



ISLAMABAD: The picture of PTI Chief Imran Khan’s clone is taken from an AI-generated video which appeared to be speaking, here on late Tuesday night.

WB approves \$350m financing for Pakistan’s fiscal reforms

Funds are to be used for second resilient institutions for sustainable economy operation, which aims to strengthen fiscal management

By our correspondent

WASHINGTON: The Board of Executive Directors at the World Bank has greenlit a significant financial injection of \$350 million for Pakistan to support fiscal and competitiveness reforms. The funding, allocated under the Second Resilient Institutions for Sustainable Economy (RISE-II) Operation, is aimed at fortifying fiscal management, and fostering competitiveness for sustained and inclusive economic growth, according to a World Bank statement.

Najiy Benhassine, the World Bank Country Director for Pakistan, emphasized the urgent need for fiscal and structural reforms to restore macroeconomic balance and lay the groundwork for sustainable growth. Benhassine stated, "RISE-II completes a first phase of tax, energy, and business climate reforms geared towards raising additional revenues, improving the targeting of expenditures, and stimulating competition and investment."

The RISE-II Operation is

designed to contribute to improved fiscal management by enhancing fiscal policy coordination, augmenting debt transparency and management, strengthening property taxation, and enhancing the financial viability of the power sector, as highlighted in the World Bank statement. The operation also aims to foster growth and competitiveness by reducing the cost of tax compliance, improving financial sector transparency, encouraging digital payments, and promoting exports through a reduction in import tariffs.

Derek H. C. Chen, Task Team Leader of the operation, emphasized that Pakistan has a crucial opportunity, with support from various international financial institutions, to address longstanding structural distortions in its economy after the upcoming general elections.

A recent World Bank report, 'Leveraging Diaspora Finances for Private Capital Mobilization', projected a decline in remittance flows to Pakistan, citing economic turmoil, balance of payment crisis, and high debt as contributing factors. The report suggested a potential drop to \$24 billion in 2023 and a further decline below \$22 billion in 2024 with a 10% decrease. Martin Raiser, the World Bank's Regional Vice President for South Asia, highlighted Pakistan's economic challenges, including floods and climate change. Raiser emphasized the need for decisive steps toward a brighter future, stating, "It is now time for Pakistan to decide whether to maintain the patterns of the past or take difficult but crucial steps towards a brighter future."

In its 'South Asia Development Update Toward faster, cleaner growth' report published in October, the World Bank projected positive but modest growth for Pakistan in fiscal year 2023-24, at 1.7%. The report noted the country's dependency on capital inflows to finance substantial fiscal and current account deficits. The financing approved by the World Bank aims to restore macroeconomic balance and lay the foundation for sustainable development, according to the statement.

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ECP initiates nomination process for Feb 8 Polls

By our correspondent

ISLAMABAD: The Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) has commenced the acceptance of nomination papers from potential candidates set to participate in the upcoming general elections scheduled for February 8, 2024. The process allows candidates to collect forms from the electoral body between 8:30 am and 4:30 pm, with the deadline for submission being December 22 (Friday).

In anticipation of the electoral process, the ECP is set to unveil the preliminary list of candidates on December 23. The scrutiny of nomination papers is slated to take place from December 24 to 30, ensuring a thorough evaluation of the submitted documents. To facilitate the nomination process in Karachi, where 22 National Assembly seats and 47 provincial assembly seats are up for contention, the ECP has appointed 69 Returning Officers (ROs) and seven District Returning Officers (DROs) for the national and provincial assemblies.

The ECP is also gearing up to allocate election symbols to political parties and independent candidates on January 13, just under a month before the scheduled polling day on February 8. Prospective candidates vying for reserved seats for women and minorities in provincial legislatures and the National Assembly can obtain their nomination papers from their respective ROs and the district election commission at a specified cost. Submission of these papers will be accepted from December 20 to December 22, with all subsequent proceedings, including scrutiny, conducted at the respective RO offices.

Babar Azam regains top position in ODI rankings

News Desk

DUBAI: In a recent update to the ICC ODI rankings, Pakistan's star batsman and former captain, Babar Azam, has reclaimed the number one position, surpassing India's Shubman Gill. Babar secured 824 points, a 14-point lead over Gill's 810, marking his return to the top spot after more than a month of Gill's reign. Notably, the third and fourth positions on the list are also occupied by Indian batsmen, with Virat Kohli at 775 and Rohit Sharma at 754.

This shift occurred after Shubman Gill was rested for the ongoing series against South Africa. The competition among these top-ranked batsmen continues to showcase the talent and prowess of cricketers from both Pakistan and India. Meanwhile, in the ICC T20I rankings for bowlers, England's Adil Rashid has risen two spots to claim the top position, displacing Afghanistan's Rashid Khan, who now holds the second position. India's Ravi Bishnoi secures the third spot. Adil Rashid becomes the second player from England to attain the No. 1 rank-

ing in T20I bowlers, following off-spinner Graeme Swann's achievement more than a decade ago.

In the T20I batting rankings, Suryakumar Yadav has extended his lead by 100 rating points after a remarkable century in the final match of India's series against South Africa. Pakistan's Mohammad Rizwan and South Africa's Aiden Markram follow as the second and third in the rankings, respectively. Switching to Test cricket, Australia's Usman Khawaja has made a significant move, climbing three places to the fourth spot. His teammate David Warner has jumped nine spots to 27th, and Mitchell Marsh has improved by 12 places, sharing the 68th position. This reshuffling comes after their impressive performances against Pakistan. In the Test bowler's rankings, Australia's captain Pat Cummins has moved up one place to third, Nathan Lyon climbed three spots to fifth, Mitchell Starc rose two places to eighth, and Josh Hazlewood climbed two spots to 10th. Meanwhile, India's spinner Ravichandran Ashwin continues to dominate the top position.

PTI’s Imran to contest elections from 3 constituencies

By our correspondent

ISLAMABAD: Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) Founder Imran Khan is set to vie for a seat in the upcoming general election from at least three constituencies, as disclosed by party leaders during a media briefing in Rawalpindi on Wednesday. Barrister Ali Zafar and Barrister Gohar, addressing the press after Imran Khan's Adiala prison hearing, revealed that he plans to file his nomination papers in Lahore, Islamabad, and Minawali. Moreover, the PTI leadership has authorized its election candidates to submit their nomination forms promptly, without waiting for the allocation of party tickets. Barrister Gohar assured that decisions regarding the distribution of party tickets would be finalized in the near future.

Despite Imran Khan being restricted from engaging in election-related activities, Gohar emphasized the PTI's commitment to ensuring the electoral process proceeds without hindrance. He reiterated the party's determination to participate in the election under any circumstances.

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ECC approves Rs. 57bn to clear K-Electric arrears

By our correspondent

KARACHI: The Economic Coordination Committee (ECC) of the Cabinet, chaired by Finance Minister Dr. Shamshad Akhtar, granted approval for a technical supplementary grant (TSG) of Rs 57 billion to settle the outstanding arrears of K-Electric. The decision was part of the ECC's efforts to address financial obligations in the power sector and streamline payments to power entities.

In another significant move, the ECC approved a summary from the Power Division, directing the release of Rs 262.075 billion through a technical supplementary grant (TSCG) to Government-Owned Power Plants (GPPs), aligning their payables with Independent Power Producers (IPPs). The committee also gave the nod for the initiation of the phase-out of the Export Finance Scheme of the State Bank of Pakistan, in compliance with the requirements of the IMF Standby Arrangement.

The release of Rs 3.87 billion to the EXIM Bank for the current fiscal year was approved to operationalize



this change.

Addressing the persisting liabilities of Pakistan Steel Mills (PSM), the finance minister directed the Ministry of Industries to conduct a diagnostic survey. This survey aims to determine why PSM's liabilities continue despite its non-operational status since 2015. Additionally, it will investigate the allocation of PSM's land to housing companies and other industries without proper due process.

The ECC also endorsed the transfer of the National Energy Efficiency and Conservation Authority (NEECA) from the Science and Technology Division to the Power Division, allocating a TSG of Rs 152.417 million for the fiscal year 2023-24.

On the agricultural front, the committee considered

the Ministry of National Food Security and Research's proposal for the "profitable support price" for the wheat crop in 2023-24.

After discussions with all provinces, it recommended maintaining last year's price of Rs 3900 per 40 kilograms. The ECC emphasized that there would be no subsidy on agricultural inputs, underscoring the responsibility of provinces in this regard.

Furthermore, the ECC approved the notification of minimum indicative prices for the Tobacco Crop 2024 and revised cess rates on tobacco for the year 2024-25. The meeting was attended by key ministers and federal secretaries, with relevant officers joining via video link to ensure comprehensive deliberations on critical economic matters.

NEPRA jacks up power tariff by Rs1.15 per unit

By our correspondent

ISLAMABAD: In a development that has reverberated across the public sphere, the National Electric Power Regulatory Authority (NEPRA) has granted approval for a substantial increase of Rs 1.15 per unit in electricity rates for distribution companies (DISCOs).

The approval, part of the quarterly adjustment mechanism, comes with a hefty financial implication, imposing an additional burden of Rs 22.29 billion on consumers. NEPRA's notification, signaling the impending price hike, has been forwarded to the government for final approval, with the new rates expected to take effect from January 1, 2024. Once approved, consumers, including those served by K-Electric, will bear the impact of the increased electricity prices.

The sanctioned increment is slated to be applicable for the next three months, extending until March 2024. This development has sparked widespread concerns as the escalating cost of electricity strains household budgets and exacerbates economic challenges. While the quarterly adjustment mechanism is intended to safeguard the financial health of power distribution companies, it often results in periodic increases in electricity prices. The direct consequence is felt by consumers, fueling debates about the accessibility and affordability of essential services.

With government confirmation pending, citizens are left grappling with the imminent surge in electricity costs, adding another layer of financial stress in an already challenging economic environment. The ramifications of this decision cut across all segments of society, underscoring the pressing need for sustainable solutions to address the intricacies of the energy sector and alleviate the burden on consumers.

Nawaz advocates for women’s participation in party’s board meeting

By our correspondent

LAHORE: Former prime minister and President of Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) Mian Nawaz Sharif emphasized the vital role of women in the political process during the 14th meeting of the PML-N Parliamentary Board held on Wednesday. The discussion focused on the upcoming general elections in 2024.

Sharif asserted the importance of women's active participation in the political arena and stressed that their inclusion is crucial for a robust and representative democracy. The meeting also addressed the ongoing evaluation of potential candidates for PML-N tickets, a

process that has been under consideration for the past three weeks.

Reflecting on Pakistan's economic trajectory, Nawaz Sharif highlighted the promising indicators of the past. He pointed out that in 2017, the country's economy held a prominent position in the Middle East, featuring controlled inflation, a thriving job market, and a population that had risen above the poverty line.

Recalling the PML-N's governance era, Sharif acknowledged the unprecedented progress made in infrastructure, poverty alleviation, and the development of new power resources and motorways. Despite acknowledging challenges, he expressed optimism for the future and affirmed the party's unwavering commitment to serving the people.

Discussing legal challenges faced by the party, Sharif highlighted the dismissal of various cases and convictions against him, his family, and the PML-N. He questioned the motives behind certain decisions and emphasized the party's resilience in the face of adversity. Turning attention to the role of women in national development, Nawaz Sharif underscored the significance of their participation across various sectors, including health, employment, and education programs.

Nawaz advocated for dismantling societal perceptions that impede women's progress, emphasizing that empowering women would contribute significantly to addressing challenges within the country.

of information and privacy, stressing the state's responsibility to ensure both. Counsel Aitzaz Ahsan advocated for self-regulation and expressed concerns about the delayed implementation of the Constitution, citing the example of postponed polls. The court decided to appoint senior journalists as amici curiae to address matters related to the code of conduct for TV channels.

The IHC directed the Pak-

ISI unable to trace source of audio leaks, IHC informed

By our correspondent

ISLAMABAD: In a recent hearing at the Islamabad High Court (IHC), it was revealed that the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) has reported its inability to trace the source of audio leaks related to the pleas of former Chief Justice of Pakistan Sagib Nisar's son and former Prime Minister Imran Khan's wife, Bushra Bibi.

The court discussed the

issue of audio conversation leaks and questioned the manner in which the ISI filed its report through the Ministry of Defence. The Attorney General for Pakistan (AGP) Mansoor Usman Awan stated that the intelligence agency should have submitted the report through the Prime Minister's Office.

According to the ISI report, the investigation could proceed only with assistance from social media platforms. The AGP

highlighted that no intelligence agency, including ISI, Federal Investigation Agency (FIA), and Intelligence Bureau (IB), is allowed to tap audio conversations according to federal government regulations. The FIA is currently working to identify the entity that recorded the call, seeking access to relevant IP addresses. The court also discussed the role of the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA) in handling

private audio leaks. The PEMRA lawyer informed the court that TV channels are not allowed to broadcast such leaks and that the matter has been referred to the Council of Complaints for resolution.

Justice Babar Sattar questioned the effectiveness of PEMRA as a regulator and whether urgent instructions had been issued to TV channels. The court emphasized the need for a balance between freedom

of information and privacy, stressing the state's responsibility to ensure both. Counsel Aitzaz Ahsan advocated for self-regulation and expressed concerns about the delayed implementation of the Constitution, citing the example of postponed polls. The court decided to appoint senior journalists as amici curiae to address matters related to the code of conduct for TV channels.

The IHC directed the Pak-

istan Telecommunication Authority (PTA) to submit a detailed report in the next hearing. If the government fails to provide the necessary information, the court may appoint national and international amici curiae for assistance. The hearing was adjourned with orders for the FIA and other institutions to submit their replies, seeking clarity on the entities involved in the unauthorized tapping of calls.

PTI goes beyond using technology in politics

Al-generated voice clone of Imran Khan addresses ‘virtual rally’

Western media covers usage of AI-generated Khan’s address in virtual gathering of party supporters

By our correspondent

ISLAMABAD: The international media gave coverage to the former prime minister Imran Khan's party—Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf—usage of an artificial intelligence voice clone of the party chief to campaign from Adiala prison. The PTI used AI startup elevenLabs software, a voice-generating platform that raised \$19M in a venture capital funding round, famous for launching a range of popular voice-cloning and voice-generating technologies. ElevenLabs is founded by Polish national Piotr Dabkowski and co-founded by Polish entrepreneurs and considered among top tools to clone AI voice. But the company is headquartered in London and New York City. The company has worked and came up with an application for generating synthetic

voices 'AI companion apps that turn chatbot responses into lifelike voices.' The Sifted reported that synthetic voice technology could also open the doors to what Staniszewski describes as "nefarious use cases"—think deepfakes or phone scams, already famous in Asian countries like Korea or Japan. Now the software has entered Pakistani politics as well.

This has been the first experiment of using artificial intelligence audio-generation software in politics in Pakistan that could pave the way for online political gathering, a new 'battlefield' for political rivals to reach their voters as Pakistan is heading towards the most crucial elections on February 8, 2024. Cable News Network (CNN) reported that the use of the AI audio recording is being seen as an example of how AI technology has

been used by politicians who say they are battling state suppression.

The Guardian commented that Artificial intelligence allowed Pakistan's former prime minister Imran Khan to campaign from behind bars on Monday. Time Magazine reported that Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party streamed a five-hour "virtual power-show" on Sunday. The Washington Post, The Verge and Voicebot.ai reported that Khan's social media team used archival footage from Khan's older rallies and ElevenLab's synthetic audio engine to clone the politician's voice.

British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) reported that the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party used AI to make an audio clip to address an internet "virtual rally"—the day Twitter, YouTube and other online

platforms services went down in Pakistan. It is pertinent to note that Islamabad Court High (IHC) had Imran Khan's three-year sentence for corruption suspended in August, but remains in jail, and on Tuesday the National Accountability Bureau (NAB). The BBC said that Khan's four-minute speech was generated from text he had written from prison and had approved by his lawyers.

The voice clone of Mr Khan said: "My fellow Pakistanis, I would first like to praise the social media team for this historic attempt. Maybe you all are wondering how I am doing in jail. Today, my determination for real freedom is very strong." "Our party is not allowed to hold public rallies," Mr Khan claimed in an AI-generated image and video. BBC reported that the imprisoned Khan urged sup-

porters to turn out in large numbers at the country's general elections set for 8 February.

PTI claimed the event was viewed by six million people across YouTube, X and Facebook and party's media adviser Zulfiqar Bukhari claimed PTI had been subject to a massive 'crackdown' with Khan banned from any public or political engagement, so they turned to social media. The Atlantic CEO Nicholas Thompson, who routinely speaks under the title 'most interesting thing in tech' said the most interesting thing in tech: "Imran Khan the imprisoned former prime minister of Pakistan, uses AI voice technology to give a speech, via video conference, at a rally for his supporters. It's a crazy new use for a technology that has improved rapidly in the last year."

Indian PM Modi vows probe into alleged US murder plot

News Desk

NEW DEHLI: In response to the alleged links between India and a US-based assassination plot, Prime Minister Narendra Modi broke his silence, stating that India would "definitely look into" any evidence provided on the matter. The remarks come after the US charged an Indian man in November with conspiring to murder Gurbhag Singh Pannun, a vocal supporter of the Khalistan movement, in New York.

Speaking to the Financial Times, Prime Minister Modi emphasized that the allegations would not impact the strong ties between India and the US. This marks the first public statement by Modi on the issue, addressing concerns about an Indian citizen's involvement in the assassination plot. "If a citizen of ours has done anything good or bad, we are ready to look into it. Our commitment



NEW DEHLI: Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi breaks silence on US murder plot allegation, vows to thorough investigation into the matter as told to the foreign media.

is to the rule of law," stated Modi, emphasizing India's dedication to legal processes.

The alleged target, Gurbhag Singh Pannun, holds dual US-Canadian citizenship and advocates for the Khalistan movement, seeking a separate Sikh state. US prosecutors claim that Nikhil Gupta paid a hitman \$100,000 in cash to assassinate Pannun, allegedly under the direction of an Indian gov-

ernment official. India has designated Pannun as a terrorist, while he maintains his identity as an activist, denying the allegations against him. The incident follows accusations by Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, who claimed India's involvement in the murder of Sikh separatist leader Hardeep Singh Nijjar.

Nijjar was shot dead in Canada in June, leading to strained relations between

India and Canada. India vehemently denies the accusations and accuses Canada of harboring "Khalistani terrorists and extremists." Delhi asserts that concrete evidence supporting the claims has not been shared by Ottawa. The diplomatic tensions have raised concerns about potential repercussions on India's growing relationship with the US. Modi, however, expressed confidence in the upward trajectory of bilateral ties, noting strong bipartisan support for the partnership.

While acknowledging concerns about the "activities of certain extremist groups based overseas," Modi dismissed the notion of linking a few incidents to diplomatic relations. The Khalistan movement, which peaked in India in the 1980s, continues to have resonance among some Sikh diaspora communities globally, including Canada, Australia, and the UK.

IPP President Aleem Khan gets nomination papers from 3 seats of Lahore

News Desk

LAHORE: President of the Istehkam-e-Pakistan Party (IPP) Abdul Aleem Khan will contest elections from a national assembly seat and two provincial assembly constituencies of Lahore. On Wednesday, Aleem Khan obtained nomination papers from NA 119 and PP-149 from Lahore. The media reported that Abdul Aleem Khan could also be a candidate from the constituency PP-150 of the Punjab Assembly.

Nomination papers have been received for all three constituencies and likely nomination papers would be submitted on Thursday (tomorrow). Istehkam-e-Pakistan Party (IPP) Jahangir Khan Tareen's daughter Meher Khan Tareen will also announce to participate in elections and receive nomination papers for NA-155 Lodhran and PP-227. Meher Khan Tareen's nomination papers were received by Jahangir Tareen's legal team. Meher Khan Tareen will be covering candidate of the Jahangir Khan Tareen. Jahangir Tareen's final decision to contest the election from NA-155.

IHC fixes Imran's plea against in-camera trial in ciphergate

By our correspondent

ISLAMABAD: The Islamabad High Court has scheduled a hearing for Thursday to address Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) founder Imran Khan's petition challenging the orders for an in-camera trial in the cipher case against him. The special court, established under the Official Secrets Act 2023, had approved the Federal Investigation Agency's plea for an in-camera hearing on December 14. Imran Khan has contested this decision, seeking to nullify the orders and prevent further proceedings until a decision on his petition is made.

Imran Khan, the former Prime Minister, argues that an open trial in the presence of the media and the public is crucial to fulfilling the requirements of justice. The special court, headed by Judge Abul Hasnat Zulqarnain, announced the reserved verdict on December 14, imposing restrictions on reporting the proceedings and allowing family members access to the courtroom during the hearing. In addition to challenging the in-camera trial orders, Imran Khan has submitted a separate plea challenging the trial court proceedings. The former PTI chairman and Vice-Chairman Shah Mahmood Qureshi have been indicted for the second time on December 13 on charges related to the alleged misuse of diplomatic cables for political purposes.

The cipher case, known as Ciphergate, involves a controversy that emerged on March 27, 2022, when Imran Khan claimed a foreign nation conspired against his government. He accused the United States of interference and claimed a cipher revealed a plot against him. The case involves audio leaks, discussions on the cipher, and accusations against political rivals. The federal cabinet approved the holding of a jail trial, leading to the second indictment of Imran Khan and Shah Mahmood Qureshi. The IHC hearing, scheduled for Thursday and presided over by Justice Mianqul Hassan Aurangzeb, will address Imran Khan's plea against the in-camera trial and subsequent proceedings in the cipher case.

FIA launches prob Greece ship disaster, inquest of immigration loopholes

ISLAMABAD: In the aftermath of the tragic Greece ship disaster on June 14, 2023, involving 286 immigrants who departed from various Pakistani airports, the Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) has initiated a comprehensive investigation into immigration irregularities. The FIA's Director General has directed the Director of Cybercrime South to spearhead the inquiry, marking a significant step in uncovering the circumstances leading to the tragedy.

During the initial phase of the investigation, the newly appointed Investigating Officer (IO) has requisitioned reports and records from 12 officers, shedding light on the bureaucratic processes surrounding immigration clearances. Several officers from different airports have been questioned regarding their role in allowing the immigrants to travel from Karachi to Libya.

The media has reported that officers are being held accountable for their alleged failure to prevent the immigrants from embarking on the ill-fated journey. The FIA report underscores Libya as a lucrative destination for illegal immigrants, drawing hundreds of thousands from around the world with aspirations of reaching European countries. It is crucial to note that, according to information provided to the FIA by families of missing passengers, the death toll from the capsized boat off Greece's coast may surpass official figures. While Greek authorities report 82 victims and 104 survivors, with 12 identified as Pakistanis, an ongoing investigation seeks to verify these numbers, as stated by FIA Islamabad Zone Director Rana Abdul Jabbar.

Data shared with Reuters indicates that among the missing passengers, 181 were from Pakistan, and 28 were from Pakistan-administered Kashmir. The FIA,

tasked by the Pakistani government to lead investigations into the tragedy, has yet to officially confirm the number of its citizens on the boat. However, DNA sampling efforts have been initiated to aid Greece in identifying those who lost their lives. DNA samples have been collected from 201 families in this regard.

The scale of the disaster becomes apparent as witness accounts suggest that between 400 and 750 people crammed onto the 20- to 30-meter-long fishing boat, leading to its capsizing and sinking 80 kilometers from the southern coastal town of Pylos. This incident is regarded as the worst sea disaster in years for the region. The FIA has reported the arrest of 29 suspected human smugglers in Pakistan thus far, underscoring the government's commitment to addressing the grave implications of human trafficking and irregular immigration.

Azerbaijan simplifies visa process for Pakistani tourists

Initiative offers Pakistani nationals the opportunity to explore rich history and diverse landscapes of Central Asian nation

News Desk

BAKU: In a move aimed at fostering international tourism and promoting cultural exchange, the government of Azerbaijan has introduced an online service to facilitate the issuance of e-visas for citizens of various countries, including Pakistan. This initiative offers Pakistani nationals the opportunity to explore the rich history and diverse landscapes of Azerbaijan.

Azerbaijan's new online service, known as the "ASAN Visa" system, streamlines the visa application process for Pakistani travelers. The three-step process involves applying

online, making a secure payment, and downloading the e-visa. For Pakistani nationals planning a visit to Azerbaijan, the government offers two categories of visit visas – Standard and Urgent. The fee for a single-entry 30-day electronic visit visa under the Standard category is \$20, with a consideration period ranging from 3 to 5 days. For those with urgent travel plans, an expedited visa option is available at a fee of \$50. The Urgent category promises a swift processing time of three to five hours, allowing Pakistani citizens to obtain their electronic visa promptly.

Azerbaijan, a nation nestled between the Caspian

Sea and the Caucasus Mountains, boasts a unique blend of historical landmarks and modern architecture. The capital city, Baku, is renowned for its medieval walled Inner City, featuring the Palace of the Shirvan-shahs dating back to the 15th century, and the iconic Maiden Tower dominating the skyline. Hidden within hillside towns are ancient mosques and minarets, offering a glimpse into Azerbaijan's rich cultural heritage. Moreover, the Flame Towers in Baku stand as a testament to the country's commitment to contemporary design, showcasing some of the most impressive modern architecture in the world.

Govt unveils 2024 public holiday calendar

News Desk

ISLAMABAD: In a notification released by the Cabinet Division on Wednesday, the Government of Pakistan has officially declared the public holidays for the upcoming year 2024. The list encompasses a range of festivals and events significant to both Muslims and minorities across the nation.

The 2024 public holiday calendar features a total of 11 days, each representing a momentous occasion in Pakistan's rich cultural and religious tapestry. Among these, Kashmir Day on February 5, Pakistan Day on March 23, and Independence Day on August 14 stand out as crucial dates symbolising the country's historical and ideological foundations.

Three convicts sentenced to life imprisonment for murder

By Niaz Narijo

DADU: The Court of First Additional Sessions Judge Mehar has handed down a verdict, sentencing three convicts to life imprisonment for their involvement in the murder of youth Irshad Wadhu. The court's decision, reached through judicial proceedings, marks a pivotal moment in the pursuit of justice.

The accused, namely Ali Gohar and Mir Hazar Khan Qadir Bakhsh, were found guilty of committing the crime related to a money transaction that tragically resulted in the loss of young Irshad Wadhu's life in November 2021. The court, considering the gravity of the offense, not only imposed life imprisonment but also levied a substantial fine of 5 lakh rupees on each of the accused.

This legal action comes as a result of a case registered against the accused individuals, initiated upon the complaint filed by Siraj Vadhu, the father of the victim. The diligent efforts of the police during the investigation and court proceedings have culminated in the delivery of justice.

The accused were officially sentenced, and they have been subsequently sent to jail, emphasizing the role of the judicial system in upholding the rule of law and ensuring accountability for criminal acts.

Dubai-based businessman cleared of all charges by court

News Desk

ISLAMABAD: The JIT report, tasked with investigating various charges against Dubai-based businessman Umar Farooq Zahoore, including the alleged kidnapping of his daughters Zainab Umar and Zuhaira Umar, has given him a clean chit after a thorough investigation. The accused has been cleared of all charges related to fake Computerized National Identity Card (CNIC), kidnapping of his own twin daughters, and passport offenses, and affirmed Zahoore's innocence. The findings in the JIT report have led to Umar Farooq Zahoore's discharge from the case, with no need for additional investigation or probe.

Umar Farooq Zahoore, previously declared a Proclaimed Offender, challenged the order's validity in the Lahore High Court. His application to the FIA Lahore for inclusion of his statement in the investigation led to the formation of a JIT. Both Zainab Umar and

Zuhaira Umar, his twin daughters, emphatically stated before the JIT and later before the Judicial Magistrate that they were not kidnapped and are happily living with their father in Dubai. They expressed their desire to remain with their father and distanced themselves from their mother's allegations. The legal battle between Umar Farooq Zahoore and his ex-wife Khushbakht Mirza, known as Sophia Mirza in showbiz, dates back to 2006 when they got married. The couple separated in the same year, leading to litigation for guardianship rights of their twin daughters. The custody was granted to Khushbakht Mirza, but the UAE Shariah court ruled in favor of Zahoore in 2010, giving him absolute custody.

The FIA's involvement in the case began when Shahzad Akbar asked for assistance on behalf of Sophia Mirza. The FIA initiated criminal cases against Zahoore, including allegations of fraud and money

laundering amounting to around 16 billion Rupees. The federal government, under the PTI administration, approved the FIA's probe into the alleged fraud. In pursuit of the criminal cases, Umar Farooq Zahoore faced severe actions, including placement on the Exit Control List (ECL), non-bailable warrants, and blacklisting of his passport and CNIC. Red Warrants were issued through INTERPOL, violating the organization's rules on family and civil disputes.

In a recent development, Umar Farooq Zahoore's name has been removed from the INTERPOL list, and he has been cleared of all cases. The constitution of INTERPOL does not permit red notices in family and civil disputes, highlighting the controversial nature of the actions taken against Zahoore. This marks the end of a legal ordeal for Umar Farooq Zahoore, who has been vindicated of all charges, with the JIT report confirming his innocence.

India tops uploading child abuse content on social media: Europol report

News Desk

BRUSSELS: A report by the European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation (Europol) revealed that India led the list of countries uploading the highest amount of content, including videos and images of child abuse, on social media in 2022. The report indicated that around 5.67 million videos and images depicting child sexual acts were uploaded from India during the specified period.

The report listed three Islamic countries among the top contributors to such content, with Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Indonesia ranking third, fourth, and fifth, respectively. The Philippines, with 2.76 million uploads, secured the second position in the distressing list. Meanwhile, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Indonesia were documented to have uploaded 2.15 million, 2.1 million, and 1.8 million videos and images of child abuse, respectively. Europol's list encompassed the 20 largest contributor countries globally. Following India, the United States, the European Union, Vietnam, Iraq, Mexico, Algeria, Colombia, Brazil, Saudi Arabia, Thailand, Egypt, the United Kingdom, Venezuela, Turkey, and the UAE were included.

According to Europol sources, France and Poland, both within the European Union, were noted for uploading the most content containing child abuse. The report highlighted that social media platforms Facebook and Instagram reported 21.17 million and 0.55 million obscene images or content to national

authorities, respectively. In 2022, Meta Platforms, the parent company of Facebook and Instagram, detected and reported 26 million images, emphasizing the ongoing challenge in combating child sexual abuse material (CSAM) online. Popular apps among teenagers, Snapchat and TikTok, also contributed to reporting efforts, filing over 550,000 and nearly 290,000 reports to the US National Center for Missing and Exploited Children.

The European Commission, in December, directed Meta to explain its actions to combat the spread of illegal sexual images taken by minors through Instagram under the EU's new content-moderation rulebook, the Digital Services Act (DSA). Law enforcement agencies worldwide are grappling with the increasing challenge of identifying and apprehending individuals involved in child exploitation, particularly as offenders become more adept at concealing their digital tracks. The use of encrypted communication online has further complicated investigations, creating a pressing need for enhanced tools and legislative measures.

Europol established a database in 2016, housing 85 million unique photos and videos of children found on pedophile forums on the "dark web," the part of the internet that is not publicly searchable and requires special software to browse. Despite the difficulties in this challenging realm, international efforts persist to combat child sexual exploitation online and bring perpetrators to justice.

Shadab Khan assumes dual role as DSP Punjab police

By our correspondent

LAHORE: Cricket sensation Shadab Khan has embraced a dual role within the ranks of the Punjab Police, being appointed as the prestigious Brand Ambassador and honored with the title of Honorary Deputy Superintendent of Police (DSP). The accolade was bestowed upon him on Wednesday, marking a unique intersection of sportsmanship and public service.

Currently on a tempo-



LAHORE: Star Cricketer Shadab Khan being decorated with honorary DSP rank in Punjab Police by IG Punjab, here on Wednesday. Shadab Khan will be the brand ambassador for the police.

rary hiatus from cricket due to an ankle injury sustained during the National T20 Cup, Shadab Khan expressed his gratitude and enthusiasm for his newly acquired role.

Taking to social media, Shadab Khan, in a post on X (formerly Twitter), shared his elation, stating, "I feel honored to serve in a different way now."

He further encouraged young individuals to consider contributing to the government sector as a means of serving and help-

ing the country.

This collaboration between a cricket luminary and law enforcement showcases the convergence of sports and public service, shedding light on the potential for influential figures to contribute meaningfully beyond their primary domains. Shadab Khan's endorsement of government service serves as an inspirational call for the youth to explore diverse avenues for national development and progress.

PPP advocates for fair, transparent elections: Imran Wazir

By Adam Khan Wazir

WANA: Imran Mukhlis Wazir, the anticipated Pakistan People's Party (PPP) candidate for the provincial assembly in South Waziristan, emphasized the party's commitment to fostering fair and transparent elections across the country during a statement on Wednesday.

Wazir highlighted that the PPP stands out as the only political entity enjoying equal popularity among the citizens of Gilgit-Baltistan, Azad Kashmir, and the four provinces. He underscored the significance of political consciousness, asserting that a nation lacking the power to instigate change will find no divine assistance. Wazir ex-

pressed the party's earnest desire for upcoming elections scheduled for February 8 to be characterized by fairness and transparency.

"The power of the thumb is a formidable force on election day," Wazir declared, emphasizing the importance of each voter's choice. He asserted that success would be bestowed upon the candidate who earns the trust symbolized by the voters' thumbs on the ballot.

Wazir reaffirmed the PPP's commitment to achieving power through the legitimate democratic process. Rejecting any notion of "selection" over election, he declared, "We will come to power by the power of the vote, God willing."

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‘Fatwa’ against TikTok, navigating moral conundrums in the digital age

In the labyrinthine landscape of religious edicts and technological evolution, the recent fatwa pronounced by scholars at Jamia Binoria Town in Karachi, categorizing the ubiquitous video-sharing platform TikTok as "Haram," has ignited a fresh dialogue on the ethical ramifications of modern digital indulgence.

The meticulously articulated fatwa, a testament to the intersection of religious tenets and contemporary technology, resonates with resolute denunciation. It reverberates not merely as a condemnation of an application but as a somber echo of societal anxieties surrounding the ethical compass of technological advancements.

At its core, the fatwa asserts that TikTok, a platform boasting over 39 million downloads in 2022 alone, is now draped in the cloak of "Haram," a term encapsulating the scripturally forbidden. The religious decree contends that TikTok has metamorphosed into a digital haven for activities explicitly outlawed by religious doctrine. These activities span a spectrum from the sharing of proscribed imagery, videos, and music to the dissemination of indecent content, all facilitated by a backdrop of financial pursuits. The stark condemnation emanating from the religious scholars encapsulates the pervasive concern that TikTok, despite its veneer of innocuous entertainment, is inextricably tethered to the unsavory underbelly of immoral content proliferation. The fatwa's contention that TikTok serves as a conduit for the commodification of impropriety raises pertinent questions about the ethical contours of financial pursuits within the digital realm.

Beyond the intricacies of religious jurisprudence, the fatwa casts a discerning eye on the diverse demographic spectrum navigating the TikTok landscape. The assertion that individuals spanning generations, from the youth to the elderly, partake in content creation that may not align with robust moral principles elucidates the far-reaching impact of digital platforms on societal values.

TikTok's trajectory in Pakistan, marked by recurrent calls for bans and regulatory interventions, underscores the dichotomy between its widespread popularity and the escalating concerns regarding its content dynamics. The echoes of discontent that resonated earlier this year in the corridors of the Lahore High Court, coupled with the temporal ban imposed by the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority in 2021, have now found a reverberating chorus in the pronouncement of the recent fatwa.

In navigating the delicate nexus of religious doctrine and digital indulgence, it is imperative to dissect the motivations behind such fatwas and their implications on societal conduct. The edict, while rooted in the lens of moral rectitude, opens a dialogue that transcends theological boundaries, prompting reflection on the symbiosis between technology and ethics in our ever-evolving digital epoch.

Pioneering Blockchain in Pakistan’s legal nexus

In the annals of technological innovation, the advent of blockchain technology emerges as a potent force with transformative implications for Pakistan's legal echelons. Recognized for its decentralized ledger capabilities, blockchain stands poised to unfurl a new chapter in legal processes, ushering in a paradigm shift characterized by transparency, efficiency, and augmented access to justice.

The adoption of blockchain technology presents an opportune moment to comprehensively address the multifaceted challenges inherent in Pakistan's legal landscape – a landscape grappling with issues of trust deficit, legal delays, and labyrinthine property disputes. At its core, blockchain's intrinsic transparency serves as a bulwark against fraud and unauthorized alterations, thereby fortifying the integrity of legal proceedings and instilling renewed trust in the country's legal apparatus.

Internationally, pioneers such as Estonia, the UAE, Singapore, Sweden, China, the US, Australia, and Switzerland have boldly embraced blockchain, etching significant advancements in their legal frameworks. For Pakistan, this adoption stands poised as a watershed moment in the quest to overcome challenges in case management, property disputes, and the secure registration of land titles.

Efficiency in case management emerges as a linchpin wherein blockchain can effect transformative change. The tamper-proof nature of case files and the transparent tracking of case progress on a blockchain can orchestrate a harmonious symphony within judicial processes, potentially mitigating the specter of case backlog and administrative delays. In a country where secure property rights are synonymous with economic development, blockchain's role in elevating land title management is indispensable.

Moreover, blockchain's promise extends to facilitating international trade and cross-border transactions, promising a more seamless and secure cross-border legal milieu. Identity verification, a perennial concern, finds an ally in blockchain, providing a robust and verifiable means of authenticating individuals.

Enter smart contracts – the vanguard of legal agreements in the digital age. These self-executing contracts, with terms directly inscribed into code, herald a transformative juncture in legal processes. The automation and streamlining of legal procedures through smart contracts align with global trends in legal technology, promising efficiency gains. Yet, the embrace of blockchain in legal processes is not devoid of challenges, chief among them being regulatory considerations. A judicious and comprehensive regulatory framework, adept at addressing data privacy concerns, stands as a sine qua non for the ethical and responsible integration of blockchain technology. Public awareness and education are indispensable companions on this transformative journey, with collaboration with legal tech startups poised to expedite blockchain adoption.

The potential dividends of embedding blockchain within Pakistan's legal processes, from heightened transparency and efficiency to the resolution of property disputes and facilitation of international trade, beckon a future where the legal framework is more accessible, transparent, and efficient. Surmounting challenges necessitates a concerted effort – regulatory clarity, educational initiatives, infrastructure development, and stakeholder collaboration.

To propel Pakistan into the vanguard of successful blockchain integration, the government must ardently prioritize the development of a lucid regulatory framework, invest in educational initiatives, and address infrastructure challenges head-on. The encouragement of collaboration between the public and private sectors, the initiation of pilot projects, and the elevation of public awareness stand as pivotal steps toward fostering trust and realizing the transformative potential of blockchain technology within Pakistan's legal landscape.

Exploring timeless reflections: Arthur Miller’s “The Crucible”

Arthur Miller's magnum opus, "The Crucible," a literary tapestry woven in 1953, unfurls against the haunting backdrop of the Salem Witch trials in 1692. Beyond its historical moorings, Miller's penmanship deftly traverses the echelons of time, casting an incisive gaze upon the McCarthyism era of the 1950s in the United States. In this tapestry, the perils of mass hysteria and the tragic repercussions borne by the innocent unfurl as a timeless allegory.

Nestled in Salem, Massachusetts, the narrative unfurls with the discovery of a cadre of young girls engaged in seemingly occult rituals in the woods. Fearful of reprisals, these girls, in an act of self-preservation, unleash a torrent of accusations, casting the specter of witchcraft upon various townsfolk. This catalyzes a deluge of hysteria, leading to numerous arrests and a community ensnared in the clutches of paranoia. At the vortex of this maelstrom stands John Proctor, a respected farmer grappling with the chaos as his wife, Elizabeth, becomes a target of the witchcraft allegations. Despite Proctor's desperate endeavors to unveil the truth, he, too, succumbs to the damning tide, condemned to the inexorable fate of death.

"The Crucible" unfurls an exploration of perennial themes that reverberate through the corridors of human history: the corrosive influence of mass hysteria, the insidious tendrils of fear, and the paramount significance of truth. Miller crafts a narrative that delves into the moral quandaries faced by characters and the deleterious aftermath of the witch trials on the community.

The play, a poignant cautionary tale, illuminates the dangers of unchecked authority and the manipulation of justice systems. Miller artfully sketches a corrupted court where judges, propelled by ulterior motives, orchestrate a macabre symphony of false testimonies and the dismissal of conflicting evidence to achieve predetermined outcomes.

In contemplating the broader tableau of human history, "The Crucible" draws parallels to epochs when slander, particularly in the name of religion, stood as one of the most reprehensible transgressions.

Theocratic rule, anchored in claims of divine authority, birthed a system where obedience metamorphosed into an unassailable duty, stifling both body and intellect. Historical echoes resound globally, resonating with the burning of intellectuals, philosophers, and scientists across Europe in the name of religious orthodoxy.

As Miller's narrative unfolds, it underscores the resilience of ideas and the indomitable nature of the human intellect. While efforts to imprison bodies through persecution persisted, the human mind remained unyielding, paving the way for the West to break free from the shackles of tradition about startups, including Byju's," he recounted, highlighting the growing disillusionment with the startup ecosystem.

These anecdotes capture the disconnect between the founders' opulent lives and the harsh realities faced by their employees, reshaping the narrative around startup culture from one of benevolent demigods to questionable villains. In Bengaluru's residential areas like Whitefield, voices of discontent can be heard about figures like Byju Raveendran, Bhavish Aggarwal of Ola, founders of Dunzo, and many others, contrasting sharply with the optimism in cafes where VCs and founders buzz with pitches and interviews. A different reality exists in the apartments, painting a stark picture and reshaping the narrative about startup leaders.

From heroes to villains - The changing face of startup founders

Of Unicorns and the Zombies

The New York Times article from December 7, 2023, reports on companies like WeWork, Olive AI, Convoy, and Veev, which, despite substantial investments, faced bankruptcy or shutdowns. In India, similar trends have manifested, with startup founders maintaining extravagant lifestyles even as their companies undergo layoffs. This is comparable to instances in Silicon Valley, where founders' personal expenditures often contrast sharply with their companies' financial challenges. For example, Bird, a scooter company, faced delisting from the New York Stock Exchange due to low stock prices, while its founder purchased a multi-million dollar mansion.

However, there are differences in how these trends manifest in India versus regions like Silicon Valley. In India, the startup ecosystem is often characterized by a more pronounced disparity between the founders' wealth and the employees' economic challenges, partly due to the country's socio-economic diversity. In contrast, though facing similar issues, Silicon Valley's ecosystem operates within a different socio-economic context, where such disparities might be less visible. The tremors shaking the foundations of India's startup landscape in 2023, as reported by Debarghya Sil for Inc42, paint a vivid picture of

By Pankaj Mishra

India's startup ecosystem exposes the harsh reality of the vast wealth gap between founders and their employees, revealing the dark side of entrepreneurial success and shattering dreams. "Your founder just bought a 12-crore villa." I read in newspapers. "I can only imagine the work culture and perks you must be used to," said a laid-off startup employee, recounting a recent job interview. She expressed frustration, "They've slashed our salaries by 30-40%, creating a smokescreen. And with the founders flaunting lavish lifestyles on social media, battling this perception is tough."

During the startup boom, headlines buzzed with stories of startups giving luxuries like Mercedes cars, high-end work-from-home setups, generous ESOPs, and liberal leave policies. Yet, as funding cools and reality checks on business models and product-market fit set in, a tightening of belts is expected. However, my conversations with over a dozen startup executives and employees reveal a painful disillusionment. They are aware of the challenging business conditions, but the lavish lifestyles of some founders expose a tragic contradiction. In one world, startup founders live like royalty, showcasing their wealth and success. In another, their employees struggle with tight budgets and job uncertainty, their careers overshadowed by sudden job cuts and late pay or no pay.

Echoes of Whitefield

In Bengaluru, the Adarsh Palm Retreat (APR) stands as a symbol of the luxury many startup founders live in. A visit to this gated community by an employee of a SaaS startup revealed a completely different world. "Walking around APR, the extravagance was palpable. Lavish homes, grand parties - it was a display of luxury at its peak," the employee recounted. This employee, once an executive at one of India's largest e-commerce startups, visited APR to meet the founder to receive instructions on cost cutting. As he spoke, I remembered my visits to the complex over the years, and I could pick several instances of feeling the harsh contrast between some founders' lifestyles and the employees.

As flagged in my column "Byju's - When Ambition Overrides Good Governance And Ethics" earlier this year, the governance crisis at start-

ups such as Byju's makes this even worse. In 2022, when Byju's announced it was one of the sponsors for the FIFA World Cup, the company followed it up by laying off around 4,000 employees. The reason? Path to profitability. While some founders have notably reduced their salaries or stopped taking them, this gesture can sometimes be an eyewash. One employee pointed out, "They've already secured their fortunes from Series A secondary sales; they don't need a monthly salary!" This disparity between the founders' opulent lifestyles and the austere measures their companies face raises critical questions about leadership and responsibility in the startup world.

Disparity in Despair

Another employee from Bengaluru shared a glimpse into her company's Slack group, "The founder invited a select few to his extravagant housewarming. Five-star caterers, private concerts - a week after they fired 100 of us. Some of us, still in the group, find it painful to witness."

A third employee, currently on maternity leave, shared her anxiety, "My leave ends next week, and I know I'll be fired. It's a constant worry." A front-end engineer from Delhi shared a disheartening story. Weeks before her entire team at a luxury services startup was laid off, the founder shared a screenshot of the company's bank account, assuring enough funds for a year's salaries. "We have the runway!" he claimed. Yet, shockingly, they were all terminated, receiving only a month's salary. "We later heard that the screenshot was photoshopped," she revealed, still reeling from the betrayal as she searches for a new job.

An employee from Dunzo, backed by giants like Google and Reliance Retail, shared his struggles of managing life without a salary for months. "I wish they'd just fire me. It's like a slow, painful bandaaid removal," he lamented. His recent job interview at a traditional logistics company became a critique session on startup culture. "The interviewer, a seasoned executive in his fifties, vented his frustra-

tionism and intolerance, embracing knowledge and scientific progress.

In a contrasting cadence, Miller directs a discerning lens towards the stagnation in Islamic thought, attributing it to the abandonment of research, analysis, and observation by religious scholars and Sufis.

The stifling of enlightened Muslim thinkers by extremists, from Miller's perspective, has resulted in contemporary Muslim societies grappling with the specters of intolerance and ignorance.

Contemplating "The Crucible," one is beckoned to consider the resonances between historical epochs and the contemporary panorama, urging societies to confront their proclivities toward hysteria, fear, and the suppression of truth. Miller's virtuosic exploration of these themes stands as a timeless testament to the enduring scars of human history and the imperative to rupture the chains of ignorance and intolerance.

- companies valued at \$10 billion or more. This is a plausible notion, especially considering India's startup landscape. As of mid-2022, India boasted 105 unicorns with a combined worth of \$338.5 billion. The digital boom, fueled by a robust digital payment framework, widespread smartphone usage, and digital-centric business models, has spurred this growth, with the years 2021 to 2019 seeing a remarkable increase in unicorn births despite the pandemic's challenges.

However, India's burgeoning startup ecosystem, the world's third-largest, also harbours numerous failures. For each success story, many ventures initiated by ambitious entrepreneurs initially showed promise and even secured funding from angel investors or venture capitalists, yet ultimately fizzled out and vanished. But the fall of some startup founders from dream-makers to heartbreakers is more because of the luxurious lives they are living despite the employees being laid off and all the cost-cutting measures. By allowing entrepreneurs to make massive cash as part of their secondary share sales, the VCs have contributed to this, too. Last week, over coffee just outside the lush confines of Adarsh Palm Retreat (APR), I had a revealing conversation with a startup founder who once called this enclave home.

"I cashed out my shares for about \$2 million during our Series A," he began. "But now, our biggest investor is pressuring us to slash the company's size by three quarters. There's money in the bank, yet here I am, grappling with decisions that seem inappropriate to me and the team I've built."

"The same investor is betting heavily on a rival startup, urging them to expand aggressively," he revealed, his frustration visible. "It's a game that defies me. Everyone assumes I'm wealthy and carefree, but the truth is, I wrestle with mental depression every day." Notwithstanding founders' internal battles, mental depression, investor pressures, and everything that comes along, it's difficult to believe they can't do better. In their pursuit of value and victory, did they forget the people who built their dreams? How will history remember them - as visionary leaders or architects of disillusionment?

(Pankaj Mishra has been a journalist for over two decades and is the co-founder of FactorDaily.)

It has been more than two months now since the Israeli authorities launched a war on Gaza in response to Hamas's attack on its southern territories, which resulted in the killing of about 1,200 people, mostly Israeli civilians. Relentless Israeli bombardment and ground attacks have flattened entire neighbourhoods and killed close to 20,000 Palestinians, more than a third of them children.

The declared goal of the Israeli onslaught has been the "eradication" of Hamas from the enclave, but the viability of that being achieved has been increasingly questioned by foreign officials and analysts. Instead, the large-scale destruction wrought on Gaza as well as internal communications point to another aim the Israeli authorities may be pursuing. A document produced by Israel's Ministry of Intelligence leaked to the Israeli press in late October outlined the forcible and permanent transfer of Gaza's 2.3 million Palestinian residents to Egypt's Sinai Peninsula.

The document was reportedly created for an organisation called The Unit for Settlement – Gaza Strip, which seeks to recolonise the Gaza Strip 18 years after Israeli troops and settlers withdrew from it.

Yet, we are not living in 1948. Today, it is much more difficult to wipe out cities and villages as was

Israel’s ‘Plan B’

done 75 years ago during the expulsion of a large percentage of the Palestinian population from its homeland by Israeli militias, when, among other things, the reach of the media was far less extensive than it is now. The Israeli authorities have therefore turned to what we might term "the plan B": that is, to make the Gaza Strip unliveable, by dropping tens of thousands of tonnes of bombs.

The new strategy is implemented by targeting civilian infrastructure that supports life in the strip, including schools, universities, hospitals, bakeries, shops, farmland and greenhouses, water stations, sewage systems, power stations, solar panels, and generators.

This is carried out in parallel with a full siege on Gaza, whereby food, water, electricity and medicine have been cut off. The Israeli army lets in a few trucks a day, if at all, which humanitarian organisations have said does not meet all the needs of the Palestinian population, 1.8 million of whom have been internally displaced.

This has resulted in what has interchangeably been called humanitarian "disaster", "catastrophe", "graveyard" and "hell". The Palestinians of Gaza have been pushed to the brink of survival, while widespread epidemics are perceived by some as a desired goal. As former head of the Israeli National Security Council Giora Eiland has claimed: "Severe epidemics in the south of the Gaza Strip will bring victory closer."

Once the Gaza Strip is rendered unliveable and the population has no choice but to leave voluntarily, the next step is to ensure that neighbouring countries, Egypt first and foremost, are ready to "absorb them". This has been made clear by several prominent figures in Israel, including former deputy director of its national intelligence agency Mossad, Ram Ben Barak.

In a tweet in Hebrew, Ben Barak expressed the need "to build a coalition of countries and international funding that will allow Gazans who want to leave to be absorbed [in those countries] through the acquisition of a citizenship".

Back on November 12, 1914, US President Woodrow Wilson wrote to racial equality advocate William Monroe Trotter that "Segregation is not humiliating but a benefit, and ought to be so regarded by you gentlemen". More than 100 years later, Israel's plan – which has less to do with segregation and more with ethnic cleansing – is presented in similar terms.

Rethinking the ‘Global Order’ in 2023

By Margus Tsahkna, Minister of Foreign Affairs, Estonia

The year 2023 has been a stark reminder of the perils of big-power politics, challenging the narrative that the rules-based world order established post-World War II ensures lasting peace and prosperity. The recent return of full-scale aggression by Russia and escalating violence worldwide has shattered the promise of "never again." International institutions, designed to maintain peace, now appear feeble in the face of pressing global challenges, with a risk of imminent collapse.

The ongoing barbaric war of aggression against Ukraine by Russia has not only broken the system but exploited its flaws, degrading its seemingly unenforceable norms and values. Confidence in the existing system is rapidly eroding, and the urgency to save it is growing. However, saving the current rules-based international system is not enough; it requires fundamental change.

To save a rules-based system, acknowledging the disengagement of victims of imperial conquest in Africa and parts of Europe is crucial. Similarly, the experiences of smaller nations in eastern Europe during World War II, forced into "spheres of influence" and subjected to aggression, highlight the flaws of the current system. As someone who grew up under Soviet occupation, I understand the isolation and powerlessness that come with being shut off from the world. The true essence of our rules-based world lies in freeing ourselves from the shackles of big-power politics and the ensuing misery. It's a narrative that resonates with us all.

Ending big-power politics requires giving everyone the freedom to contribute to international decision-making. Individuals, communities, nations, and regions currently lack a proper say in decisions that profoundly impact

them. To forge a more resilient international system, we must address not only aggression but also poverty, disease, and the climate crisis. Estonia proposes a new global conversation to make the world fit for freedom. Strengthening the international rules-based order involves admitting its flaws and reforming the United Nations. The Security Council needs additional permanent members to better reflect the modern world, and efforts must be made to protect against abusive vetoes.

Additionally, the International Criminal Court (ICC) has been left without jurisdiction over the crime of aggression, a glaring example of a broken international system. The Rome Statute of the ICC needs reviewing to ensure accountability for this crime without legal restrictions. In the case of Russia's aggression against Ukraine, urgent action is needed, and the General Assembly must lead by creating a special tribunal. Furthermore, countries violating international commitments must be held accountable for human rights violations. The promotion of human rights and basic freedoms should be integral to global security policy. Human rights violations disrupt global inclusion and present dangers to the stability of the wider global system.

Expanding the inclusivity of international policymaking is essential to creating a world fit for freedom. Small states and civil society must have a greater say in decisions traditionally dominated by big states and blocs. As we stand at a pivotal moment in world history, the existing international system cannot survive unchanged much longer. The conversation started during the darkest days of World War II, leading to the creation of the UN and the Nuremberg trials, must be reignited. We cannot afford to wait for a repeat of past devastations; instead, we must inspire a new global conversation to make the world fit for freedom.

Pakistan rejects bloc politics, seeks balanced ties, says Gen Asim

News Desk

RAWALPINDI: Chief of Army Staff (COAS) General Asim Munir emphasized Pakistan's commitment to avoiding bloc politics and maintaining balanced relationships with all friendly countries, including China and the United States, during a candid discussion with members of prominent US think tanks and media in Washington. The Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) released a statement detailing the COAS's perspective.

General Munir highlighted Pakistan's significance both geopolitically and geoeconomically, expressing the country's aspiration to become a hub of connectivity and a gateway to Central Asia and beyond. However, he made it clear that Pakistan does not engage in bloc politics and is dedicated to balanced relationships with all friendly nations. During the discussion, the COAS shared Pakistan's views on regional security, the fight against transnational terrorism, and the importance of maintaining strategic stability in South Asia. He expressed Pakistan's desire to enhance bi-

COAS, CENTCOM chief discuss regional security

News Desk

RAWALPINDI: Chief of Army Staff (COAS) General Asim Munir, currently on an official visit to the United States, held talks with CENTCOM Commander General Michael Erik Kurilla at Headquarters Central Command in Tampa Bay, Florida. The discussions centered on shared interests, emphasizing cooperation in regional security matters, according to a statement from the Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR). During the meeting,

lateral engagement with the United States through a long-term multi-domain partnership.

The army chief's interactions during his visit to the US with political and military leadership were characterized as positive and forward-looking, aiming to strengthen the relationship between the two countries. Highlighting Pakistan's role in countering transnational terrorism, Gen-

both sides explored opportunities for joint training and underscored the need to enhance training interactions between CENTCOM and the Pakistan Army. Gen Munir also visited the CENTCOM Joint Operations Center as part of his visit.

Gen Munir's visit to the US has included meetings with several top officials, such as Secretary of State Antony J Blinken, Secretary of Defence General (Retd) Lloyd J Austin, Deputy Secretary of State Victoria Nuland, Deputy National Security Adviser Jonathan Finer,

and Chairman of Joint Chiefs of Staff General Charles Q Brown. The discussions have focused on enhancing cooperation in counter-terrorism and defense collaboration. State Department Spokesperson Matthew Miller highlighted Pakistan's significance as a major non-NATO ally and a NATO partner. He expressed the United States' eagerness to partner with Pakistan on regional security and defense cooperation, emphasizing the strong relationship between the two countries.

He emphasized that Kashmir is an internationally accepted dispute, and no unilateral action can change its nature against the wishes of the millions of people in the region. Additionally, the COAS underscored the immediate need to end the suffering in Gaza, provide humanitarian assistance, and implement a two-state solution for enduring peace in the region.



WASHINGTON: Army Chief General Asim Munir during a candid discussion with members of prominent US think tanks and media.— ISPR

Sanam Javed Throws Down the Gauntlet, Set to Challenge Maryam Nawaz in Elections

LAHORE: Sanam Javed, an ardent supporter of the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), has boldly declared her candidacy in the upcoming general elections, aiming to go head-to-head against the formidable Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) leader, Maryam Nawaz.

Javed Iqbal, the proud father of Sanam Javed, revealed this audacious decision during a media interaction at the Lahore High Court on Tuesday. He confidently stated that Sanam had resolved to contest the upcoming general elections, targeting the very constituency where Maryam Nawaz plans to make her stand.

"Sanam is gearing up to submit her documents to the Election Commission of Pakistan for the Member of Provincial Assembly's (MPA) seat from PP-150 constituency," declared Javed Iqbal. He assured the media that all pertinent documents were being meticulously collected for submission to the ECP, emphasizing the seriousness of Sanam's political venture.

Adding a layer of intrigue to the political drama, Javed Iqbal hinted that Sanam Javed might also throw her hat in the ring for the women's reserved seats, showcasing a comprehensive and strategic approach to her electoral ambitions. As the political landscape in Pakistan continues to evolve, Sanam Javed's decision to take on Maryam Nawaz injects a new level of excitement and anticipation into the upcoming elections. With both candidates gearing up for a fierce competition, political enthusiasts eagerly await the unfolding of this high-stakes electoral showdown.

Israel, Hamas working toward new truce, hostage deal

Talks to focus on stopping the war and preparing an agreement for the release of prisoners and the end of the siege imposed on the Gaza Strip

News Desk

GAZA STRIP: Hopes rose Wednesday that Israel and Hamas may be inching toward another truce and hostage release deal in the Gaza war, following secret talks and as the head of the Palestinian group visited Egypt.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu late Tuesday told relatives of some of the remaining 129 captives held in Gaza since the October 7 attacks that his spy chief was working on efforts to "free our hostages." "I have just sent the head of Mossad to Europe twice to promote a process to free our hostages," the premier told them. "I will spare no effort on the subject, and our duty is to bring them all back."

Mossad director David Barnea held a "positive meeting" in Warsaw this week with CIA chief Bill Burns and Qatari Prime Minister Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al Thani, a source familiar with the talks told the media, asking not to be named. Talks were ongoing "with the aim of reaching an agreement around the release of the remaining hostages in Gaza in exchange for a truce and the potential release of Palestinians held in Israeli prisons," said the source. The Qatar-based chief of Hamas, Ismail Haniyeh, on Wednesday travelled to Egypt, traditionally a key mediator between Israel and the Palestinians, for talks with intelligence chief Abbas Kamel.

A source close to Hamas, also speaking on condition of anonymity, said the talks would focus on stopping the war and "to prepare an agreement for the release of prisoners (and) the end of the siege imposed on the Gaza Strip." President Isaac Herzog also said Israel was "ready for another humanitarian pause and additional humanitarian aid in order to enable the release of hostages." Another Palestinian group, Islamic Jihad, meanwhile, released video footage it claimed showed two hostages, ramping up pressure on Israel.

Israel launched a military campaign that Gaza's Hamas-run health ministry says has killed 19,667 peo-

ple, mostly women and children, while also cutting off most water, food, and power supplies. Qatar last month helped broker a first week-long truce in which 80 Israeli hostages were freed in exchange for 240 Palestinian prisoners. The source close to Hamas said the Egypt talks would focus on proposals including a week-long truce that would see the release of 40 Israeli hostages, including women, children, and male non-combatants. Haniyeh, before leaving Qatar, met Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, but no details of their meeting were released.

Fighting raged unabated Wednesday in Gaza, where the Israeli army reported close quarter combat and more than 300 strikes over the past day, while the death toll among its own forces rose to 134 inside Gaza. It said "ground, aerial and naval operations were carried out on dozens of terrorists and terrorist infrastructure" including rocket launch sites and military command and control centres in Khan Yunis. Hamas sources said at least 11 people were killed overnight in Israeli strikes. In Khan Yunis, residents searched by hand through the rubble of a building completely flattened by bombardment.

The house was "full of people, why did they bomb it? What's the reason?" said one distraught young resident, Amr Sheikh-Deeb. "We managed to remove some bodies, but where are the rest of them? What did these people do?" Three corpses lay on the floor of the Al-Aqsa hospital in Deir el-Balah in the central Gaza Strip, where wounded people were treated, including children. A man, Abed Abu Aisha, came in carrying his crying child, both covered in blood and dust. US defense chief urges Israel to do more to protect Gaza civilians. "A missile hit our house, without any prior notice," he said.

"We pulled out some from under the rubble, but more people are still buried. I don't know the exact number of casualties, but a whole family was wounded." The UN Security Council was set to vote later Wednesday on a resolution calling for a pause in the conflict, diplo-

matic sources told the media, after two previous votes were delayed as members wrangled over wording. The latest version of the text calls for the "suspension" of hostilities, the sources said. The US vetoed a previous ceasefire resolution, sparking condemnation by aid groups which urged more action to help civilians caught in the conflict.

The UN estimates 1.9 million of Gaza's 2.4 million residents have been forced to flee their homes, many sheltering in tents amid shortages and the biting winter cold. "Amid displacement at an unimaginable scale and active hostilities, the humanitarian response system is on the brink," said Tor Wennesland, the UN's special coordinator for the Middle East peace process. Israel, which declared a total siege on Gaza at the start of the war, has since allowed in aid trucks through the Rafah border crossing with Egypt and, as of this week, its own Kerem Shalom crossing.

The UN's World Food Programme said Wednesday it had delivered food through the crossing in a first direct aid convoy from Jordan. An Israeli military agency, COGAT, said it had also started laying a pipeline from Egypt to deliver drinking water from a mobile desalination plant in a project led by the United Arab Emirates. But aid groups have warned the humanitarian goods fall far short of the dire need, and the UN children's agency said that "child deaths due to disease could surpass those killed in bombardments."

The Gaza war has sparked fears of regional escalation and seen Israel trade deadly cross-border fire with Iran-backed Hezbollah in Lebanon, where Israel said its aircraft hit more targets Wednesday. Yemen's Iran-backed Huthi rebels, meanwhile, have repeatedly fired missiles and drones at vessels passing through the Red Sea that they say are linked to Israel, in a show of support for Palestinians. The United States this week started to build a multinational naval task force to protect the waterway leading to the Suez Canal, through which more than 10 percent of global trade transits.

Karachi Central Jail inmates find redemption through creativity

By our correspondent

KARACHI: Inside the confines of the Central Jail in Karachi, incarcerated individuals, including murderers and kidnappers, are finding a unique path to rehabilitation and self-discovery through art creation. Murals depicting rural Pakistani life adorn the prison's walls, each stroke and hue portraying the creativity and skill of the inmates who remain confined within its colonial-era structure.

The rehabilitation art and music program, initiated in 2007, allows prisoners to learn various crafts, including arts and crafts, providing them with a sense of purpose and an opportunity to hone their talents. Under this program, inmates have the chance to create intricate pieces of art, contributing to exhibitions organized with the support of the local arts council. The art created by these prisoners is not merely a pastime but a means to earn significant sums, with some artworks fetching thousands of dollars.

One such artist, Mohammad Ijaz, a former convict serving a 25-year sentence for kidnapping and abduction, discovered the transformative power of art during his incarceration. Ijaz, who specializes in painting horses, has not only funded his family's religious pilgrimage to Makkah but also contributed to his sister's wedding. Despite initial skepticism from his family about his newfound talent, the success of his artwork in exhibitions brought joy and pride to his loved ones.



KARACHI: An inmate of Karachi Central Jail busy painting during the rehabilitation process. Sindh Police has taken an outstanding step to engage convicted individuals into positive activities to allow them live a normal life after being released from the prison.

"I have found the true meaning of life since being jailed," says Ijaz. "They have taught us that life is full of colors, and the colors themselves speak." The art program extends beyond personal creative expression; it serves as a means of reflection for the inmates. By engaging in constructive pursuits, prisoners can reflect on their past actions and crimes, fostering an environment conducive to personal growth and reform.

Ammad Chandio, a senior prison official, emphasized the positive impact of such programs. "Engaging them in constructive pursuits kind of polishes them," Chandio stated. "It helps them reflect

upon their past, what crime, what sin or what violation of law they had committed." Apart from art, the rehabilitation program offers inmates the opportunity to learn languages such as Arabic, English, or Chinese, as well as skills like hand embroidery and beadwork. The prison authorities believe that these activities contribute to the overall well-being and transformation of the inmates.

"Any art that is being produced inside the correctional facility is actually the property of the inmates, and any proceeds that come from the sale of these products belong to those inmates," clarified Chandio.

ECP issues 80-point code of conduct for elections

Parties, candidates or agents should not act in a way prejudicial to the integrity and sovereignty of the country or defame the armed forces or judiciary

By our correspondent

ISLAMABAD: The Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) on Wednesday issued an 80-point code of conduct for general elections, scheduled for February 8, 2024. The code of conduct covers everything from rules for campaigning, taking out processions as well as polling day. The code of conduct's points is split across seven major headings. The key points are as follows:

Parties, candidates or agents should not act in a way prejudicial to the integrity and sovereignty of the country or defame the armed forces or judiciary. No gifts or inducements should be used by one candidate to stop him from contesting or withdrawing. Parties, candidates or agents should not make formal or informal agreements to exclude men, women or transgenders from the voting process. Parties should cooperate with law enforcement and make sure no ballots etc are destroyed. Candidates should not enlist the help of any public official. There should be no incitement to violence on or before polling day. The Political parties, candidates and election agents

shall firmly restrain their workers from exerting influence on the print and electronic media. The president, prime minister, chairman/deputy chairman senate, speaker/deputy speaker of an assembly, federal ministers, ministers of state, governors, chief ministers, provincial ministers and advisors to the prime minister and the chief minister, mayor/chairman/Nazim, their deputies, shall not participate in the election campaign.

There shall be a complete ban on convening, holding or attending any public meeting, or promoting or joining in any procession 48 hours after polls end. No political party shall run a publicity campaign in print, social and electronic media at the cost of public exchequer. Distribution of voter's perchee at the polling station on polling day will be allowed but the printing of name and election symbol of the candidate and Political Party on the perchee shall be strictly prohibited.

Prescribed sizes: Posters 18 Inches x 23 inches, Handbills/ pamphlets / leaflets 9" x 6", Banners 3' x 9", Portraits 2' x 3'. Affixing of posters on public places including bridges, national in-

stitutions and installations shall be strictly prohibited. Political parties, candidates and election agents are expected to avoid the printing of Quranic verses and Hadith on publicity materials. The organisers in consultation with the District administration shall take steps in advance to arrange for passage of the procession so that there is no blockage of or hindrance to traffic.

If two or more political parties or candidates intend to take out processions over the same route or parts thereof at about the same time, the organizers shall establish contact well in advance. Political parties, candidates, their supporters, government/local government functionaries or elected representatives, shall not announce or inaugurate, openly or in secret, their overall development schemes. Organising demonstrations or picketing before the house of an individual to protest against his political opinion or activities shall not be allowed. On Polling Day, there shall be a complete ban within a radius of 400 meters of a polling station on all kinds of campaigns.

No candidate, election agent or any of their supporters or a polling agent shall interfere or create hindrance in any manner in official functioning. No one without a valid pass from the Election Commission or Provincial Election Commissioner, District Returning Officer or Returning Officer concerned shall enter the polling station. The general public is also expected to assist the Election Commission in the effective implementation of the Code of Conduct. Bribery, personation, undue influence, capturing of polling station or polling booth, tampering with papers and making or publishing a false statement or declaration, exceeding the limit of election expenses can lead to action.

In addition to the other points, the code of conduct also outlines 14 points related to the actual polling process itself. The Election agent or Polling agent shall not solicit the vote from any voter for his candidate in the vicinity of a polling station. Polling agents can raise objections on any voter because the voter has already voted in the election at the same or another polling station, or is not the person whose name is entered in the electoral roll. Polling agents must know

that such voters who are blind or otherwise require assistance to vote are permitted by law to select any individual to accompany them. Polling agent should be aware of the fact that under the law, the Presiding Officer if he considers it necessary, may recount the votes of his motion. Polling agent shall neither unnecessarily accuse the presiding officer of making biased decisions nor shall level unfounded allegations upon him. On Tuesday, the electoral watchdog issued guidelines for candidates filing nomination papers for national and provincial assembly seats.

ECP said the nomination papers could be obtained from respective returning officers at office working hours from 8:30 am to 4:30 pm from December 20 to December 22, 2023. As per the ECP guidelines, the fee for obtaining one nomination paper's form is fixed at Rs10, and one candidate can submit a maximum of five nomination papers with different proposers/seconders.

The fee for submission of a nomination paper for a National Assembly seat is Rs30,000 and Rs 20,000 for a provincial assembly seat is non-refundable.