





# Macroeconomic indicators signal recovery, stability

ISLAMABAD: Federal Minister for Planning, Development and Special Initiatives Professor Ahsan Iqbal on Thursday said Pakistan's economy demonstrated clear signs of stabilization during July to November of the current fiscal year 2025-26, supported by prudent macroeconomic management and targeted development initiatives. Talking to the media while referring to the Ministry's Monthly Development Update for December 2025, the minister said key macroeconomic indicators reflected recovery and improving confidence across multiple sectors. "During the first five months of the current fiscal year, Pakistan's economy has moved towards stability, laying the foundation for sustainable and inclusive growth," he said. He said inflation moderated to an average of around five percent during July–November, compared to 7.9 percent in the same period last year, despite temporary pressures arising from flood-related disruptions. "The easing of inflation has provided relief to the public and created a more predictable environment for businesses and investors," he added. Highlighting industrial performance, Ahsan Iqbal said Large-Scale Manufacturing (LSM) recorded growth of 4.1 percent, indicating a recovery in industrial activity. He said improved energy availability, better supply chain conditions and enhanced business sentiment contributed to the turnaround. On fiscal performance,

the minister said the Federal Board of Revenue (FBR) collected Rs 4,733 billion during July–November, showing a growth of 10.2 percent. He said steady revenue growth underscored improved tax administration and strengthened fiscal discipline. Discussing the external sector, he said performance remained mixed, as goods exports faced constraints due to supply-side disruptions, while services exports, particularly IT, recorded strong gains. IT services exports rose by 19 percent to \$1.8 billion, he said, describing the sector as a key driver of future export-led growth. Workers' remittances, he added, increased by 9.3 percent to \$16.1 billion, strengthening foreign exchange inflows and supporting overall stability. Financial markets, he noted, maintained a stable sentiment during the period. On development spending, the minister said Rs 196 billion were sanctioned under the development budget for the quarter, against which Rs 92 billion had been utilized, with infrastructure projects accounting for the bulk of expenditures. He added that foreign-funded projects also progressed, with Rs 12.8 billion spent out of Rs 25.1 billion sanctioned. Ahsan Iqbal said that during November 2025, the Central Development Working Party (CDWP) approved 10 development projects across priority sectors, while six major projects were referred to the Executive Committee of the National Economic Council

(ECNEC). He said improved project scrutiny and the elimination of non-essential expenditures resulted in savings of Rs 3.3 billion during July–October 2025. He said the approved initiatives were expected to generate 994 immediate jobs, with an estimated 24,859 direct and 40,873 indirect employment opportunities overall, alongside enhanced skills development and inclusive growth outcomes. The minister said key initiatives during the period included the mandatory adoption of the Green Building Code for all future development projects to ensure environmental sustainability, establishment of new facilities at Karakoram University, and international collaborations under the Uraan Pakistan initiative to promote research, innovation, trade and technology. He added that partnerships with leading global universities, including Oxford and Cambridge, were being pursued to strengthen Pakistan's knowledge economy. He further said under the IT industry revival plan, more than 20,000 youth were being trained in advanced technologies, which would lead to the creation of over 14,000 new jobs. "With fiscal stability, focused development initiatives and strengthened project oversight, Pakistan's development outlook remains optimistic," Ahsan Iqbal said, adding that the government was committed to sustaining reforms that support long-term, inclusive and resilient growth.—DNA



**MULTAN:** DG PID Tahira Syed, Director Shahid Imran presenting shield to Prof Deeba of women university. – DNA

## Prudent policies restoring consumer confidence

ISLAMABAD: Adviser to Finance Minister Khurram Schehzad on Thursday said the prudent economic policies introduced by the current government had started yielding the required results, saying that consumer confidence recorded a 'strong year-on-year recovery' during the first quarter of financial year 2026. He posted on X while commenting on the Pakistan Consumer Confidence Survey conducted by D&B Pakistan and Gallup Pakistan which revealed that the recovery was driven mainly by improved household financial conditions and positive income expectations. The survey showed that overall consumer confidence increased by 19 percent on a year-on-year basis, confirming a clear rebound from last year's lows, although a slight cooling was observed on a quarterly basis. Despite the moderation, the future outlook remained resilient and close to neutral, with the Future Confidence Index standing at 98.2, indicating that consumers largely expect economic conditions to stabilize rather than deteriorate. Household finances continued to serve as a key anchor of confidence, as 62 percent of respondents expected their financial situation to improve or remain unchanged over the next six months. Income expectations also stayed firmly positive, with 63 percent of consumers anticipating their household income to increase or remain stable over the coming year, keeping the income index in optimistic territory.—APP

## Balochistan CM okays livestock reforms

QUETTA: Chief Minister (CM) Balochistan, Mir Sarfraz Bugti, approved a series of reform measures in livestock aimed at improving departmental efficiency, safeguarding public health, and strengthening transparent governance. One of the key decisions taken was the phased relocation of dairy farms from within Quetta city to areas outside municipal limits. The Chief Minister emphasized that the move is intended to provide citizens with a healthier environment, reduce pollution and traffic congestion, and promote modern urban planning to address environmental and public health challenges. To ensure effective implementation, a

special committee comprising the Secretary Services and General Administration Department (S&GAD) and the Secretary Finance was formed. The committee has been tasked with reviewing all aspects of the plan and submitting a comprehensive report within one week. The meeting also approved departmental recruitments from Grade 1 to Grade 15 in the Livestock and Dairy Development Department. CM Bugti issued strict instructions that all appointments must be made purely on merit through a transparent process, warning that no political pressure or favoritism would be tolerated. "No job will be sold, and no one will be

allowed to deprive the youth of their rightful opportunities. Merit is the top priority of the provincial government, and there will be no compromise on this principle," Bugti declared. Highlighting the broader benefits of reforms in the livestock and dairy sector, the Chief Minister noted that improvements would create new employment opportunities across the province. The initiative would significantly enhance milk and meat production and strengthen the provincial economy and improve the standard of living for citizens. The CM Sarfraz Bugti reaffirmed his government's commitment to institutional reforms.—DNA

## CPEC to put KP into industrial, business hub

PESHAWAR: Strategically located in South Asia, Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province is going to widely benefited from multifaceted China-Pakistan Economic Corridor Project (CPEC) following construction of gigantic road projects. To link southern districts of KP with Halka-Yarik-DI Khan Motorway (M-14) which is a flagship connectivity project under western alignment of CPEC, Pakhtunkhwa Highways Authority (PkHA) has issued a tender for a 42.3 km link road connecting the Bannu Link Road (N-55) with the M-14 Motorway. PkHA Spokesman told APP that the project will be constructed under Public Private Partnership (PPP-model) aims to give residents of Bannu, Karak, Lakki Marwat and nearby areas faster, safer access to the national motorway network. Bannu Link Road will not only boost regional mobility, trade and investment but integrate southern KP with major routes leading to Islamabad and Punjab, building on the improved connectivity already provided by the M-14 Motorway. He said the private partner will undertake financing, construction and operation of the project, while the authority may extend viability-gap funding and other support. The southern belt of KP would receive the same modern connectivity available to other parts of the country, he said, adding that the project would help improve mobility and boost regional trade and investment. Upon completion of this project, he said travel in the region will become smoother and effective connectivity of the southern districts with the national highway and motorway network will be possible.—APP

## Timely KP uplift project ordered

PESHAWAR: Chief Secretary Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Shahab Ali Shah has directed the concerned officers to ensure timely completion of ongoing projects and to give top priority to public interest in all matters. He was chairing weekly meeting to review governance and development matters here Thursday. All relevant administrative secretaries and senior officers attended the meeting and reviewed in detail various measures taken on the directives of the provincial government to promote public service delivery, transparency and good governance. During the briefing, it was informed that indiscriminate operations against illegal encroachments are underway across the province. A total of 1,335 illegal structures built on government land had been identified, out of

which 818 have so far been removed, while action against the remaining encroachments is in progress. The meeting also reviewed progress on projects aimed at restoring the past glory of the provincial capital, Peshawar. The briefing stated that rehabilitation and beautification work on the Ring Road and GT Road is progressing at a fast pace, while the Peshawar Ring Road missing link and the New General Bus Stand projects are also moving swiftly towards completion. Regarding the energy sector, the meeting was informed that implementation of the Dasu Transmission Line project linked to the Dasu Hydropower Project has been expedited. The project will play a vital role in meeting growing energy needs, promoting economic de-

velopment, and providing affordable electricity. On environmental protection at tourist destinations, the meeting was briefed that hotels and restaurants are being brought in line with prescribed rules and regulations. Out of 535 hotels and restaurants, 474 have improved their sewerage systems, while the remaining have been directed to make necessary improvements within the stipulated timeframe. The meeting was also informed that land use regulations and master planning at tourist spots are being strictly implemented. The meeting reviewed ongoing work on establishing a modern solid waste management system for Peshawar. The Chief Secretary was informed that various measures are being taken to modernize the city's sanitation system.—APP

## Pakistani farmers file climate justice claim against global polluters

KARACHI: Pakistani farmers affected by devastating 2022 floods on Thursday announced filing of a climate justice claim against major global carbon emitters, saying the unprecedented disaster had exposed Pakistan's extreme vulnerability to climate change. Addressing a press conference at the Karachi Press Club, claimants Hamza Khan Kalhor, Abdul Hafeez Khoso and Abdul Khaliq Leghari from Larkana, Jacobabad and Dadu said the 2022 floods had destroyed crops, livestock and homes, pushing thousands of farming families into long-term economic distress, a communiqué said. They said Pakistan, despite contributing less than one per cent to global greenhouse gas emissions, had suffered disproportionate losses due to climate-induced extreme weather events and is the 8th most vulnerable country globally. They argued that historically high-emitting corporations must be held accountable for climate-related losses and damages. They said the companies responsible for pollution continued to grow richer day by day, while affected communities were pushed further back due to their actions and the climate crisis. They added that they have now started their struggle and are filing a climate justice case against two major historical polluters in Germany, RWE and Heidelberg Materials. They said they 43 farmers are filing the claim seeking compensation for the losses they suffered during the 2022 floods. Dr Shaikh Tanveer Ahmed of the HANDS Welfare Foundation said the 2022 floods were not a "natural disaster alone" but a consequence of global warming. "Our farmers are paying the price for emissions they did not cause," he added that human-driven industrialisation, deforestation and the unchecked use of fossil fuels had intensified extreme weather, turning natural hazards into large-scale human disasters. Dr. Tanveer said climate justice requires accountability from major polluters and compensation for communities whose livelihoods had been destroyed. NTUF leader Nasir Mansoor termed climate change a livelihood and labour rights issue, noting that repeated climate shocks were undermining rural employment and food security. He said the absence of climate-resilient policies was deepening inequality and pushing working communities further into poverty. International partners supporting the claim said climate litigation was increasingly being used worldwide to seek accountability where political responses had fallen short. Lawyer Miriam Saagme of the European Centre for Constitutional and Human Rights (ECCHR), Germany, said the case aimed to amplify the voices of flood-affected communities in international legal forums, emphasizing that strategic litigation can help bridge the gap between global emissions responsibility and the lived realities of climate-vulnerable populations in countries like Pakistan.—DNA

## Kundi calls for stronger action against PTI, terrorism

He criticized the previous Khyber Pakhtunkhwa chief minister for "verbal abuse" and reiterated that his administration is focused on delivering concrete results rather than political drama

CHINIOT: Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Governor Faisal Karim Kundi on Thursday said that the world is watching Pakistan, with foreign leaders arriving every few months. He said the recent "victory in the war" has sparked a surge in global interest for trade, but every time a foreign head visits, PTI supporters stage protests that he claims harm the country's image. He expressed his views while talking to the media after offering fatiha to the father of PPP Central Punjab General Secretary Syed Hassan Murtaza in Raju Sadat on Thursday. During the interaction with media, Governor Kundi demanded that former Prime Minister Imran Khan be moved to a different jail in Punjab, alleging that the PTI's founder is receiving preferential treatment. He also criticized PTI leaders Ali Amin Gandapur and Sohail Afridi,

saying Gandapur left the province in a state of severe corruption, health and sanitation problems, while Afridi should remain in his home province instead of being held at Adiala Jail. Describing Khyber Pakhtunkhwa as a "sensitive" province fighting terrorism, Governor Kundi warned that the security situation has worsened over the past two years. He stressed that the province's rights must be defended with arguments, not rhetoric, and that there can be no negotiations with terrorists. He added that the 28th Amendment will be pursued, and called for NAB to stop using plea bargains to shield corrupt officials, citing the Kohistan Rs 50 billion scandal and the "Billion Tree Tsunami" case as examples of unadressed wrongdoing. Turning to domestic politics, Faisal Karim Kundi claimed that 80 percent of PTI parliamentar-

ians are wanted by Islamabad police and should be arrested if there is evidence against them. He accused PTI members of sitting quietly while the party's leadership aligns with Maulana Fazlur Rehman, and of ignoring the suffering of people in Kurram and the blockage of roads. He also warned that Afghan citizens will now need visas to enter Pakistan, saying the country can no longer bear the burden of hosting Afghan refugees without proper oversight. Finally, Governor Kundi said that if the provincial government cooperates, there will be no need for Governor's Rule, which he likened to "surgery" that should be avoided. He criticized the previous Khyber Pakhtunkhwa chief minister for "verbal abuse" and reiterated that his administration is focused on delivering concrete results rather than political drama.—DNA

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National Days and Armed Forces Days

DECEMBER

Dec 01/Romania National Day

Dec 02/United Arab Emirates National Day

Dec 02/Laos Republic National Day

Dec 05/Thailand National Day

Dec 06/Finland Independence Day

Dec 07/India Armed Forces Flag Day

Dec 09/Tanzania National Day

Dec 11/Oman Armed Forces Day

Dec 12/Kenya Independence Day

Dec12/Turkmenistan Neutrality Day

Dec 16/Bahrain National Day

Dec 16/Kazakhstan Independence Day

Dec 18/Qatar National Day

Dec 18/Niger National Day

Dec 23/Philippines Armed Forces Day

Dec 23/Japan National Day

Emergency

Rescue (Police).....15

Bomb Disposal.....15

Fire Services Rawalpindi/ Islamabad.....1122 & 16

Emergency Ambulance.1122 & Rescue Services.4451122

Motorway Police...9266044

Motorway Police.9270601-20

Women Police Stations Islamabad.....9222596

Rawalpindi.....9270601-20

Enquiry

Edhi Ambulance.....115

PIA Flight Info.....114

PIA Cargo.....9280979

Railway Inquiry.....117

Railway Exchange9270831-5

WASA Rawalpindi..5555489

CAA.....9281092

Hospitals

CMH.....5611111

MH.....561116

Canth 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

# Japan, UNDP to boost local governance in merged districts

**DNA**

ISLAMABAD: The Government of Japan, through the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), in partnership with the Government of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), have launched a new initiative titled “The Project for Development of Public Service Infrastructure in the Merged Districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa” to strengthen local governance and improve access to essential public services in KP’s Merged Districts. Implemented under UNDP’s Merged Areas Governance Programme (MAGP), the partnership was formalized through a signing ceremony in Islamabad. Following their merger with KP in 2018, the Merged Districts are undergoing a critical transition toward decentralized governance and localized service delivery. While notable progress has been made, newly established local systems continue to cope with the adjustments required by the merger, needing support to strengthen administrative mechanisms, improve civil

response and expand access to basic public services. This project aims to address these gaps by strengthening the institutional capacity of the first-ever elected Tehsil Local Governments (TLGs) to deliver essential public services and promote community-responsive governance. With a contribution of 518 million Japanese Yen (approximately US\$3.5 million), the project will support 19 TLGs across eight Merged Districts to deliver essential services through small-scale infrastructure schemes, directly benefiting approximately 18,000 people and indirectly reaching an estimated 500,000 community members. Working closely with local administrations, the initiative will help identify and implement community-driven projects based on local needs, strengthening coordination, accountability, and community engagement. The signing ceremony brought together senior representatives from the Ministry of Economic Affairs, Government of KP, the Embassy of Japan, JICA, and UNDP, reflecting a shared commitment to improving service delivery and local governance in a region with historically limited exposure to formal administrative systems. Addressing the ceremony, H.E. Mr. AKAMATSU Shuichi, Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of Japan to the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, said: “We see that the merged areas are the one of the most challenging, yet a very key entry point that will bring sustainable peace and development to the province as well as the country of Pakistan. This project will not only support the recovery of essential community infrastructure and local service delivery, but also foster inclusive and participatory local governance to ensure the whole of society approach toward the outcomes.” Mr. NAKATSU Masaaki, Senior Representative of JICA Pakistan Office, added: “As the JICA’s technical cooperation project for TLGs (2022-2026) has formulated Tehsil Development Plans through a participatory approach, this new project - collaboration between UNDP and JICA, will play a crucial role in implementing these Plans and responding to the needs of local communities. We are confident that this project is not merely about implementing infrastructural schemes, but also about promoting mutual trust between local governments

and communities, thereby strengthening the foundation for sustainable development in the region.” The initiative builds on the JICA’s technical cooperation project for Strengthening Capacity of Local Government Officers in Newly Merged Districts in KP, which identified locally prioritized schemes through participatory approach. Speaking at the occasion, Mr. Mahmood Khan, Joint Secretary (UN), Ministry of Economic Affairs, Government of Pakistan, highlighted: “The Merged Districts present both complex challenges and opportunities for Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. By strengthening local governments for improved service delivery, this project supports our vision of sustainable development, unlocking the potential of local communities as key drivers for achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).” Dr. Ehtisham-ul-Haq, Chief International Development Section, Planning & Development Department, Government of KP, remarked: “We wholeheartedly welcome the support of Government of Japan and UNDP - two of our most steadfast partners in the Merged District’s development journey.

ISLAMABAD: The Anti-Narcotics Force (ANF) conducted three operations across the country, arresting two suspects, including a woman and seizing 33.62 kilograms of narcotics worth more than Rs7.7 million, an ANF spokesman said on Thursday. He said the operations targeted both international and inter-provincial drug trafficking. In the first operation, ANF personnel recovered 14.912 kilograms of methamphetamine (ice) soaked in clothing from the luggage of a passenger at Allama Iqbal International Airport. The suspect was travelling to Jeddah, the spokesman added. In a second international interdiction, 13.350 kilograms of methamphetamine concealed in clothes were recovered from a parcel bound for the Philippines at the cargo shed of Jinnah International Airport, Karachi. In the third operation, carried out near the Tarnol Toll Plaza in Rawalpindi, the ANF recovered 4.800 kilograms of hashish from a female passenger during an inter-provincial check. The spokesman stated that cases have been registered under the Control of Narcotic Substances Act, 1997, and further investigations are ongoing.—APP

# SC converts rape conviction into consensual adultery case

ISLAMABAD: The Supreme Court has converted a rape conviction into a case of consensual adultery, reducing the sentence of the accused from 20 years’ imprisonment to five years’ rigorous imprisonment and lowering the fine from Rs500,000 to Rs10,000. In default of payment, the accused will undergo an additional two months’ imprisonment. According to a six-page detailed judgment authored by Justice Malik Shahzad Khan and approved for reporting, the majority of the bench held that the evidence on record did not prove the offence of rape but established consensual sexual relations. However, Justice Salahuddin Panhor dissented from the majority decision. The court observed that although, in cases of consensual adultery, the complainant may also be liable to punishment, the complain-

ant in the present case was neither challaned nor given an opportunity of defence during the trial. Therefore, the Supreme Court ruled that no punishment could be imposed on her at the appellate stage without granting a hearing. Referring to the facts of the case, the court noted that the FIR was lodged nearly seven months after the alleged incident. The prosecution failed to explain how the accused knew that the complainant would be present at the location at a specific time. The judgment pointed out that the complainant did not resist during the incident, no marks of violence or injuries were found in the medical report, and the complainant’s clothes were neither produced as evidence nor shown to be torn. Despite the incident allegedly occurring near a residential area, no alarm was raised and no call for help

was made. The court also noted that the complainant did not approach the authorities or inform her family for seven months. On DNA evidence, the court refrained from giving a final ruling, observing that DNA samples were collected after one and a half years, whereas medical research suggests reliable results can be obtained within a much shorter period. Justice Salahuddin Panhor, in his dissenting note, held that the case was one of rape and that the conviction should have been upheld. He observed that many rape cases go unreported due to social pressure, stigma, and threats, and delay in lodging an FIR should not be used against the victim. He also noted that lack of resistance in the presence of a weapon and absence of injuries after months were not unusual in such cases.—APP

# AI future, education is foundation

ISLAMABAD: Parliamentary Secretary for Information and Broadcasting Barrister Danyal Chaudhry on Wednesday stressed the urgent need for Pakistan to adopt Artificial Intelligence in a strategic and phased manner to accelerate national development, while addressing the AI X Future Summit 2025 as chief guest at Bahria University, Islamabad. The summit brought together policymakers, educators, media professionals, technology experts, and students to discuss the role of AI in governance, education, media, and innovation. Speaking to the audience, Barrister Danyal Chaudhry said Artificial Intelligence is no longer a distant idea but a defining force of the present that can reshape Pakistan’s economy, governance systems, and information landscape if adopted responsibly and thoughtfully. Drawing a parallel with education and human development, he remarked that life progresses in phases, from crawling to walking and then running, and no stage can be skipped. He said the education system, particularly at university level, is designed to build these foundations gradually, enabling students to develop skills step by step before moving toward advanced innovation and leadership Highlighting the government’s vision under the National Economic Transformation Plan Uraan Pakistan 2024–2029, he said digital innovation, technology driven governance, and capacity building are key pillars for sustainable growth and global competitiveness. The Parliamentary Secretary said AI holds significant promise for improving transparency, efficiency, and inclusivity in public institutions, especially in information dissemination, media regulation, and citizen engagement.—DNA

# Over 1323 degrees awarded at CUST convocation

**DNA**

ISLAMABAD: The Convocation of Capital University of Science and Technology for Graduates of year 2025 held at Convention Centre wherein 1323 students along with 25 PHD graduates were awarded degrees in their respective fields. Federal Minister for Railways Hanif Abbasi grace the occasion as chief guest while Executive Director Cust Prof Sohail Afzal presided the ceremony. Prof. Dr Mansoor Ahmed, Vice Chancellor of University in his inaugural speech, welcomed the graduates and highlighted the contribution made by the University in the field of higher education. Education plays a vital role in economic development of country and raises the productivity and efficiency of individuals and thus produces skilled manpower that is capable of leading the economy of the country he added Hanif Abbasi, in his address, said that Education is the only key to success and development of country. All provinces and people of Pakistan are united for their country. We need to put aside personal differences and contribute to national development. The entire nation stands like a solid wall with the Armed Forces of Pakistan that’s why we’ve given a befitting response to our enemies and raised the nation’s head high with pride. he added Graduates who were awarded PhD degrees include Muhammad Ali Malik Fizza Asif Anum Shafique Mahboob Khan in Management Sciences, Waqas Toor Mohsin Ullah Qumrisha Arooj in Electrical Engineering, Sajjad Shuker Ullah Aaroon Joshua Das Mustafa Sultan Usman Shahid in Civil Engineering, Ibrar Ahmed Bilal Khan Ehtsham Irshad Shahid Khan in Computer Science, Shahana Rizvi Areej Fatima in mathematics, while Qasim Khan Sobia Khurshid Naveed Soomro Faiga Rashid Imran Iqra Bashir Rukhsana Tabassum Sabahat Javid got degrees in the field of Biosciences. 90 top position holders were awarded Gold

silver and bronze medals in their respective degree programs. The ‘Jinnah Gold Medal’ was awarded to an overall best graduate of the Convocation to Qurat-ul-Ain Fatima of BS English program for her best performance in curricular and extracurricular activities.

# Police records 1,039 promotions in 2025

ISLAMABAD: Islamabad Capital Territory (ICT) Police recorded a total of 1,039 promotions during 2025, including the recent approval by Inspector General of Police (IGP) Syed Ali Nasir Rizvi for the promotion of five head constables to assistant sub-inspector (ASI) rank and 38 constables to head constable, marking another step in recognising officers’ service and performance. An official told APP on Thursday that the latest promotions approved by the IGP were part of the ongoing promotion process aimed at ensuring that officers receive timely elevation based on merit and seniority. He said that during the year 2025, a record 1,039 officers and officials of Islamabad Police were promoted to their next ranks. These included 10 DSPs promoted to SP, 27 inspectors to DSP, 94 sub-inspectors to inspector, 189 ASIs to sub-inspector, 311 head constables to ASI, 388 constables to head constable, and 40 clerical staff promoted to higher posts. The official said the IGP has directed that the promotion process should continue without unnecessary delay. “Any officer who has a clear right to promotion will be promoted promptly,” he quoted the IGP as saying.—APP

# ANF arrests two, seizes drugs worth over Rs 7.7m

ISLAMABAD: The Anti-Narcotics Force (ANF) conducted three operations across the country, arresting two suspects, including a woman and seizing 33.62 kilograms of narcotics worth more than Rs7.7 million, an ANF spokesman said on Thursday. He said the operations targeted both international and inter-provincial drug trafficking. In the first operation, ANF personnel recovered 14.912 kilograms of methamphetamine (ice) soaked in clothing from the luggage of a passenger at Allama Iqbal International Airport. The suspect was travelling to Jeddah, the spokesman added. In a second international interdiction, 13.350 kilograms of methamphetamine concealed in clothes were recovered from a parcel bound for the Philippines at the cargo shed of Jinnah International Airport, Karachi. In the third operation, carried out near the Tarnol Toll Plaza in Rawalpindi, the ANF recovered 4.800 kilograms of hashish from a female passenger during an inter-provincial check. The spokesman stated that cases have been registered under the Control of Narcotic Substances Act, 1997, and further investigations are ongoing.—APP



## Briefs

## FIA foils attempt to travel abroad on fake visa

ISLAMABAD: Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) Immigration foiled an attempt to travel abroad on fake travel documents and offloaded a passenger at Islamabad International Airport. An official told APP on Thursday that the passenger, identified as Abrar Ahmed, was attempting to travel to South Africa on a work visa via flight PF-784. During immigration clearance, his travel documents were found suspicious. The official said Abrar Ahmed, a resident of Jhelum, was carrying a passport bearing a forged South African visa. Upon verification, the visa was confirmed to be fake. Following initial action, the passenger was offloaded from the flight and handed over to the Anti-Human Trafficking Circle, Islamabad, for further legal proceedings. The official added that further investigation is underway to determine the source of the fake visa and to identify any facilitators involved in the attempt. FIA has reiterated that strict action will continue against individuals involved in the use or facilitation of fake travel documents.—APP

## President, PM pay tribute to Lance Naik Mahfuz

ISLAMABAD: President Asif Ali Zardari and Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif on Thursday paid tribute to Lance Naik Mahfuz Shaheed (Nishan-e-Haider) on anniversary of his martyrdom, recognizing his valor and sacrifice to safeguard the country. The president and prime minister, in their separately issued statements, lauded the exemplary gallantry of Lance Naik Mahfuz Shaheed in the 1971 war when he repelled the enemy at the Wagah Border. They prayed to Allah Almighty for the elevation of the rank of Lance Naik Mahfuz Shaheed in paradise. "Lance Naik Muhammad Mahfuz Shaheed is a symbol of bravery, sacrifice, and unwavering loyalty to the nation. During the 1971 war, despite being severely wounded at the Wagah front, Muhammad Mahfuz Shaheed's steadfastness in confronting the enemy is a testament to his extraordinary courage," the president said. "Lance Naik Mahfuz Shaheed fought the enemy with bravery. The entire nation salutes him for his exemplary valor and patriotism. The people of Pakistan recognise the sacrifices of the martyrs which they will never forget," the president remarked. Prime Minister Shehbaz said that Lance Naik Mahfuz Shaheed defeated the enemy despite its overwhelming strength. He said brave soldiers like Lance Naik Muhammad Mahfuz Shaheed were the guarantee of Pakistan's invincible defense.—APP

## Traffic diversion plan issued for Koral Bridge—Rawat

ISLAMABAD: Islamabad Traffic Police (ITP) on Thursday issued a traffic diversion plan for the Expressway stretch from Koral Bridge (Kak Pul) to Rawat T-Cross, warning commuters of possible delays between 3:00 pm and 5:00 pm. An ITP spokesperson told APP that traffic flow on the said section of the Expressway is expected to be affected during the specified hours due to operational reasons. He advised citizens to use alternative routes to avoid inconvenience. According to the advisory, motorists travelling from Islamabad towards Kak Pul and Rawat may use Kak Pul via Kahuta Road, Model Town Humak and GT Road. Meanwhile, traffic coming from Rawat via GT Road has been advised to proceed towards Sowan, Rawalpindi. The spokesperson said that traffic police officers will remain deployed at key points to guide road users and ensure smooth traffic management during the affected hours. Citizens were advised to plan their travel with an additional 20 to 25 minutes to avoid delays. For further updates and assistance, commuters may contact the Traffic Helpline 1915 or Pucar-15, the spokesperson added.—APP



ISLAMABAD: The monthly meeting of the Floral Art Society of Pakistan (Magnolia Chapter) was held on 17th December, 2025 at Serena Hotel. The demonstrator for the meeting was Ms. Suzanne Jamshaid, a highly skilled artist and floral designer. She conducted an engaging and informative workshop on the art of decoupage using natural materials, with special emphasis on its application in floral art. The meeting concluded with delicacies served by Serena Hotel.—DNA

## Ahsan urges varsities to power country uplift

DNA

ISLAMABAD :Minister for Planning, Development and Special Initiatives Professor Ahsan Iqbal on Thursday stressed the urgent need to transform Pakistan's higher education system into a driver of national development, innovation and economic growth, asking that universities must move beyond paper-based research to produce solutions with real-world impact. In his opening remarks at the National Leadership Dialogue – From Knowledge to Impact, organized by the Pakistan Institute of Development Economics (PIDE), the minister said Pakistan's development visions, including Vision 2010, Vision 2025 and now Uraan Pakistan, reflected a consistent resolve to build human capital, despite repeated disruptions. "We tried to move forward through Vision 2025, but it was disrupted. Now we are once again trying to move in that direction through Uraan Pakistan," he said, adding that earlier initiatives had

nevertheless laid the foundations of today's higher education system.

Recalling his tenure during Vision 2010, Ahsan Iqbal said Pakistan faced an acute shortage of qualified faculty. "At that time, there were only around 350 PhDs in science and technology, and nearly 65 to 70 percent were close to retirement," he noted. To address this, he said, the government approved two major initiatives including the overseas scholarship scheme for 5,000 PhDs and the indigenous PhD scholarship programme for another 5,000 scholars. "These 10,000 PhDs today form the backbone of our human resource base on which the system stands," he said, adding that continuity of policy was critical for long-term gains. The minister said higher education funding was also significantly enhanced during Vision 2025. "When we took charge, the Higher Education Commission was practically shut down and its development budget was around Rs10 to 11 billion. We raised it to Rs45 billion

and introduced major reforms to make higher education inclusive and competitive," he said. Explaining the reform agenda, he said a two-tier university system was envisaged: one focused on broad-based access and success, and another "premier league" of universities competing globally in advanced research and academic excellence. He added that national centres in emerging fields such as artificial intelligence, cybersecurity, big data, cloud computing, quantum computing and nanotechnology were also initiated. Highlighting international collaboration, Ahsan Iqbal said programmes like the US-Pakistan Knowledge Corridor and the UK-Pakistan Knowledge Gateway were launched to bridge Pakistan's human resource gap. "Our higher education participation rate is only 13 percent, compared to 25 percent in Bangladesh and 60 percent in China. This gap is holding back our expansion," he said. The minister expressed concern that much of Pakistan's re-

search remained confined to academic journals. "We suffer from what I call academic inflation. Papers are published, but ideas that can contribute to national development are missing," he said, calling for a shift towards innovation, commercialization and industry linkages. He stressed that universities must become "innovation engines, start-up launchpads and policy think tanks," capable of addressing national challenges in agriculture, industry and technology, while also producing ethically grounded and socially responsible citizens. Ahsan Iqbal said the government was developing a seven-pillar performance audit framework for universities, covering academic excellence, research and innovation, industry linkages, community contribution, technology enablement, governance and quality of graduates. "Our universities must transition into institutions of national development, and this transition has to be made in emergency mode," he said.

## China's Shandong Xinxu group meets Maritime minister

ISLAMABAD: A five-member delegation from China's Shandong Xinxu Group has met Federal Minister for Maritime Affairs, Muhammad Junaid Chaudhry to discuss a proposed multi-billion-euro Integrated Maritime Industrial Complex (IMIC) at Port Qasim. The delegation, led by the company's chairman Hou Jianxin, discussed a proposal for the project, estimated to cost between 1 billion and 2 billion, aimed at revitalising Pakistan's maritime and heavy industrial base, said a press release on Thursday. The proposed IMIC would comprise three main components including the revival of the Iron Ore and Coal Berth (IOCB) Jetty, commonly referred to as the steel jetty, the establishment of shipbuilding and shipbreaking facilities, and the setting up of a steel mill integrated with port operations. The IOCB was designed to handle bulk cargo, including iron ore and coal, primarily for Pakistan Steel Mills. The jetty can accommodate vessels ranging between 55,000 and 75,000 deadweight tonnes (DWT) and is connected to the steel mill through a dedicated conveyor system spanning approximately 4.5 to 8 kilometres, linking directly to stockyards and blast furnaces. During the meeting, the federal minister Junaid Chaudhry welcomed the interest shown by the Chinese group and asked the delegation to submit an unsolicited proposal outlining plans and comprehensive roadmap for the proposed project. The minister emphasised that the roadmap should include clearly defined core concepts, detailed implementation plans and feasibility studies covering technical, financial and environmental aspects. Following the submission of the comprehensive report, a committee comprising members from the Ministry of Maritime Affairs and Shandong Xinxu Group, led by Additional Secretary Umar Zafar Sheikh, will review the proposal. The minister underscored the importance of ensuring that the project aligns with Pakistan's broader industrial and sustainability goals, particularly in terms of job creation, value addition and environmentally responsible development. The IMIC concept was first unveiled by the minister in November 2025 at an event hosted by Port Qasim Authority in Karachi to mark the port's recognition as the world's ninth most improved container port.—DNA

## Naqvi extends congratulations to Qatar on National Day

ISLAMABAD: Federal Minister for Interior Mohsin Naqvi has extended warm congratulations to His Highness the Amir of the State of Qatar, the Royal Family, and the people of Qatar on the occasion of Qatar's National Day, lauding the country's remarkable progress and visionary leadership. In a message posted on social media platform X, Naqvi conveyed his heartfelt felicitations, describing Qatar's National Day as a symbol of enlightened leadership, national unity and a forward-looking journey. He said the occasion reflects the resilience and collective spirit of the Qatari nation under the wise guidance of its leadership. The interior minister also conveyed his special greetings to Qatar's Minister of Interior, Sheikh Khalifa bin Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani, referring to him as a dear brother and extending his warmest wishes on the national occasion. Naqvi praised Qatar's achievements under the leadership of the Amir, noting that the country has set a balanced and inspiring example of progress, stability and modern statecraft. He highlighted Qatar's remarkable innovation and development across key sectors, including the economy, education, healthcare, sports and technology, which have earned it global recognition.—APP

## Interior Minister shares video of worker's departure

ISLAMABAD :Federal Minister for Interior and Narcotics Control Mohsin Naqvi on Thursday shared a video on the social media platform X highlighting the successful departure of Muhammad Tufail to Saudi Arabia after his documentation issues were resolved, including the issuance of a valid driving licence. In his post, the interior minister said Tufail had earlier been offloaded from a flight a few weeks ago while travelling to Saudi Arabia on a driver's visa due to the absence of a driving licence, a mandatory requirement for such employment. "Alhamdulillah, Muhammad Tufail, who was offloaded a few weeks back while travelling to Saudi Arabia on a driver's visa without a driving licence, has now departed with all valid documents, including his driving licence," Naqvi wrote. The video shared by the minister features Tufail expressing gratitude for the assistance provided to him. In his recorded message, Tufail said he had been facing difficulties after being stopped from travelling abroad because he lacked the required licence.—APP

## Dr. Oumer Hussein Oba assumes charge as Ethiopian envoy to Pakistan

ISLAMABAD: H.E. Dr. Oumer Hussein Oba has formally assumed his role as the Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia to the Islamic Republic of Pakistan. Upon his arrival at the Ethiopian Mission in Islamabad, the Ambassador was received with a warm reception and provided with an extensive briefing on the Embassy's initiatives and milestones achieved



over the last three years. A Distinguished Career in

Leadership Ambassador Oba brings a wealth of high-level administrative and diplomatic experience to his new post. His notable previous roles include: Minister of Agriculture for Ethiopia, Minister of Revenue and Customs, Vice President of the Oromia Regional State, Ambassador of Ethiopia to the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Strengthening the Ethiopia-Pakistan Partnership. The transition comes at a pivotal

time for bilateral relations. Dr. Oba expressed his eagerness to lead the next chapter of this historic partnership, aiming to elevate cooperation in sectors such as agriculture, trade, and regional development. Under his guidance, both nations look forward to reaching "new heights," building upon the foundation of mutual respect and shared economic interests that have flourished in recent years.—DNA

## Haroon reaffirms full support to strengthen SME sector

ISLAMABAD: Special Assistant to the Prime Minister (SAPM) on Industries and Production Haroon Akhtar Khan on Thursday assured the Chaman Chamber of Commerce and Industry of full government support for the development and growth of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in the Chaman. He gave this assurance during a meeting with the Chaman Chamber of Commerce and Industry (CCCI) while discussing the issues faced by local businesses and Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) in Chaman, a news release said. The meeting was attended by Additional Secretaries from the Ministry of Industries and Production and

Chief Executive Officer of SMEDA Nadia J. Seth, which extensively deliberated on the challenges confronting SMEs in Chaman and the need for targeted federal support. Representatives of the Chaman Chamber highlighted that with a population of nearly one million, and its strategic importance due to commerce, transport, and cross-border trade, Chaman has the potential to emerge as a major SME hub. The Chamber called for the inclusion of the Chaman Industrial Zone in all federal industrial schemes and support programs, besides it emphasized the urgent need for vocational and technical training centers to develop skilled manpower for industrial ac-

tivities. It shared proposals for the establishment of a government-supported Common Facility Center (CFC) to enable industries to utilize shared machinery, as well as the creation of an Export Facilitation Desk in Chaman. It also sought support for the development of agro-processing and cold chain industries to strengthen local value chains and enhance export potential. During the meeting, Haroon Akhtar shared Prime Minister Muhammad Shehbaz Sharif's vision for the promotion and empowerment of SMEs, stating that the Prime Minister has directed facilitation and uplift of every SME across the country. Acknowledging the vital role of the Chaman

Chamber in cross-border trade, he assured that the Chamber would be included in all relevant development programs and committees. Haroon Akhtar announced establishing a Technical and Vocational Training Center with the support of SMEDA and the Pakistan Industrial and Technical Assistance Centre (PITAC). He expressed confidence that a Common Facility Center at the Chaman border would significantly benefit SMEs operating in the region. He added that the government was already working on agro-processing and cold chain projects, and Chaman would also be included in these initiatives.—APP

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## The West fixes its problems ... at others' expense

EYAD ABU SHAKRA

WHAT does it feel like to constantly wake up to news that makes you feel like you belong to a bygone era and that the principles you had lived by and believed in for decades have become obsolete? Millions, tens of millions, of us have realized that it had been a mirage. The ideals ingrained in us, the values we were raised on and learned at different stages of our lives, have become frail. These are horrific times. The future we are promised is even more horrifying. As of tomorrow, all our private data will be accessible to the latest models of artificial intelligence; none of us will have any privacy left. There will be no more red lines for the tech oligarchs spying on us and freely using our data to serve their objectives or those of the intelligence-political apparatuses they serve. Here we stand, powerless before a brutal, unelected clique that has effectively risen above the law, which now applies only to those who are too weak to defend themselves and “foreigners” who are perpetually threatened with arbitrary arrest or deportation on mere suspicions. Meanwhile, the two safeguards of justice have been made helpless or besieged. The judiciary does not act as a bulwark against abuses of power and the media does not play the role of a watchdog. First, the judiciary has been marginalized, weakened and called into question. Some judges, political appointees in certain democratic states, have become false witnesses who rubber-stamp whatever they receive, while dignified judges now fear for their lives or their families' safety amid the rampages of extremist, racist mobs. Second, the media, which is supposed to be the fourth estate in so-called democratic states, has been co-opted and gagged. Mergers have engendered monopolies and thinkers, writers and researchers have been stifled. Outlets are being blackmailed and bypassed through AI, which becomes a substitute for experienced professional journalists. The judiciary does not act as a bulwark against abuses of power and the media does not play the role of a watchdog, which had long served as an engine for dialogue and a safety valve preventing political gridlock from deteriorating into clashes, strife and violence. In Britain, alarming reports that go beyond the political and military roles London is now playing in support of Israel on Gaza were published this week. Indeed, they go beyond the Labour government's adoption of Likud-style terminology and characterizations of developments in the Occupied Territories, raising existential alarm bells around the future of certain migrant communities in Britain. The importance of Venezuelan oil to Washington becomes clearer with the economic background in mind. And while the racist right in France, the Netherlands and Germany has openly pursued anti-immigrant policies in recent years, re-

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ports from the UK reveal that millions of naturalized citizens and residents of migrant origin are vulnerable to being stripped of their right to stay and deported. These plans bear the fingerprints of the Labour Prime Minister Tony Blair, whose government (1997-2007) expanded the “framework” for denaturalization and the revocation of residency. As a result, no one of migrant origin (especially from the Islamic world and the Global South) is safe from deportation. Making things even more dangerous, these revelations come at a time when the racist right is gaining ground, with the two traditional parties of government, the Conservatives and Labour, seeking to court these voters by adopting its demands. In the US, the situation is no less alarming. The White House is beating the drums of war against Venezuela under the cover of the Monroe Doctrine of 1823, which turned Central and South America into America's “backyard.” Indeed, Washington has begun the countdown to occupying Venezuela. Home to the largest proven oil reserves in the world, the US is threatening the country under the pretext of combating drug trafficking. Preparations for an invasion of Venezuela follow President Donald Trump's demand that Canada join the US and his threat to occupy Greenland, which is formally linked to Denmark. At the same time, it is reportedly trying to pull four European countries (Italy, Hungary, Poland and Austria) away from the EU. As invading Venezuela and toppling its leftist regime is justified on the grounds of its mismanagement of the economy, Trump decided to support Argentina with \$40 billion. It should be noted that Argentina is currently ruled by far-right President Javier Milei, who would have faced a humiliating electoral defeat were it not for generous US backing. It is also worth noting that Trump's multibillion-dollar support for Argentina comes amid mounting domestic criticism of the White House from Democrats and liberals, who are racing to share economic statistics and Trump's declining approval ratings. In near-daily tweets, former Secretary of Commerce Robert Reich has been drawing attention to the accelerating chasm between the wealth of the few and the vast majority of citizens. One problem he pointed to is that 70 percent of the economy depends on domestic consumer spending, but with wealth piling up in the hands of the richest 10 percent, the rest of the country can no longer consume enough to keep the wheels of the economy turning. The importance of Venezuelan oil to Washington becomes clearer with the economic background in mind. Indeed, we are seeing increasing numbers of statements by US officials about the “importance” of Chile, Bolivia and Argentina as key sources of lithium. Naturally, the 2025 National Security Strategy, which explicitly frames mass migration as a threat, is also part of this picture. On the concentration of wealth in the hands of a few, left-wing Sen. Bernie Sanders recently noted that the fortunes of prominent billionaires have risen dramatically since Trump's election to a second presidential term. According to Sanders, Tesla's Elon Musk's wealth has risen by \$187 billion, Oracle's Larry Ellison's by \$78 billion, Amazon's Jeff Bezos' by \$36 billion and Meta's Mark Zuckerberg's by \$25 billion. “Meanwhile, 60 percent of Americans live paycheck to paycheck,” he wrote. Moreover, as AI continues to eliminate jobs, the cost of food and housing continues to rise steadily. As for medical and healthcare expenses, 530,000 Americans go bankrupt each year because they are unable to bear these costs, while this problem is virtually nonexistent in the vast majority of European countries and other advanced nations.

## Shariah Courts in the UK and the USA: A False Alarm?

Qamar Bashir



The names behind these pushes matter because the user asked for “renowned politicians,” and because the political mainstreaming of suspicion is precisely the engine of Islamophobia. In the United States, Senator John Cornyn and Senator Tommy Tuberville publicly announced a “No Sharia Act” in October 2025. On the House side, public communications around “No Sharia” legislation have been promoted by figures such as Congressman Randy Fine, with references to support from other lawmakers. Separately, Congressman Chip Roy has promoted a “Preserving a Sharia-Free America Act,”...

A STRANGE new alarm is being manufactured in our time—an alarm that travels faster than facts. In social media clips, in talk shows, and now even in parliamentary and congressional messaging, we are hearing a rising cry that “Sharia must be banned” in the United Kingdom and the United States. The claim is repeated with an air of urgency, as if a parallel state is quietly taking over, as if Western civilisation is under legal siege, as if courts have been replaced and constitutions have been hijacked. It sounds dramatic. It sounds mobilising. It sounds like a culture war slogan designed to trigger fear. Yet when one pauses and asks the basic question—what does “Sharia” mean in the UK or the USA in real, legal terms?—the entire narrative starts to collapse under its own exaggerations. First, Sharia as it exists for Muslims living in non-Muslim countries is not a state law, not a criminal code, not a government “replacement” for British or American law. In practice, what is most often being discussed are voluntary religious opinions and community-based mediation on personal matters such as marriage, divorce, family disputes, and inheritance—issues that Muslims want resolved in a way that aligns with their faith while still living fully under the law of the land. Even in the UK debate, reputable fact-checking has repeatedly stressed that these bodies are not “courts” in the sense of legal authority; they do not override national law, and the word “court” itself misleads the public into imagining a sovereign parallel judiciary. The “numbers” that inflame public panic are a classic example of how fear grows when precision is absent. Some voices insist that there are “300 Sharia courts” in Britain, and that the UK is “gradually turning into a Muslim country.” But the most responsible public record is blunt: no one has an official, definitive count, and credible estimates vary widely. Reuters, citing the UK's own independent review, notes that the number of Sharia councils operating in England and Wales is unknown, with academic and anecdotal estimates ranging roughly from 30 to 85—and, importantly, that to the best of the review's knowledge there were no such councils in Scotland. Full Fact has likewise explained that there are no definitive figures and that claims about large totals often bundle together everything from major councils to small local forums and on-line services, turning a complicated social phenomenon into a simplistic “invasion” statistic. Even evidence submitted in the UK parliamentary process has described the number as disputed, pointing to research that identified around 30 “major” councils while acknowledging smaller local bodies might not have been captured—again, a far cry from the certainty with which “300 courts” is shouted in viral posts. So why does this fear persist? Because it is emotionally profitable. In politics, the easiest way to rally a base is to create a symbol of threat, strip it of nuance, and repeat it until the public stops asking questions. When Nigel Farage famously claimed there were “80 practising Sharia courts” in the UK, the line travelled further than the careful corrections that followed. That single sentence became fuel for a decade of “no-go zones,” “Muslim ghettos,” and “parallel legal systems” rhetoric—even though the legal reality remains that Britain's law is Britain's law, and religious mediation cannot lawfully supplant it. In Parliament, Baroness Cox has been among the most prominent figures pushing legislation aimed at restrict-

ing or regulating these councils, presenting her campaign as a protection against discrimination—particularly against women—while critics argue the wider debate too often spills into civilisational suspicion rather than focused legal reform. Now look at the United States. Here, the phrase “Sharia courts” is even more misleading. There is no recognised network of Sharia courts governing cities, no constitutional pathway for such a thing, and no American jurisdiction where Islamic law overrides U.S. law. Politifact has addressed the underlying rumour directly: there are no communities “under Sharia law” in the United States in the sense alarmists claim; any attempt to force religious code as law would collide immediately with constitutional limits and civil courts. Yet the political theatre continues. “Anti-Sharia” messaging has not been confined to fringe social media; it has been institutionalised through recurring legislative attempts, often framed as “foreign law bans,” even when American courts already operate under the Supremacy Clause and constitutional protections. The scale of that legislative churn is not small. A well-known academic/public-policy tracking project notes that since 2010, over 230 anti-Muslim bills have been introduced or enacted in U.S. state legislatures, and that “anti-Sharia” efforts are part of that ecosystem of institutionalised othering. The Southern Poverty Law Center has documented waves of anti-Sharia bills over the years, including a spike in state-level introductions in the late 2010s. And now, in the current congressional atmosphere, the slogan has returned again in high-profile federal proposals. Congress.gov records legislation explicitly titled to keep America “Sharia-free,” and House text for a “No Shari'a Act” frames its purpose as reaffirming that only American law governs American courts, even though that principle is already foundational. The names behind these pushes matter because the user asked for “renowned politicians,” and because the political mainstreaming of suspicion is precisely the engine of Islamophobia. In the United States, Senator John Cornyn and Senator Tommy Tuberville publicly announced a “No Sharia Act” in October 2025. On the House side, public communications around “No Sharia” legislation have been promoted by figures such as Congressman Randy Fine, with references to support from other lawmakers. Separately, Congressman Chip Roy has promoted a “Preserving a Sharia-Free America Act,” reflecting how the phrase has become a repeatable political brand rather than a response to a real legal takeover. In the United Kingdom, the roster looks different, but the pattern is the same: claims about large numbers, claims about demographic replacement, claims about enclaves, and claims that Britain is “becoming” something else. Petitions have demanded bans on the basis of “85 courts,” illustrating how figures—accurate or not—become a rallying device. The Times has described the UK as a “western capital” for these councils and repeated the figure of 85 in its own framing, which then further recirculates through social media as “proof” that a parallel state exists. Meanwhile, fact-checkers and parliamentary materials keep insisting on what the public debate keeps forgetting: there is no legal authority here that outranks national law, and the uncertainty of numbers is routinely exploited by those who want certainty of fear. All of this is producing something far more dangerous than the imaginary menace it claims to prevent: a widening social

permission structure for hostility toward ordinary Muslims. The suspicion is no longer only about “law.” It bleeds into clothing, prayer, diet, family life, neighbourhoods, and identity—turning everyday religiosity into a presumed pathway to radicalisation. In this climate, even the most basic Islamic principle for minorities living in non-Muslim lands is erased: Muslims are religiously obligated to respect the law of the land they live in, and if a society forbids core worship entirely, classical teachings emphasise either compliance with law or relocation rather than rebellion. The modern anti-Sharia campaign, however, behaves as if Muslims are secretly trained to undermine constitutions—when, in reality, most Muslims are simply trying to preserve family norms, marry, divorce, and distribute inheritance in a manner consistent with faith while remaining loyal citizens bound by national law. And here is the tragedy of misunderstanding that your narrative rightly points to: Western publics are often told that Islam is “incompatible” with Western civilisation, as if Islam is built on hatred of the West. But the deeper truth is that Islam obliges belief in the prophets revered in Judaism and Christianity, including Jesus (peace be upon him) and Mary—an interfaith common ground that is rarely highlighted in angry soundbites. When that commonality is buried, fear fills the vacuum. Demagogues then sell the public a simplified enemy: “Sharia.” It becomes a code-word, not for a real legal system in London or Texas, but for the presence of Muslims themselves. If the aim is genuinely to protect women's rights and protect citizens from coercion, then the honest path is specific reform: ensure civil marriage registration, strengthen legal aid and awareness, clarify that any religious mediation cannot pretend to be a state court, and prosecute coercion or abuse wherever it occurs—without turning an entire faith into a suspect class. That is what serious governance looks like. What we are watching instead is the conversion of ignorance into policy branding, and policy branding into social hostility. This is why the new “ban Sharia” wave must be confronted with calm, verified facts and moral clarity. In the UK, we do not have “300 Sharia courts”; we have contested estimates of voluntary councils—often described in the range of about 30 to 85 in England and Wales, with no confirmed presence in Scotland in the cited independent review. In the United States, we do not have Sharia-governed towns; we have recurring anti-Sharia bills and rhetoric that treats Muslims as a fifth column even while the Constitution already governs the courts. The time has come for philosophers, thinkers, and religious scholars—Muslim, Christian, and Jewish—to raise the level of discourse in public spaces, especially on social media where fear spreads fastest. If the West can learn once more to distinguish between a citizen's private religious ethics and the public law of the state, then Muslims who live in the UK and the USA—obeying the law, contributing to society, paying taxes, raising families, and pursuing dreams—can continue to live in peace, with dignity, and with the freedom that Western civilisation itself claims to cherish.

– Press Secretary to the President (Rtd)  
Former Press Minister,  
Embassy of Pakistan to France  
Former Press Attaché to Malaysia  
Former MD, SRBC | Macomb, Michigan, USA

## CM Bihar revives the memory of Ravana

Muhammad Mohsin Iqbal



The outrage that followed was neither surprising nor unwarranted. Voices across the world condemned the incident as an assault on human rights and women's dignity. For a country that tirelessly lectures others on democratic values, the episode proved deeply embarrassing

LEADERSHIP is the mirror through which the moral character of a nation is reflected. In societies that claim democratic maturity, elected leaders are expected to embody restraint, dignity, and respect for the rights and sensibilities of all citizens. The ballot is not merely a mechanism of power transfer; it is a covenant of trust, through which people entrust their representatives with the protection of their honour, faith, and fundamental freedoms. India has long projected itself as the world's largest democracy, taking pride in constitutionalism, pluralism, and the rule of law. Yet, from time to time, incidents occur that crack this carefully constructed façade and expose uncomfortable truths beneath the surface. One such incident recently unfolded in the Indian state of Bihar, where Chief Minister Nitish Kumar, crossed a line that no civilised leader should even approach. At a public function, in full view of cameras and attendees, he forcibly removed the veil of a Muslim female Dr. Nusrat Parveen. The act was not accidental, nor could it be dismissed as a momentary lapse of judgment. It was a deliberate intrusion into the personal, religious, and bodily autonomy of a woman, carried out by the highest executive authority of the province. In a single moment, the dignity of an individual was violated, and the moral claims of a state were laid bare. The veil, irrespective of one's personal views about it, represents choice, faith, and identity for millions of Muslim women. To tear it away by force is to send a chilling message that power may trample belief, and authority may humiliate the vulnerable without consequence. That the victim was a doctor, a professional who had devoted her life to public service, only deepened the cruelty of the act. Instead of honouring her contribution, the state reduced her to an object of spectacle, her dignity sacrificed at the altar of political arrogance. History and tradition, including India's own civilisational narratives, have long warned against such abuse of power. In Hin-

du mythology, the episode of Sita in the Ramayana stands as a timeless moral lesson. After her abduction by Ravana and confinement in Ashoka Vatika, Sita was subjected to repeated pressure and humiliation, including threats against her dignity, in an attempt to break her resolve. As mentioned in some versions of the Ramayana, there is an incident where Ravana, in a fit of rage and frustration, tries to disrobe Sita by grabbing her sari. The episode is remembered not merely as a tale of captivity, but as a moral indictment of coercion and moral transgression. Ravana's actions are condemned not because of power exercised, but because of power misused. The story serves as a reminder that the violation of a woman's dignity, whether physical or symbolic, has always been regarded as an act of moral failure, not strength. When contemporary leaders echo, even faintly, such conduct, the comparison is neither flattering nor avoidable. The outrage that followed was neither surprising nor unwarranted. Voices across the world condemned the incident as an assault on human rights and women's dignity. For a country that tirelessly lectures others on democratic values, the episode proved deeply embarrassing. It punctured the illusion that constitutional guarantees automatically translate into lived equality, especially for minorities. Democracies are not judged by lofty speeches or constitutional preambles alone, but by the everyday conduct of those who wield power. In this case, that conduct fell disastrously short. What makes the incident even more troubling is that it does not stand in isolation. India's recent history is replete with examples where state power has been used to intimidate, marginalise, or humiliate minorities. From lynchings carried out in the name of cow protection, to discriminatory citizenship laws, to the routine targeting of Muslim homes and places of worship, a pattern has emerged that cannot be ignored. Each incident, when viewed separately, is often explained away as an aberration.

Taken together, they form a disturbing narrative of shrinking space for dissent, diversity, and dignity. Women, particularly from minority communities, have borne a disproportionate share of this burden. Instances of harassment, public shaming, and weaponisation of identity have become increasingly frequent. The Bihar episode thus fits into a wider mosaic of moral decline, where political power appears emboldened to test how far it can go without meaningful accountability. The silence or half-hearted responses from institutions that are meant to act as checks only reinforce this perception. Equally revealing has been the reaction of the Indian media. While some voices courageously called out the wrongdoing, large segments of the mainstream media treated the incident with evasiveness, minimisation, or selective outrage. This reluctance to confront power has become a hallmark of a media culture more invested in proximity to authority than in the pursuit of truth. When journalists behave like trained sniffers who detect controversy only when it suits the rulers, public trust inevitably erodes. The moral funeral of such leadership, it may be said, has already been held. When those at the helm lose the ability to distinguish between authority and entitlement, between leadership and domination, they forfeit their moral legitimacy. No amount of electoral victory can compensate for the loss of ethical compass. Power may command obedience, but it cannot compel respect. In the end, the real tragedy is not merely the humiliation of one woman, but the steady corrosion of values that a democracy claims to cherish. If leadership does not correct itself, if institutions do not assert their independence, and if society grows numb to injustice inflicted on the “other,” then the proud slogans of democracy will ring hollow. The Bihar incident stands as a stark reminder that democracy without morality is an empty shell, and power without accountability is nothing more than organised cruelty.



## Briefs

Tarat warns  
fake news on  
social media  
posses...

FROM PAGE 01  
He said this structured process enabled the evolution of media. However, the subsequent shift from electronic to digital media was an unnatural transition for which no one was prepared. This change arrived suddenly, and it was accepted as it came. He added that due to the rapid pace of this evolution, there was a lack of an adequate regulatory framework, limited awareness, and the main reason was a lack of understanding, as it took significant time to grasp cyberspace, cybersecurity, and its realities. Digital literacy and responsible online behavior continue to lag, underscoring the need for greater awareness of what constitutes responsible conduct. Speaking on the issue, he emphasized that cybersecurity and the responsible use of social media stand among the most pressing challenges of our era. At the World Economic Forum, global leaders were asked to name the greatest challenges of our time. Surprisingly, neither nuclear war nor climate change topped the list. Instead, the threat they singled out was misinformation and fake news. Referring to the Bondi Beach tragedy in Sydney, he noted that social media was quickly flooded with false reports. Some outlets hastily alleged the attacker was from Pakistan—without evidence or credible information. He stressed that Pakistan, itself a victim of terrorism, was unfairly targeted by baseless claims repeated even by global media, despite the absence of any documentary proof, causing serious damage to the country's image.

Military  
leadership  
pays  
homage...

FROM PAGE 01  
homage to the immortal legacy of Lance Naik Muhammad Mehfooz Shaheed, Nishan-e-Haider, on his martyrdom anniversary. "Lance Naik Muhammad Mehfooz Shaheed stands as a towering symbol of valor, sacrifice, and unyielding devotion to the motherland. During the 1971 war at the Wagah sector, he displayed extraordinary courage in the face of overwhelming enemy resistance. Undeterred by severe injuries and relentless fire, he pressed forward with fearless resolve, ultimately laying down his life in the highest tradition of military honor. His gallantry in battle remains one of the most luminous chapters in the history of the Pakistan Armed Forces," said a statement issued by Inter Services Public Relations (ISPR). His supreme sacrifice embodies the indomitable spirit, professional excellence, and selflessness that define Pakistan's Armed Forces. Lance Naik Muhammad Mehfooz Shaheed's heroism transcends time, serving as an enduring source of inspiration for generations of soldiers and citizens alike, reinforcing the sacred bond between the armed forces and the nation they are sworn to defend.

IHC orders  
to remove  
Justice...

FROM PAGE 01  
University of Karachi Registrar Imran Ahmed Siddiqui appeared before the court and submitted the degree and regional record of the Justice Jahangiri. Expanding on the matter, Siddiqui apprised the court that the Islamia Law College's principal has said that Justice Jahangiri had not been the institution's student. "Justice Jahangiri was caught cheating [therefore] the [KU's] UFM imposed a three-year ban on him for cheating and threatening the examiner," the KU official told the court, adding that the judge was eligible to retake the exams again in 1992. The KU registrar further pointed out that Justice Jahangiri used a fake enrolment form to bypass the ban and obtain the degree instead.

MNA Amnah  
appointed to  
FIFA Institutional  
Reforms  
Committee

*The development is being seen as a direct outcome of the sustained and serious efforts of the current government to promote football and strengthen sports institutions in the country*

DNA

ISLAMABAD: Syeda Amnah Batool, a member of the National Assembly (MNA), has been appointed to FIFA's esteemed Institutional Reforms Committee, marking a significant turning point for Pakistan's in sport's arena. In a statement issued here on Thursday, the appointment marks a significant achievement for Pakistan in both the sporting and diplomatic spheres, as Syeda

Amnah Batool becomes the sole Pakistani representative currently serving on various FIFA committees. Her inclusion in the high-level body reflects FIFA's renewed confidence in Pakistan's institutional direction and acknowledges the country's positive and constructive role in global football governance. The development is being seen as a direct outcome of the sustained and serious efforts of the current government to promote football and strengthen sports institutions in the country.

At UN, nations pledge people-first  
digital future, tighter AI safeguards

UNITED NATIONS: United Nations member states Wednesday pledged to narrow widening digital divides and put stronger safeguards around artificial intelligence (AI), with Pakistan calling for "effective" implementation of those promises at the UN General Assembly, which concluded a major review of how the world manages the Internet and digital technologies. "While digital technologies have expanded opportunities, they have also introduced new inequalities that demand urgent collective action," Ambassador Asim Iftikhar Ahmad, permanent representative of Pakistan to the UN, told the high-level meeting. The two-day meeting marked the conclusion of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS+20), a process

launched in the early 2000s to guide global cooperation on digital development, access and inclusion, at a time when the internet was only starting to become an essential part of everyday life. Two decades later, delegates said the challenge is no longer simply getting people online but ensuring that digital technologies – including AI – are governed in ways that protect human rights, build trust and close widening digital gaps. WSIS was created in 2003 to help countries work together on the opportunities and risks posed by information and communication technologies, or ICT. It brought governments together with businesses, civil society and technical experts – a multistakeholder approach that remains central to digital govern-

ance today. At this year's review, participants reflected on how deeply digital tools now shape the economy, education, healthcare and daily life, while warning that millions remain excluded. In remarks to the General Assembly on Tuesday, its President, Annalena Baerbock, said access to the internet has become essential – from telemedicine in remote villages to online education and digital financial services – yet progress is sluggish. While global Internet access stands at around two-thirds of the world's population, she noted that in developing countries it is far lower, and women and girls continue to be disproportionately left behind. "Two decades later, our shared vision of a people-centred, inclusive and development-oriented information society remains

Brazil Congress  
passes bill to cut  
Bolsonaro prison term

BRASILIA: Brazil's Senate on Wednesday passed a bill to slash the prison term of far-right ex-president Jair Bolsonaro, who was convicted of plotting a coup after losing reelection to left-winger Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva. Passed by the lower chamber last week, the bill now heads to Lula, whose expected veto could eventually be overridden by Congress. Bolsonaro, 70, began a 27-year prison sentence in November, and under current rules was expected to serve at least eight years behind bars before becoming eligible for a looser regime. The new legislation, which changes how sentences are calculated for certain crimes, could, however, see Bolsonaro serve a little over two years in prison. Following months of jockeying by Bolsonaro's supporters in Congress for some sort of amnesty, the bill moved surprisingly quickly through both the conservative-controlled lower chamber and the more balanced Senate. Bolsonaro's oldest son, Senator Flavio Bolsonaro – whom the former president anointed as the candidate of the right in 2026 elections – had called for the upper chamber to "address this issue once and for all." The bill provoked protests in cities across Brazil on Sunday, where demonstrators chanted "no amnesty" and held up banners reading: "Congress, enemy of the people." Though political forces are more evenly balanced in the Senate, it was approved 48-25. Centrist Senator Renan Calheiros slammed the vote as a "farce" and walked out of the session, accusing the government's allies in parliament of letting the vote take place in exchange for support for a budget initiative as part of a backroom deal. – Agencies

Romanian President  
Nicusor Dan to  
attend EU Summit

BUCHAREST: President Nicusor Dan will take part in the European Council meeting in Brussels on Thursday and Friday, the Presidential Administration announced. EU leaders will hold strategic talks on Ukraine, the EU's next long-term budget, enlargement, and the bloc's economic situation. Discussions will also cover the Middle East, European defence and migration. A key focus of the meeting will be the latest developments in Ukraine and actions the EU needs to take urgently. Leaders will discuss how to meet Ukraine's financial needs for 2026 and 2027, including support for military and defence efforts. They will also talk about security guarantees for Ukraine and diplomatic efforts aimed at achieving a just and lasting peace. EU leaders will assess ways to strengthen Ukraine's position in negotiations, increase pressure on Russia, and protect Europe's interests. The European Council said the EU has stood by Ukraine since the start of Russia's war, providing total support of 187.5 billion euros so far, including 66 billion euros in military aid. During the summit, leaders will also review progress on the EU's next multiannual financial framework, following proposals presented by the European Commission on 16 July. – Agencies

Cambodia  
says Thailand  
bombs casino  
hub on border

PHNOM PENH: Cambodia said Thailand's military bombed the casino town of Poipet, a major crossing between two nations, as foreign powers pressured them to halt reignited border clashes. Thai forces "dropped two bombs in the area of Poipet Municipality, Banteay Meanchey Province" at around 11:00 am (0400 GMT) Thursday, the Cambodian defence ministry said in a statement. Thailand has not yet confirmed any strike on Poipet – a bustling casino hub popular with Thai gamblers. The renewed fighting between the Southeast Asian neighbours this month has killed at least 21 people in Thailand and 17 in Cambodia, while displacing around 800,000, officials said. – APP

15th PSN Annual Sports  
Festival kicks off

OUR CORRESPONDENT

ISLAMABAD: The 15th Annual Sports Festival of the Private Schools Network (PSN) Islamabad kicked off on Thursday at the Margalla Town Football Ground, with enthusiastic participation from students of low-cost private schools from across Highway Zone of the federal capital. The multi-day festival is aimed at promoting physical fitness, discipline and sportsmanship among students. The concept of organising this inclusive sports event was the brainchild of renowned educationist late Dr. Afzal Babar, who dedicated his life to the uplift of low-cost schools in Islamabad. Dr. Afzal passed away on October 23 this year, and a special homage was paid to him during the opening ceremony, with participants and organisers paying tribute to his vision and services to education. Students are taking part in a variety

of sport disciplines, including cricket, tug of war, sack race, 100-metre and 200-metre races, and the traditional chatty race, where young athletes are actively showcasing their talent and competitive spirit. Speaking on the occasion, newly-appointed PSN President Maqbool Hussain Dar said the sports festival reflects PSN's commitment to the holistic development of students. "Sports play a vital role in building confidence, discipline and teamwork among children. Through this festival, we aim to provide equal opportunities to students of low-cost schools to explore and polish their hidden talents," he said. He paid rich tribute to late Dr. Afzal Babar, saying, "This festival is a continuation of Dr. Afzal Babar's vision. He believed that students of low-cost schools deserve the same platforms as others, and PSN will continue to carry forward his mission."

Pakistan,  
Libya  
discuss...

FROM PAGE 01

enhancing bilateral defence and military-to-military cooperation. Particular emphasis was placed on collaboration in the fields of training, capacity building, and counter-terrorism, with a shared understanding of the importance of collective efforts to address emerging security challenges. Field Marshal Syed Asim Munir reaffirmed Pakistan's strong commitment to further strengthening defence ties with Libya, underscoring that cooperation between the two armed forces is rooted in shared interests and mutual respect. Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar lauded the professionalism and operational experience of the Pakistan Armed Forces and expressed his keen desire to expand defence cooperation between the two countries in the coming years. The visit is seen as a significant step towards deepening Pakistan-Libya defence relations and reinforcing military cooperation in support of regional peace and stability.

PM approves  
halal meat  
export Policy

FROM PAGE 01

To enhance halal meat exports, particularly in the regional context, the prime minister directed to ensure minimizing costs in this sector. The business model for increasing halal meat exports should be developed by benefiting from globally recognized best practices, the prime minister emphasized. He stressed the need to establish special zones and centers to increase exports of disease-free halal meat from the country. During the briefing, the prime minister was informed that Pakistan's total halal meat production stood at 6 million metric tons, and after fulfilling domestic requirements, a substantial quantity was available for export. "Special measures are being undertaken to increase halal meat production and ensure international-standard packaging", the prime minister was informed. The meeting was attended by Minister for Commerce Jam Kamal Khan, Minister for National Food Security Rana Tanveer Hussain, Minister for Economic Affairs Ahad Khan Cheema, Special Assistant to the Prime Minister for Industries and Production Haroon Akhtar, and other relevant government officials.

GB election  
Postponed  
because...

FROM PAGE 01

He said that 13 political parties had demanded a postponement of the elections, while six political parties were of the view that the elections should proceed under the existing schedule. The GB Assembly was dissolved on November 24, after completing its five-year term, leading to the dissolution of Chief Minister Haji Gulbar Khan's cabinet. Justice (ret'd) Yar Muhammad Nasir, the former judge of the Gilgit Baltistan Chief Court, was sworn in as the caretaker chief minister of the region.

## Mahodand lake welcomes adventure sports enthusiasts

KALAM: Following Met office forecast for rains with chances of snowfall, the tourists arrived in substantial numbers to Kalam to enjoy snow and adventure sports. As clouds start hovering over Upper Kalam, a mesmerizing transformation unfolds over Mahodand lake in the Osho Valley due to hide and seek between sun and clouds with chances of snowfall, attracting tourists. Nestled amidst towering deodar trees and abundance of trout fish, Mahodand lake with 2 kilometers length and 9,400 feet height of sea level emerges as a jewel of nature, its bluish-white waters swelling with chances of rains and snowfalls amid cold breeze taking tourists into thrill and excitement. Visitors flock here, eager to immerse themselves in the lake's tranquil beauty and partake in leisurely boating adventures. The lake's surroundings burst into a riot of colours, sprawling across the landscape, creating a feast for the eyes and soul. This season is cherished as an unparalleled opportunity to visit one of the country's most beautiful tourist destinations. The atmosphere is imbued with a palpable sense of ecstasy, courtesy of the frequent chance of moderate to erratic rains besides snowfall that grace the region. "I came to Kalam Valley with my family after 5 years to enjoy its mesmerizing natural beauty and snowfall," said Riaz Khan of Nowshera while talking to APP. "Every snowdrop here adds to the magic, enhancing the lush greenery and the lake's emerald allure," he said, adding Mahodand lake is renowned not just for its stunning vistas but also for its freezing waters due to snowfall with highest speed and abundant trout fish besides exploring it through boating of Rs 200 trip," said Riaz while enjoying trout fish as his children playing football around him amid great fun and laughter at Mahundhand

with cold breeze started from Osho mountains. Adventure enthusiasts and nature lovers from Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa are particularly drawn to this beautiful destination taking advantage of the open access road and improved transportation facilities. The enhanced infrastructure and Swat motorway have made it easier for tourists to indulge in various adventure sports in Upper Swat, further elevating the lake's appeal. "With the start of winter season, Mahodand lake stands as a testament to nature's splendor. It invites all to experience its ethereal beauty, to breathe in the fresh, rain-kissed air, and to create unforgettable memories in one of Pakistan's most enchanting locales," he said. The spokesman of Tourism and Culture Authority told APP that elaborate arrangements were made for accommodation and facilitation of tourists and adventure sports lovers during current season in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Under Development of Ecotourism Project (ETP), he said that camping pods with facilities of two to four beds along with washrooms and kitchen were established at various scenic places including Malakand and Hazara divisions. Besides establishment of camping pod at Gabeen Jabba near Mahudhand lake, and Sharan near Saiful Malook lake, he said 10 more camping pods were installed at different tourism places to provide affordable accommodations to tourists' families. These camping pods were established at Sharan Kaghan Mansehra, Mahaband Buner-Swabi, Allai Batagram, Bamburait Chitral, Tandyani Abbottabad, Bisigram Swat, Yakhtangi Shangla, Saheed e Sir and Malka Swat and Sheikh Badin in DI Khan. Bishigram, Shran, Yakhtangi, Shaheed e Sir and Malk camping pods have already been opened for tourists. "Each pod has two to four beds for families, a wash room and a small kitchen

with foolproof security arrangements by tourism police," he said, adding Rs3500 to Rs5000 per day/night stay was being charged against Rs12,000 to Rs15,000 per room by a private hotels at Khagan, Naran and Galiyat valleys. As many as 10 more camping pods at Jargo and Sulatnir in Swat, Lashkargha Bughchal Valley and Surlaspur Shandor valley Upper Chitral, Kumrat valley in Upper Dir, Laram Top and Shahi Bin Shahi in Lower Dir, Lilowani Alpuri in Shangla Samanah Top in Orakzai/Hangu and Kalam Swat. One of the key initiatives that have been undertaken is to increase the presence of security personnel in tourist spots. This has made tourists feel safer and more secure, resulting in an increase in the number of tourists visiting northern KP. Tourism police force comprises well-trained officers equipped to handle any situation that may arise while tourists are visiting the northern KP. These officers are fluent in several languages, including English, to make communication with foreign tourists easier. A mobile application called the "Tourist Safety App," has been launched enabling tourists to quickly and easily contact the tourist police in case of an emergency. Furthermore, the government has invested heavily in improving the infrastructure, including the road network, transportation, and accommodation facilities. The construction of new hotels, resorts, and rest houses has made it easier for tourists to find suitable accommodations while enhanced road networks had reduced load on the established tourism stations. Muhammad Ali Syed, General Manager, Tourism and Culture Authority said that waterfalls of Lamchar, Sajkot, Noori, Chajjan Haripur, Jarogo Swat, Lanchar Dir and Umbrella Abbottabad were being developed to promote ecotourism. Tourism spots, jeep tracks and roads to link water-

falls of Abbottabad, Haripur and Mansehra were being developed. To reduce tourists' load at Galiyat, Kaghan, Naran, Kalam, Malam Jabba and Dir, jeepable tracks were being constructed in 15 areas, adding camping pods were also established near it while local communities were encouraged to reserve at least one room for tourists to bolster income of rural population. Omair Khattak, GM Investment, KP Tourism Authority said Integrated Tourism Zones (ITZs) at Ghanool Mansehra, Mankiyal Swat, Madaklasht Chitral and Thandiyani Abbottabad would be constructed with assistance of the World Bank. Ghanool Mansehra would be established on 59.6 acres, Mankiyal Swat on 29.5 acres, Madaklasht on 540 Kanal and Thandiyani on 640 Kanal of land respectively. Rules and regulations for Mankiyal and Ghanool ITZs were prepared that would be completed on the patterns of ITZs of Malaysia and Indonesia. These ITZs are expected to create 200,000 direct and indirect job opportunities for youth and skilled workforce. Feasibility of the Cable Car project from Dir Upper to Madaklasht Chitral has been completed and it would be financially supported by the World Bank through Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Integrated tourism project (KITE). Four colonial era tracks' development including Thandiyani-Nathigali having 8, 200 feet height, 40km length and 1500 old trees belt, Thandiyani-Biringali track, Dagri Bangla-Meera Jani-Nathigali track and Kaghan-Mahnoor track starting from Shinkaryi to Kund Bangla and onward to Shaheed Pani-Nadi Bangla to Musa Ka Musallah were in pipeline. The experts underlined the need for showcasing these treasures through short videos and pictures through social media to attract foreign tourists imperative for bolstering the rural economy of Pakistan. – APP



## Briefs

**Gold price  
surges by Rs  
2,200 per tola**

ISLAMABAD: The price of 24 karat gold increased by Rs 2,200 per tola and was traded at Rs 455,762 on Thursday against its sale at Rs 453,562 on the previous trading day, All Pakistan Sarafa Gems and Jewellers Association reported.

The price of 10 grams of 24 karat gold also went up by Rs 1,800 to Rs 390,742 whereas the price of 10 grams of 22 karat gold increased by Rs 1,275 to Rs 357,919.

The price of per tola silver increased by Rs 78 to Rs 6,900, while the price of 10 grams of 24 karat silver rose by Rs 67 to Rs 5,915.

In the international market, the price of gold increased by \$22 to \$4,334 per ounce, whereas the price of silver went up by \$0.78 to \$66.28 per ounce. —APP

**Rupee gains  
01 paisa  
against US  
Dollar**

ISLAMABAD: The Rupee on Thursday appreciated by 01 paisa against the US Dollar in interbank trading and closed at Rs 280.26 compared to the previous day's closing at Rs 280.27.

According to the Forex Association of Pakistan (FAP), the buying and selling rates of the Dollar in the open market were recorded at Rs 281.05 and Rs 283.15, respectively. The price of the Euro increased by Rs 0.76 to close at Rs 328.87, from the previous day's close of Rs 328.11, according to the State Bank of Pakistan (SBP). The Japanese Yen came down by 01 paisa and closed at Rs 1.79, whereas the exchange rate of the British Pound witnessed a increase of Rs 1.53 and closed at Rs 374.76 compared to the previous day's Rs 373.23. The exchange rate of the Emirates Dirham and the Saudi Riyal remained stagnant and closed at Rs 76.31 and Rs 74.71, respectively. —APP

**PSX surges  
1,646 points  
to close at  
171,960 points**

ISLAMABAD: The benchmark KSE-100 Index of the Pakistan Stock Exchange (PSX) on Thursday closed bullish, gaining 1,646.79 points, a positive change of 0.97 percent, to settle at 171,960.65 points compared to 170,313.86 points on the previous trading day, according to PSX data.

During the session, the ready market witnessed a trading volume of 950.146 million shares with a traded value of Rs54.075 billion, against 1,068.512 million shares valuing Rs51.799 billion in the previous session. Market capitalization increased to Rs19.498 trillion from Rs19.377 trillion a day earlier.

Out of 482 active companies in the ready market, 217 advanced, 228 declined, while 37 remained unchanged. TPL REIT Fund I topped the volume chart with 75.804 million shares, followed by Hascol Petroleum with 37.077 million shares and Siddiqsons Tin Plate Limited with 36.739 million shares.

The top gainers included Rathan Maize Products Company Limited, which rose by Rs848.93 to close at Rs10,227.25, and Bhane-ro Textile Mills Limited, increasing by Rs64.57 to settle at Rs922.80. On the losing side, Hoechst Pakistan Limited declined by Rs82.19 to close at Rs4,412.81, while PIA Holding Company Limited-B fell by Rs70.00 to close at Rs23,000.00. In the futures market, turnover stood at 166.285 million shares with a traded value of Rs12.548 billion, compared to 222.330 million shares worth Rs12.532 billion in the previous session. Out of 316 futures market companies, 171 recorded gains, 142 declined, while three remained unchanged. Among futures contracts, PIAHCL-DEC led with 19.772 million shares, followed by BOP-DEC with 10.260 million shares and PIBTL-DEC with 10.251 million shares. In the futures market, the top gainers included ENGROH-DEC, which rose by Rs18.05 to close at Rs232.05, and ENGROH-JAN, increasing by Rs14.50 to settle at Rs232.00. On the losing side, PIOC-JAN declined by Rs21.30 to close at Rs402.33, while PIOC-DEC fell by Rs18.10 to close at Rs399.80. —APP

# ICCI vows strong resistance to anti-business measures

## Yousuf Rajput describes ICCI true vice of Islamabad's business community

DNA

ISLAMABAD: President Islamabad Chamber of Commerce and Industry (ICCI) Sardar Tahir Mehmood has strongly emphasized the need to make Islamabad an integral part of the National Finance Commission (NFC), stating that this step is essential to effectively address the challenges faced by the business community as well as the residents of the federal capital. He said that the business community is the real backbone of the country's economy and must be given due respect and meaningful representation in policymaking to ensure business-friendly economic policies.

He expressed these views while addressing a large delegation of the All Traders Welfare Association, Blue Area, and Islamabad, which visited the Chamber under the leadership of its President, Yousuf Rajput, on Thursday. Sardar Tahir Mehmood stated that ICCI is the mother body of the business community in the federal capital and is fully committed to playing its advocacy role to safeguard the legitimate interests of traders, industrialists and entrepreneurs without any discrimination. The ICCI President assured the delegation that the Chamber would never hesitate to strongly oppose any anti-business step taken by any institution. He urged the CDA to prioritize the comprehensive development of Blue Area in order to facilitate commercial activities and promote sustainable business growth in the federal capital. Earlier, President All Traders Welfare Association Blue Area, Yousuf Rajput, while eulogizing the dynamic leadership of ICCI President Sardar Tahir Mehmood, said that



he is a source of pride for the business community, which stands shoulder to shoulder with him in the struggle for its legitimate rights. He said that Blue Area is the largest commercial hub of Islamabad and plays a pivotal role in the economic development of the region. He added that the traders' community looks towards ICCI leadership to hold a dedicated press conference highlighting the issues of Blue Area, similar to those held against the FBR and the CDA on property valuation and sealing of business premises.

Secretary General United Business

Group Zafar Bakhtwari, while hailing the leadership qualities of the ICCI President, stressed the need for early resolution of business community issues. He also demanded that the capital city be provided with an effective local government system, similar to that introduced during the era of late General Pervez Musharraf, to ensure timely resolution of civic and business-related problems.

All speakers, including former ICCI Presidents Mian Akram Farid and Mohammad Ejaz Abbasi, Secretary General All Traders Welfare Association

Blue Area Syed Imran Bukhari, Shaikh Kaleem Ibrar-ul-Haq, Raja Hamid and Naeem Siddiqui, said that they have no objection to the establishment of a food street in the area but strongly opposed the installation of billboards of the same colour and same design. They pointed out that Blue Area houses hospitals, hotels and other important offices, and emphasized that no compromise would be made on the provision of drop lanes and parking facilities.

Senior Vice President Tahir Ayub warned that if the problems of the business community are not addressed, the

Chamber leadership would be left with no option but to adopt an aggressive stance. Vice President Irfan Chaudhry, in his vote of thanks, said that the Chamber is the second home of the business community and remains fully determined to continue its advocacy role for the resolution of their issues. Former Senior Vice President Khalid Chaudhry moderated the session.

Prominent participants included Rohail Anwar Butt, Malik Mohsin Khalid, Imran Minhas, Haji Naeem, Amin Peerzada, Azaz Mohammad, Syed Ashfaq Shah and others.

## Trump vows eco boom, blames Biden in address to nation

WASHINGTON: President Donald Trump promised Americans an economic boom in an address to the nation on Wednesday, while blaming Democratic predecessor Joe Biden for high prices that have hit the Republican's popularity. "Good evening America. Eleven months ago I inherited a mess, and I'm fixing it," the 79-year-old said in his live speech from the White House at the end of his first year back in power. Trump faces growing voter anger over the issue of affordability despite his efforts to dismiss it as a "hoax" by Democrats, sparking Republican fears they could be punished in the 2026 midterm elections. The billionaire president insisted that prices of gas and groceries that have worried Americans were "falling rapidly, and it's not done yet. But boy, are we making progress." In a surprise announcement, Trump said that 1.45 million United States military service members would each receive "warrior dividend" bonus checks for \$1,776 before Christmas, paid for with revenues raised from tariffs. He added that specific amount was in honor of the year of the founding of the United States, the 250th anniversary of which the country will celebrate next year. Trump then promised that "we are poised for an economic boom the likes of which the world has never seen" in 2026, when the United States will co-host the FIFA World Cup, with Canada and Mexico. But while the White House had billed the speech as a chance for Trump to set out his economic agenda for the rest of his second term, much of it consisted on attacks on familiar targets. He repeatedly raged against Biden, the Democrats, and migrants whom he said "stole American jobs." Trump's speech comes at the end of a whirlwind year in which he has launched an unprecedented display of presidential power, including a crackdown on migration and the targeting of political opponents. But polls show what Americans are most concerned about is high prices, which experts say are partly fueled by the tariffs he has slapped on trading partners around the world. The inflation problem also dogged Biden as he tried to heal the US economy after the Covid pandemic, and the Democrat unsuccessfully tried similar arguments with voters about economic good times to come. Trump got his worst approval ratings ever for his handling of the economy in a PBS News/NPR/Marist poll published Wednesday, with 57 percent of Americans disapproving and expressing concerns about the cost of living. A YouGov poll published Tuesday showed that 52 percent of Americans thought the economy was getting worse under Trump. He has also faced criticism from his Make America Great Again (MAGA) movement for focusing on peace deals in Ukraine and Gaza and on tensions with Venezuela, instead of domestic issues. Trump did not mention Ukraine or Venezuela, but did boast about the Gaza ceasefire, the US attacks on Iran's nuclear program, and what he calls a war on drug traffickers. There are signs Trump's team has had a wake-up call on the economy in recent weeks, with next year's midterm elections for the control of Congress already looming. —APP

## EU leaders gather to discuss a massive loan to Ukraine

BRUSSELS: European Union leaders are gathering Thursday for a summit aimed at agreeing on a massive loan to cover Ukraine's military and other financial needs for the next two years. The leaders will also discuss migration, the bloc's enlargement policy, trade and economies, but working out how to fund most of the 137 billion euros (\$160 billion) the International Monetary Fund says war-ravaged Ukraine needs is top priority. "It is up to us to choose how we fund Ukraine's fight. We know the urgency. It is acute. We all feel it. We all see it," European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen told EU lawmakers on the eve of the summit. European Council President António Costa, who is chairing Thursday's meeting in Brussels, has vowed to keep leaders negotiating until an agreement is reached, even if it takes days. Many leaders will press for tens of billions of euros in frozen Russian assets held in Europe to be used to meet Ukraine's economic and military needs. Such a decision has never been made before, and it comes with risks. The European Central Bank has warned that if Europeans appear willing to grab other countries' money, it could undermine confidence in the euro. Some member nations are also concerned about inviting retaliation from Russia. Belgium, where most of the frozen assets are held at a financial clearing house, is the main opponent of the plan. It fears that Russia will strike back and would prefer that the bloc borrow the money on international markets. Last week, the Russian Central Bank sued the Belgian clearing house Euroclear in a Moscow court, raising pressure on Belgium and its European partners ahead of the summit. Hungary and Slovakia oppose von der Leyen's plan for a "reparations loan." Some 90 billion euros (\$105 billion) would be lent to Ukraine until Russia ends its war and pays for the damage it has caused over almost four years. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky says that totals more than 600 billion euros (\$700 billion). The UK, Canada and Norway would fill the gap beyond the 90 billion euros (\$105 billion). Bulgaria, Italy and Malta also remain to be convinced. In recent weeks, EU envoys have worked to flesh out the details and narrow differences among the 27 member countries. If enough countries object, the plan could be blocked. There is no majority support for a plan B of raising the funds on international markets. —APP

## Pakistani agri officer sees new paths for Sino-Pak farm cooperation

SANYA: When Muhammad Waleej Arslan first took control of an agricultural drone in southern China, it was not the machinery that struck him most, but what it represented. For the Punjab-based agriculture officer, three months spent training among orchards, laboratories and vertical farms in China's tropical south became a window into how technology and research might offer new answers to some of Pakistan's most persistent farming challenges. Arslan, an officer with the Punjab Extension Agriculture Department, recently completed a three-month training programme in Sanya, Hainan Province, home to China's national seed breeding base, as part of Pakistan's Capacity Building of 1,000 Agricultural Graduates in China initiative. The programme combined classroom instruction with extensive field visits, focusing on fruit and vegetable processing as well as modern farm mechanisation. In an interview with China Economic Net, Arslan stated that at the first half of the training concentrated on post-harvest processing of fruits and vegetables. Participants studied the processing of mangoes, black pepper, watermelon, jujube, root crops, and other agricultural products. Visits to mango orchards and mango processing facilities in Sanya provided insights into value addition, quality control, and export-oriented production. Arslan also visited

soybean-processing factories producing tofu, soybean milk, and other products - an eye-opening experience given Pakistan's limited industrial-scale soybean processing. The second phase shifted toward modern agriculture and mechanization. From advanced tractors and agricultural drones to radar-based monitoring systems, the training introduced participants to technologies that are transforming Chinese farming. For Arslan, operating an agricultural drone for the first time was a particularly memorable experience, highlighting how precision tools can reduce labor costs while improving efficiency. "Among the most striking concepts he encountered was vertical farming. Unlike traditional horizontal agriculture, vertical farming uses multi-story structures to grow crops with controlled inputs of water, fertilizer, and light. This method, already widely adopted in parts of China, relies heavily on automation, robotics, and precise nutrient management. For Pakistan - where soil infertility is becoming an increasing concern - vertical farming could offer an alternative path to higher yields and better-quality produce without expanding farmland," Arslan said. "Artificial intelligence (AI) plays a central role in these systems," Arslan observes. In China, AI-powered tractors and driverless machinery are increasingly common, while drones and sensors help determine exactly how much water or fertilizer crops need. Mobile

applications can identify pests, plant diseases, and nutrient deficiencies simply by analyzing leaf images. "Such technologies could significantly improve decision-making for Pakistani farmers if adapted to local conditions," Arslan notes. However, technology transfer alone is not enough. Arslan believes that joint China-Pakistan agricultural research laboratories should be established in Pakistan to address local challenges. "Pakistan needs research tailored to its own soils, climate, weather patterns, and market needs," he argues. Without localized research, imported technologies risk being underutilized or misapplied. As Pakistan faces mounting pressures from climate change, water scarcity and land degradation, the country's agricultural community is increasingly looking to China for cooperation in joint projects and talent development. According to Dr. Abid Ali who currently works at Shenyang Normal University, recent policy initiatives in Punjab, Pakistan's agricultural heartland, have opened up new possibilities. "Punjab has recent announced initiatives on shrimp farming. Although the province has no coastline, similar inland aquaculture systems operating successfully in parts of China could provide inspirations. "Shrimp farming in Punjab would have sounded unrealistic a few years ago," he said. "But with the right technology and research support, it could become a viable new source of income for farmers." —DNA

## KSA concerned by Israel's impact on regional instability

CHICAGO: Experts on Wednesday noted Saudi Arabia's increased concern over Israel's regional conduct during a panel discussion hosted by the Middle East Institute and attended by Arab News. F. Gregory Gause III, professor emeritus of international affairs at the Bush School of Government at Texas A&M University, said Israel rather than Iran has become the more immediate worry for the Kingdom. "I think there's a real worry that post-Oct. 7 it's the Israelis, not the Iranians, who might be the fomenters of instability in Syria, in Lebanon, even with the attack on Doha," he said. Saudi Arabia's priority is achieving "stability in the region," and it believes that closer relations with the US can achieve that, he added. Former US Ambassador to Saudi Arabia Michael Ratney said the Kingdom's concerns have pushed it to seek closer ties to the US through President Donald Trump, who has been more responsive than his predecessor Joe Biden. During his recent visit to Washington, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman "got everything he wanted" for Saudi Arabia's interests, Ratney said, adding that his priority is to make the Kingdom a linchpin of regional stability. The Saudis "are more positive about the relationship with the US than I think a lot of people here realize," Ratney said. "They genuinely want their entire strategic outlook anchored in the US." Dr. Karen E. Young, a senior MEI fellow, said the Saudis have a growing concern for how regional instability impacts their economic advances under the Vision 2030 reform plan. "Certainly there's concern for the neighborhood, but in new ways and more geared toward what instability in the region means for economic development, tourism, logistics, trade and even connectivity, whether it's in trading and selling electricity or perhaps in the transfer of data," she added. "So they need calm, and that means on both sides of the Red Sea." —APP

## Iran, Russia FM's sign coop document

MOSCOW: Iranian Foreign Minister, Abbas Araghchi, and his Russian counterpart, Sergei Lavrov, have inked a cooperation document following their meeting in Moscow, the capital of Russia. Araghchi and Lavrov signed a cooperation document at the conclusion of their discussions on Wednesday. After the signing ceremony, Araghchi said, "Bilateral relations between Iran and Russia have significantly expanded in recent years, particularly this year with the signing of the Comprehensive Strategic Treaty, which has further accelerated our cooperation. This treaty is now in force, and we are moving forward based on its vision." The top Iranian diplomat emphasized, "In the agreement we signed, we have established a consultation program for the years 2026 to 2028." —APP

## Germany to take in more than 500 stranded Afghans from Pakistan

BERLIN: The German government said Thursday it would take in 535 Afghans who had been promised refuge in Germany but have been stuck in limbo in Pakistan. Interior Minister Alexander Dobrindt told the RND media network Berlin wanted to complete the processing of the cases "in December, as far as possible" to allow them to enter Germany. The Afghans were accepted under a refugee scheme set up by the previous German government, but have been stuck in Pakistan since conservative Chancellor Friedrich Merz took office in May and froze the program. Those on the scheme either worked with German armed forces in Afghanistan during the war against the Taliban, or were judged to be at particular risk from the Taliban after its return to power in 2021 - for example, rights activists and journalists, as well as their families. Pakistan had set a deadline for the end of the year for the Afghans' cases to be settled, after which they would be deported back to their homeland. Dobrindt said that "we are in touch with the Pakistani authorities about this," adding: "It could be that there are a few cases which we will have to work on in the new year." —APP

## Turkiye urges peaceful Syria-SDF talks

ANKARA: Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan said on Thursday that Türkiye did not want to resort to military action against Syria's Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), but warned that the patience of the actors involved was running out over what he described as delays in implementing an integration deal. "We just hope that things go through dialogue, negotiations and peacefully. We don't want to see any need to resorting to military means again. But SDF should understand the patience of the relevant actors are running out," Fidan told an interview with TRT World. "They should come to a place where their commitment to the agreement of 10th of March should be honored. Everybody is expecting from them to honor that agreement without any delay and without any twisting because we don't want to see a deviation from this agreement," he added. —APP



## Briefs

Saudi Arabia  
abolishes  
iqama fees

IN a move to empower its industrial sector, the Saudi Arabian cabinet has greenlighted the abolition of expatriate worker fees, commonly known as iqama or work permit, in licensed industrial establishments. The decision was taken in a session of the Council of Ministers chaired by Saudi Crown Prince and Prime Minister Mohammed bin Salman on the recommendation of the Council of Economic and Development Affairs (CEDA), Saudi Gazette reported. Minister of Industry and Mineral Resources Bandar Alkhorayef said that the cabinet's decision to revoke the financial levy for expatriate fees for industrial workers will enhance sustainable industrial development in the Kingdom. Terming it an extension of continuous support to the industrial sector under its Vision 2030, the minister pointed out that it will contribute to enhancing the global competitiveness of Saudi industry and increasing the reach and distribution of non-oil exports in various global markets. Under its ambitious Vision 2030, Riyadh intends to diversify its economy independent of oil trade. The minister pointed out that the fresh move would attract more quality investments besides reducing the operating costs in factories. It will enable the industries to expand, grow, and increase their production, and accelerate the adoption of modern business models by industrial establishments, such as automation solutions, artificial intelligence, and advanced manufacturing technologies, he added. Saudi Arabia remained Pakistan's largest source of remittances, with overseas Pakistanis sending \$753 million in November, followed by the United Arab Emirates at \$675 million. — APP

Azerbaijan,  
European  
Union explore  
bilateral  
relations

## DNA

BAKU: Speaker of Azerbaijan's Milli Majlis Sahiba Gafarova met with Marijana Kujundžić, Head of the European Union (EU) Delegation to Azerbaijan. The meeting focused on Azerbaijan-EU relations. Both sides hailed the positive momentum observed in bilateral ties during 2025, including reciprocal visits and high-level meetings. They emphasized the significance of discussions between President of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev and António Costa, President of the European Council, as well as Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission, in advancing various aspects of the bilateral agenda. Marijana Kujundžić congratulated Azerbaijan on the progress achieved in the peace process with Armenia, describing it as a historic milestone. She noted that these advancements are significant not only for the region and continent but also for the global arena.

Pakistan greatly values  
relations with Bahrain

Ambassador of the Kingdom of Bahrain, Mr Mohamed Ebrahim Mohamed Abdul Qader, called on President Asif Ali Zardari at Aiwan-e-Sadr

## DNA

ISLAMABAD: Ambassador of the Kingdom of Bahrain, Mr Mohamed Ebrahim Mohamed Abdul Qader, called on President Asif Ali Zardari at Aiwan-e-Sadr. The President said Pakistan greatly values its close and fraternal relations with Bahrain, rooted in shared religion and culture. In the backdrop of Prime Minister's recent visit to Bahrain he said the warm welcome and gracious hospitality extended to him reflected the depth of ties between the two brotherly countries. President Zardari recalled that Prime Minister Muhammad Shehbaz Sharif had invited the Bahraini leadership, including His Majesty the King, His Royal Highness the Crown Prince and His Royal Highness the Deputy Crown Prince, to visit Pakistan, and said Pakistan looks forward to hosting them. He appreciated His Majesty the King of Bahrain's gracious acceptance of the invitation to visit Pakistan. The President congratulated Bahrain on its election to the United Nations Security Council for the 2026-2027 term and thanked the Kingdom for its solidarity and support following the recent terrorist incidents in Pakistan. Highlighting economic cooperation, the President said Pakistan



is keen to strengthen trade and investment ties with Bahrain and welcomes efforts to enhance bilateral trade and investment. He invited Bahraini investors to explore opportunities in priority sectors, including food security, IT and tourism.

The President expressed appreciation for the Pakistani community in Bahrain, noting their positive contribution to Bahrain's economy and their role in supporting Pakistan through remittances. He thanked the Kingdom for the respect and opportunities

extended to over 100,000 Pakistanis and conveyed gratitude for His Majesty's generous pardoning of Pakistani prisoners. Leader of the House in the Senate, Senator Shery Rehman, and Senator Saleem Mandviwala also attended the meeting.

In White House speech,  
Trump highlights  
victories amid sinking  
approval ratings

"Eleven months ago, I inherited a mess, and I'm fixing it," says Trump in his opening remarks

In a rare evening address from the White House, US President Donald Trump boasted on Wednesday of his accomplishments and blamed his Democratic predecessor for soaring consumer prices as his party braces for a tough midterm election next year. "Eleven months ago, I inherited a mess, and I'm fixing it," Trump said in a speech that lasted less than 20 minutes and was delivered at rapid-fire pace. The Republican president, who regularly complains that he does not get credit for his accomplishments, offered few new policy initiatives to address high costs. Instead, he placed blame at the feet of former President Joe Biden, previous trade deals, immigrants and what he described as a corrupt system. The Republican president, who regularly complains that he does not get credit for his accomplishments, touted his administration's work this year on a range of issues from reducing border crossings to bringing down prices of some goods. Trump announced his administration would send a "warrior dividend" of \$1,776 to 1.45 million US service members in the coming week. — Agencies

Senator highlights digital  
banking, financial inclusion

## MAHNOOR ANSAR

ISLAMABAD: Minister for Finance and Revenue Senator Muhammad Aurangzeb on Thursday said that the national drive towards digitization has gathered strong momentum, including at the highest level and that clear performance targets are being pursued through a co-ordinated approach across key pillars covering digital infrastructure, payment systems and rails and digitization of government-related payments. He stated this while, talking to a delegation comprising of Douglas Feagin, President Ant International and Senior Vice President, Ant Group; Irfan Wahab Khan, Chairman, Easypaisa Digital Bank; Jahabzeb Khan, President and Chief Executive Officer, Easypaisa Digital Bank, said a press release. The meeting focused on accelerating Pakistan's transition towards a cashless and digitally enabled economy, with particular emphasis on expand-

ing financial inclusion, strengthening digital payments and leveraging technology to widen access to formal financial services for individuals and small businesses across the country. The Finance Minister noted that policy coordination and implementation have been strengthened through high-level ownership to ensure that cross-cutting decisions are taken swiftly and executed effectively, enabling faster progress in broadening digital acceptance and reducing reliance on cash. During the discussion, Senator Aurangzeb emphasized the role that digital banks and fintech platforms can play in enabling inclusive credit and targeted lending, including for under-served segments such as small farmers. He noted that agriculture lending needs to reach a broader base of smallholders and that scalable digital platforms can help improve outreach and sustainability, particularly in initiatives aimed at expanding access to finance. He also highlighted the importance of

diversifying the investor base for domestic public debt and reducing friction costs in distribution by facilitating retail participation through digital platforms, enabling citizens to invest in secure and liquid government securities through accessible channels. Speaking on the occasion, Douglas Feagin conveyed appreciation for the opportunity to engage with the Finance Minister and reaffirmed Ant International and Ant Group's commitment to supporting Pakistan's digital economy agenda by bringing global experience, technology capabilities, and operational know-how gained across Asia to help expand cashless payment adoption and digital financial services. He highlighted that the licensing of Easypaisa as a digital bank presents an important opportunity to accelerate capability building, deepen outreach, and advance the shift towards digital transactions, while acknowledging that cash remains prevalent and that sustained efforts are required to expand nationwide adoption.

EU holds  
crunch  
summit on  
Russian  
asset plan  
for Ukraine

BRUSSELS: EU leaders gather in Brussels Thursday for a make-or-break summit on using frozen Russian assets for Ukraine — with key player Belgium under pressure to drop its opposition. The 27-nation bloc is scrambling to strengthen Kyiv's hand as Russia's war drags towards the four-year mark and US President Donald Trump pushes for a quick deal to end the fighting. Officials have insisted the talks will last as long as it takes to hammer out an agreement, saying both Ukraine's survival and Europe's credibility are at stake. "If we do not succeed in this, then the European Union's ability to act will be severely damaged for years," German Chancellor Friedrich Merz warned this week. "We will show the world that we are incapable of standing together and acting at such a crucial moment in our history."

The EU estimates Ukraine, whose president Volodymyr Zelensky will join the meeting, needs an extra 135 billion euros (\$159 billion) to stay afloat over the next two years — with the cash crunch set to start in April.

In a bid to plug the yawning gap, the European Commission, the EU's executive, has put forward a plan to tap some 210 billion euros of Russian central bank assets frozen in the bloc.

The scheme — which would initially provide Kyiv 90 billion euros over two years — involves an untested financial switcheroo under which the funds are loaned to the EU, which then loans them on to Ukraine. Kyiv would then only pay back the "reparations loan" once the Kremlin coughs up for all the damage it has wrought. Belgium, where international deposit organisation Euroclear holds the vast bulk of the funds, has been firmly opposed due to fears it could face crippling financial and legal reprisals from Moscow. Russia has already fired a shot across the bows by announcing it was suing Euroclear. — Agencies

No cheap contraceptives as  
International Monetary Fund turns  
down request to abolish 18% GST

Lender stresses that such issues can only be discussed in upcoming budget for 2026-27

ISLAMABAD: Despite having one of the highest population growth rates in the world and clear directives from Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) has refused to grant permission to abolish the 18% General Sales Tax (GST) on contraceptives immediately. The News reported on Thursday. As a result, condoms will remain expensive in the country. The IMF has flatly rejected the Federal Board of Revenue's (FBR) proposal and stated that such issues can only be discussed in the upcoming budget. Top official sources told the publication that the IMF has outrightly turned down the FBR's request to withdraw GST on contraceptives, effectively blocking the prime minister's August 2025 instruction to make birth control products affordable and widely accessible across the country. There is, therefore, no immediate possibility of reducing the prices of condoms, despite Pakistan's surging population. They said the prime minister had directed the FBR in August 2025 to take up the matter with the IMF, but months of engagement yielded no breakthrough. During a recent meeting at the PM Office, it was disclosed that the FBR had failed

to secure the IMF's consent despite repeated attempts. According to officials, the FBR formally approached the IMF's headquarters in Washington via email, seeking deliberation on abolishing GST on contraceptives. The FBR estimated the revenue impact of the proposed relief at Rs400 to 600 million, but the IMF's Fiscal Affairs Department showed little appetite for the proposal. A virtual meeting was subsequently held, in which Pakistani authorities conveyed the prime minister's wish to abolish GST on condoms with immediate effect. The IMF side rejected the demand, stating that no tax relief could be granted midway through the fiscal year, particularly when the FBR was already struggling to meet its revised revenue target of Rs13.979 trillion — down from Rs14.13 trillion — for the fiscal year 2025-26. IMF staff in the closed-door discussion made it clear that any such tax relief could only be considered in the next budget for 2026-27. The Pakistani side also raised proposals to reduce GST on sanitary pads and baby diapers. However, officials said the IMF strongly opposed these measures as well, citing the large revenue stakes involved, particularly in baby diapers where the tax base runs close to Rs100 billion. The IMF further argued that granting tax relief on contraceptives or diapers could complicate enforcement for the FBR by encouraging smuggling of these items, the sources added. — DNA

Australian PM vows to stamp  
out hatred as nation mourns  
youngest Bondi Beach victim

"Australians are shocked and angry. I am angry," says Prime Minister Anthony Albanese

SYDNEY: Australia's prime minister vowed to stamp out extremism on Thursday as the nation mourned the youngest victim of the Bondi Beach shooting, a 10-year-old girl remembered as "our little ray of sunshine". Father-and-son gunmen are accused of firing into crowds at a beach-side Jewish festival on Sunday evening, killing 15 in an onslaught authorities linked to "Daesh ideology". Prime Minister Anthony Albanese promised a sweeping crackdown to banish the "evil of antisemitism from our society". "Australians are shocked and angry. I am angry. It is clear we need to do more to combat this evil scourge," he told reporters. This included new powers to target extremist preachers and to refuse or cancel visas for those who spread "hate and division". Australia would develop a regime for listing organisations whose leaders engage in hate speech, he said. "Serious vilification" based on race would become a federal offence. As the prime minister spoke, mourners gathered for the funeral of 10-year-old Matilda, the youngest victim slain in the attack. "Matilda is our little ray of sunshine," said the rabbi leading the service, reading out a message from her school. "She is genuinely the most kind, caring and compassionate young girl, who brightened everyone's day with her radiant smile and infectious laugh." Black-clad mourners clutched bouquets of lilies as they filed into the funeral at Sydney's Chevra Kadisha, a Jewish society responsible for customary burial rites. Others held balloons emblazoned with pictures of bumblebees, a reference to the young girl's nickname "Matilda Bee". Photos taken in the hours before the first bullets were fired showed the young girl stroking animals at a petting zoo and smiling after having her face painted. Matilda's family — who have asked media not to publish their last name — left Ukraine to settle in Australia before the Russian invasion. "I couldn't imagine I would lose my daughter here. It's just a nightmare," mother Valentyna told reporters ahead of the funeral. "It just stays here and here, and I can't get it out," she said, pointing to her head and heart. Her father, Michael, said they chose her name as a nod to Australia, where the beloved folk song "Waltzing Matilda" is sung as an unofficial national anthem. "We came here from Ukraine, and Matilda was our firstborn here in Australia," he said earlier this week. — APP

LNG surplus resolution draws  
praise from the World Bank

## SAIFULLAH ANSAR

ISLAMABAD: Federal Minister for Petroleum, Mr. Ali Perwaiz Malik, held a meeting with the World Bank Country Director for Pakistan, Ms. Bolormaa Amgaabazar, to discuss ongoing and future reforms in Pakistan's energy sector, with a particular focus on gas sector sustainability. During the meeting, Ms. Bolormaa Amgaabazar appreciated the Petroleum Division for successfully resolving the long-standing LNG issue. She noted that resolving the



LNG challenge was not an easy task and commended the Minister for personally owning the sustainability of the gas sector. She reaffirmed the World Bank's continued support to Petroleum Division in advancing gas sector reforms and expressed willingness to work collaboratively on reforms in the LPG sector & capacity building of OGRA. She noted that the World Bank is already working closely with the Ministry to develop a comprehensive roadmap for gas sector reforms, including measures aimed at improving the performance and efficiency / unbundling of the Sui gas companies. Federal Minister Ali Perwaiz Malik thanked the World Bank Country Director for acknowledging the government's efforts in resolving the LNG issue. He emphasized that input from international partners such as the World Bank is highly valuable in shaping effective and sustainable policy reforms. The Minister reiterated the government's strong commitment to ensuring long-term sustainability of the gas sector through structural and institutional reforms. The Minister also appreciated the World Bank's analytical reports / work, describing it as deep, strategic, and forward-looking rather than merely tactical diagnostics. He further highlighted that improving the Air Quality Index (AQI) remains a key priority for the government, adding that efforts are underway to enhance fuel standards, which will ultimately require upgrading Pakistan's refineries.

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