province, in March 2022. In contrast to China's responsible handling of the Afghan issue, the United States, which is partly responsible for the current predicament in Afghanistan due to the hasty withdrawal of its forces from the country in 2021, still refuses to return the \$7 billion in frozen Afghan assets to the cash-strapped country, which has worsened the humanitarian and economic woes in Afghanistan.

It is ironic that the US, which always trumpets human rights, has now become "the biggest external factor that hinders substantive improvement in the humanitarian situation in Afghanistan".



World economy

Remember the roaring 20s? Even as Covid gripped the world, optimists piped up that the economy would come roaring out of the pandemic, bolstering incomes and kickstarting an almighty boom. Harking back to the Spanish flu pandemic of a century earlier, they saw a decade of glorious growth ahead. Well, they were wrong. Ahead lies not roaring but snoring; no boom, but ever-deepening gloom. That is the message from the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, which are holding their spring meetings in Washington DC this week. In its economic outlook, the IMF not only outlines what a mediocre few years lie ahead, it is also worried that things could get even worse. As for the World Bank, it has published a 564-page book whose chief preoccupation is in its title: *Falling Long-term Growth Prospects*. It warns of a "lost decade in the making", and projects that the meagre growth of the 2010s will "extend into the remainder of the current decade". We may be less than a third of the way into the 20s but, as far as the serried ranks of the top economists in Washington are concerned, it is already game over.

Neither the IMF nor the World Bank have any incentive to be so pessimistic. Indeed, after the banking crash of 2008, World Bank economists were resolute in their cheeriness, declaring that all would be well because of China and other fast-developing economies. Why the change of tone? Some of the gloom can be blamed on Vladimir Putin, but the reality is that, even before Ukraine and Covid, the world economy was already stuck in a deep rut, in what the former US treasury secretary Larry Summers dubbed "secular stagnation". China has slowed down sharply. In the west, many countries enjoyed a decade of almost free money, which would have been an ideal time to invest. Instead, Europe and the UK wasted it, with austerity for public services and handouts for the rich.

The 2010s were a wasted decade for economies and the environment. The 20s have all the makings of a second. But in highly unequal societies, economic stagnation doesn't mean, to borrow an infamous phrase, that we're all in this together. It means some will do very well while others will go sharply backwards.

It makes pitched battles over who gets how big a share of the pie more likely, followed by rightwing attacks on minorities and the poor. Rather than chase the spectre of economic growth and productivity, it would be better to think about a fairer distribution of what we do have and ensuring children are fed, the elderly and sick are looked after, and everyone is housed. Otherwise, we are in for a long, brutal era of political extremism and nasty culture wars. Underneath all the charts and figures, that is what the IMF and World Bank are warning lies ahead.

Israel's tampering with Al-Aqsa status is a recipe for disaster

Osama Al-Sharif

For years now successive Israeli governments have been caving in to the demands of Jewish extremists to alter the historic status of Al-Aqsa Mosque – allowing Jews to pray and perform Talmudic rituals at the compound. But what is even more dangerous is that prominent Israeli politicians are now talking openly about dividing the Muslim mosque so that Jews can pray inside the Haram at set times – thus turning the place into a synagogue. Some scholars have called the incremental extension of Israeli sovereignty over Al-Aqsa compound – what Jews call the Temple Mount – as the "Hebronization" of Al-Haram Al-Sharif, in reference to what took

The third holiest Muslim site, Al-Aqsa Mosque, or Al-Haram Al-Sharif, has become a dangerous flashpoint that could ignite the entire region. The shocking events of last week, when Israeli soldiers stormed the holy site, beating worshippers and causing serious damage to the main building, is an assault on a Muslim place of worship that is under the custody of Jordan. Nothing can justify the barbaric Israeli action, which was repeated over a number of days during the month of Ramadan.

For years now successive Israeli governments have been caving in to the demands of Jewish extremists to alter the historic status of Al-Aqsa Mosque – allowing Jews to pray and perform Talmudic rituals at the compound. But what is even more dangerous is that prominent Israeli politicians are now talking openly about dividing the Muslim mosque so that Jews can pray inside the Haram at set times – thus turning the place into a synagogue. Some scholars have called the incremental extension of Israeli sovereignty over Al-Aqsa compound – what Jews call the Temple Mount – as the "Hebronization" of Al-Haram Al-Sharif, in reference to what took place at the Ibrahim Mosque in Hebron in 1972.

So far Israel has succeeded in what is called the temporal division of Al-Aqsa, where Jewish pilgrims are allowed to enter the compound under police protection almost every day at set hours. Despite Arab, Muslim and international denunciations such provocative visits have been increasing with Jewish extremists performing Talmudic rituals while carrying posters of the third temple replacing Al-Aqsa Mosque. Now the likes of Jewish extremist and minister in the current Israeli government, Itamar Ben-

Gvir, want to have access to the mosque itself to enforce a de facto spatial division. It is no secret that some ultra-religious groups openly call for the destruction of the mosque.

The mosque came under Israeli attack soon after the fall of East Jerusalem in 1967. In August, 1969 an Australian zealot set fire to the historic pulpit at the main prayer hall of the mosque. Attempts to do harm to the mosque and to worshippers continued over the following years. Israel has frequently blocked Jordanian plans to do essential renovation work at the site. The waqf personnel, including officials, guards and ushers, have been harassed by Israeli police on a regular basis. But the most serious attempt to impose a new reality at the compound took place in September 2000 when Ariel Sharon, as leader of the Likud party, broke with protocol and visited the site under heavy police protection.

That provocative tour of the site triggered riots across the West Bank, leading to the eruption of the second Palestinian Intifada. Under Benjamin Netanyahu, breaches of Al-Aqsa compound became more regular and on a number of occasions, tensions with Jordan mounted over unilateral steps that successive Likud governments, all under Netanyahu, tried to impose at the compound.

In 2014 and under US pressure, Netanyahu recommitted to the historical status quo arrangement on Al-Aqsa with Jordan. The status quo, which goes back to the mid-19th century, has been respected by successive administrators of Palestine since. The arrangement recognizes the compound and all that it entails as an exclusive Muslim site. Accordingly, Al-Aqsa's administration belongs to a Muslim institution, the Jerusalem Islamic Waqf,

which is under the custodianship of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan.

In 1878, Jerusalem's Status Quo arrangement was internationally recognized in the Treaty of Berlin, which was signed between European powers and the Ottoman Empire. Interestingly, an ad hoc commission established under the British mandate in 1929 determined that the Buraq wall, what Jews call the Wailing Wall, forms an integral part of Al-Aqsa Mosque, and is therefore a Muslim property.

Even as recently as this Monday, Netanyahu continued to argue that Israel will not change the historical status quo, but his government's actions say otherwise. There is no legal or historical claim to the 1440-dunum compound by Israel. Every country in the world recognizes the Hashemite custodianship of Al-Aqsa. It is important to note that Israeli actions in occupied East Jerusalem, including the Old City, are illegal under international law. Still Israel is mixing politics with religion – a lethal cocktail that is undermining freedom of worship in Jerusalem, not only for Muslims but for Christians as well. So far Israel has broken all pledges to keep the peace and allow Muslims to worship peacefully at Al-Aqsa. Unless it receives a serious warning from the US, which is the only country that may still have some influence over Israel, the current path will certainly lead to a bloodbath. Allowing a dangerous far-right government to tamper with the religious beliefs of millions of people in such a reckless manner is a crime. Allowing Jewish ultra-religious zealots to escalate the situation is a recipe for disaster.

–Courtesy: Arab News

Why is Modi so scared of history textbooks?

Apoorvanand

It's shocking – how will students make sense of present-day India without understanding the role and contribution of Mughal and Muslim rulers? Yet these edits aren't surprising. They are in keeping with the ideological agenda of Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which seeks to portray India as a historically Hindu-only land. Any other presence, especially of Muslims, is to be seen as an intrusion and pollution – a distortion of the ideal original past that the BJP wants to

After nine years in power, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Hindu nationalist government has finally defeated the long departed Mughal Empire and other Muslim rulers.

It has quietly pushed them to the margins in school textbooks, where they had occupied significant territory for the past seven decades, recent revelations show. Several pages on the Mughal rulers and Delhi Sultanate have been deleted from the textbooks of different classes. The Mughals have not disappeared entirely, but students will no longer learn of the milestones and achievements of some of India's most important rulers even though their legacy lives on in the architecture and cultural landscape of India. It's shocking – how will students make sense of present-day India without understanding the role and contribution of Mughal and Muslim rulers? Yet these edits aren't surprising. They are in keeping with the ideological agenda of Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which seeks to portray India as a historically Hindu-only land. Any other presence, especially of Muslims, is to be seen as an intrusion and pollution – a distortion of the ideal original past that the BJP wants to persuade Indians was the reality. School textbooks have made Indian Muslims an inalienable part of the national memory with their history long predating an invasion and their immense contributions an inescapable reality, so this legacy must be deleted. Mughals and Muslim rulers must be referenced only as cruel invaders. This approach is in sync with the renaming of Muslim-sounding towns and roads. The historic city of Allahabad is now Prayagraj. Aurangabad is Chhatrapati Sambhaji Na-

gar, and Osmanabad is Dharashiv. The demolition of the Babri Mosque in 1992 in Ayodhya was part of this great anti-Muslim cultural purge. The Gyanvapi Mosque in Varanasi and the Shahi Mosque in Mathura have been identified as next in line. The marginalisation of Mughals and Muslims in textbooks mirrors what Muslims in Modi's India are facing in real life. The recent textbook edits are part of a cultural genocide. But this war against history has many more enemies. It isn't enough that the past and the present be uniquely Hindu. They must also be harmoniously Hindu. Anything that shows conflict or tension in society must be eliminated. That's why, in addition to Muslim history, the truth about caste and its legacy of untouchability and exclusion are also being whitewashed by the textbook revisionists, who want future generations to believe in the fantasy of an India that was – and is – free of conflict.

More recent history also makes the BJP uncomfortable, such as the Hindu extremist background of Nathuram Godse, the man who assassinated Mahatma Gandhi in 1948. Godse was part of a Hindu supremacist network led by the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh organisation, the ideological fountainhead of the BJP. He killed Gandhi because of Gandhi's insistence on a secular India. The parts of history books that detailed these links have been deleted too, and Godse comes across as a lone wolf. Sections in textbooks on the 2002 mass killings of Muslims in the state of Gujarat – which happened under Modi's watch as chief minister at the time – have been removed. Similarly, examples of gender-related discrimination have also been deleted. It is as if India has been a society that has never seen any discrimina-

tion against any social group on any basis. Meanwhile, a more contemporary section on how water theme parks for the wealthy co-exist with drought-hit farmlands in the central region of Vidharbha has also been removed from social science books. The BJP wants the world to believe that Indian society is Hindu and Hindu society has always been just, loving and absolutely non-discriminatory in its essence. But the obscene reality is just the opposite. Children reading these fantastic tales about India live in conflict-ridden situations. This approach is not only about controlling the past or painting it in Hindu colours. It is also about the future, a dark, undemocratic future into which the BJP is dragging India. A strong state and obedient masses are central to the idea of an India that Modi's BJP wants to build. It already portrays itself as synonymous with the Indian state. In keeping with this thinking, references to social and political protest movements defending democratic rights have been removed from textbooks. Instead of citizens holding the state accountable, the BJP wants the people to be accountable to the state. Officially, the textbooks were edited to reduce the learning load for students. But even a cursory look at the removed parts shows a clear pattern. The changes are driven by the idea of portraying India's past as essentially Hindu and as a nation without discrimination and violence. To create a Hindu India out of a secular nation, the BJP needs to build a fake history of a fantasy land. Rewriting the past is about giving the Hindu supremacist ideology legitimacy for the future while sending truth to its grave.

–Courtesy: Al Jazeera

Briefs

Apex court halts...

FROM PAGE 01
The Act that comes into being shall not have, take or be given any effect nor be acted upon in any manner," read the interim order. The larger bench of the top court heard the petitions challenging the SC bill 2023 amidst a boycott of court proceedings by the country's top lawyers body and criticism of the coalition government. Pakistan Bar Council (PBC) Vice Chairman Haroon Rashid and Executive Committee Vice Chairman Hassan Raza Pasha, said that the chief justice constituted the bench in haste for hearing the petitions. They said that the lawyers' community would boycott the court proceedings across the country on Thursday. The bill is aimed at curbing the CJP's suo moto powers in an individual capacity. The SC bill was initially passed by the Senate amid PTI's opposition on March 30 and sent to the president for his assent. The bill was moved in the Senate after it was approved by the National Assembly a day earlier. The president, however, returned the SC bill for reconsideration to parliament as per the provisions of the Article 75 of the Constitution, stating that the bill prima-facie travels beyond the competence of the parliament and can be assailed as colourable legislation. On April 9, the coalition government got the bill passed by a joint sitting of parliament. Subsequently, three separate petitions were filed by Raja Amer Khan, Chaudhry Ghulam Hussain and Mohammad Shafay Munir, among others, under Article 184(3) of the Constitution, asking the top court to set aside the bill.

Ruling alliance...

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Minutes after the statement was released, Law Minister Azam Nazeer Tarar addressed a press conference along with ruling alliance leaders Qamar Zaman Kaira and Amin-ul-Haq and other members of the coalition parties. Tarar reiterated that bill can be challenged by the citizens once its legislation, adding that the entire situation is "alarming" as the petitions against the "pre-mature" bill are being heard by a "selective bench". He said that the bench does not comprise two senior-most judges and those placed on number five, seven, and eight according to the list of seniority are not part of the bench. The bench is constituted on a "pick and choose" basis, the law minister said, adding that there is a conflict of interest as the bill was passed against the CJP and he himself was leading the bench.

Iran's embassy...

FROM PAGE 01
"In accordance with the implementation of the agreement between Iran and Saudi Arabia on the resumption of diplomatic activities... the Iranian technical delegation arrived in Riyadh at midday Wednesday and was welcomed by Saudi officials," Iran's Foreign Ministry spokesman Nasser Kanani said. "The Iranian delegation will take the necessary steps to reopen the embassy in Riyadh and the consulate general in Jeddah as well as the activities of Iran's permanent representative in the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation." Both countries' foreign ministers met in Beijing this month for the first formal gathering of their top diplomats. A Saudi technical delegation met Iran's chief of protocol in Tehran last week, and is due to fly on to Iran's second city Mashhad on Thursday. As the contacts grow, Saudi Arabia is also negotiating with the Iran-backed Houthi militia in Yemen to bring about an end to the nine-year conflict there. Saudi ambassador Mohammed Al-Jaber is in Sanaa, Yemen's Houthi-held capital, hoping to stabilize an existing ceasefire and work toward a comprehensive political solution between the Houthis and Yemen's legitimate government. In the first fruits of those talks, a three-day operation to exchange about 900 prisoners is expected to begin on Friday.

Full-strength Pak to bring 'A game' against New Zealand

Pakistan, runners-up to England in last year's Twenty20 World Cup in Australia, welcome back skipper Babar Azam and key players M. Rizwan, Fakhar Zaman, Shaheen Shah Afridi and Haris Rauf. They were rested for the recent losing series against Afghanistan

DNA

LAHORE: A full-strength Pakistan take on a New Zealand side depleted by the Indian Premier League when their five-match T20 series gets under way in Lahore from Friday. Eight Kiwis are missing because of the IPL and skipper Kane Williamson has a bad knee injury, leaving the captaincy to batsman Tom Latham — and providing plenty of opportunity for newcomers to shine.

While Pakistan's top cricketers featured in the inaugural edition of the multibillion-dollar IPL in 2008, they have been barred since — mirroring the frosty diplomatic relations between the neighbours.

Pakistan and New Zealand will also meet in five one-day internationals after the T20 series, honing preparations for this year's 50-over World Cup in India. Pakistan, runners-up to England in last year's Twenty20 World Cup in Australia, welcome back skipper Babar Azam and key players Mohammad Rizwan, Fakhar Zaman, Shaheen Shah Afridi and Haris Rauf. They were rested for the recent losing series against Afghanistan. Shaheen's return will be his first international match since injuring his knee in the World Cup final. Pakistan boast a new backroom team with former New Zealand all-rounder Grant Bradburn taking head coach duties for the 10 matches from Abdur Rehman.

New sensation Ihsanullah, who goes by only one name and bowls at a ferocious 150 kilometres (90 miles) an hour, kept his place despite the disastrous loss against Afghanistan, along with opener Saim Ayub and pacer Zaman Khan. "We have a good squad that marries the exuberance of youth and the experience of senior cricketers," skipper Azam said Thursday, adding they would not take a weakened Black Caps side lightly. "International cricket demands full commitment and that's what we are focused on," he said. "We are going to bring our 'A' game and keep ourselves focused for good results." New Zealand's interim coach Shane Jurgensen is in confident

mood despite missing so many players. "It will be a quick turnaround from the fantastic series win against Sri Lanka," said Jurgensen of New Zealand's 2-1 T20 victory. Former spin-king Saqlain Mushtaq will be Jurgensen's assistant — just two months after completing his stint as Pakistan's head coach. "It will be a challenging series," Jurgensen said. "Obviously Pakistan are a fantastic team to play in the white-ball format, so it's a good opportunity to challenge them." The tour comes as something of compensation for New Zealand pulling out of their visit to Pakistan on the day of the first game in September 2021, citing security concerns. The Black Caps played two Tests and three ODIs in Pakistan just

three months ago. The remaining four T20 matches are on April 15 and 17 in Lahore, and 20 and 24 in Rawalpindi. Teams (from): Pakistan: Babar Azam (captain), Shadab Khan, Faheem Ashraf, Fakhar Zaman, Haris Rauf, Iftikhar Ahmed, Ihsanullah, Imad Wasim, Mohammad Rizwan, Naseem Shah, Saim Ayub, Shaheen Shah Afridi, Shan Masood, Zaman Khan. New Zealand: Tom Latham (captain), Chad Bowes, Mark Chapman, Matt Henry, Ben Lister, Adam Milne, Daryl Mitchell, Jimmy Neesham, Rachin Ravindra, Henry Shiple, Ish Sodhi, Will Young, Dane Cleaver, Cole McCool, Blair Tuckner.

Asif warns of striking...

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"If that is not done, as some point we'll have to [...] resort to some measures, which will definitely — wherever [terrorists] are, their sanctuaries on Afghan soil — we'll have to hit them," he said. "We'll have to hit them because we cannot tolerate this situation for long." Asif went on to say that the Afghans responded to this "really well". "They responded well, really well. Perhaps for them to disentangle the TTP from this stage — of course they want to disentangle, this is my impression [that] they want to disentangle — but this disentanglement, perhaps, will take time. "But they are doing well and we wish them well and we don't want to get into a situation where this situation with the [TTP] escalates and we do something that is not to the liking of our neighbours and brothers in Kabul."

3 terrorists killed in...

FROM PAGE 01

forces were held inserted," read the statement. While the establishment of blocking positions to cut the escape routes was underway, the terrorists opened fire on the security forces, said the ISPR. Three terrorists were killed during the heavy exchange of fire, the military's media wing said, adding that a cache of arms and ammunition including IEDs were recovered from their possession.

PTI developing...

FROM PAGE 01

"It's not just Pakistan. Once you start borrowing in dollars and you have to service your debt in dollars," Imran said. He raised the question of how the country is going to pay its debts if the country's dollar income doesn't improve or increase. "Unless we increase our dollar earnings to exports, I don't see how we would be able to service any debts in Pakistan — whether it's Chinese or Paris Club or commercial debts."

PM all praise for...

FROM PAGE 01

successful visit to UAE in January this year, the Prime Minister emphasised that it was the common resolve of the leadership of both countries to translate the fraternal bonds into mutually rewarding economic ties. Prime Minister also stated that the UAE is home to 1.7 million Pakistanis, contributing to the progress, prosperity and economic development of the two brotherly countries.

PM for boosting...

FROM PAGE 01

emphasized the need for enhancing people-to-people contacts, including cultural and educational exchanges, to promote mutual understanding and cooperation between the two nations. Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif lauded the Iranian leadership's efforts in promoting peace and stability in the region and congratulated President Ebrahim Raisi on the historic development of resumption of diplomatic relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia. The Prime Minister called for an immediate end to Israel's human rights violations in the occupied territory and stressed the need for a just and lasting solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, based on the two-state solution, in accordance with the relevant United Nations resolutions and international law.

Russian team in...

FROM PAGE 01

teams of the Operational Services Centre (OSC) — a Russian state-owned entity — held talks for two days on March 21-22 with the PSO team, which ended without progress on the constitution of Special Purpose Vehicle (SPV) responsible not only for importing the crude but also for the payments. "The Russian delegation is here now to finalise the government-to-government agreement, including the mode of payment. Russia is currently asking for payment in China's Yuan or Ruble, but Pak wants to pay in rupee," the official.

Dominant Madrid earn solid lead on Chelsea



MADRID: Karim Benzema and Marco Asensio struck for Real Madrid as they dominated 10-man Chelsea and opened up a 2-0 Champions League quarter-final first leg lead on Wednesday. The record 14-time winners and reigning champions eased to a com-

fortable win against Frank Lampard's side, who had Ben Chilwell sent off in the second half for pulling down Rodrigo Goes as he ran through on goal. Benzema netted from close range after 21 minutes after Kepa Arrizabalaga tipped a Vinicius Junior

effort into his path. Despite controlling the game, Madrid had to wait until the 74th minute for their second, with Asensio drilling home from the edge of the box after a short corner routine. In a battle between the last two Champions League winners, Madrid demonstrated their strength with an impressive display, while Chelsea showed why they are struggling in 11th in the Premier League. "We are satisfied with the result, for the performance but it's not over yet, we have to fight, to sacrifice for another 90 minutes at Stamford Bridge," said Real Madrid coach Carlo Ancelotti. "We are satisfied only for tonight, it's not over yet. We know Chelsea will try to (give) everything next week."

Ancelotti, who coached Lampard at Chelsea between 2009-2011, relied on veteran midfielders Toni Kroos and Luka Modric to pull the strings.

Lampard, in his second game at the helm since replacing Graham Potter last week, threw Thiago Silva and N'Golo Kante straight into the starting line-up after injury worries.

Kante shone against Madrid in the 2021 semi as Chelsea beat them en route to winning the trophy for the second time, and his performance was one positive for Lampard.

The French midfielder slipped on-loan Atletico striker Joao Felix through at the start, but he fired at former Chelsea stopper Thibaut Courtois.

Madrid fans had shown their support for Fede Valverde before the game, after he allegedly punched Villarreal's Alex Baena on Saturday, and he nearly rewarded them with a piledriver which flew narrowly off-target. "For me he was the best player on the pitch, he put in a lot of energy," said Ancelotti. — Agencies

'Don't focus on Wimbledon U-turn'

MONTE CARLO: The war in Ukraine and the plight of its tennis players must be at the forefront of discussions at Wimbledon, not the Grand Slam's decision to reverse its ban on Russian and Belarusian players, former world number one Andy Murray said. Wimbledon was the only Grand Slam to ban competitors from Russia and its ally Belarus in 2022 after the invasion, which Moscow calls a "special operation", but has said they could return as neutrals this year. "What's really important is to continue to talk about what's happening in Ukraine now, not focusing on a few tennis players and a few athletes who may or may not be able to play major sporting events," Murray told the Tennis Majors website. "It's a difficult decision for Wimbledon. The rest of sport had gone in a completely different direction to them, which made it hard. But I don't think this should be so much about that. "It's distracting a little bit from actually what's taking place. You don't want that to happen. You want the actual issue to be at the forefront of all of these discussions." Several Ukrainian players have spoken about how difficult it is to continue competing while their country is at war. "I've seen some of the female players have spoken out about how difficult they found it and maybe felt like they could have had more support through that," Murray said. — Agencies

Mbappe sees future at PSG and targets Olympic 'dream'

A World Cup winner with France in 2018 and runner-up last year, Mbappe said it was his "dream" to represent his country at Paris Olympics

PARIS: Kylian Mbappe has said he will still be a Paris Saint-Germain player next season despite regular speculation over his future, as the France superstar also admitted he hopes to play for his country at the 2024 Paris Olympics. Asked where he saw himself playing next season in an interview with television channel France 3 on Wednesday evening, Mbappe responded: "At Paris Saint-Germain. I am Parisian, I have a contract and so it's Paris Saint-Germain." Mbappe signed a new contract with PSG at the end of last season to keep him at the Qatar-owned club until 2025, although French media reports have indicated that the last year of that deal is optional and down to the player. That would raise the possibility of the 24-year-old being able to leave for free at the end of next season. Mbappe's comments came a week after he complained over the club's use of an interview with him as part of their season-ticket advertising campaign, before the club removed the footage. He joined PSG in 2017 from Monaco and still hopes to win the Champions League with his home city club. "I have already got to one final and a semi-final. I have been to the quarter-finals, the last 16. I have done everything but win it," he said. "That is all I am lacking. I hope it will come as soon as possible." A World Cup winner with France in 2018 and runner-up last year, Mbappe said it was his "dream" to represent his country at the Paris Olympics. "I hope to be there. Everyone knows I have always dreamed of playing at the Olympic Games but it doesn't depend on me," he admitted. Clubs are not usually obliged to release players to compete at the Olympics as it is not part of the FIFA international match calendar. Mbappe added: "I won't force it because if people don't want me to play at the Olympics that means I must not." "The truth is that it is not part of the FIFA calendar. I have to think about my club, and my national team too because there is the Euro just before it, so it needs to be discussed. "All these things need to be considered but of course it would be a dream to play at the Olympics, all the more so in Paris." — APP

Bennacer gives Milan first blood in UCL

MILAN: AC Milan have the slenderest of advantages in their all-Italian Champions League quarter-final after Ismael Bennacer fired his team to a 1-0 win over wasteful Napoli on Wednesday. Algeria midfielder Bennacer lashed in the decisive strike five minutes before half-time of an engaging first leg at a packed, loud and wet San Siro after Ibrahim Diaz and Rafael Leao combined brilliantly. The 25-year-old's second goal of the season ensured Milan's second win over Italy's champions-elect Napoli in less than a fortnight and a narrow lead to defend at the Stadio Maradona in Naples next week. "It will be a great return leg with a lot of tension and emotion," said Milan coach Stefano Pioli to Amazon Prime. "We performed at a level worthy of the Champions League...

we'll go to Naples with confidence and concentration high, we know how difficult it will be down there." Napoli, who had Andre-Frank Zambo Anguissa sent off in the 74th minute and will be without Kim Min-jae for the second leg, should have Victor Osimhen back for the second leg on Tuesday and without their star striker Luciano Spalletti's team got nothing despite having plenty of chances. Milan goalkeeper Mike Maignan made a series of impressive stops, in particular late on when he clawed out Giovanni Di Lorenzo's effort just as the more than 70,000 home fans were celebrating victory.

But Bennacer's strike was just enough to give Milan hopes of their first Champions League semi-final since they were crowned kings of Europe for the seventh and most recent time in 2007.

That prospect will be all the more mouth-watering for Milan fans as their likely opponents would be local rivals Inter following their convincing win at Benfica



on Tuesday. "It's a defeat, but with the attitude we showed today we're confident," said Napoli captain Di Lorenzo to Amazon Prime. "It's not easy to come here without a cen-

tre-forward but we created chances." The home fans had barely discarded their pre-match display which read "our destiny is in our hands" when Khvicha Kvar-

atskhelia wasted a great chance to give Napoli a stunning early lead. Anguissa's low cross was dealt with terribly by the home defence but the home fans breathed a huge sigh of

relief after Davide Calabria and Rade Krunic combined to block the Georgian winger's shot on the line.

Anguissa then had a powerful shot tipped over the bar by Maignan before Di Lorenzo headed a presentable Mario Rui cross over the bar as Napoli flooded towards the Milan goal in the opening minutes. Kvaratskhelia had a shot blocked after neat exchange with Eljif Elmas and Piotr Zielinski forced Maignan into another good stop with a rocket in the 12th minute. Milan had barely been in the game up to that point but midway through he first half Leao reminded everyone he was there by fashioning a glorious chance through pure pace only to drop his shot just wide after bursting past Anguissa and Stanislaw Lobotka. And then Bennacer put the hosts into the lead after an-

other brilliant piece of individual skill, this time from Ibrahim Diaz. The Spanish international span beautifully in the midfield and fed Leao, whose first-time pass alluded Diaz and found Bennacer for a thumping near-post finish. Simon Kjær then smashed Bennacer's corner off the bar in stoppage time with a header which for a moment had fans celebrating before the ball bounced out just before the line. Napoli began the second half in the same manner in which they started the first but again couldn't find their way past Maignan, who did brilliantly to tip Elmas' looping header over the bar. And after Kim Min-jae headed straight at Maignan from the subsequent corner Napoli struggled hard to go into damage limitation mode once Anguissa was sent off for two quick-fire bookings. — Agencies

Briefs

German imports from Russia down over 90%

BERLIN: Germany's imports from Russia fell by more than 90% in the first year of Moscow's war in Ukraine, largely as a result of the collapse of Russian energy deliveries to Europe's biggest economy, official figures showed Thursday. The Federal Statistical Office said Germany imported goods worth 300 million euros (\$329 million) in February, down from 3.7 billion euros a year earlier. That was a 91% fall, and dropped Russia from the 11th-biggest source of imports to 46th place. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on Feb. 24, 2022 triggered several rounds of Western sanctions.

Its relations with the West chilled even in areas that weren't directly subject to sanctions, such as natural gas. Moscow, which once supplied more than half of Germany's gas, reduced and then stopped gas deliveries to the country last summer. The statistics office said imports of Russian oil and gas were down 99.8% in the year to February, falling to 4.2 million euros from 2.2 billion euros. Germany's overall imports of oil and gas this February totaled 6 billion euros.—DNA

'Supporting Ukraine is collective effort'

WASHINGTON: US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen said Wednesday that supporting Ukraine during Russia's war is "a collective effort." "We welcome the efforts by our allies and partners to provide significant, predictable and timely assistance and urge all of us to continue doing so," Yellen said in remarks at the Third Ukraine Ministerial Roundtable which were published on the Treasury Department's website.

"The United States is proud to have provided significant budget support since Russia's invasion. We have current plans to provide additional aid through September—all as grants—as well as to provide support for energy security and early recovery," she added. Yellen said the new International Monetary Fund (IMF) program will anchor the US's support in a macroeconomic framework and catalyze further reforms essential to Ukraine's recovery. The IMF last month approved a \$15.6 billion loan program for Ukraine amid the ongoing war with Russia.—Agencies

Expelled Tennessee state lawmaker reinstated

NEW YORK: Tennessee state lawmaker Justin Pearson, one of two Black Democratic representatives who were expelled from the Republican-controlled House of Representatives for supporting gun control protesters, was reinstated Wednesday. County officials unanimously voted to return Justin Pearson to the House.

"The message for all the people in Nashville who decided to expel us: You can't expel hope," he said after the vote. "You can't expel justice. You can't expel our voice." The Tennessee House of Representatives expelled Pearson and Justin Jones last week after they participated in a gun control protest on the House floor following a shooting at a school in Nashville that left six people dead, including three children. Jones was similarly voted back to the Tennessee House of Representatives on Monday. A third lawmaker, Gloria Johnson, who is white, took part in the protest but was not expelled. The expulsions of the Black lawmakers were criticized by Democrats and Black leaders around the country. President Joe Biden called it "shocking and undemocratic," while former President Barack Obama wrote on Twitter that it was a "sign of weakness."—Agencies



SAMARKAND: Ministerial Meeting of the neighboring countries of Afghanistan began under the chairmanship of the Uzbekistan. Delegations from Uzbekistan, China, Iran, Pakistan, Russia, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan are attending the meeting.—DNA

'End violence immediately'

ASEAN decries Myanmar airstrikes on civilians

NEWS DESK

JAKARTA: Strongly condemning the airstrikes on civilians by the military junta, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Thursday demanded an immediate end to "all forms of violence" in Myanmar. The regional multi-national bloc said: "All forms of violence must end immediately, particularly the use of force against civilians." Indonesia is the current chair of the 10-member bloc. Dozens of people were killed in the latest junta airstrikes in Myanmar on Tuesday, the unity government in exile claimed. "About 100 people of Kanbalu in Sagaing, including children and women, were killed by Myanmar military junta's airstrikes," the Labor Ministry of the National

Unity Government (NUG) said on Twitter.

The airstrikes by junta jets which targeted the inauguration ceremony of a People's Administration Team office in the village of Pa Zi Gyi caused condemnation and criticism by the UN, US, and Switzerland, among others. A statement by ASEAN said ending the violence "would be the only way to create a conducive environment for an inclusive national dialogue to find a sustainable peaceful solution in Myanmar." "We reiterate ASEAN's commitment to continue assisting Myanmar in seeking a workable and durable solution to the ongoing crisis through promoting the full implementation of the Five-Point Consensus," the statement added. Interestingly, Myanmar's Permanent Rep-

resentative to the ASEAN Aung Myo Myint met with the bloc's Secretary-General Kao Kim Hourn on Thursday in Jakarta. Aung and Kao discussed and exchanged views on the "implementation of ASEAN's Five-Point Consensus and the recent developments in Myanmar," the bloc said on Twitter, without providing further details. Extending support to the ASEAN statement, Singapore's Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan said: "Any attack on civilians is reprehensible and cannot be condoned." "Singapore is gravely concerned by these attacks. We reiterate our commitment to work with Indonesia, other ASEAN Member States, and our external partners to facilitate a peaceful resolution of the crisis in Myanmar, in line with the Five-Point Consensus," Balakrishnan tweeted.

The People's Administration Team office operates under the NUG which the country's military junta has designated a terrorist organization. Myanmar has been in turmoil since the military overthrew Aung San Suu Kyi's government over two years ago. The NUG was formed after the Burmese military, locally known as Tatmadaw, ousted the government led by the National League for Democracy (NLD) in February 2021. The Myanmar junta also disbanded the NLD after it said the deadline for political parties to re-register under a new electoral law expired. The NLD and 40 others parties on Tuesday failed to comply with the new law. ASEAN is a political and economic union of 10 member states, includ-

ing Myanmar, in Southeast Asia. It promotes intergovernmental cooperation and facilitates economic, political, and sociocultural integration among its members in Asia-Pacific. Soon after the February 2021 coup launched by Myanmar's military, ASEAN issued the Five-Point Consensus plan, also called the 5PCs, when Brunei was at the helm of the regional grouping. The military takeover triggered mass protests in Myanmar, with the junta's forces killing more than 1,500 people in a crackdown on dissent, according to the local monitoring group Assistance Association for Political Prisoners. While the protests have recently decreased, ASEAN's 5PCs called on all parties in Buddhist-majority Myanmar to cease violence in the country and "exercise

utmost restraint." Urging a "constructive dialogue among all parties," the regional bloc said that doing so would involve seeking "a peaceful solution in the interests of the people." It also appointed a special envoy of the ASEAN chair to facilitate mediation of the dialogue process. The envoy would be assisted by the bloc's secretary-general. Under the 5PCs, ASEAN also provides humanitarian assistance, through its Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on Disaster Management, to Myanmar, while the special envoy was assigned to undertake visits to Myanmar to "meet with all parties concerned." ASEAN has held several summits and meetings since the latest military coup in Myanmar but has stopped inviting junta representatives.

'Joining NATO won't solve all our problems'

COPENHAGEN, Denmark (AP) — Finland's President Sauli Niinistö on Thursday warned that the country's new status as a NATO member "doesn't solve every problem," and said Helsinki should not let down its guard on security issues.

"We still bear the main responsibility for our own security. Wherever we detect any gaps or vulnerabilities, they must be fixed," Niinistö said, in a speech to lawmakers as they gathered for the first time since the April 2 elections.

He added that Finland, which shares a 1,340 kilometer (832 mile) border with Russia, has been focused on regional security in the past year, after the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

"We must not let this level of alertness drop in the future, either," the president said as he formally opened the 200-member Eduskunta legislature. "We should better understand how organically the dangers and tensions we are witnessing here are linked with the increasing geopolitical pressures."

Finland's main conservative party came first in this month's elections, after a tight three-way race that saw right-wing populists take second place. Sanna Marin, the head of the Social Democrats that came in third, stepped down as prime minister as her hopes for reelection were dashed. No new government has been formed.—DNA

US to Mali: End restrictions on peacekeepers

NEW YORK: The United States warned Mali's military government Wednesday that it would be "irresponsible" for the United Nations to continue deploying its more than 15,000 peacekeepers unless the western African nation ends restrictions including on operating reconnaissance drones and carries out political commitments toward peace and elections in March 2024.

The warning came as the U.N. Security Council considers three options proposed by Secretary-General Antonio Guterres for the peacekeeping mission's future: increase its size, reduce its footprint, or withdraw troops and police and turn it into a political mission. Its current mandate expires on June 30.

U.S. Deputy Ambassador Jeffrey DeLaurentis told the council that "it is unacceptable" that Malian authorities denied nearly 300 flight requests from January through March — about 80% of them for intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance drones. The denials were seen as threatening the safety of peacekeepers and their ability to protect civilians. The United States is also "greatly concerned" that the government expelled the peacekeeping mission's human rights chief and didn't issue sanctions for U.N. experts monitoring sanctions against Mali.—Agencies

Two EU graft scandal suspects leave prison

BRUSSELS: Two key suspects in the probe into alleged bribery by Qatar and Morocco at the European Parliament left prison in Brussels on Thursday for house arrest. Belgian MEP Marc Tarabella and Italian former EU lawmaker Pier Antonio Panzeri were released with electronic bracelets to their residences in Belgium. The move means that a Greek legislator in the parliament, Eva Kaili, remains the only suspect still in jail. She is expected to move to home detention in the coming days, also with an electronic bracelet. The so-called Qatargate inquiry focuses on alleged attempts by the Gulf state and North African kingdom Morocco to buy influence in the parliament, the European Union's directly elected assembly. Both countries deny any involvement, as do Kaili and Tarabella Panzeri, who struck a plea deal with prosecutors to spill the beans on the people and countries involved, clutched two bags as he climbed into a waiting car outside the Saint Gilles prison.—DNA

Europe capable of defending itself without China's help

Keeping nuclear power plants safe, facilitating grain exports and stopping unilateral sanctions were also listed in the plan, which noted that dialogue and negotiation are "the only viable solution to the Ukraine crisis"

ILNIUS: Lithuania's foreign minister said Wednesday that Europe does not need China's help to defend itself, criticizing the continent's foreign policy.

"Instead of requesting assistance, we should be projecting our strengths, showing the world that Ukraine, Europe and the US are willing and able to secure the European continent," Gabrielius Landsbergis wrote on Twitter. "That is the only signal we should be sending," he said, adding that Europe's "geopolitical blindness" has not yet been cured. "For years, the West said economic cooperation would persuade dictators to support (a) rules-based international order. But all we did was feed their economies

while letting them break all the rules. China is betting that we will repeat this mistake. It's time to try something else," he said. "We bought energy, we transferred technology, we invested in totalitarian regimes. We enabled them to grow. Not for the practical benefits, but due to the messianic delusion that the spread of Western influence is inevitable and can only bring change for good." Claiming the West's entanglement made it "strategically blind," Landsbergis said they ignored the threats made not only to countries bordering Russia but also to Western society itself. Alongside a weak foreign policy, Western countries also weakened internally and "corruption,

weaponized radicalization and interference in elections became the norm," he said. "We asked Russia not to invade Ukraine. We asked Russia not to invade Georgia. We made phone calls. The result was a tragically predictable disaster. Our strategy clearly failed with (Russian President Vladimir) Putin." Landsbergis said that now asking for China's help to secure peace in Europe "would be a mistake bigger than Nord Stream," referring to the Russian-built Nord Stream gas pipelines on the bed of the Baltic Sea, which were ruptured in explosions last year. He said that Europe should show the world that Ukraine, Europe and the US are willing and able to secure the

continent. "There is no substitute for transatlantic unity, so we must protect and defend it, not dismantle it," he added. In February, the Chinese Foreign Ministry released a 12-point statement listing Beijing's position on a political settlement to the war in Ukraine. It called for respecting the sovereignty of all countries, ceasing hostilities, resuming peace talks and resolving the humanitarian crisis in the region. Keeping nuclear power plants safe, facilitating grain exports and stopping unilateral sanctions were also listed in the plan, which noted that dialogue and negotiation are "the only viable solution to the Ukraine crisis."—Agencies

Norway expels 15 Russian diplomats

COPENHAGEN: Norway's government said Thursday that it was expelling 15 Russian diplomats from the country, saying they were suspected of spying while working at the Russian Embassy in Oslo. Foreign Minister Anniken Huitfeldt said the move was "an important measure to counter and reduce the scope of Russian intelligence activities in Norway, and thereby secure our national interests." The Russians declared persona non grata "must leave Norway within a short time," Huitfeldt said, adding: "We will not grant visas to intelligence officers who apply for a visa to Norway." The minister declined to say whether the government was acting in response to a specific incident, referring questions to Norway's domestic security agency PST for details. The government said the activities of the expelled diplomats were "incompatible with their diplomatic status." "We are not talking about regular diplomats, but intelligence officers under diplomatic cover. Their activities are a threat to Norwegian interests," Huitfeldt said. Norwegian newspaper VG described Thursday's expulsions as the most the Scandinavian country has ordered at one time involving Russian diplomats. The Russian Foreign Ministry said Moscow would respond in kind, Russia's Tass and RIA Novosti news agencies reported. In a text message to VG, Russian Embassy spokesman Timur Chekanov called the Norwegian government's decision "another extremely unfriendly step." Huitfeldt reacted during an afternoon news conference, saying: "Russia has no reason to respond. We have Norwegian diplomats stationed in Russia, but none of them are undercover intelligence officers." She called Russia "an unpredictable neighbor" and "many European countries in the past year have expelled hundreds of Russian intelligence officers under diplomatic cover." At the same time, she stressed that the government in Oslo wants "normal diplomatic relations with Russia, and that Russian diplomats are welcome in Norway."—APP

Turkish elections will send firm message to West: Erdogan

"The West has plans regarding Türkiye. You are currently viewing the situation of (French President Emmanuel) Macron. What is behind the scenes of Macron's trip to China? What is the situation in its (France's) relations with America? Why did Macron go to China?" Erdogan asked.

NEWS DESK

ANKARA: The fight against "hitmen of global imperialists" was among the highlights of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's election manifesto speech earlier this week, and the president Wednesday further elaborated on the importance of the elections for the West. "Türkiye will send a message to the West" through the country's upcoming presidential and parliamentary elections, which not only the West but also the Islamic world is closely following, Erdogan said in a televised interview. "The West has plans regarding Türkiye. You are currently viewing the situation of (French President Emmanuel) Ma-

terrorism nor in determining its economic policies," he added. Under Erdoan's leadership, Türkiye made strides in improving ties with the West, especially Europe, whose European Union has long remained an ambition for the country. Yet, Western countries' changing attitudes toward his government frustrated Erdogan, who has been vocal in his criticism of particularly the support for groups recognized as ter-

rorists by Türkiye. Most recently, he fiercely criticized the United States for its open support of the PKK terrorist group's Syrian wing, the YPG, in Syria's northeast, under the guise of "fighting Daesh." Türkiye's ties with Western countries are also somewhat strained as the country seeks to cut off its dependence abroad on the defense industry to ensure its security, particularly against terror threats. An F-16 sale deal with the United States still lags while the country strives to boost its arsenal with domestic products. Erdogan said during the interview that the projects in the local defense industry will continue. Speaking about the TCG Anadolu, Türkiye's largest

warship and the world's first unmanned combat aerial vehicle (UCAV) carrier, he said it has enabled Türkiye to propel to "a very different place" in the world standard. "We are taking another step. We are now having talks. We will build a bigger one than this," he added. The warship was delivered to the country's navy on Monday. Built at Istanbul-based Sedef shipyard, the ship can carry helicopters, drones, land vehicles, light aircraft and personnel. Turkish Bayraktar TB3 UCAVs, K z lelma drones and Hurjet light attack aircraft can land on and take off from the ship. With a length of 231 meters (758 feet) and a width of 32 meters, the full load displacement equals some 27,000 tons.



Briefs

Ex-AJK PM's plea to stay verdict rejected

DNA

MUZAFFARABAD: The Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK) Supreme Court rejected former prime minister and Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf leader Sardar Tanveer Ilyas' plea to stay the implementation of the AJK High Court's order to disqualify him in a contempt of court case. The AJK top court will continue to hear Ilyas' petition challenging the high court's verdict. A full bench, headed by AJK Supreme Court Chief Justice Raja Saad Akram, and comprising Justice Raza Ali Khan and Justice Khawaja Muhammad Nasim, heard the case. In a major blow to the PTI, the AJK High Court had removed Ilyas from the post of prime minister on Tuesday, making him the region's first premier to be disqualified in a contempt of court case. Following the disqualification, the politician moved AJK's top court against the high court's decision. The deposed prime minister filed a miscellaneous plea today in which he asked the court to stay the implementation of the AJK High Court's order to disqualify him. During the hearing, the AJK chief justice remarked that "the former prime minister did not apologise. He [only] said he apologises if there was any contempt of court."

Gold rates slide further as rupee recovers

DNA

KARACHI: Gold prices continued to fall from historic highs reached earlier this week as the rupee, which had also plunged to record lows, recovered on Thursday. According to the data released by All Pakistan Sarafa Gems and Jewellers Association (APSGJA), the price of gold (24 carats) declined by Rs500 per tola and Rs429 per 10 grams to reach Rs217,500 and Rs186,471, respectively. The fall in the precious metal's value was in line with the rupee's upward movement, with the local currency appreciating Rs1.71 or 0.6% to settle at Rs284.91 per US dollar in the interbank market. The yellow metal had reached an all-time high in Pakistan on Tuesday, with the price of gold (24 carats) jumping to Rs218,300 per tola as the rupee plunged and inflation remained at record levels. People prefer to buy gold as a hedge against inflation. Its value also usually goes up in Ramadan due to increased demand. Weekly inflation jumped 0.92% week-on-week and 44.49% year-on-year during the seven-day period that ended April 6, as prices of sugar and chicken surged on account of Ramadan and likely hoarding.

Tunisia recovers more migrant bodies

TUNIS: Tunisia has recovered 14 bodies of migrants from sub-Saharan Africa in the Mediterranean, bringing to 24 the number of dead after their boat headed for Europe sank. The coastguard said on Thursday that 14 more bodies of migrants were discovered, including six women, during search operations, as well as the body of the boat's Tunisian captain. It also announced on Wednesday that it had recovered 10 bodies of sub-Saharan African migrants after the shipwreck the day before off the coastal city of Sfax. Faouzi Masmoudi, the spokesman for the court of Sfax which is investigating the tragedy, said that the 15 bodies had been trapped under the boat. The spokesman for the National Guard also announced Thursday that 41 Tunisian migrants and asylum seekers, including five women and nine children, had been "rescued" off the coast of Sousse. - APP

Latest leak suggests US spying on UN chief

US document says UN secretary general accommodated Russia during Black Sea grain deal negotiations, according to a news report

DNA

WASHINGTON: Leaked Pentagon files indicate the United States was monitoring UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres because it believed he was too soft on Russia after its invasion of Ukraine. The documents appear to reveal private communications between Guterres and his deputy that focused on a Black Sea grain export deal, which, according to the leaked papers, the UN chief was eager to preserve and willing to accommodate Russian interests to make happen. "Guterres emphasised his efforts to improve Russia's ability to export, even if that meant working with sanctioned Russian entities or individuals," the leaked US doc-

ument said, according to a report. Ukraine and Russia signed the export deal in July. They committed to allowing the export of grain, fertiliser and other farm goods across the Black Sea while they are at war. Guterres and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan mediated the talks, which they said would help ease a global food crisis. During discussions in February, Guterres was "undermining broader efforts to hold Moscow accountable for its actions in Ukraine", the leaked document alleged. Another US document from mid-February said Guterres expressed "dismay" after a call with Ursula von der Leyen, president of the European Commission, in which she said the European Union intended to increase its production of weapons and am-

munition for Ukraine. The United Nations declined to comment on the documents, but a senior UN official told the BBC its primary concern was "to mitigate the impact of the [Ukraine] war on the world's poorest". "That means doing what we can to drive down the price of food and to ensure that fertiliser is accessible to those countries that need it the most," the official was quoted as saying. The grain deal must be periodically renewed, and on Wednesday, Russia warned that the prospects for extending the grain deal beyond May 18 was not promising because of obstacles that Moscow faces over its own exports. The Pentagon leaks have been the subject of a media and political furor in recent days and have sparked a national

security investigation in the US. The information provided in the leaks, which have not yet been verified, reveals highly sensitive information regarding the war in Ukraine and indicates the US has been spying on its allies. US officials have warned at least some of the documents appear to be doctored. The person who leaked the classified documents is a gun enthusiast in his 20s who worked on a military base, The Washington Post reported on Wednesday, citing his fellow members in an online chat group. Hundreds of pages of material had been posted there by a man who said he worked on a US military base and brought the documents home with him, two members of the group on the online social platform Discord told the Post.

Qatar and Bahrain to resume diplomatic ties

DNA

CAIRO: Qatar and Bahrain will resume their diplomatic ties, both Bahrain news agency (BNA) and the Qatari foreign ministry said. The move comes over two years after an Arab boycott of Qatar was lifted. Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Egypt in January 2021 ended a 3-1/2-year embargo of Qatar but all but Bahrain restored travel and trade links in 2021. On Wednesday, the Bahraini-Qatari Follow-up Committee held its second meeting at the headquarters of the GCC General Secretariat in the Saudi capital where the decision was made, the two countries said in separate statements. In January, Bahrain's crown prince spoke with Qatar's emir by telephone, in a sign the two Gulf states were moving toward repairing relations.



ISLAMABAD: Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif in a meeting with PPP Chairman Bilawal Bhutto Zardari and Co Chairman Asif Ali Zardari. -DNA

Saudi Arabia, Syria discuss solutions to crises

WEB DESK

RIYADH: Saudi Arabia and Syria have pledged to seek a political solution to the crises besetting the latter, according to a joint statement released after a meeting between the two countries' foreign ministers in Jeddah on Wednesday. Saudi's Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan and Syria's Foreign Minister Faisal Mekdad held discussions on Syria's unity, security, stability and territorial integrity. The ministers welcomed the start of procedures for resuming consular services and flights between the two countries, according to the statement. The two sides also agreed on the importance of resolving Syria's humanitarian challenges and creating a suitable environment for aid to reach all regions of the country. Among the issues discussed was finding ways to ensure the return of external and internal refugees to their homes.

SBP foreign reserves decline by \$170m

DNA

ISLAMABAD: Foreign exchange reserves held by the State Bank of Pakistan (SBP) fell by \$170 million in the week ending on April 7 owing to external debt repayments, data released by the central bank showed on Thursday. The SBP said in a statement that its reserves stand at \$4.03 billion, which is not enough to cover even a month's imports. Central bank data showed forex reserves held by commercial banks stand at \$5.5 billion while the country's total reserves are \$9.6 billion. Pakistan's \$350 billion economy continues to dwindle amid financial woes and the delay in an agreement with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) that would release much-needed funding crucial to avoid the risk of default. The government has been in talks with the Washington-based lender since end-January to resume the \$1.1 billion loan tranche that has been on hold since November, part of a \$6.5 billion Extended Fund Facility (EFF) agreed upon in 2019. The country is getting closer to securing the loan as Saudi Arabia has already committed \$2 billion in funds, while sources said the United Arab Emirates (UAE) is likely to assure the global lender that it will provide \$1 billion to Pakistan by this week.

W. Australia braces for category five storm

SYDNEY: A powerful storm that is charging towards Western Australia (WA) has intensified to a category five system. Severe Tropical Cyclone Ilsa is expected to hit Port Hedland, in the state's north, late on Thursday night. A red alert has been issued across the region, with thousands of people ordered to take immediate shelter. While northern Australia is no stranger to cyclones, this storm is predicted to be the strongest to hit the region in 14 years. The "very destructive core" of the storm will bring "extreme" wind gusts of up to 315km/h (195mph) in parts of the Kimberley and Pilbara regions, the Bureau of Meteorology (BOM) said. - DNA

Fears in Sudan as army and paramilitary force face off

WEB DESK

KHARTOUM: The Sudanese army says a paramilitary group headed by General Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo has mobilised its forces in the capital, Khartoum, and other cities, a move that raises the prospect of confrontation with the armed forces. The army said in a statement on Thursday that members of the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) were also moving into the northern city of Marawi in a "clear violation of law" that risked creating more tensions as Sudan goes through what it described as a "dangerous juncture". The RSF said in a statement on Twitter that it deploys across

the country as part of its duties and that its operations in Marawi were part of "national forces operating within the framework of the law and in full coordination with the leadership of the armed forces". The RSF, which operates under a special law and has its own chain of command, is a powerful former militia that has been accused of widespread human rights abuses, especially during the conflict in Sudan's Darfur region. Dagalo, also known as Hemedi, climbed Sudan's political ladder by serving under former leader Omar al-Bashir, under whom the forces were recognised in 2017. Al-Bashir was removed after a mass protest movement against him in 2019. Hemedi is now deputy leader of Sudan's

ruling council, which took power after a coup by the army and RSF in late 2021. However, he has recently pulled away from the military and found common ground with a civilian political alliance. Reporting from Khartoum, Al Jazeera's Hiba Morgan said tensions between the army and RSF have been rising for months over the integration of the RSF into the military. "The army wants the integration of the RSF into it within a two-year transitional period. The RSF wants to fall under civilian leadership," she said, adding that the army wants RSF forces and officers to be assessed before they are integrated. Morgan said political parties have warned against developments that could lead to political turmoil.

Ukraine wants Russia out of Crimea too

KYIV: Ukraine's foreign minister said Thursday his country won't budge from its demand that Russia withdraw its forces from Crimea, as well as from other parts of Ukraine that Moscow illegally annexed more recently, for the war to end. Calling the conflict in Ukraine "a bleeding wound in the middle of Europe," Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba said all his country's territory must be treated equally in dealing with the Kremlin after its full-scale invasion more than 13 months ago. "We are united by U.N. charter principles and the shared conviction that Crimea is Ukraine and it will return under Ukraine's control," Kuleba said, speaking by video link to a gathering in the Romanian capital, Bucharest. "Every time you hear anyone from any corner of the world saying that Crimea is somehow special and should not be returned to Ukraine, as any other part of our territory, you have to know one thing: Ukraine categorically disagrees with these statements," he said at the Black Sea Security Conference. Russia took over Crimea in 2014, and during the current war has expanded its presence there. Occasional acts of sabotage and other attacks against Russian military and other facilities on the peninsula have occurred since, with the Kremlin blaming Ukraine. The Kyiv government hasn't claimed responsibility for the attacks but welcomes efforts to repel the Russian presence there. The Kremlin wants Kyiv to acknowledge Russia's sovereignty over Crimea and also recognize September's annexation of the Ukrainian provinces of Donetsk, Kherson, Luhansk, and Zaporizhzhia. Ukraine has rejected those demands and won't hold talks with Russia until Moscow's troops pull back from all occupied territories. Though there is no sign of possible peace negotiations, the two countries have sporadically exchanged prisoners of war and have engaged in a wartime deal for the export of Ukrainian grain and Russian grain and fertilizers. - Agencies

Committee rejects bill seeking funds for polls

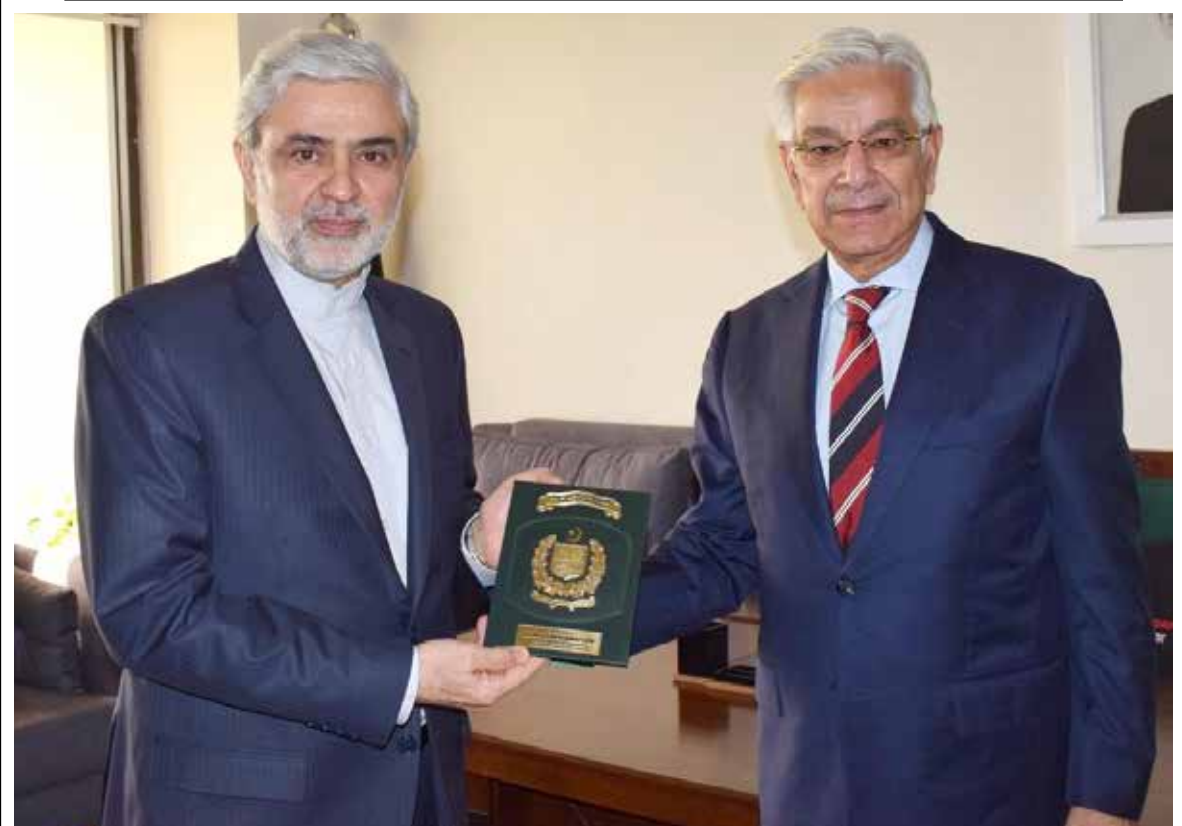
ISLAMABAD: The fate of the Supreme Court's deadline to hold elections in Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa became more uncertain on Thursday after the National Assembly's Standing Committee on Finance and Revenue rejected a bill seeking the release of \$21 billion to the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP). On April 4, the apex court had fixed May 14 as the date for the polls in Punjab and directed the federal government to release the election funds to the ECP by April 10 for elections

to both assemblies. The government, instead of disbursing the funds to the commission, had referred the matter to the Parliament, where Finance Minister Ishaq Dar on Monday tabled a bill titled "Charged Sum for General Election (Provincial Assemblies of Punjab & Khyber Pakhtunkhwa) Bill 2023". In a brief conversation after the NA committee meeting wrapped up today, panel chairman Qaiser Ahmed Sheikh, who is of the PML-N, said that the bill was rejected. "This bill [...] as it was not allocated

in our budget and the finance minister has said that funds are not available, there was no other option [so] we rejected it. "We do not have any other fund, right - the committee does not have funds of its own. The alerts that we have been given [...] the entire committee has collectively rejected the bill," he said. During meeting, committee chairman Qaiser Ahmed Sheikh raised an objection on why the bill was presented before the finance committee and not the budget committee. The committee then rejected the bill. The standing committee's rejection of the bill means it will return to the NA for lawmakers to ponder over, from whence it will be sent to the relevant committees again. - Agencies

N Korea missile launch sparks confusion in Japan

TOKYO: A missile launch by North Korea sparked confusion in northern Japan, where an evacuation order was issued and then retracted within 30 minutes. Sirens blared across Hokkaido and residents were told to "evacuate immediately" on Thursday morning. Authorities later said the missile did not land near the island and withdrew the alert. Tensions have been growing in the region, as North Korea has already fired 27 missiles this year. The projectile flew about 1,000 km (620 miles), in what South Korea's military called a "grave provocation". The missile is believed to be of medium or longer-range, but details on which weapon was tested on Thursday morning have not yet been made public. Meanwhile, Japanese coastguards said the missile had splashed into waters to the east of North Korea. Mr Hamada said he could not confirm whether the missile flew over Japan's exclusive economic zone. Schools in Hokkaido delayed their start times and some train services were suspended. Japanese broadcaster NHK reported, Japan's Foreign Minister Yoshimasa Hayashi said Pyongyang's repeated missile launches pose a "grave and imminent threat" to Japan's security. US National Security Council spokesperson Adrienne Watson said the latest launch "needlessly raises tensions and risks destabilising the security situation in the region". This latest launch came days after North Korean leader Kim Jong Un ordered his military to adopt a "more practical and offensive" manner in war deterrence, as reported by its state media agency KCNA. - Agencies



ISLAMABAD: Defense Minister Khawaja Asif presenting a souvenir to Ambassador of Iran Seyed Mohammad Ali Hosseini. - DNA