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Pakistan greatly values relations with France: envoy

Detailed News On Page-08

Aga Khan Varsity honors Princess Zahra Aga Khan

Detailed News On Page-06

Air defence supplies are insufficient

Detailed News On Page-01

PM gets invitation

Pakistan invited to join US-led Gaza peace board

Mr. Andrabi underscored that Pakistan's engagement with the Board of Peace will be guided by its commitment to multilateralism and international law. He noted that the government views this development as an opportunity to contribute meaningfully to regional stability and to amplify the voices of those suffering in Gaza

ANSAR M. BHATTI

ISLAMABAD: The Ministry of Foreign Affairs has confirmed that the Prime Minister of Pakistan has received an official invitation from the President of the United States to join the newly constituted Board of Peace on Gaza. The announcement was made by the Spokesperson of the Ministry, Mr. Tahir Andrabi, during a press briefing in Islamabad on Sunday. Responding to media queries, Mr. Andrabi stated that Pakistan will remain actively engaged with international efforts aimed at ensuring peace and security in Gaza. He emphasized that Islamabad's position on the Palestine issue has been consistent and principled, rooted in the framework of United Nations resolutions and the right of the Palestinian people to self-determination. "Pakistan will continue to support initiatives that lead to a lasting solution to the Palestine question," the Spokesperson remarked. The invitation from Washington comes at a critical juncture, as the humanitarian situation in Gaza remains dire following years of conflict, blockade, and repeated escalations. The Board of Peace on Gaza is expected to bring together key international stakeholders to coordinate diplomatic, humanitarian, and reconstruction efforts. Pakistan's inclusion reflects recognition of its longstanding advocacy for Palestinian rights at global forums, including the UN General Assembly, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), and the Non Aligned Movement. Historically, Pakistan has maintained unwavering support for the Palestinian cause. Successive governments have called for the establishment of an independent Palestinian state with pre-1967 borders and Al Quds Al Sharif as its capital. Pakistan has also consistently condemned Israeli military actions in

Continued on Page 06

Israeli PM objects to Gaza peace panel

DNA

TEL AVIV: Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu convened a meeting of his ruling coalition partners on Sunday after objecting to the composition of a Gaza advisory panel formed by the White House, according to an official and media reports. The White House announced this week the setting up of a "Gaza Executive Board," which would operate under a broader so-called "Board of Peace" to be chaired by US President Donald Trump as part of his 20-point plan to end the war in Gaza. The executive board, described as having an advisory role, includes Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan and Qatari diplomat Ali Al-Thawadi, alongside other regional and international officials. Late on Saturday, Netanyahu's office objected to the composition of the executive board. "The announcement regarding the composition of the Gaza Executive Board, which is subordinate to the Board of Peace, was not coordinated with Israel and runs contrary to its policy," the office of Netanyahu said. "The prime minister has instructed the foreign affairs minister to contact the US secretary of state on this matter." It did not explain the reason for its objection,

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KARACHI: Bystanders gathered in shock outside the charred remains of Gul Plaza after a devastating blaze claimed six lives. The tragedy has once again raised serious questions about public safety standards and the effectiveness of building control mechanisms in Sindh. —APP

Policeman martyred in Bannu

Following the incident, a heavy contingent of police reached the scene, cordoned off the area, and launched a search operation

NEWS DESK

BANNU: A target killing incident occurred in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's Bannu district on Sunday, where unknown assailants riding a motorcycle opened fire on a policeman, killing him on the spot. According to a police statement, the incident occurred in the district's Mamma Khel area, which falls within the jurisdiction of the Haved Police Station. It added that the martyred policeman was deployed at the Mazanga police checkpoint when he was attacked. District Police Officer (DPO) Yasir Afridi said, "The martyred policeman, identified as Iqbal, was in his native village of

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Six dead, several missing in Karachi Gul plaza blaze

Firefighter loses life during rescue operation; multiple building portions collapse; plaza houses around 1,200 shops

NAZIR SIYAL

KARACHI: A deadly blaze at Karachi's Gul Plaza shopping mall has killed at least six people, with officials warning on Sunday that the toll may rise as several remain trapped inside. The fire, at the shopping mall, which houses around 1,200 shops, reportedly broke out at a flower shop on Saturday and had yet to be extinguished more than 16 hours later. Firefighters stated that the lack of ventilation and the closure of windows at the mall — which spans over 1.75 acres, roughly the size of a football field — has led to smoke filling the interior of the building, hindering rescue efforts. Pakistan Navy, Rescue 1122, and

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SAIFULLAH ANSAR

ISLAMABAD: Prime Minister Muhammad Shehbaz Sharif, Sunday expressed grief over the fire incident at Gul Plaza in Karachi. The prime minister shared the grief with the bereaved families of those who lost their lives in the inferno. The prime minister directed that all possible measures should be taken to

Continued on Page 06

Briefs

Zelensky says air defence supplies very small

NEWS DESK

LONDON: President Zelensky has called Ukraine's air defence supplies "insufficient", having revealed several systems were "without missiles" until Friday morning. "I can say this openly because today I have those missiles," the president said, adding that Ukraine had received a "substantial package" earlier in the day. His comments follow days of intense Russian bombardment of Ukraine's energy infrastructure, leaving thousands of people without heating and electricity during a bitterly cold winter. Schools in Kyiv will shut until February, the capital's mayor has announced, as the city continues to face severe energy shortages amid temperatures which have dropped as low as -19C.

Another bridge blown up in N. Waziristan

DNA

NORTH WAZIRISTAN: Another key bridge was blown up using explosives in the Mir Ali tehsil of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's North Waziristan district, causing severe difficulties for residents and triggering widespread anger. According to the police, the explosion occurred in Khushehali (Makina) village of Mir Ali, where unidentified assailants carried out the blast late at night, destroying the bridge and cutting off the area's land connectivity with nearby settlements, markets and agricultural lands. Soon after the incident, police and security forces cordoned off the area and launched an investigation.

Tajikistan says four terrorists neutralized on Afghan border

Tajik security services say terrorists killed after refusing to put down weapons

NEWS DESK

DUSHANBE: Tajikistan officials on Sunday said they "neutralised" four "terrorists" who crossed over from neighbouring Afghanistan in an area where deadly incidents have been on the rise in recent weeks, state media reported. Tajikistan, in Central Asia, shares a mountainous border with Afghanistan and has had tense relations with the Afghan Taliban regime. According to Tajik security services cited by the state-owned Khorovar news agency, "four terrorists were neutralised" after they refused to put down arms in the southern Khatlon region. Tajik authorities have reported at least five deadly incidents on the mountainous border, which is some 1,350 kilometres (840 miles) long, since November. An AFP count using official data found that 16 people have been killed in total. These include Tajik border guards, Chi-

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TTAP chief Achakzai proposes 'national govt'

Power should be handed to winning party after elections, says Mahmood Khan Achakzai

JAN ALI LEGHRI

HYDERABAD: Tehreek Tahaffuz-e-Aiyyen Pakistan (TTAP) chief Mahmood Khan Achakzai has proposed the formation of a national government for four months to hold transparent elections, after which power should be transferred to the winning party. Speaking to media representatives after meeting Qaumi Awami Tehreek (QAT) chief Ayaz Latif Palijo at his residence in Hyderabad on Saturday, Achakzai said the current rulers lack the capacity to govern and called for a three-day roundtable conference involving all stakeholders to put the country back on track, The News reported. Former National Assembly speaker Asad Qaiser and Majlis Wahdat-e-Muslimeen leader Allama Raja Nasir Abbas were also part of the delegation. He proposed that the national government should be comprised of five major political parties. He said the TTAP was formed to resist attacks on the Constitution, adding that all concerns raised by the opposi-

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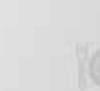
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FIA foils illegal foreign travel bid, offloads two

ISLAMABAD: Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) Immigration carried out a major operation at Islamabad International Airport and offloaded two passengers attempting to travel abroad through fraudulent means. An FIA official told APP on Sunday that the intercepted passengers were identified as Hasnain Azhar and Muhammad Atif. According to the official, Hasnain Azhar attempted to travel to Portugal using a fake resident card, which was detected during immigration clearance. Meanwhile, Muhammad Atif was found to be in contact with illegal travel agents in an attempt to reach Europe through unlawful channels. The official said both passengers were immediately offloaded and shifted to the Anti-Human Trafficking Circle (AHTC), Islamabad, for further legal action and identification of the agents involved. He added that further investigation is underway to trace facilitators and dismantle the network involved in document fraud and illegal migration attempts. FIA Immigration reaffirmed its commitment to maintaining strict vigilance at airports to curb human smuggling, document fraud and illegal travel, and warned that no leniency would be shown to those involved in such activities.—APP

Sahulat Bazaars ease inflation, generate employment: CM

LAHORE: Punjab Chief Minister Maryam Nawaz Sharif's flagship Sahulat Bazaar initiative is delivering affordable, quality food items to the public, while generating employment opportunities for thousands of people across the province. According to a briefing given to the Chief Minister, here on Sunday, 46 Sahulat Bazaars established across Punjab have so far provided decent employment to 9,200 individuals, benefiting nearly 55,000 family members. The project has emerged as a dual-impact initiative by easing inflationary pressures on consumers and creating sustainable livelihoods for the unemployed.—APP

COURT NOTICE

IN THE COURT SHAMAS AHMED JUDGE CIVIL/FAMILY COURT RAWALPINDI Sui For Dissolution Marriage on the basis of Khullah Kiran Nisar Versus Yasir Abbasi Notice to Yasir Abbasi s/o Fayyaz Muhammad Abbasi R/o House No. 348, Street No. 9, Mohallah Sadqabad Rawalpindi. The service through ordinary means is difficult, so you are informed to attend the court personally, through counsel or attorney on 19-12-2025 at 9 am avoid ex parte proceeding.

Greenwich University honors Senator Sarmad Ali with Doctorate degree

The convocation ceremony was attended by Governor Sindh Kamran Tessori, Chancellor Greenwich University Seema Mughal, senior government officials, academicians, diplomats, and graduating students as well as their parents

DNA

KARACHI: Senator Sarmad Ali, Managing Director of the Jang Group and President of the All Pakistan Newspapers Society (APNS), was conferred an Honorary Doctorate in Media Innovation and Public Leadership by Greenwich University at its convocation ceremony held at the Governor's House, Karachi. The honorary degree was awarded in recognition of his distinguished services to Pakistan's media industry and his contribution to strengthening media institutions, promoting ethical journalism, and advancing innovation in communication. In his acceptance speech, Senator Ali said he was "deeply honoured and sincerely grateful" for the recognition, describing it as "an acknowledgement not only of an individual journey, but of a lifetime spent in an industry that shapes ideas, institutions, and societies." He said the award recognized his "modest contribution to the field of media and communications that today stands at the intersection of technology, democracy, culture, and public trust." Reflecting on Pakistan's media landscape, he described it as an industry marked by "extraordinary creativity, resilience, and courage," often operating under political

pressure, commercial constraints, and security risks. "To serve in such an environment is not merely a career choice; it is an honour," he remarked.

Paying tribute to his mentors and colleagues, Senator Ali said that no meaningful journey is undertaken alone, and acknowledged the guidance of his mentors including Javed Jabbar, Syed Naseer Haider, S. H. Hashmi, Iqbal Mir, Hameed Haroon, and Mir Shakil-ur-Rahman. He also credited his colleagues at the Jang/Geo Group, noting that "performance is a team sport." Emphasizing the ethical responsibilities of media leadership, he said, "Innovation without integrity is hollow, and influence without accountability is dangerous," adding that the duty to inform truthfully, criticize fairly, and represent voices honestly remains sacred. Referring to Pakistan's emerging generation of public leadership, Senator Ali said it was encouraging to see leaders "speak the language of inclusion, diplomacy, climate responsibility, and democratic continuity," and cited Chairman Bilawal Bhutto Zardari as an example of this generational shift. Addressing graduating students, he urged them to remain anchored in ethics while embracing change. Referring to the age of artificial intelligence and rapid technological transformation, he said uncertainty should not paralyse



young people but provoke them to "question established models, challenge inherited assumptions,

and break moulds that no longer serve progress."

The convocation ceremony was

attended by Governor Sindh Kamran Tessori, Chancellor Greenwich University Seema Mughal, senior

government officials, academicians, diplomats, and graduating students as well as their parents.

Snow spells turn 'Neelum Valley' into must-visit destination

ISLAMABAD: 'Neelum Valley' of Azad Kashmir becomes a dreamlike winter paradise as glistening snowflakes settle on forests, lakes and trails with snow spells blanketing its hills in pristine white, drawing tourists from across the country to witness its dramatic beauty and snowy charm. Neelum Valley of Azad Kashmir is increasingly emerging as a top winter getaway as snow blankets its hills and lakes, turning the region into a stunning winter spectacle where glistening snowflakes settle over forests, trails and water. recent local media report noted that the Valley's snow-covered mountains and pristine landscapes are drawing tourists from across the country, each eager to experience its serene winter views and snowy

charm. Families and travel groups are sharing memorable experiences, with many describing their visit to Neelum Valley as peaceful and unforgettable. An elderly family group commented that "traveling here together has been wonderful; the serene valleys and gentle streams make it a memorable experience for all generations," adding to the valley's appeal as a destination that offers both adventure and relaxation for winter tourists. Local authorities are stepping up efforts to maintain safety and preserve the natural beauty of the area amid the peak winter season. "This winter snow has been a blessing for us as tourists are coming in great numbers and our guesthouses and shops are more lively than ever." a local shopkeeper from Neelum Valley. "We love seeing visitors enjoy the

snow on trails and hills winter is hard but this season brings life and smiles to our valley," a local resident talking about the winter crowd. "It is amazing to see snow-covered forests and lakes, the views are unforgettable and every snowflake feels like a tiny jewel on the mountains," a tourist visiting Ratti Gali Lake commented. The Pakistani Meteorological Department has reported that the current snow spell in the valley is expected to continue for the next few days. "The snow will intensify over the coming days, which may cause road disruptions and travel difficulties," said a department official. The Met Department has advised tourists to take extra precautions, particularly when traveling along mountain routes, and to stay updated on weather forecasts.—APP

Unity vital to defeat hostile designs against Pakistan

RAWALPINDI: Ulama and religious scholars on Sunday underscored national unity, religious harmony and collective resolve alongside the armed forces as essential to defeating hostile designs against Pakistan at a Paigham-e-Pakistan conference held in Rawalpindi. The conference, themed "Pulpit and prayer niche: a violence-free society, religious harmony, victory of the Battle of Truth, national unity and the promotion of Paigham-e-Pakistan," was presided over by Chairman, Central Ruet-e-Hilal Committee, Maulana Syed Abdul Khair Azad. Addressing the gathering, Maulana Azad said Pakistan, founded on the Kalima Tayaba, required unity, stability and national cohesion to safeguard its security and future. A source of national pride, he said the entire nation stood shoulder to shoulder with its armed forces for the country's defence and protection. He said the armed forces, under the leadership of Field Marshal General Syed Asim Munir, had achieved decisive success in the Battle of Truth, adding that the outcome had enhanced Pakistan's honour and standing across the world. The success, he added, was not only Pakistan's achievement but a victory for the entire Muslim Ummah. Maulana Azad said the nation remained united for Pakistan's security, defence and sovereignty, and paid tribute to the enduring sacrifices of the armed forces. He said the trust reposed by Muslim leaders in Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif and Pakistan's military leadership reflected confidence in Pakistan and affection for the country across the Muslim world. Referring to regional and international developments, he said Pakistan had been bestowed, among 57 Islamic countries, with the honour of protecting the holy sites, and described the Pakistan-Saudi Arabia defence agreement as a guarantor of security for the Muslim Ummah. He said remarks by Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman referring to himself as Pakistan's ambassador were a matter of pride and honour for the country.—APP

CCPL pushes for stronger cyber defenses

ISLAMABAD: The Common Criteria Pakistan Lab (CCPL) is participating in ITCN Asia Lahore from January 17 to 19, 2026, spotlighting the urgent need to strengthen Pakistan's IT and cybersecurity ecosystem through internationally recognized security evaluations. During the event, CCPL, being the first & only NTTISB & PNAC accredited lab in Pakistan, is showcasing its role in

enhancing trust, resilience, and compliance within the national digital infrastructure. By conducting Common Criteria-based security evaluations, CCPL is contributing to the development of secure and reliable IT products and systems aligned with global standards. CCPL representative emphasized that robust security evaluation frameworks are essential for safeguarding digital transformation initia-

tives and protecting sensitive information across public and private sectors. The lab is actively sensitizing industry leaders, policymakers, and technology stakeholders on the importance of adopting secure-by-design principles and evaluated technologies. The representative also highlighted that it is working for the cause of national cyber security since IT products & services secu-

rity evaluations as per Pakistan Security Standards, implemented in 2023, are going to be mandatory in 2028. Through its participation at ITCN Asia Lahore, CCPL reaffirmed its commitment to contributing to cutting-edge innovation and excellence in cybersecurity. The organization continues to play a pivotal role in nurturing a secure

technology ecosystem, ensuring the future of IT in Pakistan through comprehensive security evaluations and international best practices. ITCN Asia remains one of the region's premier technology exhibitions, bringing together industry leaders, innovators, and experts to discuss emerging trends and challenges in information technology and cybersecurity.—DNA



Investment possible in KP despite challenges, says Afridi

PESHAWAR: Chief Executive Officer of Markhor Group of Companies, Nabeel Afridi, has said that sincere efforts to promote Pak-China trade will yield positive results. He expressed confidence that the CPEC project will not only prove beneficial for Pakistan's economy but will also help eliminate unemployment in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and bring prosperity to the province. He shared these views during his visit to the Chinese Cultural Center, China Window, here on Sunday. During the visit, he toured various galleries of the Chinese Cultural Center and showed keen interest in them. Nabeel Afridi said that the brotherly neighboring country, China, has always safeguarded Pakistan's interests. He added that Pak-China friendship is widely acknowledged because China also wants to improve Pakistan's economic conditions, with

CPEC being a major example of this commitment. He said that the perception that investment is not possible in Peshawar and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa due to the law and order situation is incorrect. Rather, the reality is that industrialists and investors need to play a positive and constructive role while facing challenges. Appreciating the initiatives at China Window for teaching the Chinese language and providing free scholarships, Nabeel Afridi said that Markhor Group of Companies will extend full support to male and female students from Peshawar and across the province who wish to pursue education in China, by facilitating their admissions to Chinese universities and colleges. Congratulating the people of both countries on the occasion of the 75th anniversary of Pak-China friendship, Nabeel Afridi, a pride of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's investment

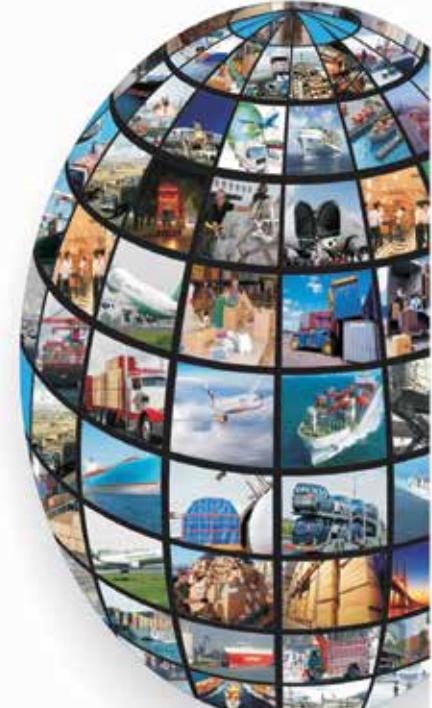
community, said that China is Pakistan's time-tested friend. He added that at a time when Pakistan needed a sincere ally, China has always fulfilled its role as a great friend, bringing the people of both countries closer together. He expressed confidence that Pak-China friendship will grow even stronger in the future. He also termed the second phase of CPEC as extremely important for Pakistan's economic development, stating that while this phase will bring transformation in technology, new industries established in Special Economic Zones will provide employment to millions of people. Praising China Window, Nabeel Afridi said that after visiting the center, it feels as if one has arrived in a city of China. He described China Window as a remarkable hub of Pak-China friendship.—APP

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National Days and Armed Forces Days

JANUARY

Jan 01 / CUBA Revolution Day

Jan 01 / Palestine Palestine Revolution Day

Jan 01 / Sudan National Day

Jan 04 / Myanmar Independence Day

Jan 06 / Iraq Armed Forces Day

Jan 12 / Tanzania Armed Forces Day

Jan 14 / Uzbekistan Armed Forces Day

Jan 15 / Nigeria Armed Forces Day

Jan 20 / Mali Armed Forces Day

Jan 20 / Laos Armed Forces Day

Jan 25 / Thailand Armed Forces Day

Jan 26 / Australia National Day

Jan 26 / India Republic Day

Turkish Airlines.....8494949



Emergency

Rescue (Police).....15
Bomb Disposal.....15
Fire Services Rawalpindi/Islamabad.....1122 & 16
Emergency Ambulance.....1122
& Rescue Services.....445112
Motorway Police.....9266044
Motorway Police.....9270601-20
Women Police Stations
Islamabad.....9222596
Rawalpindi.....9270601-20



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PIA Cargo.....9280979
Railway Inquiry.....117
Railway Exchange.....9270831-5
WASA Rawalpindi.....5555489
CAA.....9281092



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MH.....561116
Cantt Hospital.....9270907-11
DHQ.....5556311-4
RGH.....9290301-7
Holy Family.....9290322-7
PIMS.....9261170-79
Polyclinic.....9218300-09
Shifa International 4603666



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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

IWCCI Int'l moot opens to boost women-led businesses

President of the Islamabad Women Chamber of Commerce and Industry Samina Fazil said the growing number of Women Chambers across the country reflects progress but also creates new responsibilities

DNA

ISLAMABAD: The 4th All Pakistan Women Chambers Presidents International Conference opened in Islamabad bringing together presidents and senior leaders from more than 30 Women Chambers of Commerce and Industry for a two-day forum focused on strengthening women's economic institutions and entrepreneurship. The conference is being hosted by the Islamabad Women Chamber of Commerce and Industry in collaboration with the Azerbaijan Pakistan Joint Chamber of Commerce and Industry. Special Assistant to the Prime Minister for Industries and Production Haroon Akhtar Khan is scheduled to inaugurate the event. Participants include women chamber leaders, policymakers, regulators, representatives of financial institutions, diplomatic missions, development partners and private sector stakeholders. The forum aims



to promote dialogue, shared learning and practical solutions to challenges faced by women led businesses across Pakistan.

Organizers said the central focus of the conference is institutional capacity building of Women Chambers, enabling them to more effectively support women entrepreneurs at a time when women owned businesses are expanding in number and scope. Key themes under discussion include regulatory and DGTO compliance, leadership development, resource mobilization, financial and digital inclusion, and international market access. President of the Islamabad Women Chamber of Commerce and Industry Samina Fazil said the growing number of Women Chambers across the country reflects progress but also creates new responsibilities. She said that with more than 30 Women Chambers now operating, many of them recently established, there is a need to ensure they have the tools, knowledge and institutional strength to serve women entrepreneurs effectively. Ahsan Zafar Bakhtawari, Patron in Chief of the Azerbaijan Pakistan Joint Chamber of Commerce and Industry, highlighted the export

potential of women owned enterprises and stressed the importance of global connectivity. He said international exposure and institutional support are critical for enabling women led businesses to access regional and global markets, particularly through partnerships with countries such as Azerbaijan. The conference programme includes expert led sessions and panel discussions with regulators, bankers, development organisations and private sector representatives. A dedicated Pakistan Azerbaijan Women Entrepreneurship Dialogue has also been scheduled to encourage cross border collaboration and knowledge exchange. Organizers said the conference aims to strengthen coordination among Women Chambers, encourage policy engagement and reinforce the contribution of women led enterprises to Pakistan's economic growth and export development. A networking gala dinner will also be held to recognise partners and promote further engagement among stakeholders.

CDA launches operation against illegal advertisements

ISLAMABAD: A comprehensive operation has been launched to rid the Federal Capital, Islamabad, of illegal advertisement boards and signboards. In line with the direction of Chairman Capital Development Authority (CDA) and Chief Commissioner Islamabad, Muhammad Ali Randhawa, a large-scale cleanliness campaign is underway across the city against illegally placed advertisements, signboards and wall-chalking. The primary objective of this campaign is to transform Islamabad into a well-organized Capital while preserving its natural and scenic beauty. According to details, under this initiative by MCI and CDA, not only are illegal advertisements

being removed from the walls of commercial areas and Marakaz, but also from residential areas. Furthermore, unauthorized signboards along roadsides and advertisement materials on poles are being permanently removed. Chief Officer MCI, Dr. Anam Fatima, said that legal proceedings have been initiated against those who install illegal advertisements. She said the process of registering FIRs is ongoing against individuals and groups who advertise without permission from the relevant authorities, so that action can be taken against such elements in accordance with the law. Chief Officer MCI further said that all trade unions and the business commu-

nity are being taken into confidence in this regard. She further said that all trade unions and the business community are highly appreciative of this commendable step by CDA. On this occasion, citizens of the Federal Capital Islamabad said that this operation will not only enhance the aesthetic beauty of the city but will also protect citizens from the unauthorized advertisements of fraudulent and deceitful elements. MCI administration has appealed to the citizens of the Federal Capital Islamabad to fully cooperate in such initiatives and to immediately inform the relevant authorities in case of any illegal advertisement or signboard.—APP

Kohistani urges Achakzai to prioritize country's interest

ISLAMABAD: Minister of State for Religious Affairs Khal Das Kohistani on Sunday called on opposition leader Mahmood Khan Achakzai to take an active role in dialogue under the constitutional framework, stressing that NFC-related reforms can only be introduced with the backing of all opposition parties, notably the PPP. While speaking to a local news channel, the state minister said that Opposition leader Mahmood Khan Achakzai should rise above personal loyalty to Khan Sahib and play a constructive role for the welfare of the country. Kohistani further emphasized that

Achakzai needs to focus on real issues facing the nation, which required cooperation and consensus from all parties. He emphasized the importance of putting the nation's interests first and contributing positively to dialogue and consensus-building. He added that Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif has categorically offered dialogue, but if the PTI and Achakzai continue to follow Khan Sahib's instructions and fail to change their approach, no further dialogue will be possible. Kohistani stressed that meaningful discussions require a cooperative attitude from all par-

ties. Talking about NFC and other constitutional reforms, minister said that such reforms would not be possible unless all opposition parties, especially the PPP are on board. He emphasized that without convincing every party, there was no way to move forward with these important reforms. He added that once all parties were engaged and fully on board, the reforms could be implemented in a constructive and harmonious manner. Kohistani stressed that cooperation and consensus were essential for meaningful constitutional changes.—APP



ISLAMABAD: Drummers waiting for customers along the roadside in the federal capital.

Reforms implemented to strengthen food, agri governance: Ministry

ISLAMABAD: The government has started implementing comprehensive reforms to make food and agricultural governance more transparent, digital and publicly accountable, with a focus on curbing corruption, limiting discretionary powers and strengthening import and export systems, the Ministry of National Food Security and Research said here Sunday. In a statement, the ministry said that 22 out of 31 registrations, licences, certificates and other permits had been fully automated. The digitalisation drive has been implemented across six attached departments dealing with plants, animals and seeds, significantly reducing human intervention, improving traceability and minimising systemic loopholes. According to the statement, Federal Minister for National Food Security Rana Tanveer Hussain had specially

emphasized a rules-based system, verifiable decision-making and enhanced inter-agency coordination as key pillars of the reform agenda. As part of the reforms, the Department of Plant Protection has been modernised, laboratory capacity enhanced, operational controls tightened and alignment ensured with international phytosanitary standards. The objective, the ministry said, was to strengthen biosecurity and safeguard Pakistan's export credibility. The ministry has also improved import conditions for methyl bromide on scientific grounds, leading to a reduction in costs for importers. As a result, exporters of cotton, grains, pulses and other commodities are saving approximately Rs30,000 to Rs40,000 per container. In one case related to methyl bromide, a suspicious import procedure was identified through in-

ITP announces facilitation vans schedule

ISLAMABAD: Islamabad Traffic Police (ITP) has announced the deployment schedule of its facilitation vans and Police Station on Wheels at different checkpoints and locations across the federal capital from January 19 to January 25, 2026, to provide traffic and police-related services at citizens' doorsteps. An ITP official told APP that the facilitation vans will operate daily from 8:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m., offering services including learner driving permits, renewal and issuance of duplicate driving licences, character certificates and missing documents reports. On Monday (January 19), the Police Station on Wheels will be available at Zero Point Checkpoint, Srinagar Highway, while Van-II will be stationed at Faizabad Checkpoint (Faisal Avenue), Van-II at Zero Point Checkpoint, Srinagar Highway, and Van-III at Adventure Inn Checkpoint, Murree Road. On Tuesday (January 20), the Police Station on Wheels will be positioned at G-14 Checkpoint, Srinagar Highway, Van-I at Community School Checkpoint, Police Lines Headquarters, Van-II at Edopia School Checkpoint, I-8/2, and Van-III at Traffic Office Checkpoint, Faizabad. On Wednesday (January 21), the Police Station on Wheels will operate at E-9 Checkpoint, Margalla Road, Van-I at F-10 Markaz Checkpoint, Van-II at Zero Point Checkpoint, Srinagar Highway, and Van-III at Adventure Inn Checkpoint, Murree Road. On Thursday (January 22), the Police Station on Wheels will be available at G-14 Checkpoint, Srinagar Highway, Van-I at B-17 Checkpoint, Van-II at Community School Checkpoint, Police Lines Headquarters, and Van-III at Traffic Office Checkpoint, Faizabad. On Friday (January 23), the Police Station on Wheels will be stationed at Faisal Masjid Checkpoint, Van-I at Ittehad Kantha Checkpoint, Rawat, Van-II at Benazir Chowk Checkpoint, Tarnol, and Van-III at Foreign Office Checkpoint, Constitution Avenue. On Saturday (January 24), the Police Station on Wheels will operate at Zero Point Checkpoint, Srinagar Highway, Van-I at DHA Phase-II Checkpoint, Van-II at G-14 Checkpoint, Srinagar Highway, and Van-III at Bahria Town Phase-II Checkpoint. On Sunday (January 25), the Police Station on Wheels will be available at Trail-III Checkpoint, Margalla Road, Van-I at Traffic Office Checkpoint, Faizabad, Van-II at Police Lines Checkpoint, H-11, and Van-III at Islamabad Club Checkpoint.—DNA

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Saadat Hasan Manto honoured

ISLAMABAD: Renowned Pakistani writer, playwright and author Saadat Hasan Manto was remembered on his 71st death anniversary on Sunday (January 18) with media paying tribute to his lifelong contributions to the literary world. Media outlets paid homage to Saadat Hasan Manto, highlighting his contributions to literature, while fans and literary circles shared his poetry and stories on social media. Admirers expressed deep respect for his fearless writing and enduring impact, celebrating the legacy of a writer who continues to inspire generations. Saadat Hasan Manto was born on 11th May 1912 in Ludhiana, British India. Celebrated for his fearless storytelling, he wrote short stories, novels, radio plays, essays and sketches that captured the raw realities of human life with honesty, empathy and sharp social insight. His works, including Toba Tek Singh and Thanda Gosht, remain powerful examples of his ability to portray the marginalized and challenge societal norms.—APP

DG FIA reviews immigration operations

ISLAMABAD: Director General Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) Riffat Mukhtar Raja visited Islamabad International Airport to review immigration operations and assess steps aimed at improving passenger facilitation. An official told APP on Sunday that the DG Riffat inspected immigration procedures and was informed that the airport handles 94 international flights daily, clearing more than 10,000 international passengers every day. The official said that on January 13, immigration staff cleared 2,400 passengers within a single hour, reflecting heavy pressure during peak hours due to the simultaneous arrival of multiple international flights. Temporary congestion also occurs because of flight delays caused by weather conditions and technical issues. According to the briefing, the FIA Immigration at the airport operates in three shifts, with 15 immigration counters for departures and 13 counters for arrivals currently functional to manage passenger flow. During the visit, the DG Riffat directed officers to ensure the provision of the best possible immigration services.—APP

Briefs

IGP Islamabad reviews policing reforms

ISLAMABAD: Inspector General of Police (IGP) Islamabad Syed Ali Nasir Rizvi chaired an important meeting at the Security Division to review ongoing police initiatives and the service delivery roadmap for 2026. An official told APP on Sunday that the meeting was attended by DIG Islamabad Muhammad Jawad Tariq, DIG Security Muhammad Atiq Tahir, SSP Security Captain (retd) Syed Zeeshan Haider and Chief Traffic Officer Islamabad Hamza Humayun. During the meeting, detailed discussions were held on new reform initiatives of Islamabad Police, further improvement in public service delivery during 2026, and the provision of quality facilities to citizens in a model, professional and people-friendly environment at police stations. The meeting also reviewed measures to ensure that maximum citizens benefit from Police Khidmat Markaz services. The IGP Rizvi directed officers to further strengthen and make foolproof security arrangements in the Red Zone, emphasizing proactive and effective strategies to counter any potential security threats. He also stressed coordinated efforts to improve traffic flow, address public inconvenience, and expedite the issuance of driving licenses and other licensing services with transparency and efficiency. —APP

AIOU offers 82 academic programs for int'l students

ISLAMABAD: Allama Iqbal Open University (AIOU) announced admissions for the Spring Semester 2026 for overseas Pakistanis and international students residing around the world, offering 82 academic programs. Detailed information about all programs is available on the university's official website. Vice Chancellor Professor Dr Nasir Mahmood stated, "Allama Iqbal Open University takes pride in providing modern and quality education to students living in different regions of the world." He added that the University's online education system has been specially designed to meet the needs of international students, enabling them to obtain globally recognized education from their homes. The University's active Directorate of International and Collaboration is providing guidance and support to students throughout the admission process and during their academic journey. Currently, students from 37 countries are enrolled at the University and a 26 percent increase in international student admissions has been recorded compared to the previous semester. DNA

More fun for kids at Gwadar's Model Park

ISLAMABAD: Families and young visitors in Gwadar now have more to enjoy at Model Beach Park, where a new range of modern electronic amusement rides has been installed to expand recreational options for children. The coastal park, developed by the Gwadar Development Authority (GDA) as a dedicated space for women and children, has added attractions including Bike, 4 Bee Rides, Badal New Shape, Bannuman Kingkong, Buggy 2 Horse, Moto Car, Moto Cup, Panda Jahaz, Titanic Ship and Train rides, according to a Gwadar Pro's report. Officials said the rides have been installed with a strong focus on safety and quality, offering a comfortable and enjoyable environment for families. Located along the scenic coastline, Model Beach Park has become a popular family destination in the port city. The park recently served as a hub for community activities during New Year celebrations, which featured cultural programs and fireworks and drew large numbers of women and children. Another highlight of the park is the Baloch Insight Café, a three-container café that has emerged as a social space for women and families.

DNA

ISLAMABAD — The concerned citizens and experts speaking at a webinar raised their apprehensions on the growing environmental crisis in Islamabad caused by rapid, unplanned, and largely irreversible urban development by the Capital Development Authority (CDA) and different housing societies in violation of zoning rules and regulations. Speakers stressed that the city's green spaces are steadily being replaced by concrete due to weak governance, elite capture, and a persistent conflict between populist decision-making and professional, science-based planning.

A key outcome of the discussion was the strong call for a new, collaborative approach to sustainable urban development through the establishment of a dedicated Islamabad-focused think tank. Participants emphasized the need to bring together independent professionals, policymakers, civil society, and creative communities in-

cluding architects, designers, and artists to develop long-term, people-centered solutions. The webinar underscored that environmental degradation is not only an ecological issue but also a major public health concern, making citizen engagement and collective responsibility essential. The session stressed with a shared resolve that Islamabad's green future depends on informed decision-making, institutional reform, and sustained public participation in shaping the city's development trajectory. The thought-provoking webinar was organized by the Development Communications Network (Devcom-Pakistan) on the subject "Islamabad's Green Future – Coping with Irrational Development" that brought together environmental experts, policymakers, civil society members, and concerned citizens to deliberate on the growing environmental challenges facing Pakistan's capital.

Well-known environment expert Dr. Tariq Banuri, highlighted that environmental protection efforts are further undermined

by institutional weaknesses and the marginalization and at times harassment of environmental professionals and activists working to safeguard natural areas such as protected hills, forests, and wildlife habitats. Participants agreed that without transparent, democratic, and inclusive governance, Islamabad's ecological balance will continue to deteriorate. He focused on the environmental consequences of rapid and often unplanned urban development in Islamabad and underscored the urgent need for sustainable governance models that balance economic growth with environmental conservation.

Dr. Banuri highlighted that Islamabad's environmental degradation is a symptom of deeper governance challenges. He pointed to elite capture, weak institutional frameworks, and the ongoing tension between populism and professionalism as key factors driving the replacement of green spaces with unchecked concrete development. He also expressed concern over the harassment and marginalization of environmental

activists and professionals, including members associated with the Islamabad Wildlife Management Board (IWMB), who have been working to protect the city's natural heritage. Devcom-Pakistan Executive Director Munir Ahmed said: Islamabad is witnessing an alarming and distressing wave of tree cutting that threatens the very identity of the capital as a green and livable city. "The unchecked felling of trees in the name of development reflects a serious failure of planning and governance," said Munir Ahmed, expressing deep concern over the rapid loss of urban greenbelts, roadside trees, and natural green buffers. He warned that this indiscriminate destruction is accelerating urban heat, worsening air quality, increasing flood risks, and eroding biodiversity, while also undermining the mental and physical well-being of citizens. According to him, trees are being treated as expendable obstacles rather than essential infrastructure, despite their critical role in climate resilience and public health.



ISLAMABAD: Siblings are posing for a photo with duck frame at Birds section of the Lake View Park in Federal Capital.

Failure to meet tax targets raises risk of mini-budget

DNA

ISLAMABAD: Prominent business leader and former president of the Islamabad Chamber of Commerce, Shahid Rasheed Butt, said the risk of a mini-budget is increasing due to the failure to achieve tax collection targets, while the real challenges facing the economy are tax evasion and smuggling, which require decisive action. He said the continuous increase in tax rates is encouraging tax evasion, making fundamental policy changes essential.

In a statement issued here, Shahid Rasheed Butt has said that during the first half of the current fiscal year, a shortfall of Rs 331 billion was recorded against the tax collection target. On the other hand, smuggling is causing annual losses of more than Rs 1 trillion. He alleged that in the former tribal areas, people from Punjab and Sindh have set up factories producing ghee, steel, and other goods, where records of tax evasion and smuggling are being broken, preventing the government from meeting its targets.

According to Shahid Rasheed Butt, the undocumented economy has become the biggest obstacle to economic recovery. Smuggling of property, illegal cigarettes, tires, oil, medicines, tea, and other goods is inflicting heavy losses on the national exchequer.

He warned that if the current situation persists, the government will have no option but to introduce a mini-budget, the burden of which will fall on the general public. He said the solution lies not in imposing new taxes but in curbing tax evasion and bringing the undocumented sectors within the legal framework. Without taking serious measures against smuggling, achieving tax targets will be impossible. He also stressed that weak enforcement and a lack of coordination among tax, customs, and law enforcement agencies are allowing illicit networks to operate with impunity. Unchecked smuggling is hurting documented businesses, leading to closures, job losses, and unfair competition in formal markets. Shahid Rasheed Butt urged the government to prioritize enforcement to stabilize revenues and protect consumers from further fiscal shocks.

Education family planning festival held

Participants appreciated the government initiative and pledged to spread the message in their communities

RAWALPINDI :The Population Welfare Department here on Saturday organized an 'Education Family Planning Festival' to raise public awareness about family planning, maternal and child health and the importance of educating both boys and girls.

The event, held in line with Punjab Chief Minister's vision and under the guidance of the provincial Health and Population Department, was inaugurated by Zia Ullah

Shah, MPA (PML-N) and Parliamentary Secretary for WASA, who served as chief guest.

District Population Welfare Officer Rawalpindi, Shireen Sukhan was the chief organiser. All district office staff actively participated, making the programme a success. The mela revolved around the slogans: "Balanced Family, Prosperous Pakistan" and "Educated Mother, Educated Society". It combined entertainment

with education to reach families effectively.

Information stalls provided guidance on family planning to men and women, while child health activities, recreational programmes and educational demonstrations kept visitors engaged. Key messages focused on the benefits of planned families, the challenges caused by rapid population growth, the importance of maternal and child health, and the equal value of

educating

daughters and sons.

Large numbers of men, women, families and children attended. Interactive sessions and artistic performances generated strong interest.

At the end, prizes were distributed to winners of child health competitions. Participants appreciated the government initiative and pledged to spread the message in their communities.

Pakistan Post remains reliable

ISLAMABAD: Postmaster General Punjab Province Iram Tariq Sunday expressed the confidence that government post offices still remain effective, offering organized services at cheaper rates than private companies with a fully devitalized system and urged users to continue relying on them for their trust and reliability.

In an exclusive interview with PTV News, PG Punjab highlighted that in today's digital age, where not just Pakistan but the entire world faces emergencies like COVID-19, dependable postal services are more critical than ever to maintain seamless communication and delivery. He emphasized that Pakistan Post, serving from Islamabad to Punjab and even the remotest villages across the country, remained highly organized, efficiently managed and cost-effective, adding, the system had been upgraded to modern standards, ensuring speed, reliability and accessibility for all citizens. The PG Punjab stressed that government post offices continue to provide superior services at cheaper rates compared to private alternatives, combining affordability with a fully devitalized, streamlined system that sustains public trust and confidence. She noted that while traditional letters may have declined, the need to send important documents such as passports, degrees, pension papers, interview letters, university assignments and diplomas as well as parcels of all sizes, both domestically and internationally, remained significant. Pakistan Post continues to play a vital role, providing efficient, well-organized and cost-effective delivery services with unmatched reliability and professional management, she added. Responding to a query about digitalization, she said Pakistan Post will soon launch its official app, with all operations being upgraded and fully devitalized through strategic partnerships and agreements with the IT sector. To another query, she further elaborated that under Pakistan Post's digitalization vision, all operations were being upgraded to a modern, fully digitized system to improve efficiency, trace and tracking system and customer convenience. This includes online parcel booking, digital payment integration, real-time tracking of letters and parcels and automated sorting processes, she added. She told that the upcoming Pakistan Post app would allow users to access services from their smartphones, submit requests, track deliveries and manage accounts without visiting post offices. —APP

Orange Line Metro Rail transforms urban life

The project has also created over 2,000 local jobs, contributing to skill development and economic opportunities within the region

DNA

ISLAMABAD: After five years of continuous operations (2020–2025), the Orange Line Metro Rail (OLMT) Lahore launched as Pakistan's first metro rail system has crossed an impressive 270 million riders, said a report released by OLMT the Management, according to Gwadar Pro on Sunday. Today, the system serves over 250,000 commuters daily, providing a reliable alternative to congested road travel and significantly reducing journey times across Lahore. "Stretching over 27 kilo meters with 26 stations, the Orange Line connects key residential, commercial, and educational areas of Lahore, from Dera Gujran to Ali Town, providing efficient and affordable transportation to hundreds of thousands of passengers every day," the report mentioned. Since its inauguration in October 2020, OLMT has seen rapid growth in ridership. In its first two years, the metro carried about 50 million passengers, demonstrating increasing adoption by urban commuters. By mid-2023, the system had reached 100 million total passengers, marking continued growth. By late 2024, cumulative ridership exceeded 200 million passengers, reflecting sustained demand. With dedicated tracks, automated signalling, and modern rolling stock, the system ensures punctuality and reduced travel time compared to conventional road transport, the report added. It has completed more than 512,000 trips in five years with a punctuality rate of around 99%, ensuring dependable service for commuters. "Comfort features include air-conditioned trains, clean stations, elevators, escalators, and clear passenger information systems, making the Orange Line accessible and comfortable for people of all ages, including women, elderly citizens, and persons with disabilities," the report revealed. The project has also created over 2,000 local jobs, contributing to skill development and economic opportunities within the region.

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UK leader looks to China

ANDREW HAMMOND

A major UK pivot to the Asia-Pacific region has been underway now for several years during the post-Brexit era. However, there has been a significant intensification of this shift in recent months, with the country seeking to seize what has been called the "Asia-Pacific moment." Later this month, UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer is expected to visit Beijing – his first trip to the nascent superpower since he assumed office. The agenda will be shaped by the economic opportunity for the UK in the vast Chinese market. This follows up on Starmer's trip to India last fall, and his visit to the Pacific island of Samoa in 2024 for the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting. Building from these trips, just before Christmas, the UK reached a trade deal with South Korea, the fourth such agreement in 2025 for London, following UK agreements with the EU and India, plus a US tariff deal. The South Korea accord is forecast by London to grow UK services exports by £400 million (about \$540 million). This includes improved access to a growing financial market, building on £1.1 billion in financial and insurance exports in 2024. The South Korea deal will secure continued, permanent UK tariff-free access across 98 percent of tariff lines, the same terms the EU has with South Korea. It will also update rules of origin that will simplify tariff-free access and will open doors for greater diversification across supply chains for sectors such as automotive and pharmaceuticals. Smaller businesses could be particular winners by streamlining custom processes and reducing South Korean non-tariff barriers. By 2030, a growing slice of the world's population will live in the vast Asia-Pacific region, which is helping to drive huge demand for goods and services across sectors where the UK has long-established strengths. This includes financial services, life sciences, defence and security, education, advanced manufacturing, clean energy, creative industries, digital healthcare, green finance, luxury brands, and professional and business services. This economic opportunity is especially compelling in a world of growing protectionism where there is a growing need for London to diversify its trade and investment markets toward the region. While the UK has recently reached major trade deals with individual countries such as India, the biggest single deal so far is perhaps the Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership, or CPTPP, which includes Australia, Brunei, Japan, Malaysia, New Zealand, Singapore, and Vietnam. Since leaving the EU, overall, the UK has made significant diplomatic progress in the Asia-Pacific. As Starmer's upcoming trip indicates, engagement is also intensifying

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with China after relations cooled significantly following the coronavirus pandemic beginning in 2020. The UK government has said that while a stronger partnership is desired with China, London will be a pragmatic, if sometimes critical, friend in future.

These and other opportunities highlight the upside opportunity to the UK economy given the UK's global competitiveness in areas ranging from life sciences to fintech, and education to security. However, rising data protectionism threatens to fragment the market, and there is now an urgent mission for London to push for interoperability, including through CPTPP, and wider multilateral rule-shaping. Another opportunity is driving the Asia-Pacific region's green transition, leveraging UK tech strengths and knowhow in this area. Half of global greenhouse emissions emanate from this region, yet demand for offshore wind, green hydrogen and carbon finance is growing fast in the push to net-zero targets in the second half of the 21st century. One other key strength is defense-industrial partnerships. In nations across the region, from Japan to Australia, the UK is not only an economic partner but also a longstanding security ally. Recent developments such as AUKUS showcase UK expertise in sectors including aerospace, cyber, and manufacturing. The latter, moreover, highlights the imperative of the UK engaging in the Asia-Pacific for geopolitical reasons. This is not just the fact that relations between the US and China are tense, but also reflects broader challenges, including North Korean unpredictability. In this dynamic, highly uncertain context, the UK's longstanding reputation as a relatively stable, predictable, and trusted partner has potential for a distinct strategic advantage. Especially with a government in place in London with a large majority that could be in power till 2029, this offers a multi-year horizon for a trusted alternative for Asia-Pacific business and governments seeking to hedge against political and regulatory uncertainty. If it is to seize this huge opportunity, London needs a compelling grand strategy that combines the best of UK hard and soft power, drawing on longstanding national economic strengths and diplomacy. This should leverage the UK's global soft power, including higher education, research collaboration, the creative industries, and cultural diplomacy to strengthen long-term influence. Moreover, sustained senior-level business and political engagement is key too, embedding the UK more fully within regional growth corridors through regular ministerial and diplomatic presence on the ground, including permanent partnerships across the Asia-Pacific. This political and commercial diplomacy should leverage CPTPP accession, bilateral trade agreements and wider enhanced trade dialogues, plus significant new market access. The goal is a long-term, targeted strategy capable of addressing key obstacles through sustained government-to-government engagement, backed by leading-edge corporate dialogue.

Taken together, a potentially significant intensification of the UK pivot to the Asia-Pacific is underway that builds from the post-Brexit reorientation to the region. Economics, not only politics, is at the heart of this, with UK businesses seeking to secure greater traction in the region on the back of new bilateral trade deals and the CPTPP.

How Trump Opened the Polar Door to China

QAMAR BASHIR



While cast in the language of strategic necessity, the message that reverberated through Europe and North America was one of disregard for sovereignty and partnership. For Denmark and Greenland, the proposal felt less like an offer of cooperation and more like a declaration of intent, prompting unease across the Nordic region.

Against this backdrop, Canada's reported openness to involving China in Arctic research and development takes on a deeper meaning. It is not simply about scientific collaboration or icebreaker technology; it signals a recalibration of strategic options

THE Arctic, once a frozen frontier of quiet diplomacy and carefully balanced power, is rapidly becoming a theater of geopolitical drama. What makes this moment striking is not merely China's growing presence in the polar north, but the pathway that has led it there. In a twist of strategic irony, policies designed in Washington to contain Beijing's global reach appear to have instead nudged America's closest allies toward deeper engagement with China—transforming the Arctic into a new symbol of a shifting world order. For decades, Canada stood as one of the United States' most dependable partners, sharing not only borders and security arrangements but also a sense of political alignment rooted in NATO, democratic values, and mutual defense. Canadian soldiers fought alongside American forces in distant theaters, reinforcing the idea of a partnership that went beyond transactional interests. Yet recent years have strained that bond, as a sharper, more unilateral American posture has unsettled long-standing assumptions about alliance and trust. The shockwaves intensified when Washington floated the idea of exerting direct control over Greenland, framing the move as a preemptive step to block Chinese and Russian influence in the Arctic. While cast in the language of strategic necessity, the message that reverberated through Europe and North America was one of disregard for sovereignty and partnership. For Denmark and Greenland, the proposal felt less like an offer of cooperation and more like a declaration of intent, prompting unease across the Nordic region. Against this backdrop, Canada's reported openness to involving China in Arctic research and development takes on a deeper meaning. It is not simply about scientific collaboration or icebreaker technology; it signals a recalibration of strategic options. The Arctic's future hinges on access, infrastructure, and year-round navigability, and in these areas, China has invested heavily. Its growing fleet of icebreakers, polar research stations, and logistical capabilities give it a practical advantage in a region where technological capacity often matters as much as territorial proximity. This development forms what some observers describe as a "double pincer" dynamic. On one side, China has cultivated research and commercial ties with Nordic countries under international law and bilateral frameworks. On the other, Canada's engagement opens a transcontinental corridor of cooperation that links North America's Arctic access with Europe's northern gateways. The result is a network that extends China's influence across the polar circle without the need for direct territorial claims, relying in-

stead on partnership, investment, and technical expertise. The strategic implications are profound. Climate change is steadily reducing ice coverage, shortening shipping routes between Asia, Europe, and North America by as much as 40 percent. What was once a seasonal passage is edging toward year-round viability, transforming the Arctic into a critical artery for global trade, energy transport, and mineral supply chains. Control over icebreaker fleets, ports, and monitoring systems becomes a form of soft power, shaping who sets the rules for access and security. China's Arctic engagement also dovetails with its broader Belt and Road Initiative, which has already linked more than 150 countries through infrastructure, logistics, and digital networks. The extension of this vision into polar waters reframes the initiative as not merely a land-and-sea project, but a planetary one—connecting continents through roads, ports, fiber-optic cables, and now, ice-cleared maritime corridors. For partner countries, the appeal lies in tangible investment and shared development rather than overt military alignment. Europe's role in this evolving landscape reflects its own reassessment of transatlantic ties. Leaders in Paris and Berlin have spoken openly about strategic autonomy, emphasizing the need to diversify partnerships in a world where U.S. policy can shift sharply with domestic politics. High-level visits to Beijing and renewed economic engagement signal a willingness to explore avenues of cooperation that Washington has discouraged, particularly in areas like research, energy, and infrastructure. This recalibration is not driven by ideological conversion to China's worldview, but by a pragmatic reading of interests. European states, facing energy transitions, supply chain vulnerabilities, and economic competition, see value in maintaining multiple channels of partnership. The Arctic, rich in rare earths, hydrocarbons, and strategic shipping lanes, becomes another arena where diversification seems prudent rather than provocative.

The ripple effects extend beyond the polar north. In the Middle East, China and Russia's consistent calls for sovereignty and non-intervention have positioned them as counterweights to U.S. influence, particularly in countries wary of regime-change rhetoric. In Latin America, Beijing's infrastructure financing and trade agreements have offered alternatives to traditional U.S.-centric economic models. Together, these trends paint a picture of a world where influence is increasingly earned through development and investment as much as through security guarantees.

For Washington, the challenge lies in reconciling the desire to protect national interests with the realities of alliance management in a multipolar era. Tariffs, threats, and public confrontations may signal resolve domestically, but they can also push partners to hedge their bets internationally. The Arctic case illustrates how strategic pressure, when perceived as overreach, can produce the opposite of its intended effect—encouraging allies to seek balance rather than alignment. None of this suggests that the United States is losing its capacity to shape global outcomes. Its economic scale, technological leadership, and network of alliances remain formidable. But the nature of influence is evolving. In regions like the Arctic, where long-term investment, scientific cooperation, and infrastructure development determine access and authority, power is exercised quietly and incrementally rather than through dramatic declarations. The deeper lesson may lie in the unspoken reality of international politics: every nation, whether it proclaims it or not, puts its own interests first. What differentiates successful strategies is not the assertion of primacy, but the ability to align national goals with the aspirations of partners. When cooperation feels mutually beneficial, alliances endure; when it feels conditional or coercive, alternatives emerge. As the ice recedes and shipping lanes open, the Arctic will continue to draw the attention of powers near and far. It will test whether established alliances can adapt to new economic and environmental realities, or whether emerging networks of partnership will redefine the region's governance. In this unfolding story, China's growing presence is not solely the result of its own ambition, but also of the spaces created by others' missteps. The coming years will reveal whether Washington chooses to recalibrate—investing in polar infrastructure, engaging allies in shared development plans, and framing Arctic security as a collective endeavor rather than a zero-sum contest. Such an approach could rebuild confidence and reassert leadership without forcing partners to choose sides. If not, the Arctic may become a lasting symbol of a broader global shift: a world where influence flows toward those who build, connect, and invest, rather than those who command and confront. In that sense, the frozen north is no longer just a remote frontier—it is a mirror reflecting the changing dynamics of power in the twenty-first century.

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Michigan.

When Hope Dies

MUHAMMAD MOHSIN IQBAL



The moment has now arrived when parents dispatch their children each morning to schools, colleges, and universities with a mingled sense of hope and apprehension. Education is still regarded as the safest path to dignity and stability. Yet a chilling fear has begun to haunt families across Pakistan; what if a

In childhood, if we stepped out of the house for an errand and failed to return at the appointed hour, the entire household would sink into a quiet unease. Mothers would begin to pace, fathers would cast repeated glances towards the gate, and when at last we returned—dusty and carefree—we were met with a barrage of questions that felt little short of a formal interrogation. Irritation often overcame us in those moments, and it was then that a grandmother's gentle yet resolute voice would remind us that one day we would understand it all ourselves. Time, as it invariably does, proved her right. Today, we worry for our own children in much the same way our parents once worried for us. The moment has now arrived when parents dispatch their children each morning to schools, colleges, and universities with a mingled sense of hope and apprehension. Education is still regarded as the safest path to dignity and stability. Yet a chilling fear has begun to haunt families across Pakistan; what if a

Lahore, long considered the intellectual heart of the country, has in recent years witnessed a disturbing rise in such tragic incidents, with their frequency particularly notable in certain private universities. Similar tragedies have also been reported from Peshawar, Karachi, Islamabad, Faisalabad, and other cities. In one case, a student is found lifeless in a hostel room; in another, a young soul leaps from a building after a bitter confrontation with the administration; elsewhere, a few hastily written lines are left behind, heavy with despair. Each incident briefly flashes across news screens and social media, yet behind every headline lies a family shattered beyond repair. Credible studies and media-based analyses reveal that a significant proportion of reported student suicides occur within colleges and universities. Research drawing upon

newspaper records over several years suggests that nearly half of such cases are linked to higher education institutions. Even more alarming are the findings of academic surveys; more than forty percent of university students in Pakistan exhibit symptoms of depression, while studies conducted among medical and professional students indicate that nearly one-third acknowledge suicidal thoughts. A smaller, yet deeply troubling, percentage admit to having attempted suicide at some point. These figures, frequently cited in research, almost certainly understate the true scale of the crisis due to stigma and chronic underreporting. The tragedy assumes an even more painful dimension when the victim is a young girl. Instead of restraint and compassion, society often responds with whispers, insinuations, and merciless speculation. Her character is scrutinized, her family placed in the dock, and her suffering rendered suspect or sensational. Rarely do we pause to ask, with sincerity, what unbearable pressure or humiliation might have driven her to such a final decision. The causes of this crisis are complex and deeply interwoven. Academic pressure stands foremost among them. Many institutions privilege grades, attendance percentages, and rigid discipline over mental well-being. Instances have emerged where students were publicly humiliated for academic shortcomings or threatened with expulsion—consequences that, for a vulnerable mind, can feel like the end of the world. Family expectations, though often born of love, can become suffocating when success is narrowly defined and failure treated as disgrace. Financial strain, fear of unemployment, and relentless competition further intensify this anxiety. Modern life has added new dimensions to old pressures. Social media magnifies comparison and failure, exposing young minds to constant judgement while offering little genuine support. At the same time, mental health remains a taboo subject. Many students suffer in silence, fearful that seeking help will earn them labels of weakness or instability. The erosion of patience, tolerance, and empathy within society has only deepened their isolation. A profound spiritual vacuum also plays its part in this tragedy. Growing distance from faith has deprived many young people of an inner anchor. Islam not only forbids suicide but places immense emphasis on hope, patience, and the sanctity of human life. When these values fade, despair finds fertile ground in which to take root. If this trend continues unchecked, parents will inevitably begin to question whether universities are sanctuaries of learning or arenas of silent torment. This crisis cannot be addressed through perfunctory inquiries after each tragedy. It demands a clear, sustained, and humane course of action.

Educational institutions must establish credible and confidential mental health services staffed by trained professionals. Counselling should not be an afterthought but an integral part of campus life. Teachers and administrators must be trained to recognize signs of psychological distress and to enforce discipline with humanity rather than humiliation. Academic policies should allow room for compassion without compromising standards. Parents, too, must recalibrate their expectations—valuing effort and integrity over mere results—and create homes where children feel safe to speak openly of failure and fear. At the national level, the state must invest in mental health infrastructure, improve the collection of suicide-related data, and ensure the enforcement of protective regulations within educational institutions. Above all, society must rediscover empathy and restore meaning to life through faith, purpose, and human connection. Only then can parents send their children out each morning with confidence rather than dread, assured that the pursuit of education will nurture life, not extinguish it.

Briefs
Pakistan
Invited to...

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Gaza and voiced concern over civilian casualties. In recent years, Islamabad has participated in humanitarian relief campaigns and diplomatic initiatives aimed at de-escalation. Mr. Andrahi underscored that Pakistan's engagement with the Board of Peace will be guided by its commitment to multilateralism and international law. He noted that the government views this development as an opportunity to contribute meaningfully to regional stability and to amplify the voices of those suffering in Gaza. "Our participation will be constructive, principled, and aligned with the aspirations of the Palestinian people," he added.

Israeli PM
objects to...

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but Israel has previously objected strongly to any Turkish role in post-war Gaza, with relations between the two countries deteriorating sharply since Israel's assault on Gaza began in October 2023. In addition to naming Turkey's foreign minister to the executive board, Trump has also invited Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan to join the overarching Board of Peace. Media reports said that leaders of the country's ruling coalition were scheduled to meet on Sunday to examine the composition of the executive board.

TTAP chief
Achakzai...

FROM PAGE 01
courts, and termed the Peca Act a curtailment of press freedom. He maintained that Sindh's share in the NFC and other budgets has been reduced, and the province was being kept under constant pressure. Allama Raja Nasir Abbas said that in times of crisis, it is always the common people who suffer. He alleged that innocent people, including women leaders such as Yasmin Rashid, are languishing in jails, while PTI founder Imran Khan, whom he termed the most popular leader in the country, is imprisoned in what he called false cases.

Tajikistan
says four...

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Chinese nationals were killed, and several were wounded in two separate attacks along Tajikistan's border with Afghanistan in late November and early December. According to a UN report in December, a militant group, Jamaat Ansarullah, "has fighters spread across different regions of Afghanistan" with a primary goal "to destabilise the situation in Tajikistan." Dushanbe has previously voiced concerns about the presence in Afghanistan of members of Daesh in Khorasan.

Aga Khan University installs Princess Zahra Aga Khan as Pro-Chancellor

"Pakistan's young people are inclusive, comfortable across faiths and perspectives, and aware that a divided society cannot meet shared challenges"



DNA



field-based learning that prepares graduates to teach effectively in diverse school contexts.

"The University's geographic expansion has seen AKU's presence expand across Pakistan, into more cities and villages than ever before," said AKU's Pro-Chancellor, Princess Zahra Aga Khan. "From Karachi to Matiari, from Lahore to Gilgit, the University's health care professionals, educators, and researchers are part of the fabric of people's lives."

The Aga Khan University continues to address Pakistan's critical development challenges through a commitment to access and excellence. With nearly 70 percent of the graduating class being women, the University is actively addressing the gender gap in a country where millions of girls remain out of school.

Valedictorian Muhammad Taha Nasim thanked AKU's faculty, noting how they challenged graduates to "reach our highest standards while teaching us that excellence without empathy is empty."

AKU's graduates are filling important workforce gaps. For

example, in a country with a nurse-to-population ratio of just 5.2 per 10,000, AKU alumni now hold high-level leadership positions in approximately 80 schools of nursing and midwifery.

In 2025, AKU secured more than USD\$100 million in research funding, a sign that leading global institutions hold its research capabilities in high regard. Across AKU, 27 faculty members were ranked among the top two percent of scientists globally in a well-known study conducted by a researcher at Stanford University. "Pakistan's young people are inclusive, comfortable across faiths and perspectives, and aware that a divided society cannot meet shared challenges. Digitally fluent, they see technology not as disruption but as opportunity – to expand knowledge, build skills, and apply learning in practical ways," noted Dr Sulaiman Shahabuddin, President of AKU.

To ensure talented students with limited financial means are able to attend AKU, the University provides financial assistance, to a large portion of the

student body. In the last academic year, the University provided assistance to 72 percent of students across all classes and programmes in Pakistan.

Noorish Khan, Syeda Tasmiya Mohiuddin, Dr. Hamzah Jehanzeb, and Sara Karim Sadruddin received Best Graduate Awards in their respective undergraduate programmes in Dental Hygiene, Education, Medicine, and Nursing. Also present at the ceremony was Shamsul Kassim-Lakha, Founding President of AKU and Chairman of the Board of Trustees of the University of Central Asia, a sister university of AKU within the Aga Khan Development Network. The University conferred Awards of Distinction upon several faculty and staff, recognising their sustained contributions to innovation, research and leadership. Professor Emeritus Mushtaq Ahmed received the President's Medal, one of AKU's highest honours, in recognition of his extraordinary service as an eminent surgeon and academic leader.

Dupont guides Toulouse to Champions Cup last 16 after Sale hammering

PARIS: France superstar Antoine Dupont scored two tries as Toulouse reached the Champions Cup last 16 on Saturday with a 77-7 hammering of Sale. Ugo Mola's side strolled over for 11 tries as the six-time winners avoided missing out on the knock-out stages for the first time since 2016. Toulouse look likely to play their last 16 tie at home, but will have to play away from home if they go further in the competition. "We enjoyed ourselves," Dupont told reporters. "We know it's always harder away from home, it's not the easiest route but we're capable of going far especially when we're at our best," the 29-year-old added. Tom Curtis's second-half converted try was Sale's only score after the already-qualified English side had made a host of changes for the game. Toulouse's win eliminated the Sharks, despite the South Africans' 50-12

win over Clermont earlier in the day. In-form Glasgow host three-time champions Saracens on Sunday in the final game in the group with the Scottish side eyeing a top seed in the last 16. Mola's Toulouse were hampered by injuries, with Scotland's Blair Kinghorn partnering captain Dupont at half-back in the absence of France fly-half Romain Ntamack. Alex Sanderson made nine changes to Sale's side from last Saturday's win over the Sharks, which sealed the English club's first last-16 spot in the tournament since 2022. The home side raced into a 28-0 lead at the interval with Dupont's score after a Matthias Lebel break the highlight of the first half. The visitors ended the half with 13 players as winger Alex Wills and No.8 Sam Dugdale were yellow-carded moments before the break. – Agencies

Uganda's Museveni wins seventh term

KAMPALA: Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni won a seventh term in office on Saturday after an election marred by violence and an internet shutdown, with African observers saying arrests and abductions had "instilled fear". Museveni, 81, won 71.65 percent of the vote in Thursday's election, the Electoral Commission said, amid reports of at least 10 deaths and intimidation of the opposition and civil society. His victory allows the former guerrilla fight-

er to extend his 40-year rule of the east African country. He defeated Bobi Wine, 43, a former singer who styles himself the "ghetto to president" after the Kampala slum areas where he grew up, but has faced relentless pressure including multiple arrests before his first run for the presidency in 2021.

Wine, whose real name is Robert Kyagulanyi, won 24.72 percent. He stated his "complete rejection of the fake results" and said he was in hiding after a raid by security forces on his home. "I know that these criminals are looking for me everywhere and I am trying my best to keep safe," he posted on X. Police denied there had been any raid and said Wine was still at home, though they said there was a deployment around his residence. – APP

British qualifier upsets 20th seed Cobolli to make mum proud

MELBOURNE: Briton Arthur Fery did his tennis-mad mum proud Sunday after she jetted over from Europe when he came through qualifying at the Australian Open to witness him upset 20th seed Flavio Cobolli. The 23-year-old, ranked 185 and in his main draw debut at Melbourne Park, blasted past the Italian 7-6 (7/1), 6-4, 6-1 on John Cain Arena.

"Very satisfying. I was already happy to qualify here for my first time, and now obviously coming through qualies and winning a round, I'm proud of it," he said.

Fery's only other Grand Slam second round appearance came at Wimbledon last year, where he also beat a 20th seed in his first round – Australian Alexei Popyrin.

When he successfully negotiated qualifying in Melbourne his mum Olivia, who played in the 1991 Roland Garros women's dou-

bles, was quick to jump on a plane to Australia and support him. "When I won that last round (of qualifying), she asked me if she could come," he said. "I was, of course, it would be nice to have you here. It's obviously a long way, but at least I made it worth it. She can see at least two matches – hopefully more."

Asked if she had given him any tips, given her own professional tennis career, he replied: "When I was younger. Now, not so much. "She leaves me with my coaches to talk about tennis. But like everyone's mum and dad I guess they give you life advice."

Defeat was a big setback for Cobolli, who appeared to be battling a stomach issue throughout the match. He made the Wimbledon quarter-finals last year, before falling to Novak Djokovic, and won two ATP titles at Bucharest and Hamburg. – DNA

Six dead, severa...

FROM PAGE 01
Karachi Metropolitan Corporation machinery are battling the blaze, which erupted on the ground floor and spread to the third floor. Geo News reporters at the site said they heard parts of the building collapsing, raising fears that the entire structure could give way. Officials said the third-degree fire has severely gutted the building, compromising its structure and preventing rescue personnel from entering.

PM expresses grief over...

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ensure the protection of people's lives and property, PM Office Media Wing said in a press release. He further asked that all possible assistance should be provided to the affected traders and other individuals, besides all relevant departments should work together in the rescue operation.

Policeman martyred...

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Akhund Mamma Khel, when he was shot. "After offering evening prayers, he was on his way back home when motorcycle riders opened fire on him in front of his house, killing him on the spot," the DPO added. Following the incident, a heavy contingent of police reached the scene, cordoned off the area, and launched a search operation, while further investigation into the incident is underway.

Fake clubs exposed in Islamabad hockey scrutiny scandal

ISLAMABAD: The so-called "scrutiny" conducted by the Islamabad Hockey Association (IHA) on January 17th has once again emerged as a clear example of severe controversy, mismanagement, and corruption. During the process, dozens of bogus hockey clubs were not only included but were also being prepared to receive the right to vote, despite having no genuine existence at the grassroots level or the required number of players.

According to sources, phantom clubs like Al-Abbas Hockey Club, Capital Hockey Club, Midas Hockey Club, and Margalla Hockey Club registered on the Pakistan Hockey Federation's online portal using data of school children. However, on the day of scrutiny, those very children were not present.

Instead, other children were brought in who were not registered on the portal at all.

Shockingly, some clubs were completely absent from the scrutiny, yet preparations were being made to grant them voting rights. For example: Hadaf Hockey Club, which was given voting rights in the previous scrutiny, was not present today, but is still being declared eligible. Similarly, Satellite Hockey Club also remained absent, yet it is being considered for voting rights. Further revelations indicate that during the scrutiny, children were subjected to non-standard, illogical, and unprofessional tests, such as throwing an aerial ball using a five-foot-long hockey stick—a task most children failed. Clear videos of this entire process are available with every club and are circulating on WhatsApp and social media groups, exposing the farce of this so-called scrutiny. – Agencies

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OUR CORRESPONDENT

ISLAMABAD: A delegation of the Pakistan Football Federation (PFF), representing PFF President Syed Mohsen Gilani, held a high-level meeting with the Chief Minister of Balochistan, Mir Sarfraz Bugti, aimed at reviving and promoting football in Balochistan. The PFF delegation comprised Advisor to the PFF President

Ahmed and Director Legal PFF Ali Akram. The meeting was also attended by Chief Secretary Balochistan Shafeeq Qadir, Provincial Minister for Sports Meena Majeed, and Inspector General of Police Balochistan Tahir Khan, highlighting the government's collective interest in sports development. Discussions focused on the revival and long-term development of football across Balochistan, with particular

emphasis on upgrading sports infrastructure and introducing structured youth education and development programmes. Both sides stressed the urgent need to create sustainable pathways for young talent, especially in under-served areas of the province. A key highlight of the meeting was the proposed implementation of FIFA's "Football for Schools" programme and the establishment of FIFA Arena

Briefs

Chile declares emergency after wildfires force 20,000 to evacuate

SANTIAGO: Chilean President Gabriel Boric declared a state of emergency on Sunday for two southern regions where raging wildfires have forced about 20,000 people to evacuate their homes. Firefighters were battling 19 blazes across the country, 12 of which were in the regions of Nuble and Biobio, south of the capital Santiago. "In the face of the ongoing serious fires, I have decided to declare a state of natural disaster for the Nuble and Biobio regions," the left-wing president said in a post on X. "All resources are available." The government has not said whether the fires killed anyone or how many homes had been impacted. Alicia Cebran, the director of the National Service for Disaster Prevention and Response, told local media that about 20,000 people had been evacuated. She said most of the evacuations were in the Biobio cities of Penco and Lirquen, which have a combined population of around 60,000 people. Images broadcast by local television showed the flames in both cities, with charred cars in the streets. Wildfires have severely impacted south-central Chile in recent years. In February 2024, several fires broke out simultaneously near the city of Vina del Mar, northwest of Santiago, resulting in 138 deaths, according to the public prosecutor's office.—APP

Australian govt says firearms hit a record high in 2025

SYDNEY: The number of firearms in Australia reached an all-time high of more than 4 million in 2025, the center-left government reported on Sunday, a day after saying it would introduce a gun reform bill in parliament in response to the Bondi massacre. There were a record 4,113,735 guns in Australia last year, with 1,158,654 of those in the most populous state of New South Wales where the Bondi attack took place, the government said, citing Department of Home Affairs data. The Labor government on Saturday said parliament, recalled from its summer break, would debate bills this week to authorize a gun buyback and lower the bar for hate speech prosecutions — measures drafted in the wake of the December 14 shooting that killed 15 at a Hanukkah celebration. Home Affairs Minister Tony Burke said there were now more guns in Australia than at the time of a 1996 shooting that killed 35 and prompted a gun buyback scheme by the conservative government of former Prime Minister John Howard. "The deadly antisemitic terrorist attack at Bondi Beach is a national tragedy which can never be allowed to happen again," Burke said, adding that the government was committed to "getting dangerous guns off our streets.—APP

Indonesia rescuers find body from plane crash

MAKASSAR, Indonesia: Rescuers found debris and one body on Sunday from a small plane that crashed in eastern Indonesia with 10 people on board, officials said. The Indonesian Air Transport turboprop plane lost contact with the air traffic controller on Saturday afternoon while en route from Yogyakarta to the city of Makassar on Sulawesi island. Among the debris, the joint search and rescue team found what is believed to be "the fuselage, the tail section, and the windows," local official Muhammad Arif Anwar told a press briefing. The body of one victim was found on a steep mountain slope in the same area, said Arif, head of the Makassar search and rescue agency. "One male victim was found... at a depth of roughly 200 meters (656 feet) in the ravine and near aircraft debris," he said.

Another local rescue official, Andi Sultan, confirmed a body had been recovered, saying the remains would be evacuated on Monday due to poor weather conditions. A unit was also deployed by air to search for the missing passengers, according to Arif.—APP

Libya security agencies free more than 200 migrants

Syrian army continues advance against Kurdish-held towns despite US calls against it



BENGHAZI: Libya's security authorities have freed more than 200 migrants from what they described as a secret prison in the town of Kufra in the southeast of the country after they were held captive in inhuman conditions, two security sources from the city told on Sunday. The security sources, speaking on condition of anonymity, said that the security authorities had found an underground prison, nearly three meters deep, which the sources said was run by a Libyan human trafficker. One of the sources said this person had not yet been detained. "Some of the freed migrants were held captive up to two years in the underground cells," this source said. The other source said what the operation had found was "one of the most serious crimes against humanity that has been uncovered in the region." The operation resulted in a raid on a secret prison within the city, where several inhumane underground detention cells were uncovered," one of the sources added. The freed migrants are from sub-Saharan Africa, mainly from Somalia and Eritrea, including women and children, the sources said. Kufra lies in eastern Libya, about 1,700 kilometers (1,000 miles) from the capital Tripoli. Libya has become

a transit route for migrants fleeing conflict and poverty to Europe via dangerous routes across the desert and over the Mediterranean since the toppling of Muammar Qaddafi in a NATO-backed uprising in 2011. The oil-based Libyan economy is also a draw for impoverished migrants seeking work, but security throughout the sprawling country is poor, leaving migrants vulnerable to abuses. At least 21 bodies of migrants were found in a mass grave in eastern Libya last week, with up to 10 survivors in the group bearing signs of having been tortured before

they were freed from captivity, two security sources told Reuters. Libya's attorney general said in a statement on Friday the authorities in the east of the country had referred a defendant to the court for trial in connection with the mass grave on charges of "committing serious violations against migrants." In February last year, 39 bodies of migrants were recovered from about 55 mass graves in Kufra. The town houses tens of thousands of Sudanese refugees who fled the conflict that erupted in Sudan in 2023. Moreover, The Syrian army continued its push

into Kurdish-held territory on Saturday, despite US calls to halt its advance in towns in the area in Syria's north. State media said the army took over the northern city of Tabqa and its adjacent dam, as well as the major Freedom dam, formerly known as the Baath, west of the Syrian city of Raqqaa. Syrian Kurdish authorities had not acknowledged their loss of control over those strategic points, and it was unclear if fighting was still ongoing. For days, Syrian troops had amassed around a cluster of villages that lie just west of the winding Euphrates and had called on the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces stationed there to redeploy their forces on the opposite bank of the river. They have been clashing over strategic posts and oilfields along the Euphrates River. SDF fighters withdrew from the area on Saturday as a gesture of goodwill — but then accused Syrian troops of violating the agreement by continuing to push further east into towns and oilfields not included in the deal. Brad Cooper, who heads the US military's Central Command, said in a written statement posted on X that Syrian troops should "cease any offensive actions in areas" between the city of Aleppo and the town of Tabqa, approximately 160 kilo-

meters further east. The initial withdrawal deal included the main town of Deir Hafer and some surrounding villages whose residents are predominantly Arab. The SDF withdrew on Saturday and Syrian troops moved in relatively smoothly, with residents celebrating their arrival. "It happened with the least amount of losses. There's been enough blood in this country, Syria. We have sacrificed and lost enough — people are tired of it," Hussein Al-Khalaf, a resident of Deir Hafer, told Reuters. The Syrian Petroleum Company said that the nearby oilfields of Rasafa and Sufyan had been captured by Syrian troops and could now be brought back online. SDF forces had withdrawn east, some on foot, toward the flashpoint town of Tabqa — downstream but still on the western side of the river and near a hydroelectric dam, a crucial source of power. But when Syria's army announced it aimed to capture Tabqa next, the SDF said that was not part of the original deal and that it would fight to keep the town, as well as another oilfield in its vicinity. Syria's army said four of its troops had been killed in attacks by Kurdish militants, and the SDF said some of its own fighters had been killed, but did not give a number.—APP

Pak-Japan govt-business joint dialogue held in Tokyo

ISLAMABAD: The 8th Pakistan-Japan government-business joint dialogue was held in Tokyo marking the first convening of the dialogue in Tokyo since 2018. The dialogue was co-chaired by Rana Ihsaan Afzal Khan, Coordinator to the Prime Minister on Commerce and Industry, and Takuuo Komori, Parliamentary Vice-Minister of economy, trade and industry of Japan, with the participation of Abdul Hameed and senior officials and private-sector representatives from both sides, said a release issued on Friday. Discussions focused on strengthening bilateral economic cooperation, improving the trade and investment environment, and advancing practical, follow-up oriented engagement between Pakistan and Japan. During the Dialogue, both sides exchanged views on strengthening bilateral economic relations, with a focus on improving the trade and investment environment and advancing practical cooperation. The Pakistani side outlined Pakistan's economic priorities and highlighted opportunities for collaboration in sectors such as minerals and mining, agricultural and agri-food products, and information technology. The Japanese side shared perspectives on the operating environment for Japanese companies in Pakistan and discussed areas where continued engagement and follow-up could further facilitate business activity. Participants reaffirmed the importance of sustained government-to-government engagement, supported by close coordination with the private sector, to advance mutually beneficial economic cooperation between Pakistan and Japan. Following the Joint Dialogue, the Pakistan Business Forum was held in Tokyo. The Forum was co-organized by the Embassy of Pakistan in Tokyo and the Japan External Trade Organization (JETRO), with the cooperation of the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry of Japan, and was attended by Japanese and Pakistani business leaders. The Forum featured remarks by Ms. Okumura Akiko, Executive Vice President of JETRO, and Mr. Takuuo Komori, Parliamentary Vice-Minister of Economy, Trade and Industry of Japan, as well as a message from Mr. Akira Terakawa, Chairman of the Japan-Pakistan Business Co-operation Committee. Mr. Rana Ihsaan Afzal Khan, Coordinator to the Prime Minister of Pakistan on Commerce, delivered remarks as Guest of Honour. The Pakistan Business Forum also included selected sectoral presentations highlighting practical cooperation between Japanese and Pakistani partners. A presentation by Komatsu outlined ongoing and planned engagement in Pakistan's mining sector, including long-term operations, technology deployment, and workforce development. Pak Suzuki Motor Company shared an overview of its biogas pilot initiative in Pakistan, focused on converting agricultural and livestock waste into alternative fuel and organic fertilizer. The Forum also featured a presentation by the Trade and Investment Counsellor of the Embassy of Pakistan in Tokyo on "From Trade to Investment: Building Japan-Pakistan Joint Value Chains." The Forum concluded with closing remarks by Mr. Abdul Hameed, Ambassador of Pakistan to Japan, who highlighted the importance of sustained engagement, trust-building.—DNA

Pakistan's vision on digital assets highlighted

LAHORE: Advisor to the Federal Finance Minister, Khurram Schehzad, said on Sunday that the government is actively working on policies aimed at empowering youth, particularly by creating opportunities in modern financial and digital sectors. Highlighting the global context, he noted that Bitcoin has a capped global supply of nearly 21 million units, making digital assets a significant topic in today's evolving financial landscape. He was speaking at a fireside chat titled "Tokenizing the Sovereign Assets - Liquidity Ready" during the 27th ITCN Asia exhibition held at the Expo Center. Khurram Schehzad emphasized the government's evolving role in the digital economy, stating that its primary responsibility was to facilitate innovation and create an enabling environment for emerging technologies rather than hinder progress. Citing available reports, he said that Bitcoin and cryptocurrency mining activities were already taking place in Pakistan, reflecting growing domestic engagement with crypto-related technologies. He further revealed that the Ministry of Finance, Government of Pakistan, planned to tokenize a portion of its domestic debt worth USD 2 billion in the first phase, primarily targeting retail investors. Discussing regulatory and institutional developments, he explained that the concept of establishing a dedicated framework or authority is linked to regulating and understanding crypto assets. He acknowledged that Pakistan remains at a nascent stage in this domain, while citing the UAE as an example of a country that has already developed structured mechanisms for virtual assets.—APP

Portugal's presidential election may deliver another gain for populists in Europe

LISBON: A record 11 candidates are standing in Portugal's presidential election Sunday, with a populist party leader poised to possibly bring another political breakthrough for Europe's growing far-right parties. The large field makes it unlikely that any candidate will capture more than 50 percent of the vote for a first-round win. That would leave the two top candidates to compete in a runoff ballot next month. Almost 11 million people are eligible to vote in the election, with most results expected late in the day. The winner will replace President Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa, who has served the limit of two five-year terms. Polls opened at 8 a.m. on a mostly sunny day across the country and were due to close 12 hours later. Main candidates Among the front-runners, according to recent opinion polls, are Andre Ventura, the leader of the populist Chega (Enough) party. Chega's surge in public support made it the second-largest party in Portugal's parliament last year, just six years after it was founded. One of Ventura's main targets has been what he calls excessive immigration, as foreign workers have become more conspicuous in Portugal in recent years. "Portugal is ours," he says. During the election campaign, Ventura put up billboards across the country saying, "This isn't Bangladesh" and "Immigrants shouldn't be allowed to live on welfare." Such blatant anti-immigrant sentiment expressed in public was unthinkable in Portugal just a few years ago. Other leading candidates are from the country's two main parties that have alternated in power for the past half-century: Luis Marques Mendes from the center-right Social Democratic Party, currently in government, and António José Seguro of the center-left Socialist Party. A strong challenge is expected from retired Rear Adm. Henrique Gouveia e Melo, who is running as an independent and won public acclaim for overseeing the speedy rollout of COVID-19 vaccines during the pandemic. Only one woman is among the candidates. Portugal has never had a female or non-white head of state. Challenges for next president Last May, Portugal held its third general election in three years in its worst spell of political instability for decades. Steadying the ship is a key challenge for the next president. Ventura, the populist leader, has sought to turn immigration into a campaign issue, but voters appear more concerned about a housing crisis and the cost of living. A law permitting euthanasia and physician-assisted suicide in Portugal that parliament approved in 2022, but has been held up by constitutional objections, will likely land on the president's desk for approval. What's at stake In Portugal, the president is largely a figurehead with no executive power. Mostly, the head of state aims to stand above the political fray, mediating disputes and defusing tensions. However, the president is an influential voice and possesses some powerful tools, being able to veto legislation from parliament, although the veto can be overturned. The head of state also possesses what in Portuguese political jargon is called an "atomic bomb" — the power to dissolve parliament and call early elections. Political events in Portugal have little bearing on the overall direction of the European Union. It has one of the bloc's smallest economies, and its armed forces are of a modest size. What comes next A runoff between the top two finishers on Sunday will be held on Feb. 8. That will decide who serves a five-year term at the president's riverside "pink palace" in Lisbon.—Agencies

Israeli troops kill Palestinians for crossing vague ceasefire line that's sometimes unmarked

CAIRO: A dividing line, at times invisible, can mean life or death for Palestinians in Gaza. Those sheltering near the territory's "yellow line" that the Israeli military withdrew to as part of the October ceasefire say they live in fear as Israeli soldiers direct near-daily fire at anyone who crosses or even lingers near it. Of the 447 Palestinians killed between the ceasefire taking effect and Tuesday, at least 77 were killed by Israeli gunfire near the line, including 62 who crossed it, according to the Gaza Health Ministry. Among them were teenagers and young children. The Associated Press found. And although the military has placed some yellow barrels and concrete barriers delineating the limits of the Palestinian zone, the line is still unmarked in certain places and in others was laid nearly half a kilometer deeper than what was agreed to in the ceasefire deal, expanding the part of Gaza that Israel controls, according to Palestinians and mapping experts. "We stay away from the barrels. No one dares to get close" said Gaza City resident Ahmed Abu Jahl, noting that the markers are less than 100 meters from his house — instead of the roughly 500 meters outlined in a map put out by the Israeli military. As of Tuesday, the military had acknowledged killing 57 people around the yellow line, saying most were militants. It said its troops are complying with the rules of engagement in order to

counter militant groups, and are informing Palestinians of the line's location and marking it on the ground to "reduce friction and prevent misunderstandings." Under the ceasefire, Israel withdrew its troops to a buffer zone that is up to 7 kilometers deep and includes most of Gaza's arable land, its elevated points and all of its border crossings. That means more than 2 million Palestinians live in a strip along the coastline and central Gaza. People of all ages, some already dead, have been showing up almost daily at the emergency room of Gaza City's Al-Ahli hospital with bullet wounds from straying near the line, said hospital director Fadel Naeem. Amid the vast destruction in Gaza, the demarcation line often isn't easy to detect. Naeem said. He recounted picking his way through undamaged paths during a recent visit to the southern city of Khan Younis. He didn't notice he was almost across the line until locals shouted at him to turn back, he said. The Israeli military said most of the people it has killed crossing the line posed a threat to its troops. According to a military official who spoke on the condition of anonymity in line with military rules, troops issue audible warnings and then fire warning shots whenever someone crosses the line. Many civilians retreat when warning shots are fired, though some have been killed, the official acknowledged. Zaher Shamia, 17, lived with his grandfather in a tent 300 meters from the

line in northern Gaza's Jabalya refugee camp. On Dec. 10, he was playing with his cousin and some friends near the line, according to video he took before his death. Suddenly, shots rang out and the video stopped. Soldiers approaching the line with an armored bulldozer had fired on the teens, hitting Zaher, said a witness. A neighbor eventually found Zaher's body, which had been crushed by the bulldozer, said Zaher's grandfather, Kamal Al-Beih: "We only recognized him from his head." Two doctors, Mohamed Abu Selmiya and Rami Mhanna, confirmed that the teen had been killed by gunshots and then run over by a bulldozer. The military official said he was aware that Shamia was a civilian and that the military was looking into it. Maram Atta said that on Dec. 7, her 3-year-old daughter, Ahed, was playing with siblings outside of their tent, which was near the yellow line along Gaza's southern coast. Atta was preparing lentils when she heard aircraft overhead, then shots. A stray projectile whizzed close to her and struck Ahed, who was dead before they reached the clinic. "I lost my daughter to what they keep calling a 'ceasefire,'" said Atta, crying. "What ceasefire are they talking about?" A military official denied the killing. The line's exact location is ambiguous, differing on maps put out by the Israeli military and the White House.—Agencies

Malik for exploring Africa's potential for exports

LAHORE: Former SAARC Chamber of Commerce and Industry (SAARC CCI) President Iftikhar Ali Malik on Sunday called for a coherent, Africa-focused trade strategy backed by strong public-private collaboration to tap emerging African markets. In a statement, Malik said that by diversifying exports, fostering long-term partnerships and engaging Africa as a strategic economic partner, Pakistan can unlock new growth drivers, reduce trade imbalances and build a more resilient economy. "Africa, with a population exceeding 1.4 billion, a rapidly expanding middle class, and growing demand for consumer goods, offers immense potential for Pakistan, which must be fully exploited," he said. Malik highlighted the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) — the world's largest free trade area by number of countries — as an opportunity for Pakistan to gain preferential access, reduce tariff barriers, and integrate into regional value chains.—APP

Dense toxic fog shrouds Delhi

NEW DELHI: Residents of Delhi woke up to hazardous air quality on Sunday as a thick blanket of toxic smog and fog engulfed the Indian capital region, pushing air pollution into "severe" levels for the first time this year. Home to 30 million people, Delhi has not recorded a single "clean air" day since September 2023, with Air Quality Index readings hitting high above the 50 score throughout the past two years. On the AQI scale from 0 to 500, good air quality is represented by levels below 50, while levels above 300 are dangerous. Based on Central Pollution Control Board data, the overall AQI was around 439-444, with several stations across Delhi reaching almost 500 — the worst since the peak winter smog season in early November. The air quality is so bad that a Danish badminton star, Anders Antonsen, withdrew from the ongoing India Open, saying the city was not fit to host the tournament. Antonsen, who is the discipline's No. 3, said in an Instagram story that the decision was due to "extreme pollution." While the athlete chose to pay a \$5,000 fine rather than spend a few days in Delhi, its residents are left with little choice but to endure its toxic air.—APP

EU leaders reject Trump's threat over Greenland

AMSTERDAM: The Netherlands' foreign minister on Sunday said that US President Donald Trump's threat to impose new tariffs on European allies until they agree to sell Greenland to the United States is "blackmail." "It's blackmail what he's doing ... and it's not necessary. It doesn't help the alliance (NATO) and it also doesn't help Greenland," David van Weel said in an interview on Dutch television. Italy's prime minister called US President Donald Trump's threat to slap tariffs on opponents of his plan to seize Greenland a "mistake" on Sunday, adding she had told him her views. "I believe that imposing new sanctions today would be a mistake," Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni told journalists during a trip to Seoul, adding that "I spoke to Donald Trump a few hours ago and told him what I think." The United States will also suffer if Trump implements threats to impose tariffs on European countries opposing his plan to seize Greenland, a French minister said on Sunday. "In this escalation of tariffs, he has a lot to lose as well, as do his own farmers and industrialists," French Agriculture Minister Annie Genereux told broadcasters Europe 1 and CNews. Ireland's Foreign Affairs Minister on Sunday described the tariffs being threatened by Trump over European allies' stance on Greenland as "completely unacceptable".—APP

Briefs

**Indonesia
rescuers find
body from
plane crash**

MAKASSAR: Rescuers found debris and one body on Sunday from a small plane that crashed in eastern Indonesia with 10 people on board, officials said. The Indonesian Air Transport turboprop plane lost contact with the air traffic controller on Saturday afternoon while en route from Yogyakarta to the city of Makassar on Sulawesi island. Among the debris, the joint search and rescue team found what is believed to be "the fuselage, the tail section, and the windows", local official Muhammad Arif Anwar told a press briefing. The body of one victim was found on a steep mountain slope in the same area, said Arif, head of the Makassar search and rescue agency. "One male victim was found... at a depth of roughly 200 meters (656 feet) in the ravine and near aircraft debris," he said. Another local rescue official, Andi Sultan, confirmed a body had been recovered, saying the remains would be evacuated on Monday due to poor weather conditions.

A unit was also deployed by air to search for the missing passengers, according to Arif. The plane crashed into Mount Bulusaraung in Bantimurung-Bulusaraung National Park, which borders the city of Makassar, Arif said. - Agencies

**ECP
announces new
delimitation
schedule**

PESHAWAR: The Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) has announced a new delimitation schedule for Village Councils and Neighborhood Councils in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa ahead of the upcoming local government elections. According to the ECP, delimitation will be carried out in phases across 24 districts starting in March. These districts include Peshawar, Mardan, Swabi, Nowshera, Charsadda, Swat, Buner, Kohat, Abbottabad, Haripur, Dir, Chitral, and other areas of the province. The process will begin with the preparation of preliminary lists from January 19 to February 2, followed by compilation from February 3 to February 4. The preliminary delimitations will be published between March 5 and March 6, while objections can be submitted from March 6 to March 25. The final lists are scheduled to be issued on April 20. The Election Commission has confirmed that the final delimitations will be officially published in the Gazette of Pakistan, marking an important step toward the conduct of local government elections in KP. - Agencies

**Pak 3rd largest
exporter of
rice in Dec**

LAHORE: Pakistan's rice exports recorded a strong rebound in December 2025, registering a 14 per cent month-on-month (MoM) increase compared to November, primarily driven by a more than 50pc surge in Basmati shipments.

The impressive performance enabled Pakistan to overtake Vietnam and emerge as the world's third-largest rice exporter, behind India and Thailand, during the month. According to trade data, Pakistan exported 489,000 tonnes of rice in December 2025, excluding shipments to Iran, compared to Vietnam's 387,000 tonnes. This marks Pakistan's best monthly rice export performance, underscoring renewed momentum in the sector. The UAE remained the top destination for Pakistani rice, importing 74,897 tonnes, including 16,850 tonnes of Basmati. China followed closely with 74,685 tonnes, while other major destinations included Tanzania (62,900 tonnes), Kenya (60,300 tonnes), Ivory Coast (41,700 tonnes), Guinea-Bissau (31,850 tonnes), Malaysia (23,930 tonnes), Madagascar (17,800 tonnes) and Kazakhstan (17,050 tonnes).

Sector G 12 known as Mehra Abadi branded 'no go area'

Authorities reported that multiple ATM and debit cards, sensitive electronic equipment, and other incriminating materials were recovered during the operation conducted in Mehra Abadi

DNA

ISLAMABAD: The National Cyber Crime Investigation Agency (NCCIA) has successfully dismantled an organized ATM fraud gang operating in Islamabad and other parts of the country, arresting several suspects including the main female ringleader. Officials confirmed that the prime suspect, identified as Asma Minhaj, was apprehended in Chiniot. Following her arrest, NCCIA teams conducted further raids in Mehra Abadi, Islamabad, leading to the detention of additional gang members. Authorities reported that multiple ATM and debit cards, sensitive electronic equipment, and other incriminating materials were recovered during the operation.

According to initial investigations, the gang specialized in swapping ATM cards of unsuspecting citizens at booths during peak hours, later withdrawing cash from their accounts. Victims were targeted using deceptive tactics designed to confuse and mislead them in crowded banking environments. Officials revealed that the arrested ringleader was already a proclaimed offender and had been wanted in multiple fraud cases across different jurisdictions. The crackdown is part of NCCIA's broader campaign against financial crimes and cyber fraud, with further arrests expected as investigations expand. Authorities emphasized that all facilitators and accomplices connected to the network will be brought to justice, while efforts are underway to trace additional victims and financial links tied to

the gang's operations. Meanwhile, concerns have been raised about the law-and-order situation in Islamabad's G-12 sector, particularly the Mehra Abadi locality, which has reportedly become a no-go area. Residents allege that criminals, including narcotics dealers, have taken refuge there, while police remain hesitant to intervene. Despite being a Capital Development Authority (CDA) sector, enforcement measures have failed to clear the area, raising questions about governance and security. The NCCIA operation highlights both the growing sophistication of cybercrime networks and the challenges faced by law enforcement in tackling organized fraud. Officials reiterated their commitment to protecting citizens from financial ex-

ploitation and urged the public to remain vigilant while using ATM services. Citizens are advised to safeguard their personal banking information, avoid assistance from strangers at ATM booths, and immediately report suspicious activity to authorities. The successful arrest of the female ringleader marks a significant breakthrough in the fight against financial crime, but the broader issue of criminal safe havens in Islamabad underscores the need for coordinated action between cybercrime investigators, police, and civic authorities. The NCCIA has vowed to continue its crackdown until all members of the fraud network are apprehended and prosecuted, ensuring justice for victims and restoring public confidence in financial security systems.

Gaza humanitarian crisis 'far from being over,' United Nations warns

UNITED NATIONS: Three months into the ceasefire in the Gaza Strip, the UN and partners have delivered tonnes of assistance items and carried out critical repairs, but this is only a temporary solution, a veteran aid worker has warned. "The humanitarian situation and crisis in Gaza is far from being over," Olga Cherevko from the UN aid coordination office OCHA said in an update to journalists in Jerusalem. "For the Palestinians in Gaza, their lives continue to be defined by displacement, trauma, uncertainty, and deprivation."

This has been further compounded by "severe recurrent storms that not only destroy people's meagre belongings, but they're also deadly - whether through crumbling buildings or by taking the lives of children who are highly susceptible to the cold". Since the ceasefire between Israel and Hamas, humanitarian teams have brought in over 165,000 metric tonnes of assistance into Gaza. They also repaired roads, rehabilitated hospitals, cleared rubble, and re-opened aid distribution points. "We celebrated our gains and showed once again that when we're enabled to do so, we deliver," Ms. Cherevko said, adding that "the results speak for themselves."

During the first two months of the truce alone, over 1.3 million people received food packages, and over 1.5 million hot meals were prepared and delivered to people in need across Gaza, thus improving food security. When torrential floods hit Gaza, putting thousands of families at risk, humanitarian teams worked with municipalities to find safer options. They also distributed tents, tarpaulins, mattresses and warm clothes. "But while this progress is clear, it remains fragile and could be reversed overnight,"

she said. "Because airstrikes, shelling, and armed clashes continue with civilian casualties being reported daily. Most of Gaza lies in ruins and the needs far outpace our efforts to meet them." Ms. Cherevko said that "due to various impediments and restrictions placed on organizations operating in Gaza and specific types of supplies that could enter, we could basically only apply Band-Aids to a wound that can only be closed with proper care." The harsh winter storms have also reversed gains made on the humanitarian front "because no amount of tents or tarpaulins can replace repairing people's homes". Additionally, despite humanitarians re-opening or establishing dozens of health service points, less than 40 per cent of healthcare facilities in Gaza are operational, while educational supplies critical for children who have not gone to school for two consecutive years continue to be barred from entry. She also pointed to delays at border crossings, limited humanitarian corridors, delays, and other impediments, as well as restrictions on the operations of UN entities and international NGOs which "are putting lives at risk." Ms. Cherevko stressed that "emergency response and its transition to early recovery cannot wait for political solutions. And a ceasefire in itself is not a recovery plan."

What humanitarians working in Gaza need "remains very simple," she said, calling for parties to the conflict to respect the ceasefire, ensure civilians are protected and that humanitarian access remains predictable, sustained and unimpeded. Furthermore, restrictions on both aid agencies and critical supplies must be lifted, early recovery must be funded and enabled, and donor support must continue. - APP

Syrian army extends hold over north Syria

DEIR HAFA: Syria's army has seized swathes of the country's north, dislodging Kurdish forces from territory over which they held effective autonomy for more than a decade. The government appeared to be extending its grip on Kurdish-run areas after President Ahmed al-Sharaa issued a decree declaring Kurdish a "national language" and granting the minority group official recognition.

The Kurds have said Friday's announcement fell short of their aspirations, while the implementation of a March deal - intended to see Kurdish forces integrated into the state - has stalled. Government troops drove Kurdish forces from two Aleppo neighbourhoods last week and on Saturday took control of an area east of the city.

On Sunday, the government announced the capture of Tabqa, about 55 kilometres (34 miles) west of Raqa.

"The Syrian army controls the strategic city of Tabqa in the Raqa countryside, including the Euphrates Dam, which is the largest dam in Syria," said Information Minister Hamza Almustafa, according to the official SANA news agency.

The Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), however,

said they had "taken the necessary measures to restore security and stability" in Tabqa. In Deir Hafer, some 50 kilo-

metres east of Aleppo city, an AFP correspondent saw several SDF fighters leaving the town and residents returning under heavy army presence. Syria's army said four soldiers had been killed, while Kurdish forces reported several fighters dead. Both sides traded blame for violating a withdrawal deal. Kurdish authorities ordered a curfew in the Raqa region after the army designated a swathe of territory southwest of the Euphrates River a "closed military zone", warning it would target what it said were several military sites.

The SANA news agency reported Sunday that the SDF destroyed two bridges over the Euphrates in Raqa city, which lies on the eastern bank of the river. Raqa's media directorate separately accused the SDF of cutting off Raqa city's water supply by blowing up the main water pipes. Deir Ezzor governor Ghassan Alsayed Ahmed said on social media that the SDF fired "rocket projectiles" at neighbourhoods in government-controlled territories in the city centre of Deir Ezzor, Al-Mayadin, and other areas. The SDF said "factions affiliated with the Damascus government attacked our forces' positions" and caused clashes in several towns on the east bank of the Euphrates, opposite Al-Mayadin and which lie between Deir Ezzor and the Iraqi border. - Agencies

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