

COAS Gen Asim stresses Kashmir resolution for lasting peace in South Asia

Condemns India’s unilateral, illegal efforts to alter the status of Indian Illegally Occupied Jammu and Kashmir, emphasizing that such actions violate UNSC resolutions

Press Release

RAWALPINDI: During the meeting with United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres at the UN headquarters in New York, Chief of Army Staff (COAS) General Asim Munir reiterated the crucial role of finding a peaceful solution to the long-standing Kashmir dispute for enduring peace in South Asia. The Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) issued a statement highlighting the discussions during the meeting.

“Peace in South Asia will remain elusive until a peaceful solution to the long-standing Kashmir dispute is found in accordance with the [UN Security Council] UNSC resolutions and the aspirations of Kashmiri people,” emphasized COAS General Asim Munir, emphasizing the urgency of addressing the longstanding issue in accordance with international resolutions and the will of the Kashmiri people.

The army chief condemned India’s unilateral and illegal efforts to alter the status of occupied Jammu and Kashmir, emphasizing that such actions violate UNSC resolutions. General Asim Munir’s meeting with Guterres also included discussions on ongoing issues in both Kashmir and Gaza.

During the meeting, COAS Gen Asim Munir reaf-



NEW YORK: Army chief Gen Asim Munir meeting with UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres in New York to discuss the current situation in Gaza as well as Kashmir.

firmed Pakistan’s commitment to a just and peaceful resolution of the Palestine issue. He urged the UN chief to mobilize the international community for an immediate cessation of hostilities in Gaza to prevent further human tragedy. General Munir highlighted that a sustainable solution to the Palestine-Israel conflict lies in the establishment of a two-state solution.

The meeting between COAS Gen Asim Munir and UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres focused on various aspects of the Palestine-Israel conflict, with Pakistan expressing concerns over the plight of innocent civilians in Gaza who

are being targeted in the conflict. The COAS underscored the importance of international efforts to bring about a sustainable solution and restore peace in the region.

The discussions further reinforced Pakistan’s stance on the Palestine issue and its commitment to supporting diplomatic initiatives for peace in the Middle East. The meeting also provided an opportunity for Pakistan to engage with the UN chief on critical regional issues and contribute to international efforts aimed at promoting peace and stability.

Expressing deep concerns over the plight of innocent civilians facing brutality

in Gaza, COAS Gen Asim Munir emphasized the need for sufficient humanitarian relief.

Guterres warmly welcomed the army chief upon his arrival, acknowledging the contributions made by the Pakistan Army and law enforcement agencies towards global peace and stability.

The COAS reassured Pakistan’s unwavering support to the UN in all earnest efforts for global peace and security. The meeting with Guterres is part of General Asim Munir’s visit to the US, where he has engaged with high-ranking US defense officials to discuss regional and global security issues.

Breezing temp to lure Karachiites from today

By our correspondent

KARACHI: The Pakistan Meteorological Department (PMD) has issued a warning for residents of Karachi and adjoining areas as a cold wave is set to sweep through Sindh and Balochistan’s coastal regions, following the first snowfall in Balochistan.

As the cold wave approaches, the residents are advised to take necessary precautions to stay warm and protect themselves from the harsh cold weather conditions. The PMD’s alert comes after Karachi experienced its coldest night of the winter season on December 7, with the temperature dropping to 13.5°C. Karachiites are urged to stay updated with weather forecasts and adhere to safety guidelines as they prepare for the upcoming chilly weather in the coastal regions of Sindh and Balochistan.

According to the PMD, various areas in Balochistan, including Toba Achakzai, Toba Kakari, Ziarat, Kanjoghi, and Khwaja Amran, have also experienced the first spell of winter snow. Additionally, districts such as Chaman, Pishin, Killa Abdullah, Ziarat, Muslim Bagh, and Chaghi have witnessed rainfall, which is expected to persist until Saturday evening in north Balochistan.

The meteorological department highlighted that the western wave causing extreme winter conditions in northeastern and central Balochistan will exit the region tomorrow. It is anticipated that the mercury will remain below freezing point for two days in north Balochistan.

Black day observed

Nation commemorates 9th anniversary of APS attack

News Desk

PESHAWAR: Today marks the ninth anniversary of the tragic terror attack on the Army Public School (APS) in Peshawar, where 147 innocent students and teachers, including 122 students, embraced martyrdom on December 16, 2014. The nation observes this day to remember and honor the victims of one of the deadliest attacks in Pakistan’s history.

Nine years ago, on December 16, 2014, our nation was shaken to its core as the Army Public School (APS) in Peshawar became the tragic scene of one of the deadliest terror attacks in our history. Today, as we observe the solemn occasion of the ninth anniversary of the APS attack, we come together as a nation to honor the memory of the innocent lives lost and pay tribute to the resilience and strength of those affected. On that fateful day, 147 individuals, including 122 students, became martyrs at the hands of terrorists who targeted the very essence of our future—the students of APS. The school, once a symbol of hope and education, bore witness to an act of brutality that left an indelible mark on our collective consciousness.

The response from our security forces was swift and resolute. In a display of unparalleled courage, they confronted the terrorists, bringing the ordeal to an end but not without significant sacrifice. Nine security personnel, including two officers, were injured in the operation. The terrorists responsible for this heinous act were apprehended, tried, and sentenced to death, bringing a measure of justice to the grieving families. The APS attack was a watershed moment that galvanized our nation into action. In the aftermath, we devised and implemented the National Action Plan, a comprehensive strategy to combat terrorism in all its forms.

As we remember the young souls and dedicated educators who were taken from us on that tragic day, we also honor the resilience of the survivors and their families. Their strength in the face of adversity serves as an inspiration to us all. Pakistan has endured significant



losses in its struggle against terrorism, sacrificing over 70,000 lives and incurring economic losses exceeding \$150 billion. Yet, our resolve remains unbroken. We stand united, vowing to create a future free from the shadows of terror.

On that fateful day, six terrorists, disguised in military uniforms, entered the APS premises, unleashing indiscriminate fire on students, teachers, and staff. The immediate response from security forces led to a prolonged operation resulting in the elimination of the Tehreek-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP) terrorists responsible for the heinous act. During the encounter, nine security personnel, including two officers, were injured. Subsequently, six terrorists involved in the attack were arrested, tried by military courts, and sentenced to death.

The APS attack stands as a stark reminder of the nation’s commitment to countering terrorism and ensuring the safety of its people. This tragic incident prompted the formulation of Pakistan’s first-ever National Action Plan, a comprehensive strategy to combat terrorism in all its forms, leading to major military operations such as Zarb-e-Azb and Radd-ul-Fasaad.

The entire nation, encompassing civil and military leadership, remains united in paying tribute to the martyred children, teachers, and their families for their immense sacrifices.

Pakistan, having endured over 70,000 lives lost and economic losses exceeding \$150 billion due to terrorism, stands resolute in its determination to eradicate this menace.

On this occasion, Pakistan has reiterated its concerns about Indian involvement in state-sponsored terrorism, exposing clandestine designs aimed at financing terror groups to destabilize the country.

A dossier containing specific information, including bank accounts and details of Indian nationals involved, was sent to the United Nations, European nations, and envoys of friendly countries. Security analysts have recently revealed that India’s intelligence agency RAW spent \$1 million to merge the TTP with other militant groups, indicating India’s persistent efforts to fuel terrorism in Pakistan.

[The nation has consistently exposed India for its involvement in terror attacks, particularly those targeting the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). As Pakistan commemorates the APS attack anniversary, it renews its call for the Interim Afghan government to take decisive action against terrorist outfits like TTP and cease the use of Afghan soil against Pakistan. The nation stands together to honor the memory of the APS martyrs and renews its commitment to a future free from the scourge of terrorism.] in Box

On this solemn anniversary, we reiterate our concerns about external forces, particularly Indian involvement in state-sponsored terrorism. We have consistently exposed these clandestine designs to destabilize our country, sending dossiers to international forums containing specific details about India’s role in supporting terror groups.

As we reflect on the APS attack, we also renew our call to the Interim Afghan government to take decisive action against terrorist outfits operating from Afghan soil. The memory of this tragic day strengthens our resolve to build a peaceful and secure future for our nation. Today, as we commemorate the ninth anniversary of the APS attack, let us remember the lives lost, honor the survivors, and reaffirm our commitment to building a resilient and terrorism-free Pakistan.

Fawad Ch arrested by NAB in corruption case

By our correspondent

ISLAMABAD: The National Accountability Bureau (NAB) has apprehended former federal minister Fawad Chaudhry in connection with a corruption case, as reported by Geo News on Saturday. The arrest warrant for Chaudhry was signed by NAB Chairman Lt-Gen (retd) Nazir Ahmed Butt, leading to his detention from Adiala Jail, where he was already in custody for a fraud case.

The arrest warrant specifies that the former information minister is detained in relation to a corruption case, and he is scheduled to be presented before the court. Fawad Chaudhry was initially arrested from his residence in Islamabad on November 4 after a complaint was filed against him at Islamabad’s Aabpara Police Station, alleging that he accepted a bribe of Rs5 million in exchange for a job.

Following the arrest, Chaudhry’s wife, Hilba Chaudhry, claimed that her husband was arrested without any valid reason. This is not the first time the politician has faced legal troubles. In January, Fawad Chaudhry was arrested from his residence after making public threats against the members of the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) during a media talk outside former PTI chief Imran Khan’s residence in Zaman Park. The then-coalition government asserted that it was not involved in the politician’s arrest.

In June, Fawad Chaudhry issued an apology to the electoral watchdog for allegedly using “intemperate” language targeting the ECP and Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) Sikandar Sultan Raja. He was also among the PTI leaders arrested during the crackdown on the party since May 9, accused of involvement in riots that resulted in casualties and injuries. In June, Fawad Chaudhry participated in the launching ceremony of the Istikham-e-Pakistan Party (IPP), led by Imran Khan’s close political aide Jahangir Tareen.

USCIRF recommends blacklisting india over religious freedom concerns

News Desk

WASHINGTON: The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) has strongly advocated for the blacklisting of India, urging Biden administration to designate the country as a “Country of Particular Concern” under the US Religious Freedom Act. The Independent Federal Government Commission cited India’s alleged transnational repression against religious minorities as the basis for its recommendation.

Highlighting recent actions by the Indian government, the USCIRF expressed serious concerns about efforts to silence activists, journalists, and

lawyers abroad, characterizing these actions as posing a substantial threat to religious freedom. The commission’s statement emphasized the need for the US Department of State to recognize India’s systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of freedom of religion or belief.

USCIRF Commissioner Stephen Schneck voiced particular concern over the alleged involvement of the Indian government in the killing of Sikh activist Hardeep Singh Nijjar in Canada and the reported plan to assassinate another Sikh activist, Gurpatwant Singh Pannun, in the USA. Schneck described these incidents as “deeply troubling.” India’s government routinely denies accusations of dis-

crimination in the Hindu-majority country.

The USCIRF’s recommendation comes amidst heightened sensitivity in US-India relations, with the Biden administration seeking closer ties with India amid concerns over China’s growing influence. The commission underscored its longstanding advocacy for India’s designation as a country of particular concern, dating back to 2020. Commissioner David Curry expressed grave concern over India’s extension of domestic repression to target religious minorities living abroad, deeming it “especially dangerous and cannot be ignored.” The USCIRF highlighted Indian authorities’ use of spyware and online harassment campaigns

to intimidate journalists and activists advocating for religious minorities abroad.

The USCIRF’s stance on India’s religious freedom practices has faced previous dismissal by India’s foreign ministry in 2020, criticizing the remarks as “biased and tendentious.”

The USCIRF also drew attention to India’s use of legislation like the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act and anti-conversion laws to crack down on religious minorities, journalists, and activists within its borders. As the delicate issue unfolds, it poses challenges for both India and the Biden administration in their efforts to strengthen bilateral relations in the face of shared concerns about China’s geopolitical influence.

Congress members say India-US relations at risk over Pannun murder plot

LONDON/WASHINGTON: Indian-American members of the US Congress praised the Biden administration for the classified briefing on Indian intelligence agent Nikhil Gupta’s indictment and a foiled murder-for-hire plot against the US citizen and Sikhs For Justice (SFJ) pro-Khalistan leader Gurpatwant Singh Pannun.

Members including Ami Bera, Pramila Jayapal, Ro Khanna, Raja Krishnamoorthi, and Shri Thanedar emphasised their constitutional duty to protect citizens and urged a thorough investigation by the Government of India.

They expressed concern over potential harm to the US-India partnership if not addressed appropriately.

The US Department of Justice last month charged Gupta for attempting to murder the Sikh activist in New York City, hired by an unnamed Indian government employee, prompting diplomatic warnings, and highlighting alleged Indian government involvement.

Pannun welcomed the statement by US Congressmen. He said: “It is reassuring that the Indian-American members of US Congress are upholding their fundamental constitutional duty to protect the life, liberty and freedom of expression of the US Citizens at home and abroad.”

The US Congress members wrote: “As Members of Congress, the safety

and well-being of our constituents are our top priorities. The allegations outlined in the indictment are deeply troubling.”

“We appreciate the Government of India’s establishment of a Committee of Enquiry to investigate the murder plot. It is crucial that India conducts a thorough investigation, holds those responsible, including Indian government officials, accountable, and assures that such incidents will not recur.”

“While we acknowledge the meaningful impact of the U.S.-India partnership on both our nations, we express concern that the actions described in the indictment, if not addressed appropriately, could severely harm this significant partnership.”

This incident occurred shortly after the killing of Canadian citizen Hardeep Singh Nijjar in British Columbia by two unidentified gunmen. Nijjar was a close aide of Pannun and leader of Khalistan Referendum campaign in Canada.

According to the US District Court for the Southern District of New York, Gupta was hired by an unnamed Indian government employee who coordinated an effort from his country to kill “an attorney and political activist who is a US citizen of Indian origin.”

Like Nijjar, Pannun was involved with the Khalistan movement, a decades-old separatist effort to carve out historically Sikh-populated lands in North India and

establish an autonomous state.

After US officials thwarted the plot, a “diplomatic warning” was issued to India, and President Joe Biden reportedly confronted Prime Minister Modi about it. The DOJ had prepared a sealed indictment, initially planning to open it after Canada completed its probe into another related murder, resulting in a diplomatic spat between Canada and India.

Also yesterday, the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom said in Washington it is alarmed by India’s increased transnational targeting of religious minorities and those advocating on their behalf.

Recent efforts by the Indian government to silence activists, journalists, and lawyers abroad pose a serious threat to religious freedom. Due to India’s systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of freedom of religion or belief, USCIRF implores the US Department of State to designate India a Country of Particular Concern (CPC), said the organisation.

“The Indian government’s alleged involvement in the killing of Sikh activist Hardeep Singh Nijjar in Canada and the plot to kill Gurpatwant Singh Pannun in the United States are deeply troubling, and represent a severe escalation of India’s efforts to silence religious minorities and human rights defenders both within its country and abroad,” said USCIRF Commissioner Stephen Schneck.

Political discourse heats up as PML-N Sindh opens wings

By our correspondent

DADU: President of PML-I Sindh Bashir Ahmad Memon addressed the media, alongside Kheladas Kohistani and Yasir Babbar, welcomed a large number of educated individuals from Sindh who joined the reception for Nawaz Sharif. The press conference touched on various issues, primarily focusing on the recent visit of Nawaz Sharif and the political landscape in the region.

Bashir Ahmad Memon emphasized that Nawaz Sharif’s first priority should be to manage the country’s economy, which he believes will bring substantial benefits to Sindh. He highlighted infrastructure challenges in the region, citing instances like the collapse of the Kalimuri, a tower incident in China, and the recurring floods in Juhu. He criticized the lack of development projects and essential facilities, such as a hospital, in the district headquarters.

The PML-N Sindh President expressed support for Nawaz Sharif’s vision of national development, specifically pointing to the economic progress during Nawaz Sharif’s tenure, including the Neelum Jhelum

project that contributed to a 5.8 GDP and generated employment. He questioned the status of the Gorakh Hill project, pointing out the substantial funds spent without visible results. He lamented the lack of infrastructure and facilities in the area that certainly can boost internal tourism.

Bashir Ahmad Memon compared India’s space achievements with Pakistan’s and raised concerns about the sinking of Pakistan’s fleet, questioning the responsibility for the incident. The press conference also delved into political alliances, with Bashir Ahmad Memon mentioning those who were allies with Nawaz Sharif before continuing to support him. He acknowledged the improved relations with the United States and the resurgence of CPEC.

Commenting on Imran Khan’s previous government, PML-N leader criticized the halt in industry and transport, suggesting that under Khan, the country would have gone bankrupt. He also expressed his views on the nature of politics, emphasizing that there should be no enmity in politics. He accused Imran Khan of introducing hatred and abuse into politics.

Major airports set to introduce e-gates for expedited immigration services

KARACHI: In a bid to enhance immigration services for passengers, Pakistan is in discussions with a United Arab Emirates (UAE) company to install electronic gates (e-gates) at major airports in Karachi, Lahore, and Islamabad, akin to facilities in developed countries, as reported by The News on Saturday.

Sources at airports revealed that the prospective installation of e-gates at Jinnah International Airport in Karachi, Allama Iqbal Airport in Lahore, and Islamabad International Airport aims to streamline immigration services, offering a self-immigration experience for passengers arriving from developed nations. Similar to airports in Birmingham, Edinburgh, Dubai, and other advanced countries, passengers at these major Pakistani airports equipped with e-gates will enjoy a hassle-free experience, bypassing traditional queues and efficiently passing through automated self-service immigration barriers.

According to immigration sources, the e-gates service will be exclusively available to passengers with e-passports. E-gates, also known as Automated Border Control Systems (ABC), utilize data stored in biometric passports to verify the identity of the passport holder upon entry.

COAS commends American-Pakistani for \$9m donation to NUST

News Desk

WASHINGTON: Chief of Army Staff (COAS) General Asim Munir has expressed his appreciation for American-Pakistani business tycoon Tanweer Ahmed, who generously donated \$9 million to Islamabad's National University of Science and Technology (NUST) for the construction of an IT Tower, as stated by the Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR).

Currently on a visit to the United States, the COAS engaged in meetings with top officials in Washington and interacted with various Pakistani diaspora communities. During his visit, he met with Tanweer Ahmed, acknowledging his significant contribution to NUST in the field of IT development in Pakistan. In an official statement, the ISPR mentioned, "COAS appreciated him and said Pakistan is proud of heroes like him."

In a letter of commenda-

tion, Gen Asim Munir praised Ahmed for his philanthropic efforts, particularly in supporting Pakistan during natural disasters and promoting IT education in the country. The COAS emphasized the positive impact of Ahmed's initiatives, such as the establishment of the Science and Technology Park, campus expansion, and financial assistance for economically challenged students at NUST. The letter from the COAS read, "Your efforts in the domains of humanitarian assistance and interest in academia of Pakistan are a true reflection and favor for the people of Pakistan."

Last week, Ahmed was honored with an honorary doctorate degree by Indus University in recognition of his significant contributions to the IT and health sectors in Pakistan. Notably, he has played a pivotal role in establishing a modern hospital in Sialkot that provides free medical care. In an inter-

view, Ahmed expressed his admiration for the COAS's vision and passion for Pakistan's IT sector, stating, "No army chief has done as much as Gen Munir has done in just one year for the IT sector of Pakistan and for a clean national economy. He has taken excellent steps to put Pakistan's economy on the right course."

Ahmed shared his enthusiasm for the NUST Information Technology (IT) Tower project, which aligns with the COAS's efforts to boost the IT potential of Pakistan. Highlighting the country's untapped digital potential and the significant youth population, Ahmed underscored the importance of collaborative efforts to harness this potential for economic growth. The donation from Tanweer Ahmed reflects the commitment of individuals and organizations to contribute to the development of Pakistan's education and technology sectors.

SSP Sukkur recommends Rs5m reward for arrest of journalist's killer

By our correspondent

SUKKUR: SSP Sukkur Irfan Ali Samoo has recommended a reward of Rs. 5 million for the arrest of Sheero Mahar, the alleged killer of slain journalist Jan Mohammad Mahar. The recommendation was made following an ongoing operation in the Shah Bhello Area of Shikarpur, characterized by an exchange of fire between the police and the suspects.

During the operation in the reverine area of Shah Bhello, the accused reportedly fired rockets at the police, prompting a retaliatory response. Later, the suspect managed to flee the scene. SSP Irfan Ali Samoo stated that the reward recommendation has been communicated to IGP Sindh. The murder of journalist Jan Muhammad Mahar occurred on August 14, 2023, in an ambush while returning home from the office on Queens Road.

Meanwhile, a persistent sit-in protest against the non-arrest of the killers of journalist continues as the journalists, members of civil society, political and religious workers have been protesting consecutively for 117 days, demanding justice for the slain journalist. The protestors expressed dissatisfaction with the progress of the police investigation and criticized the caretaker CM Sindh, Home Minister, and IGP Sindh for not engaging the Pakistan Rangers in the operation.

Rupee seen falling 5pc-10pc in 2024 amid economic challenges

KARACHI: The rupee may extend its slide in 2024 as the country grapples with economic challenges such as soaring inflation, hefty debt obligations, a widening external financing gap and dwindling foreign exchange reserves, a report from Tresmark, a financial terminal, said on Saturday.

The rupee, which has dropped 20 percent against the dollar this year, could depreciate another 5-10 percent next year as Pakistan suffers from near-zero growth, low productivity, higher repayments with fewer avenues for raising forex, the report said.

On December 15, 2023, the local currency closed at 283.26 per dollar in the interbank market. It ended on December 30, 2022, at 226.43.

"Challenging times ahead for rupee," the report said. "In the current scenario, the economy is grappling with a slowdown in imports (fresh letters of credit openings), a decline in both exports and remittances, creating a stifling effect exacerbated by persistent inflation."

Tresmark, however, warned that the currency's weakness could fuel another round of inflation, posing a potential back-breaking burden for all stakeholders.

Average inflation for the first five months of the fiscal year was 28.62 percent, well above the central bank's target of 22 percent for the current fiscal year.



LAHORE: Punjab's interim Chief Minister Mohsin Naqvi revealed the deployment of 48 flares for cloud seeding, with a specific focus on the Shahdara area to counter the prevailing smog. —File photo

Punjab Capital, in Collaboration with UAE, Celebrates Milestone with Historic Artificial Rain Success Through Cloud Seeding

News Desk

LAHORE: Lahore, the capital city of Punjab, achieved a groundbreaking success in meteorological innovation on Saturday as it successfully implemented artificial precipitation through cloud seeding, in collaboration with the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The momentous experiment, aimed at addressing the persistent smog challenge, resulted in rainfall across ten sectors of Lahore, marking a significant achievement in environmental sci-

ence. The city has been grappling with worsening smog conditions, leading to elevated air pollution levels and a surge in medical cases related to respiratory ailments. The successful artificial rain initiative, unveiled by Punjab's interim chief minister, Mohsin Naqvi, aims to combat these environmental challenges. In his address to the media, Naqvi highlighted the meticulous planning and collaboration that went into this milestone initiative. He expressed gratitude to the UAE government for its

generous support, emphasizing that not a single unit of currency from Punjab's exchequer was spent on the project. The procedure involved the deployment of 48 flares for cloud seeding, with a focus on the Shahdara area. The geographical precision of the rainfall, confined within a radius of 10 to 15 kilometres in Lahore, showcased the accuracy and efficacy of the experiment, propelling Lahore to the forefront in terms of recorded rainfall. Artificial rain, or cloud seeding, is a meteorological

technique designed to induce precipitation by introducing specific substances into clouds, promoting raindrop formation. The UAE has been a pioneer in the use of cloud seeding to address water challenges in the region. Naqvi reiterated the commitment to monitoring and alertness, underscoring the success of Lahore's artificial rain initiative. The innovative approach to environmental challenges reflects ongoing efforts to augment water resources and combat air pollution.

Inflation hits six-month high: SPI records 43.16% in weekly inflation

News Desk

ISLAMABAD: The weekly inflation rate in Pakistan reached a six-month high, standing at 43.16% for the week ending on December 14, as per official data released by the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (PBS) on Friday. The persistent surge in food prices, notably sugar, pulses, eggs, and rice, contributed significantly to this inflationary trend.



ISLAMABAD: A vendor selling dry fruits while the market seems to be waiting for the customers due to the recent hike in prices.

The Sensitive Price Indicator (SPI) showed a marginal 0.06% decrease week-on-week, maintaining the highest level since June 1 when SPI inflation was at 43.17%. This marks the fifth consecutive week with SPI inflation above 40%, signaling the enduring challenges of soaring prices faced by consumers. The nation grapples with severe inflationary pressures, prompting the State Bank of Pakistan (SBP) to keep its benchmark interest rate unchanged at a record high of 22%. The central bank, having increased interest rates by a total of 15 percentage points in the last two years, awaits signs of easing inflation after a recent hike in gas prices.

Notably, gas prices saw a staggering surge of 1108.6% over the year, reaching Rs1,711 per MMBtu for consumers using up to 3.3719 MMBtu. Cigarette prices increased by 93.2%, while various commodities such as chili powder, wheat flour, garlic, and rice experienced notable hikes. The inflation bulletin revealed that among different income slabs, the lowest-income group, earning up to Rs17,732 per month, faced an SPI inflation of 35.59%, whereas the group spending more than Rs44,175 per month recorded an inflation rate of 41.47%. The middle quintile (Rs22,889 to Rs29,517) wit-

nessed the highest weekly inflation at 46.99%. Out of the 51 items monitored by SPI, 37.26% experienced an increase, 19.6% witnessed a decrease, and 43.14% remained unchanged. Notable price hikes were observed in sugar, gram pulse, eggs, rice, and various other commodities, while certain items like potatoes, tomatoes, tea, chicken, and vegetable ghee saw price reductions. Consumers face the continued challenge of coping with rising prices, prompting concerns about the overall economic impact and the need for sustained measures to mitigate inflationary pressures.



SUKKUR: A photograph of the participants of the 'Faulty Workshop' organized by Archaeology Department at Shah Abdul Latif University (SALU), Khairpur.

Workshop to elevate archaeological research, teaching standards

By our correspondent

SUKKUR: In a bid to enhance the skills and knowledge of faculty members in the field of archaeology, the Archaeology Department at Shah Abdul Latif University (SALU), Khairpur, organized a 'Faculty Workshop' on Teaching Geographic Information System (GIS) and Photogrammetry in archaeology. The workshop, conducted by renowned senior faculty members from the United States, aimed to provide essential training for faculty engaged in research and teaching in Pakistan.

Led by Dr. Uzma Z. Rizvi, an Associate Professor at Pratt Institute, USA, the workshop attracted participation from various aca-

demic institutions in Pakistan, including Hazara University, Quaid-e-Azam University, and Shah Abdul Latif University. Head of the Department of Archaeology at SALU Dr. Tasleem Abro emphasized the workshop's objective of imparting training in GIS and Photogrammetry to enhance the capabilities of faculty members. She highlighted the collaborative effort with senior faculty members in Pakistan and praised Dr. Uzma's over two decades of teaching experience in the United States and South Asia.

The workshop facilitated by Dr. Uzma Rizvi focused on exposing junior faculty members to new open-source technologies while enabling them to apply ad-

vanced cartographic methods for archaeological and heritage studies. The event featured expert teachers such as GIS Faculty Sara Eichner from Pratt Institute and Photogrammetry Faculty Greg Smith from Northwest College, USA.

Participants from Pakistan included Muhammad Zahoor and Haseeb ur Rehman from Hazara University, Aliza Rizvi from Lahore Museum, Nafees Ahmed from the University of Punjab, Imran Shabir and Shakir Naseer from the University of Baluchistan, Manik Mustafa Shar and Mohammad Amin Chandio from the University of Sindh, Rashid Kalhoro and Tooba Shafaq from Aror University. Representatives

from the Government of Sindh Culture Department, Zulnorain Haider, and Zahid Dehto also attended the workshop.

During the workshop, participants had the opportunity to visit historical sites such as Moen jo Darro and Kot Diji Fort. The archaeologists collectively opined that preserving these cultural sites through Photogrammetry would not only contribute to documentation but also attract foreign tourists. The event marked a significant step forward in advancing archaeological and historical knowledge in Pakistan, fostering collaboration among institutions, and integrating cutting-edge technologies into academic practices.

America experiences biblical extremism

Controversy surrounds over Satan Club's visit to local school

News Desk

WASHINGTON: The After School Satan Club, organized by 'The Satanic Temple,' is facing a wave of criticism as it prepares to visit Chimneyrock Elementary School in Cordova, Tennessee, next month. Despite its provocative name, the group, associated with a non-theistic religion based in Salem, Massachusetts, known as "The Satanic Temple," aims to challenge authority and promote pluralism, secularism, and religious rights.

The controversy erupted after the temple recently displayed a ram's head symbolizing Baphomet, an occult figure, in Iowa. The display was met with backlash from several political figures. The incident took a turn when a 35-year-old man vandalized the display, leading to his charge under the First Amendment. The First Amendment charge stems from the constitu-

tional right that allows religious groups to rent government buildings and display holiday decor in public areas. The Satanic Temple has previously set up similar clubs in various school districts, challenged abortion laws, and featured symbols next to Christmas decorations in statehouses.

The After School Satan Club was initiated in 2016, providing an alternative to after-school religious services. It offers entertainment and educational activities, such as puzzles, scientific experiments, and community volunteering.

Presently, there are active clubs in California, Ohio, Connecticut, and Pennsylvania. The club recently secured permission to lease school premises, extending its reach to students from pre-kindergarten to grade five. The controversy has sparked responses from local religious leaders, including Pastor William A. Adkins Jr., who

expressed concern about allowing any 'Satanic Temple' private time with adolescents. However, he acknowledged the challenge of finding a balance that respects constitutional rights while addressing community concerns.

Interim Superintendent Toni Williams attended a press conference with Christian pastors, emphasizing the importance of not being misled by recent events and cautioning against an agenda aimed at ending faith-based associations collaborating with the school district. Chairwoman of the Shelby County Board of Education, Althea E. Greene, echoed sentiments against the presence of Satan in the district and encouraged individuals to voice their concerns. Despite the controversy, the After School Satan Club retains legal privileges to use school facilities post-school hours, similar to any other nonprofit organization.

Diesel import soars 67pc in Nov on harvest, smuggling curbs

By our correspondent

KARACHI: The country imported 317,000 tonnes of high-speed diesel in November, the highest this fiscal year, as demand rose from the harvesting season and the government clamped down on smuggling from Iran, oil industry data showed on Saturday.

The diesel imports increased 67 percent from October, when the country imported 190,000 tonnes, the data showed. In the first five months of the fiscal year, Pakistan imported 737,000 tonnes of diesel, compared with zero imports in July, when Iranian diesel flooded the market.

Industry officials said the Iranian diesel is still finding its way into Pakistan, but it saw a sharp cut in the last two and a half months.

"In July this year, the country didn't import HSD as Iranian smuggled diesel was supplied in large quantities," an industry official said.

The month of August witnessed the import of over 109,000 tonnes, which kept on increasing during the months of September, October and November of this financial year.

Oil industry officials said the rise in diesel imports was mainly driven by the harvesting season, which boosted demand for agricultural machinery and irrigation pumps.

They said local refineries were pro-

ducing more diesel to meet the domestic demand, as the government asked them to ramp up their output in November.

The rise in the diesel demand was anticipated at the beginning of November when the government had asked the refineries to increase their production of petroleum products especially HSD," the officials said.

The government directed the refineries to enhance their output after diesel demand soared by 70 percent in the first week of November compared with the previous month.

Industry officials said apart from the harvesting season-driven demand, the recovery in the economic activity has also pushed up the diesel sale in the country after industrial and transport activities slowed down in the first nine months of the current calendar year.

Major demand drivers for petroleum include the transport, industry and power segments of the country.

During FY23, the transport segment consumed 43.6 percent of MOGAS and 33.6 percent HSD of the total petroleum products consumed.

Industry officials said the figures for the refineries' production of HSD are still being compiled, but the initial estimates suggest that their production of HSD is also on the higher side because of the higher import of crude oil in November compared to the preceding month of October this fiscal.

Admission of VC's wife in SALU Khairpur irks controversy

By our correspondent

SUKKUR: Shah Abdul Latif University Khairpur is under the scrutiny for allegedly violating the prescribed rules of the Higher Education Commission (HEC) in granting admission to Mahwish Asif Shaikh, the wife of Vice Chancellor IBA University Sukkur Asif Shaikh, in the M. Phil program at the Institute of Islamic Studies.

Sources have revealed that the university granted admission without the necessary approvals from the Board of Studies, Board of Faculty, and the Advanced Studies Research Board (ASRB). Vice Chancellor of Shah Abdul Latif University Khairpur Professor Dr. Khalil Ahmed Ibhuto purportedly directed the Director of Post Graduate Studies and the Director of the Institute of Islamic Studies to ensure Mahwish Shaikh's admission. The Board of Advanced Studies reportedly rejected the case, deeming it ineligible due to the significant differences between Muslim history and the subjects covered in the M. Phil program in Islamic Studies. Despite the rejection, the case was referred to the proper forums, including the Board of Studies and Board of Faculty.

The ASRB, consisting of Deans of Faculties, Director of Post Graduate Program, Pro-Vice Chancellors of the Campuses, and the Registrar, declared Mahwish Shaikh's admission as not eligible. However, under the influence of the Vice Chancellor, the Dean and Director of the Institute of Islamic Studies allegedly provided admission to Mahwish. Sources revealed that the Director of the Post Graduate Program sought guidance from the HEC regarding the admission of a candidate from Muslim history into Islamic Studies. The HEC responded that while Muslim History and Islamic Studies are different disciplines, it is within the domain of the university to frame rules through their legal forums.

Members of the ASRB, Professor Dr. Ghulam Mustafa Mashori, and Professor Dr. Ikhtiar Ghumro, confirmed that the ASRB had refused to grant admission to a candidate in Islamic Studies.

EDITOR: Ehtasham Anwar
Vol. No. 2
Issue. No. 1
Email: news@metro-morning.com
Jamadi-us-Saani 3, 1445 A.H.
Sunday, December 17, 2023

Gaza’s battle against starvation calling world’s attention

In the heart of the devastating conflict between Israeli forces and Hamas fighters lies an often-overlooked battle – one against hunger as starvation is the only major issue for all especially the parents with infants and kids. The story of Kifaya Al Kafarna, a housewife from Gaza Strip, epitomizes the profound humanitarian crisis unfolding in the region, unfortunately forced to seek refuge in a school library in Rafah with 27 family members amid Israeli insane airstrikes, Ms Kafarna now confronts the alarming prospect of starvation.

The relentless Israeli missile fire, coupled with the scarcity of humanitarian aid, has left hundreds of thousands of Gaza residents grappling with a dire food crisis, while Kafarna’s desperate plea reflects the grim reality faced by many in Gaza, where essential items such as flour, water, and food have become luxuries. The recent humanitarian pause in the conflict provided a brief respite, allowing some aid to reach the region by the Israeli authorities after escalating pressure by the world leading countries. However, with the resumption of hostilities on December 1, food aid has dwindled, and black market prices have surged, exacerbating the plight of Gaza’s population.

A survey by the World Food Program during the cease-fire revealed harrowing statistics – 97 percent of the households in northern Gaza and 83 percent in southern Gaza reported inadequate food consumption, with many receiving one meal a day or less. Severe hunger affected 50 percent of Palestinians in northern Gaza and 33 percent in the south. These distressing numbers are likely to have worsened since the conflict resumed and Israel insanely bombing the innocent civilians and civilian infrastructures including hospitals, schools and libraries, where most the Palestinians took refuge from the blind bombardments of the Israeli forces.

The war in Gaza not only unfolds on military front lines but is also shaped by an invisible force – the rules of war dictated by international law. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), custodian of the Geneva Conventions, plays a crucial role in upholding these rules. President Mirjana Spoljarić’s recent visit to Gaza sought to broker temporary truces and facilitate exchanges of hostages and prisoners, demonstrating the humanitarian principles guiding such efforts. The International Criminal Court’s prosecutor, Karim Khan, echoed the call for adherence to international law, urging both Hamas and Israel to avoid war crimes and prioritize civilian aid. Amid the complexities of modern warfare, institutions like the ICRC persistently advocate for fundamental principles, emphasizing impartiality and protection for the innocent.

As the conflict in Gaza persists, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) emerges as a stalwart guardian against invisible forces, tirelessly working to establish boundaries within the chaos of the war. In this labyrinth of complexity, the ICRC’s commitment to ensuring that the conflict adheres to limits defined by international law and that the innocent populace retains the right to protection becomes a beacon of hope. The intricacies of the conflict extend beyond the visible front lines, with the ICRC embodying the principles of impartiality and adherence to humanitarian law. Amidst the visible devastation caused by warfare, there exists an equally pressing and often overlooked crisis – the battle against hunger, intricately woven into the fabric of the conflict.

The people of Gaza, grappling with the aftermath of Israeli airstrikes, find themselves not only contending with the immediate dangers of war but also confronting the insidious threat of starvation. The scarcity of humanitarian aid compounds their suffering, as essential supplies vanish from the markets, leaving a vulnerable population at the mercy of an unseen enemy. In this challenging theater of war, the ICRC’s commitment to mediating temporary truces, facilitating exchanges, and upholding the principles of the Geneva Conventions becomes increasingly critical.

The battle against hunger, intricately entwined with the broader conflict, demands an immediate and comprehensive humanitarian response, and the urgency of this situation cannot be overstated. The ICRC’s unwavering commitment to mitigating the complexities of this conflict, coupled with the pressing need for humanitarian intervention, signifies a clarion call for the international community to act decisively. It is imperative to prevent further suffering in Gaza and address the silent crisis that threatens to deepen amidst the tumult of war.

Non-alcoholic fatty liver disease: Asymptomatic & Under-Diagnosed

Over 30 per cent Indians are affected by NAFLD, a lifestyle disease. The cases are expected to increase manifold as obesity and diabetes numbers rise

Arka De & Ajay Duseja

Non-alcoholic fatty liver disease (NAFLD) is a condition in which excess fat accumulates in the liver of people who drink little or no alcohol. NAFLD leads to inflammation (NASH) and scarring (fibrosis) in the liver, which can progress to cirrhosis and end-stage liver disease if left untreated. It is one of the most common causes of chronic liver disease globally and in India. NAFLD is also associated with an increased risk of heart attack, stroke and cancers, particularly liver. More than one-third of adults and children in India have NAFLD. It is particularly common in the North. A study in PGIMER, Chandigarh, found NAFLD in 50 per cent of otherwise healthy adult blood donors. The cases are expected to increase exponentially as obesity and diabetes numbers rise.

Although genetics and gut microbiota are some of the factors behind NAFLD, it is primarily a lifestyle disease driven by insulin resistance and metabolic dysfunction. The main risk factors are a sedentary lifestyle and unhealthy dietary habits, with an increased intake of calorie-rich foods. NAFLD is closely linked with other metabolic lifestyle diseases like obesity, diabetes mellitus, hypertension, and dyslipidemia (lipid imbalance). People who are obese or di-

abetics are at more risk of NAFLD and vice versa, these metabolic co-morbidities are more common in NAFLD patients. Also, patients with these metabolic co-morbidities are at a higher risk of having severe forms of NAFLD, including NASH, fibrosis, cirrhosis and even liver cancer.

The barriers against this burgeoning public health problem are many, including low awareness. NAFLD is largely asymptomatic in the early stages and is usually detected only in investigations or when patients become symptomatic with complications of cirrhosis and end-stage liver disease. The Indian National Association for Study of the Liver has recommended that those who are obese, or diabetic should be screened for NAFLD using abdominal ultrasonography.

Even the number of NAFLD specialists (hepatologists or gastroenterologists) is also quite less, given the humungous burden of NAFLD. Many NAFLD patients at low risk of developing significant liver disease can be managed at the primary care level. This risk stratification to identify low or high-risk patients can be accomplished through blood investigation parameters and elastography. The recent incorporation of NAFLD in the National Program for Prevention and Control of Cancer, Diabetes, Cardiovascular Diseases and Stroke

(NPCDCS) will also help in increasing awareness about the disease, promoting a healthy lifestyle and streamlining its overall management.

As NAFLD is primarily a lifestyle disease, prevention, and treatment demand lifestyle changes. These include diet modification and increase physical activity

Calorie restriction by one-third or 500-1000 kcal/day is more important than any specific diet. Though some studies have found the Mediterranean diet to be beneficial, a healthy diet sourced from local foods that is sustainable is equally beneficial. A healthy diet will protect not only against NAFLD but also diabetes, hyperten-

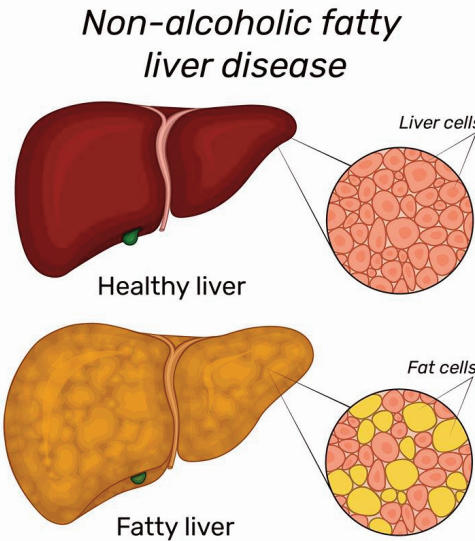
garh, found that intermittent fasting was better than standard calorie restriction in improving the metabolic profile, hepatic inflammation, and fibrosis though both were found to be equally effective in weight reduction and improving hepatic steatosis in NAFLD.

The exercise regimen should consist of moderate intensity aerobic exercises like brisk walking, jogging, running, swimming, cycling, etc., for at least 30 to 45 minutes per day, at least 5 days a week (150- 200 minutes per week). Even without weight loss, exercise has added benefits on insulin resistance and the overall metabolic milieu. Resistance exercises and yoga can supplement aerobic exercises. Yoga has also been shown to have several health benefits, including prevention and control of obesity and diabetes, decrease in waist circumference, reduction of blood pressure, improvement in lipid profile and insulin resistance. Yoga may also enhance the psychological well-being of NAFLD patients, who often suffer from depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, and poor quality of life.

Intake of three or more cups of unsweetened, black coffee may help in reducing liver fat and scarring.

Physical activity of at least 150 minutes of moderate-intensity, or 75 minutes of vigorous exercise per week, or a mix of both can improve insulin sensitivity, lower blood pressure, and reduce inflammation. Avoid alcohol as it damages liver, increases fat accumulation in the liver, and worsens liver function synergistically with NAFLD.

Managing other diseases linked to NAFLD, such as diabetes, high blood pressure and high cholesterol, can prevent or reduce liver damage and complications. Avoid self-prescribed medications, including complementary and alternative medicines and supplements that can potentially harm the liver. Consult with your doctor before taking any medication or supplement. Regular screening for liver functioning and NAFLD, particularly if you are diabetic, overweight/obese. Early detection and treatment can check progression to serious stages and reduce the risk of liver failure and cancer.



‘My responsibility to be hopeful’: The Climate Generation at COP28

By Taylor Luck

Fresh off 21 hours of travel and two flights from her home in Barbados to “the farthest I have ever been,” Naomi Cambridge tackles the first day of her first-ever Conference of Parties, or COP, powered by “adrenaline and hope.”

Like many young activists balancing their climate work and university studies, she spent hours on the way to Dubai cramming for end-of-semester university exams waiting for her next week. At the climate conference Tuesday, she smiles and waves down colleagues she had previously only met via Zoom, as they push for commitments to phase out fossil fuels and financing for developing countries. “We are not all starting from an equal playing field or the same starting line,” Ms. Cambridge said of developing nations’ struggle to access or afford renewable energy technologies – a major concern. “It is our generation’s role to push for climate justice.”

Two dynamics hit her within her first hour here: inclusivity and the “influx” of oil and gas firm lobbyists and PR firm handlers. “Being at COP at an oil- and gas-producing country is a bit of a paradox, but it is not necessarily a negative thing,” she says. If the United Arab

Emirates and other oil producers “are sincere,” it can “bring climate activists into the same room.”

This is the kind of credible hope that defines the Climate Generation, as the Monitor chronicled in a global project about the cohort born since 1989, when consciousness of children’s rights and global warming began to intersect. Here at COP28, we met up with three of these young change-makers to hear how the conference is playing out from their perspectives.

Public cynicism and skepticism abounded even before this COP opened in Dubai, with the world set to miss its 1.5-degree-Celsius target. Climate apathy is prevalent among young people, which is why Ms. Cambridge has set out to counter it at COP. “Hope is the fundamental thing that spurs action. We need action; therefore, we need to be powered by hope,” she says. And if, as it seemed on Friday, rich developing nations and oil producers are digging in their heels and refusing to grant concessions to developing nations? “All the more reason for youth to be here. Our main role here is to hold the officials at COP28 accountable,” she says.

Namibian Deon Shekuzza darts from negotiation rooms to panels to pavilions with a bounce in his step, somehow locked onto

both his phone and everyone around him, stopping every minute to wave or clasp hands with an acquaintance. Since he’s an eight-time veteran at COP, you might think he runs the place.

As a climate negotiator for Namibia focusing on the issue of a just and inclusive transition, he is splitting his time advocating for adaptation funding for Africa, negotiating at odd hours day and night, presenting young Namibians’ views at panels, and guiding first-time African youth COP-goers under his wing. It is exhausting. But his energy and voice do not falter. Neither does his smile.

“This is the only forum where all our voices, all nations, on paper are equal,” he says in between shaking hands with a delegate. “Namibia has a voice in the process, young people have a voice in the process, and we must take advantage of this opportunity and keep talking and acting to push for change every way we can.” There have been setbacks.

He describes the big money pledges and announcements by the COP28 organizer, the UAE, as “a distraction,” sizzle without substance. He worries too about his countries over focus on green hydrogen as its climate response, and the conference’s complete absence of attention on adaptation

financing for developing countries.

Then there is the exclusivity: closed-door meetings, delegates and negotiators being cordoned off into hallways for hours as princes and world leaders arrive. Lobbyists are everywhere. On Tuesday, the COP28 presidency booted Mr. Shekuzza and other negotiators from the room they were convening in to make way for a high-level private sector “event.” “I accidentally wandered into one VIP lounge, and I never saw so many world leaders and CEOs in my life,” he says. “They should be in the negotiating rooms, not closed rooms.”

But he still retains hope in the process, no matter this year’s outcomes. “There is a global focus on climate right now. It is up to us to steer the negotiations and debate in the right direction,” he says.

Farzana Faruk Jhumu has spent COP crisscrossing the 2-square-mile expo center, racing from the United Nations women’s pavilion to informal negotiation talks, down to the Bangladesh pavilion, and to the UNICEF pavilions where she distributes brochures and speaks to visitors. For the UNICEF youth ambassador and Bangladesh representative, conference days run from 9 a.m. panels to 11 p.m. reviews of negotiation texts before doing it all over again.

Can AI outsmart Europe’s bid to regulate it?

By Ned Temko

“Landmark” was the headline of choice, and little wonder. After months of discussion and debate among politicians, pundits, and pressure groups worldwide, a group of legislators was finally taking regulatory steps to address the potential dangers of artificial intelligence. And not just any legislators. Following a series of marathon meetings, the Parliament of the European Union – the world’s largest bloc of free-trading democracies – had reached agreement with representatives of its 27 member states on the draft text of the Artificial Intelligence Act. Last Friday’s announcement, however, also drew attention for the twin wake-up calls it sounded.

First, it brought home how difficult it is for governments to place effective guardrails on the dizzyingly rapid expansion of AI. The EU began working on its AI strategy in 2018, and the new law won’t take full effect until sometime in 2026. Yet it also honed in on the main reason that the task is becoming more urgent: the impact already being felt on the everyday lives, rights, and political autonomy of individual citizens around the globe. The EU’s purpose is explicit: ensuring “trustworthy, human-centric” use of AI as ever more powerful computer systems mine, and learn from, ever larger masses of digital data, spawning an ever-wider array of applications.

The same technology that may now allow researchers to unlock the mystery of a virus could help create one. Large language models such as ChatGPT can not only produce fast, fluent prose from billions of words on the internet. They can, and indeed do, make mistakes, producing misinformation. And that same huge store of data can be abused in other ways. One key individual-rights concern for the EU legislators was the prospect that AI could be employed, as is the case in China, to surveil and target citizens or partic-

ular groups in Europe. The new law bans scouring the internet for images to create face-recognition libraries, as well as the use of visual profiling. The police would be exempted, but only under tightly defined circumstances.

More broadly, though the exact wording of the law has yet to be published, it will reportedly ensure that people are made aware whether the words and images they’re seeing on their screens have been generated not by humans, but by AI. Among systems to be banned outright are any “manipulating human behavior to circumvent free will.” The most powerful “foundation” AI systems – the general-purpose platforms on which developers are building a whole range of applications – will face testing transparency and reporting requirements, obliged to share details of their internal workings with EU regulators.

All of this will be enforced by a new AI regulatory body, with fines for the most serious violations as high as 7 percent of a company’s global turnover. Still, the laborious process of producing the AI Act is a reminder of the head winds still facing efforts to place internationally agreed-upon guardrails around a technological revolution whose reach transcends borders. In the world’s major AI power, the United States, President Joe Biden issued an executive order in October imposing safety tests on developers of the most powerful systems. He also mandated standards for federal agencies purchasing AI applications. His aim, like the EU’s, was to ensure “safety, security, and trust.”

Yet officials acknowledged that more comprehensive regulation would need an act of Congress, which still seems far from agreeing on how, or even whether, to legislate limits. One obstacle is the AI companies themselves. Though they acknowledge potential perils, they have argued that there is a risk that overregulation could limit the growth

of AI and reduce its benefits. And would-be regulators also face geopolitical obstacles, especially the rivalry between the U.S. and China.

One sign has been Washington’s move to limit Chinese access to the latest, specialized computer chips key to building the highest-powered AI systems. And that touches on a wider national security issue: the growing role of artificial intelligence in weapons systems. Drones have played a major role in Ukraine’s war against Russia’s invasion and in Israel’s attacks on Gaza. The next evolutionary step, military analysts suggest, could be AI-powered “drone swarms” on future battlefields.

The priority of the U.S. is clearly to seek an edge in AI weaponry – at least until there is a realistic hope of bringing China, Russia, and other high-tech military powers into the kind of agreements that, last century, helped limit nuclear weapons. The EU’s new law does not even cover military applications of AI. So for now, its main impact will be on the kind of “trust” and “human-centric” issues that European authorities and Mr. Biden both highlighted: letting people know when words or images have been created by AI, and, the lawmakers hope, blocking applications that seek deliberately to manipulate users’ behavior.

Still, that could prove important not just for individuals but also for the societies they live in – the beginning of a fight against the use of AI to “amplify polarization, bias, and misinformation” and thus undermine democracies, as one leading AI expert, Dr. De Kai, recently put it. The historian Yuval Harari has voiced particular alarm over AI’s increasingly powerful ability to “manipulate and generate language, whether with words, sounds, or images,” noting that language, after all, forms the bedrock of how we humans interact with one another. “AI’s new mastery of language,” he says, “means it can now hack and manipulate the operating system of civilization.”

Is the stock market out of line?

It is. I say this because I think that as the stock market climbs by nearly 60 per cent in the past six months, its rise is not in sync with our economic fundamentals, or the pace of economic activity, which is slow.

And economic fundamentals determine the stock market’s overall direction. It cannot be otherwise, because buying stocks means buying a share of future profits, which depend on the pace of economic activity.

But then the question is if gross domestic product (which is a measure of economic activity), is crawling up barely 2.0 per cent, why then are investors now cheerfully pouring money into the stock market?

One reason could be that profits of some companies traded on the stock market have indeed surged. But this happened without an economic boom. And it could be explained by monopoly power (including undue concessions taken from the government) and windfall profits, such as Rs275 billion profit last year earned by just five banks, partly by speculating in foreign exchange and earning money from high-yielding government securities.

Another reason is that because economic activity is slow, investment options other than the stock market are absent.

A third reason is that foreign money is pouring into the stock market: \$36 million in the last five months. But this is very likely ‘hot money,’ which is pouring in to create an artificial boom, and to abruptly pull out at the peak and profit at the expense of ‘dumb money.’ A good example of hot money is the foreign money poured into the stock markets of the ‘miracle economies’ of Southeast Asia in 1997. Within months it was in full flight, after raking in huge profits by cashing in at the market’s peak. Herein is a lesson for us.

Yet, the puzzle is, so far no one has raised red flags. Instead, serious sounding people assure us there is more to come; that the benchmark index of the Pakistan Stock Exchange will soon reach 75,000.

ECP chief affirms commitment to fair elections

By our correspondent

ISLAMABAD: Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) Chief Election Commissioner Sikandar Sultan Raja reassured the nation on Friday of his commitment to ensuring a level playing field for all political parties, particularly emphasizing fairness for the ruling Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) and other contenders in the upcoming elections.

Commissioner Raja, while sharing his perspective, stated, "I had never said the elections would be delayed in the country. It is better to confirm prior to the dissemination of the news. We have prepared the election schedule."

The Chief Election Commissioner shed light on his meeting with Chief Justice of Pakistan (CJP) Qazi Faez Isa, emphasizing its significance. "Today, I had a great meeting with the CJP," he stated. Addressing concerns about the Islamabad Deputy Commissioner (DC) issue, Commissioner Raja downplayed its significance, stating,



ing, "The matters in line with the Islamabad DC had been watched vigilantly."

The ECP CEC's appearance before the Supreme Court of Pakistan (SCP) marked a crucial development, where the meeting with Chief Justice Qazi Faez Isa aimed to discuss and resolve key issues related to the upcoming elections. Attorney General Mansoor Usman Awan was also present during the meeting.

The assurance of a level playing field is of paramount importance in Pakistan's political culture, where allegations of bias and undue influence have been a historical concern. The ECP, as the custodian of electoral integrity, plays a vital role in shaping the democratic process. Political parties, including the ruling PTI, often look to the ECP to ensure fair

and transparent elections, fostering a political culture that values the principles of democracy and equal opportunity for all participants.

The confirmation of the election schedule signals a critical step in the electoral process, fostering confidence in the democratic framework and underscoring the ECP's commitment to upholding the principles of free and fair elections.

Markle, Harry's Christmas card sparks royal discontent

By our correspondent

LONDON: The Duchess of Sussex, Meghan Markle, and Prince Harry have ignited a wave of disappointment among royal enthusiasts and notably, King Charles, with the unveiling of their Christmas card for this year. In a departure from the expected traditional family portrait, the royal couple chose to share a virtual holiday card, emanating from their philanthropic endeavors under the banner of Archewell.

The exclusive virtual greeting conveyed warm holiday wishes, proclaiming, "On behalf of the office of Prince Harry & Meghan, the Duke and Duchess of Sussex, Archewell Productions, and Archewell Foundation, we wish you a very happy holiday season." Gratitude was expressed for the unwavering support received throughout the year 2023.

Contrary to widespread anticipation, the card notably excluded images of Meghan and Harry's children, Archie and Lilibet. This conspicuous absence has left both King Charles and ardent royal followers yearning for a more conventional family-centric card, akin to the heartwarming displays shared by Prince William and Kate Middleton featuring their cherished children.

In the wake of the card's release, expressions of disappointment flooded social media, with one fan lamenting, "No children, no family, no friends. The biggest losers of 2023." Another questioned the essence of the card, asking, "Is this their Christmas card? Where the hell are the kids?" A third fan directed criticism at Meghan, pondering, "What kind of mother doesn't include her children in the family Christmas card?"

Of noteworthy mention is King Charles's expressed eagerness to reunite with his grandchildren, Archie and Lilibet, emphasized during his recent speech at a climate conference held in Dubai. The absence of the children from the Christmas card has become a central point of discussion among royal followers, triggering a spectrum of reactions on various social media platforms.

Taliban send abuse survivors to prison, faces controversy

By our correspondent

KABUL: The Taliban government in Afghanistan is facing international controversy as a recent UN report exposed a disturbing practice of putting women abuse survivors in prison under the guise of protection, sparking concerns about human rights violations.

The United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) detailed that the Taliban government's actions have severe repercussions on the mental and physical health of the survivors. Shockingly, the report noted the absence of state-sponsored women's shelters, as the Taliban government deems them unnecessary, marking a significant departure from the previous support systems in place.

The Taliban's oppression of women's rights in Afghanistan has garnered worldwide attention, with critics considering it one of the harshest regimes in terms of gender-based discrimination. UNAMA disclosed that gender-based violence against

Afghan women and girls was already prevalent before the Taliban took control of Afghanistan. However, the situation has deteriorated further due to economic, financial, and humanitarian crises, contributing to the increased occurrence of such incidents.

Before the Taliban's resurgence in 2021, Afghanistan had 23 state-sponsored women's protection centers or shelters. Shockingly, these crucial facilities have disappeared under the Taliban regime. Taliban officials justified this by asserting that women should be with their husbands or male family members, dismissing the shelters as a "western concept."

In instances where women had no male relatives or faced safety concerns, the Taliban officials opted to send survivors to prison "for their protection." UNAMA condemned this practice, asserting that it constitutes arbitrary deprivation of liberty and exposes vulnerable women to further risks of discrimination and stigmatization upon release.

Moreover, UNAMA criticized the Taliban administration's unclear and inconsistent handling of gender-based violence complaints, highlighting the lack of effective legal protection for women and girls. The absence of women personnel in complaint resolution processes further deters survivors from seeking justice, leaving them without guaranteed redress.

While the international community had witnessed efforts to advance women's rights in Afghanistan between 2001 and 2021, including law and policy reforms, the recent developments indicate a drastic reversal. The Taliban government, since regaining power in 2021, has reneged on its earlier promises to grant women the right to work and study, imposing severe restrictions on their education, movement, and attire. As the UN report sheds light on these alarming practices, concerns mount about the plight of Afghan women and the Taliban's disregard for human rights and international norms.

Sarfraz Bugti resigns eyes PML-N ticket in upcoming elections

News Desk

QUETTA: Former interior minister Sarfraz Bugti has submitted his resignation, paving the way for a potential political shift. Sources close to the matter reveal that Bugti is contemplating contesting the upcoming general elections on the ticket of the Pakistan Muslim League-N (PML-N). Bugti officially tendered his resignation on December 13, citing personal reasons for his departure from the position. Caretaker Prime Minister Anwaar-ul-Haq Kakar swiftly accepted Bugti's resignation, setting the stage for a political transition.

Insiders suggest that Bugti had made the decision to step down nearly two months ago, strategically timing his resignation before the announcement of the election schedule.

The move aligns with his intention to participate in the upcoming elections under the PML-N banner.

Amidst speculation, sources close to Bugti anticipate a meeting between the former interior minister and the PML-N leadership in the coming days.

Humayun Akhtar resigns from PTI, joins Tareen's IPP amid May 9 fallout

By our correspondent

LAHORE: In a surprising twist of events, prominent Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) leader Humayun Akhtar Khan has officially parted ways with the party and joined the ranks of the Istehkam-e-Pakistan Party (IPP). The move comes as a response to Khan's dissatisfaction with the PTI's handling of the aftermath of the May 9 incidents, particularly in light of the National Accountability Bureau's (NAB) arrest of former PTI chief Imran Khan in the Al-Qadir Trust corruption case earlier this year.

Humayun Akhtar Khan, addressing a press conference alongside political figures Jahangir Tareen and Aleem Khan in Lahore, expressed his deep concern about the events that transpired on May 9 and called for accountability.

He emphasized the importance of the courts punishing those found guilty while allowing the innocent to return home. Attributing credit to the IPP's leadership for its role in the formation of the PTI, Humayun Khan, however, expressed disappointment, stating that the PTI had failed to meet the expectations of the country's

disillusioned youth.

Jahangir Tareen echoed Khan's sentiments, acknowledging a decline in the PTI's popularity post-May 9 events. Tareen emphasized the imperative of economic recovery for the nation's development and expressed optimism about potential seat adjustments in the upcoming elections.

Discussing the recent Supreme Court decision to suspend the Lahore High Court's order against the appointment of election officers from the executive, Tareen urged for elections to be held on February 8. The urgency for political stability in the country was underscored by the party.

Dr. Firdous Ashiq Awan, a prominent IPP member, commented on the fluid nature of alliances and rivalries in politics. She stressed the need to prioritize people's rights when discussing unity. Aleem Khan addressed ongoing negotiations with the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N), clarifying that no alliance has been formed yet.

He assured that the party holds respect for all individuals and affirmed their commitment to avoid engaging in politics that exploit the legacy of the deceased.

ECP issues schedule for Feb 8 elections

ISLAMABAD: The Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) Friday night issued the election schedule for the general elections scheduled for February 8, 2024.

According to a notification, Returning Officer will issue a public notice on December 19, and the period for filing nominations with the Returning Officer will be from December 20 to 22.

The Election Commission of Pakistan stated that the names of nominated candidates will be published on December 23, and the scrutiny of their nomination papers will take place from December 24 to 30.

The deadline for filing appeals against the RO's decisions on accepting or rejecting nomination papers is January 3, and the appellate tribunal is expected to decide on the appeals by January 10.



MANIPUR: People walk past a burnt vehicle and rubble on a street in Churachandpur in violence hit areas of north-eastern Indian state of Manipur. —File Photo

Mass burial for victims of India ethnic clashes laid to rest

News Desk

MANIPUR, India: As many as 64 victims of the ethnic clashes that erupted in India's north-eastern state of Manipur nearly eight months ago will finally be laid to rest, marking a long-awaited homecoming for the families affected by the violence.

A funeral was held in Giza for Samer Abu Daqqa, a journalist with TV network Al Jazeera killed the previous day by an Israeli strike in Khan Yunis that also wounded his colleague, Wael al-Dahdouh.

"He died hungry, they died with nothing to eat, with hunger. Oh my darling," said his grieving mother, Umm Maher.

More than 60 journalists and media staff have died since the war began, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists.

of the victims, including 60 from the Kuki community and four Meiteis, were handed over to their grieving families.

These bodies had been held in government mortuaries since the violence erupted on May 3. In a poignant gesture, the bodies were airlifted from the capital, Imphal, and Churachandpur district, and transported to their respective families across the state.

The clashes, driven by tensions between the majority Meitei group and the Kuki minority over the sharing of government quotas, claimed a devastating toll, resulting in at least 170 lives lost and the displacement of thousands of people.

On Thursday, the bodies

Kangpokpi district, where the Kuki victims will be laid to rest. The burial ceremony is expected to draw attention to the prolonged agony of the affected families and serve as a poignant reminder of the brutal conflict.

The clashes between the Kukis and Meiteis have been marred by horrific incidents of torture, rape, and killings, with a disproportionate impact on the Kuki community. Approximately two-thirds of the casualties have been from the Kuki minority.

In response to the severity of the situation, India's Supreme Court established a committee, comprising

three former high court judges, to assess relief and rehabilitation efforts in Manipur. The committee's report highlighted that, out of the 175 reported deaths during the clashes, 169 had been identified, and only 81 bodies had been claimed.

In November, the Supreme Court directed the state government to facilitate the burial or cremation of the bodies that had been identified but remained unclaimed in morgues by December. This mass burial, while marking the end of a long and tumultuous chapter, also underscores the ongoing challenges in the aftermath of the violence.

Kuwait Mourns as Emir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah Passes Away at 86

KUWAIT: In a solemn moment for Kuwait, Emir Sheikh Nawaf al-Ahmad al-Sabah, aged 86, passed away on Saturday, as announced by the royal court. The news comes just over three years after he assumed power in the Gulf oil-producing nation. The cause of his demise was not immediately disclosed, but the royal court confirmed the loss of the leader who took the reins in September 2020.



The emir had been admitted to the hospital last month due to an emergency health problem, and although described as stable, his health took a critical turn. Crown Prince Sheikh Meshal al-Ahmad al-Sabah, 83, who has been the de facto ruler since 2021 when the frail emir delegated most of his duties, is the designated successor.

Sheikh Nawaf took on the role of emir after the passing of his brother, Sheikh Sabah, who had been a formidable leader, shaping the state's foreign policy for over 50 years. Despite facing challenges in governance, Sheikh Nawaf was recognized as a consensus builder by diplomats. His reign saw an intense standoff between the government and the elected parliament, impeding key structural reforms in the oil-rich Gulf state. However, in recent months, consensus was restored between the two entities.

As the holder of the world's seventh-largest oil reserves, Kuwait is strategically located, sharing borders with Saudi Arabia and Iraq and lying across the Gulf from Iran. Sheikh Nawaf maintained a foreign policy that sought to balance ties with neighboring countries. Domestically, his rule witnessed the formation of eight governments.

Under Kuwait's constitution, the crown prince automatically ascends to the position of emir but assumes power only after taking an oath in parliament. The new emir has up to a year to name an heir, allowing for a period of transition during this poignant moment for Kuwait. The nation mourns the loss of a leader who navigated challenges and worked towards stability both at home and in the broader geopolitical landscape.

Hostages killed by Israel forces waved white flag

JERUSALEM: The Israeli army said on Saturday that three hostages mistakenly killed by soldiers carried a white flag and cried for help in Hebrew.

Yotam Haim, Alon Shamriz and Samer El-Talalka—all in their 20s—were shot during operations in Gaza City on Friday, sparking protests in Israel.

They were among about 250 people taken hostage during Palestinian militant group Hamas's October 7 attacks in Israel, which killed around 1,140 people, mostly civilians, according to Israeli figures.

Vowing to destroy Hamas and bring back the hostages, Israel launched a massive military offensive against the Palestinian Islamist movement that has left much of the Gaza Strip in ruins. The territory's Hamas government says the war has killed at least 18,800 people, mostly women and children.

Army spokesman Daniel Hagari said that during fighting in the Shejaiya district of Gaza City, troops "mistakenly identified three Israeli hostages as a threat and as a result, fired toward them and the hostages were killed."

An army official said the hostages were all "without shirts" and had "a stick with

a white cloth on it", but a soldier felt threatened and opened fire. "Two are killed immediately, one is injured and runs back into the building," the official said, adding that the soldiers heard "a cry for help... in Hebrew."

Despite a ceasefire order, "there's another burst of fire towards the third figure and he also dies." The official called it a "tragic" event and "very hard day", but said the troops had faced "intense combat in the area". Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu described their deaths as an "unbearable tragedy".

Hundreds were expected to gather Saturday in Tel Aviv to call on Netanyahu's government to secure the release of 129 hostages still held in the Hamas-ruled Gaza Strip. "I am dying of fear," said Merav Svirsky, sister of hostage Itay Svirsky at a protest on Friday. "We demand a deal now."

In November, a one-week truce saw more than 100 hostages freed in exchange for Palestinians held in Israeli jails, but fighting has since resumed.

The hostages' deaths have heightened already fierce scrutiny of how Israel is conducting its ground and air assault in Gaza.

The White House, which

provided billions of dollars in military aid to Israel, has voiced growing concern over civilian deaths. "I want them to be focused on how to save civilian lives—not stop going after Hamas, but be more careful," US President Joe Biden said this week. News platform Axios said the director of Israeli intelligence agency Mossad, David Barnea, was due to meet this weekend in an unspecified location in Europe with Qatari Prime Minister Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al Thani, who helped negotiate the earlier truce.

In Gaza, fierce fighting continued. The Israeli army said Saturday it had raided two schools in Gaza City. It said they were Hamas hiding places.

A funeral was held in Gaza for Samer Abu Daqqa, a journalist with TV network Al Jazeera killed the previous day by an Israeli strike in Khan Yunis that also wounded his colleague, Wael al-Dahdouh.

"He died hungry, they died with nothing to eat, with hunger. Oh my darling," said his grieving mother, Umm Maher.

More than 60 journalists and media staff have died since the war began, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists.