



POSTIVE POST

A Publication by Department of Media, Art & Design and the Diplomatic Academy

Pakistan's standing in the global rankings

Overview

Pakistan observed a slight improvement in the overall international rankings in 2021 covering socio-economic and political outcomes of the country. Several elements complemented the prospects including successful democratic transition, efficient counter-terrorism measures leading to enhanced peace and security, and foreign direct investment inflows under CPEC, among others. Albeit, decoupling economic growth from human development suggests that the country needs to enhance its scores in health, education and standard of living by ensuring political will, equitable financing and efficient governance to ensure parallel growth for marginalized segments as well. Civil and political liberties must grow hand in hand to ensure a conducive environment for democratic dialogue and accountability which ultimately supports its nation building process.

DEMOCRACY INDEX

Pakistan was placed at the 104th spot among 167 states on the global Democracy Index 2021, compiled by the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU).

Index from 0 (authoritarian regime) to 10 (full democracy)

Compiled based on indicators covering: Electoral process and pluralism, Civil liberties, Functioning of government, Political participation, and Political culture.

HUMAN DEVELOPMENT INDEX

Pakistan ranked 161 out of 192 countries in the Human Development Index scoring 2022 0.562 out of 1.000 in 2018 compared to 0.560 out of 1.000 in 2017.

Index from 0 (low development) to 1 (very high development)

Compiled based on indicators covering: life expectancy, education, and per capita income

PRESS FREEDOM INDEX

Pakistan's press freedom rank dropped to 145 out of 180 countries in the Press Freedom Index, An annual ranking of countries published by Reporters Without Borders (RWB), an international non-governmental organization dedicated to safeguard the right to freedom of information.

Compiled based on indicators covering: pluralism, media independence, environment and self-censorship, legislative framework, transparency, and infrastructure.

TERRORISM INDEX

Terrorism Index in Pakistan decreased to 7.83 in 2021 from 7.92 in 2020.

Index from 0 (lowest impact) to 10 (highest impact)

Compiled based on indicators covering : Total number of terrorist incidents in a given year, total number of fatalities caused by terrorism in a given year, total number of injuries caused by terrorism in a given year and the approximate level of total property damage from terrorist incidents in a given year.

ECONOMIC FREEDOM INDEX

In 2021, index of economic freedom for Pakistan was 51.7 score. Though Pakistan index of economic freedom fluctuated substantially in recent years, it tended to decrease through 2002 - 2021 period ending at 51.7 score in 2021.

Compiled based on indicators covering: Market openness, Regulatory efficiency, Government size and the rule of law.

Positive Post is a strategic effort to project achievement and contributions of Pakistan.

While showcasing Greenwich University's cultural diplomacy initiatives, it also encapsulates a compilation of different developments complementing Pakistan's socio-cultural, economic & Political outcomes.

January in History

January 12, 1952 : Pakistan Industrial Development Corporation (PIDC), Headed by Founder Chairman Ghulam Faruque

January 1, 1955: Pakistan International Airlines comes into being.

January 1, 1961: Decimal coinage introduced in Pakistan.

January 5, 1963: First trade agreement is signed between Pakistan and China.

January 10, 1966: Tashkent Declaration signed between India and Pakistan.

January 30, 1972: Pakistan snaps ties with Commonwealth on recognizing Bangladesh.

January 1, 1981: Interest-free banking introduced.

January 3, 1981: International Islamic University starts functioning.

January 3, 1982: Pakistan defeats Argentina 12-3 in World Cup Hockey in Bombay.

January 15, 1983: First three F-16 jets reach Pakistan.

January 25, 1983: Wifaqi Mohtasib (Ombudsman) Order is promulgated. Justice Sardar Iqbal is named, WM.

January 19, 1989: Students unions are restored in Punjab .

January 12, 1992: Lahore-Islamabad Motorway project launched.

January 15, 1994: Pakistan Television transmission gets access to 38 countries via satellite.

January 2, 2006: Dr. Shamsbad Akhtar assumes office of State Bank Governor having the first woman Governor of SBP.

Pakistan steps up surveillance in Arabian Sea

Pakistan has stepped up naval and aerial surveillance of the Arabian Sea in a bid to protect traffic in international shipping lanes, the navy said on Sunday.

Pakistan Navy said it had deployed its ships in wake of the recent maritime security incidents in the Arabian Sea.

The development comes days after an Indian Navy warship intercepted a Bahrain-bound bulk carrier following reports that the vessel had been hijacked off the coast of Somalia.

In a statement issued on Sunday, the Pakistan Navy said it is “ensuring [a] permanent presence in the Arabian Sea to keep our and international sea lines of communications under intense surveillance”.

Navy says aerial monitoring increased, ships patrolling global shipping lanes

“Two to three ships are always patrolling the areas [where] Pakistan-bound and international merchant ships are plying. In addition, extensive air surveillance is also being undertaken to ensure the safety of international sea lines of communications passing through our maritime area.

Earlier, Reuters reported that the hijacking and attempted hijacking of commercial ships in the Gulf of Aden and Arabian Sea resumed in December after a six-year lull.

Experts attributed this rise to the fact that pirates had been encouraged by US-led anti-piracy naval forces diverting their attention to the neighbouring Red Sea to thwart attacks there by Houthi forces from Yemen.

Maritime traffic has been disrupted over the past several weeks after the Houthis began carrying out attacks on vessels in the Gulf region to show



their support for the people of Gaza. Major shippers such as Maersk have paused or diverted their vessels away from the Red Sea the shortest route from Asia to Europe via the Suez Canal after a number of craft came under attack from Houthi drones and gunboats.

Even though India is not part of the US-led Red Sea task force, it had deployed ships in the region.

Following last week's hijacking attempt, New Delhi had announced it was providing protective escorts to Indian container ships in the high seas around the Red Sea as the

security situation there continues to simmer.

Earlier, the Indian navy had said that task groups of frigates and destroyers had been deployed in the central and northern Arabian Sea to assist merchant vessels passing through the region.

“Aerial surveillance by long-range maritime patrol aircraft and RPAs (Remotely Piloted Aircraft) has been enhanced to have a complete maritime domain awareness,” Reuters quoted a statement as saying.

Courtesy: Dawn

IMF board nod allows disbursement of \$700m

In a significant development, the Executive Board of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) announced on Thursday that it had successfully concluded the first review of Pakistan's economic reform programme, backed by the Stand-By Arrangement (SBA), paving the way for an immediate disbursement of SDR 528 million, equivalent to approximately \$700m.

This latest disbursement brings the cumulative total under the arrangement to an impressive SDR 1.422 billion, roughly \$1.9bn. The financial support provided by the IMF underscores the global confidence in Pakistan's commitment to implementing essential economic reforms.

The successful review signifies a crucial step forward for Pakistan as it continues to navigate economic challenges and work towards fostering stability. The disbursement is expected to provide the much-needed support to the country's financial framework, facilitating the implementation of key reforms outlined in the IMF-supported programme. The board's decision reflects a recog-



nition of Pakistan's efforts in addressing economic vulnerabilities and implementing policy measures aimed at promoting sustainable growth.

“Economic activity has stabilised in Pakistan, although the outlook remains challenging and dependent on the implementation of sound policies,” the IMF board observed. It also said that “continued timely and consistent implementation of programme policies remains critical, with no room for slippage”.

The board reminded Pakistan that it “requires strict adherence to fiscal targets while protecting social spending, a market-determined ex-

change rate to absorb external shocks, and further progress on structural reforms to support stronger and more inclusive growth”.

The IMF board noted that macroeconomic conditions in Pakistan have generally improved, with the growth of 2pc expected in FY24 as the nascent recovery expands in the second half of the year. The fiscal position also strengthened in FY24Q1 achieving a primary surplus of 0.4pc of GDP driven by overall strong revenues.

Inflation remains elevated, although with appropriately tight policy, this could decline to 18.5pc

by the end of June 2024. Gross reserves increased to \$8.2bn in December 2023, up from \$4.5bn in June, while the exchange rate has been broadly stable.

The current account deficit is expected to rise to around 1.5pc of GDP in FY24 as the recovery takes hold. Assuming sustained sound macroeconomic policy and structural reform implementation, inflation should return to the State Bank of Pakistan's target and growth continue to strengthen over the medium term.

The IMF stressed that boosting jobs and inclusive growth in Pakistan requires continuing protection of the vulnerable through Benazir Income Support Programme and accelerating structural reforms.

It also emphasised the need for improving the business environment and levelling the playing field for investors, advancing the SOE reform agenda and safeguards related to the Sovereign Wealth Fund.

Published in Dawn, January 12th, 2024

Scientists confirm 2023 was 'hottest year on record'

Global temperatures reached exceptionally high levels in 2023, as the unprecedented heat from June onwards led 2023 to become the warmest year on record overtaking the previous warmest year, 2016, by a large margin.

The year-to-year increase in global average temperature was exceptionally large from 2022 to 2023. It follows a transition from three years of La Nina in 2020–2022 to El Nino conditions in 2023, although other factors appear to have also played a role.

The report says 2023 marked the first time on record that every day within a year has exceeded 1°C above the 1850–1900 pre-industrial level for that time of year. Nearly half the days were more than 1.5°C warmer than the 1850–1900 level, and two days in November were, for the first time, more than 2°C warmer.

Mauro Facchini, Head of Earth Observation at the Directorate General for Defence Industry and Space, European Commission, commented: "We knew thanks to the work of the Copernicus programme throughout 2023 that we would not receive good news today. But the annual data presented here provides yet more evidence of the increasing impacts of climate change."

The 'Copernicus Climate Change



Service' (C3S) monitored several key climate indicators throughout the year, reporting on record-breaking conditions such as the hottest month on record and daily global temperature averages briefly surpassing pre-industrial levels by more than 2C. Copernicus is a component of the European Union's space and earth observation programme.

The evolution of the daily global average temperature shows that 2023 is noteworthy for the occurrence of the highest global temperatures on record, both in absolute terms, during July, and relative to the annual cycle, during November. Almost all days from the beginning of June were the warmest in the ERA5 data record for that particular day of the year.

The rise in air temperature since the mid-1970s has been about twice as large over land than over ice-free ocean,

but each surface accounts for about half of the rise in global average air temperature, as the area of the Earth's surface covered by ocean is much larger than the area covered by land, the annual climate summary shows.

Samantha Burgess, Deputy Director of the C3S said: "2023 was an exceptional year with climate records tumbling like dominoes. Not only is 2023 the warmest year on record, it is also the first year with all days over 1°C warmer than the pre-industrial period. Temperatures during 2023 likely exceed those of any period in at least the last 100,000 years".

The distribution of surface air temperature anomalies across the globe in 2023 shows a marked contrast with that of 2022. Almost all land areas experienced above-average temperatures in 2023. Annual temperatures were more than 1°C higher than the 1991–2020 average over

much of Europe and North America, and over several other regions.

The flagship report says marine heatwaves were a common occurrence in 2023, affecting regions such as the Mediterranean, the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean, the Indian Ocean and the North Pacific, and much of the North Atlantic.

Greenhouse gas concentrations in 2023 reached the highest levels ever recorded in the atmosphere and carbon dioxide concentrations in 2023 were 2.4 ppm higher than in 2022 and methane concentrations increased by 11 ppb.

Globally, annual economic losses from climate- and weather-related disasters have significantly increased since the 2000s. In low and lower-middle-income countries, 82 per cent of all damage and loss caused by drought concerned the agriculture sector.

Between 2008 and 2018, across least developed countries and lower middle-income countries, 34pc of disaster-related crop and livestock production losses were attributed to drought, followed by 19pc to flooding events, 18pc to severe storms and hurricanes, 9pc to crop pests and animal diseases, 6pc to extreme temperatures, and 1pc to wildfires.

Courtesy: Dawn

Islamabad urges Kabul to address bilateral concerns

Caretaker Foreign Minister Jalil Abbas Jilani urged Afghanistan's Taliban administration to address pressing issues in bilateral ties for fully realising the potential of the two countries' relationship.

The call came during a meeting on Wednesday with Haji Mullah Shirin, the governor of Kandahar and deputy head of military intelligence and strategy in the Taliban administration in Afghanistan.

Mr Jilani, during the conversation, reaffirmed Pakistan's commitment to maintaining engagement and nurturing mutually beneficial ties with Afghanistan. He emphasised the importance of addressing all contentious issues to enhance trade and connectivity between the two nations.

Mullah Shirin's visit is viewed as crit-

ically important due to his high-ranking position within the Taliban and his close ties with the top leadership.

The meeting holds added significance against the backdrop of strained relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan, primarily due to the presence of Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) sanctuaries in Afghanistan, which have been the source of attacks on Pakistani soil. Accompanied by representatives from various Afghan government agencies, including the Ministry of Defence and the General Directorate of Intelligence (GDI), Mullah Shirin's delegation engaged in discussions focusing on key mutual concerns.

These included peace and security, and people-to-people contacts, as per a statement issued by the



Foreign Office.

The Afghan delegation, led by Mullah Shirin, also participated in the 6th session of the Pakistan-Afghanistan Joint Coordination Committee (JCC). The JCC meeting explored coordination mechanisms to facilitate cross-border movement, aiming to promote people-to-people contacts between the two countries.

According to the Afghan Islamic Press news service, Mullah Shirin, as deputy defence minister, previously headed a commission formed to discuss border control and violations with neighbouring countries. This commission has engaged in discussions with Iran, Turkmenistan, and others, with Mullah Shirin's current visit being a continuation of these diplomatic efforts.

Courtesy: Dawn

ECP leaves no ambiguity about Feb 8 elections

Chief Election Commissioner Sikandar Sultan Raja declared on Thursday that general elections scheduled for Feb 8 will proceed as planned despite security challenges, particularly in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan.

Chairing a high-level meeting to review the worsening law and order situation in the two provinces, Mr Raja said the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) was fully prepared to hold elections on time and there should be no ambiguity about it.

He said that with the help of law enforcement agencies and the Pakistan Army, the elements obstructing the elections and disturbing peace would be dealt with strictly and no leniency would be shown to anyone in this regard.

Mr Raja expressed concern over the deteriorating law and order situation in the two provinces, particularly the unabated attacks on the offices of ECP and political rallies.

He identified terrorism as the primary threat to the electoral process and expressed his full confidence in the security forces' capability to manage the situation effectively. He underscored the necessity of ensuring a safe and peaceful environment for political parties, candidates and voters to enable them to participate in the electoral process without fear.

He urged the law enforcement agencies to beware of attempts by various elements to take the law into their own hands on the election day, especially during the counting process and declaration of results.

The meeting was attended by the caretaker interior minister, interior secretary, director general of the Intelligence Bureau, chief secretaries and police chiefs of KP and Balochistan, representatives of other agencies, ECP's secretary and other senior officials.

The meeting reviewed the overall law and order situation with particular reference to Balochistan and KP and its impact on the

nationwide electoral exercise to be held next week.

Caretaker Interior Minister Gohar Ejaz said he had returned from a visit to Balochistan, where he reviewed the security situation.

He stressed that the federal and provincial governments were fully prepared to ensure peaceful elections.

"All preparations in this regard are complete, and full cooperation and resources will be provided to the Election Commission for the conduct of the general elections, and there will be no negligence at any level in this regard," he assured the meeting.

The interior secretary, chief secretaries and IGs of KP and Balochistan, and representatives of other agencies apprised the ECP of the



law and order situation across the country, especially in the two provinces, and all the security and administrative measures taken for the safe and peaceful conduct of the general elections.

The chief secretary and IG Balochistan informed the meeting that the provincial administration and security agencies are fully alert and ready to fight terrorism. They apprised the commission of the ongoing operation against terrorists in the province and assured that no political or non-political force would be allowed to obstruct the election process and those doing so would be dealt with strictly.

Likewise, the KP's chief secretary and IG highlighted the security measures taken while highlighting the threats faced by the elections in



the province.

The meeting was informed that elections are being held in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa for the first time after the merger of erstwhile Fata with the province, but preparations at the administrative level are complete and all resources have been provided to the law enforcement agencies.

Election Management System

After the meeting, CEC Sikandar Raja told reporters that the ECP would use the Election Management System (EMS) despite voices of concern from political parties fearing a repeat of the 2018 Result Transmission System (RTS) fiasco.

He said the system would function even if the issue of internet connectivity arose on the polling day.

He said there was no discussion regarding the internet shutdown on the polling day, but the Election Management System would work offline in case of internet service disruption.

In reply to a question, Mr Raja said that ballot papers were not available for the by-elections at present. He contended that reducing the size of the ballot paper would not make

any difference and the box where the ballot is to be stamped by the voters would be sufficient in size.

He noted that due to court decisions, the plan for printing ballot papers had to be changed and they had to be reprinted in many constituencies. He claimed that the Election Commission provided a

level playing field to all political parties and submitted a report to the Supreme Court in this regard. He said that instructions were issued to the chief secretaries and IGs to provide equal opportunities to all.

Meanwhile, the ECP has taken notice of the blasts in Quetta, Turbat and Jafarabad and has sought an immediate report from Balochistan's chief secretary and IG.

It has also taken notice of the presence of guns and incidents of aerial firing during the election campaign of a political party in Sindh's Kashmore and Sukkur districts and sought an immediate report from Sindh's chief secretary and IG and directed them to take immediate legal action against all those involved in it.

Courtesy: Dawn

Torkham trade halted as visa curbs placed on truckers



Bilateral trade between Pakistan and Afghanistan temporarily came to a halt as trucks loaded with import and export items became stranded on both sides of the border due to the imposition of visa restrictions on truck drivers by the Pakistan government.

Officials told transporters from both countries that they could not move to either side of the border without valid visas on their passports.

The sudden imposition of the restrictions caused traffic congestion at the border point on both sides, as the majority of drivers and their assistants could not present valid travel documents.

Ashna Mohammad, a truck driver, told Dawn that he was stuck in traffic despite having a visa stamped on his passport. However, several drivers ahead of his vehicle did not have visas and were thus not allowed to cross the border.

Sabir Khan, a local customs clearing agent, told Dawn that with fruit imports from Afghanistan coming to an end due to winter, the export of Pakistani goods had increased, leading to a traffic rush from the Pakistan side.

He mentioned that Afghan border authorities had also stopped some Pakistani drivers from entering Afghanistan after the sudden implementation of visa restrictions on Afghan drivers by the Pakistan government.

Mr Khan further stated that hundreds of trailers and containers

loaded with Pakistani export goods, including cement, tractors, other agricultural tools, vegetables, oranges, and miscellaneous items, were stranded on the Pakistan side, causing hardships for the transporters.

It was also learnt that customs and security officials were in constant touch with high-ups in Islamabad for the early settlement of the visa issue for Afghan transporters.

Customs officials emphasised that with exports from Pakistan flowing at a high rate, they could not afford any delay in the customs clearance of goods already arrived at the Torkham border.

Representatives of local transporters demanded Pakistani authorities show leniency in the implementation of the visa policy and allow vehicles that have been cleared by customs authorities to proceed to Afghanistan.

They argued that these restrictions would not only result in financial losses but also negatively affect bilateral trade.

Local transporters are already troubled by the prolonged delay in the completion of the much-awaited customs terminal at Torkham by the National Logistics Cell.

Afghan border official Abdul Jabbar Hekmat, in a statement on Friday, said Torkham was closed to commercial truck drivers without visas from Pakistani authorities, AFP adds.

Courtesy: Dawn

Mass Hindu wedding defies poverty and persecution in Pakistan

Pakistani Hindu bride Ashwariya waits to take part in a mass marriage ceremony organised by the Pakistan Hindu Council, a non-profit organisation, in Karachi.

Under a chequered marquee dazzling with chandeliers, 122 Hindu couples unable to afford their own weddings were instead married in a mass ceremony in Muslim-majority Pakistan.

In the southern megacity of Karachi, the joint nuptials on January 7 were a riot of celebration in defiance of poverty and persecution.



“I am getting married here because my parents are poor. They cannot afford the wedding expenses,” said 25-year-old bride Kalpana Devi, swathed in traditional red attire.

Her financial misfortunes – and sharing her big day with dozens of other brides – failed to dampen her spirits.

“I wish that everyone could get married here,” she said.

Weddings are a costly affair in Pakistan, where the bride’s male relatives are also often expected to pay a dowry to the groom’s family, with the expense delaying the marriage of women.

“This is a good opportunity for me as my financial state is very weak. I was not able to raise funds for the wedding,” said 25-year-old Sateesh Parmar, the brother of bride Neha Parmar.

The country is clawing its way out

of a financial crisis, and rights monitors have long warned that marginalised Hindus suffer some of the worst socioeconomic discrimination in Pakistan.

The Pakistan Hindu Council, which hosted the ceremony, says there are eight million Hindus among the 240 million people living in Pakistan, according to last year’s census.

Rights groups say Hindu women are sometimes subjected to forced conversion to Islam through marriage. Last January, United

Nations experts said there was a reported rise in girls as young as 13 being “kidnapped from their families, trafficked to locations far from their homes, made to marry men sometimes twice their age, and coerced to convert to Islam”.

Shiva Kacchi, a Hindu activist, said he spoke with more than 170 families who said their daughters were forcibly converted in 2022.

Police, however, have said that the girls eloped with affluent Muslim men to evade poverty.

“Young girls have many desires, and our parents cannot afford to fulfil them,” explained Hindu activist Sundarta Rathor, also involved in arranging the mass wedding.

“The combination of economic challenges and limited education makes them susceptible to external pressures.”

Courtesy: Daily Time

In Kabul, Fazl confident of a breakthrough

JUI-F emir Maulana Fazlur Rehman arrived in Kabul to hold talks with senior Afghan Taliban leaders on the regional security situation, a spokesman for his party said.

Upon his arrival, traffic was stopped on the road leading from Kabul's international airport to the venue of his stay, with due security protocol.

The JUI-F leader, who is leading a nine-member delegation comprising party leaders from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan, will be holding a series of meetings in Kabul.

Afghan Taliban chief spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid, in a brief statement on X, confirmed the Maulana's arrival in the Afghan capital.

In an audio WhatsApp message shared with Dawn, Mr Mujahid said the Pakistani politician was due to attend a dinner hosted by Maulvi Abdul Kabir, Third Deputy Prime Minister for Political Affairs.

JUI-F chief to hold key meetings from today; says Senate resolution seeking poll delay 'endorses his stance'

The duration of Maulana Fazl's stay in Kabul is not clear, but the Afghan Taliban say his formal engagements with key Taliban leaders would begin.

Pakistan's Charge d'affaires Obaidur Rehman Nizamani is also expected to attend the meetings.

JUI-F spokesman Aslam Ghouri said the party leader was visiting Kabul at the invitation of the Afghan Taliban leadership to discuss regional and security issues.

Maulana Fazl has said that he would raise Pakistan's security concerns with the Afghan Taliban and listen to their grievances as well.

The JUI-F said he was confident to break the ice between the two sides and resolve issues.

Relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan have soured in recent months due to an uptick in terrorist attacks which Islamabad says are carried out by the outlawed Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) operating from inside the neigh-



bouring country.

Negotiations between Pakistan and the banned TTP collapsed over the latter's refusal to disband, lay down arms and surrender to the state. The militant outfit had also demanded Pakistan rescinded the law that had allowed for the merger of tribal districts into Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

Kabul, which has hosted and facilitated negotiations between Pakistan and the TTP, denies the militant outfit operates from Afghanistan and has urged Pakistan to address its internal security challenges instead of blaming others.

The relationship between the two neighbours took a further hit when Pakistan started deporting illegal Afghans. Nearly half a million undocumented Afghans have so far left Pakistan since November 1, last year.

Interestingly, the JUI chief has also been the vocal critic of the Fata's merger into KP, saying the legislation was made without the will and consent of tribal people.

The party emir and some senior JUI-F figures have survived suicide bombings, apparently by the TTP, which has been accusing the party leadership of betraying Islamic principles by believing in democratic principles. The Maulana has on several occasions made it publicly clear that his party did not believe in enforcement of sharia through armed struggle.

It is not clear how the banned TTP, which has also targeted ANP and PPP, would react to the Afghan Taliban's overtures towards the JUI-F or that the militant outfit would even listen to their Afghan patrons and host.

Senate move backed

Separately, Maulana Fazl threw his weight behind a controversial resolution, passed by the Senate on Friday, seeking a delay in the Feb 8 polls on security and weather concerns. He said the Senate resolution endorsed his party's stance that security situation was not conducive for holding the elections.

He said the atmosphere was not conducive for polls as the JUI-F could not hold rallies after the party leaders received threats. However, he said, "If polls are enforced on us, we will not escape but contest the polls."

The JUI-F chief said that gravity of the situation must be realised and such an atmosphere should be provided in which his party could reach their voters to seek votes. "The atmosphere in Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa is not suitable for elections."

'Bold leadership'
Reacting to the Maulana's remarks, PPP Secretary Information Faisal Karim Kundi said "the country needs bold leaders".

In a statement, he said PPP conducted its campaign bravely during the 2008, 2013 and 2018 elections when the wave of terrorism was worse than today.

Mr Kundi said some people were afraid of the possible decision of the nation through ballot and therefore they wanted escape from the polls. "People should not be deprived of choosing the government they like only on the whims of some individuals," he added.

Courtesy: Dawn

FG/Din Polo clinch 11th Corps Commander Cup Trophy

FG/Din Polo emerged title winners with a slender margin of 8-7½ against DS Polo/Sheikhoo Steel in the thrilling main final of the Maj Gen Saeed-uz-Zaman Janjua Memorial Polo Cup 2023, sponsored by JS Bank, here at the Jinnah Polo Fields on Sunday.

The hard-fought match was witnessed and enjoyed by esteemed guests including former Army Chief General Jahangir Karamat (R) and Mrs. Maj Gen Saeed-uz-Zaman Janjua, son Brig Badr-uz-Zaman (R), other family members, Club Secretary Maj Ali Taimur (R) and a large number of spectators.



Juan Cruz Greguol was the stand-out performer for the winning side, scoring five crucial goals, while Mian Abbas Mukhtar contributed three goals for FG/Din Polo. Nicholas Roberts displayed a notable performance for DS Polo/Sheikhoo Steel, with three goals, while Daniyal Shaikh added two, and Col Omer Minhas (R) and Osman Aziz Anwar scored one each.

Mian Abbas Mukhtar expressed his joy after the title victory, saying, "We are happy to have played the second final of the season, and thanks to Allah Almighty, we have won it. We will play and plan better to win upcoming tournaments as well."

Farhad Sheikh of FG/Din Polo credited their success to a well-executed game plan, saying, "We played with a good game plan, which resulted in the title triumph.

We are keen to continue performing well in the coming tournaments and win more titles for our team." In the subsidiary final, Master Paints outpaced Master Paints/Newage Cables by 9-5½, adding to the day's exhilarating polo action.

Courtesy: Pakistan Today

Ready to upgrade CPEC, says Beijing

China has said it is ready to work with Pakistan to upgrade the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and accelerate the building of an even closer China-Pakistan community with a shared future in the new era.

Separately, caretaker Prime Minister Anwaarul Haq Kakar said after having achieved the first phase of CPEC, Pakistan is benefiting from its early harvest projects while remaining engaged with China to execute the next phase.

Chinese foreign ministry's spokesperson Wang Wenbin while answering a question during a briefing on Wednesday said, "China stands ready to work with Pakistan to deliver on the important common understandings between the leaders of the two countries, deepen political mutual trust, and expand practical cooperation."

About the recent visit of Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Sun Weidong to Pakistan, he said the minister during his Jan 20-22 trip called on President Arif Alvi, Prime Minister Kakar, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Committee General Sahir Shamshad Mirza, Chief of the Army Staff General Syed Asim Munir and Foreign Minister Jalil Abbas Jilani to have in-depth exchange of views on bilateral relations and issues of mutual interest.

The spokesperson added that the Chinese minister also co-chaired the fourth meeting of the CPEC Joint Working Group on International Cooperation and Coordination with Foreign Secretary Syrus Saj-



jad Qazi. "China and Pakistan are all-weather strategic cooperative partners," he said.

China appreciates Pakistan's firm commitment to the One-China principle and supports Pakistan in defending its sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity, stability, development and prosperity.

In Islamabad, PM Kakar said that after having achieved the first phase of CPEC, Pakistan is benefiting from its early harvest projects while remaining engaged with China to execute the next phase.

"We have already achieved the CPEC's first phase and we are benefiting from its early harvest projects. We are entering the second phase. We do need more deliberations when it comes to the second phase," he said in an interview recorded by CGTN during his recent visit to Davos to attend the World Economic Forum. The Chinese news

outlet ran the interview.

PM Kakar said the CPEC's second phase required road and air connectivity around industrialisation projects.

"Both sides are engaged and we have developed a lot of connectivity road, air and the rest of connectivity corridor. We are benefiting from the ecosystem of doing trade with one another," he remarked.

Asked how he saw the Chinese economy, the prime minister said: "I am always sanguine about it. There are 1.5 billion consumers and 1.5bn producers. How can you divorce 1.5bn people from 8bn people? It has to remain connected."

Less than two weeks away from the end of its term, the caretaker government on Wednesday vowed to devise a plan to overcome the mammoth circular debt in the power and gas sector.

The circular debt reportedly swelled to over Rs5.73 trillion Rs2.5tr power and Rs3tr gas.

Presiding over a meeting, PM Kakar directed the authorities concerned to devise an effective, durable and doable plan to overcome circular debt.

The PM had already expressed dissatisfaction over the poor performance of Discos and directed the power division to submit a comprehensive plan with clear targets, responsibilities and timelines, said an official.

Courtesy: Dawn

Iranian FM in Pakistan to mend ties following mutual air strikes

Iran's foreign minister arrived in Pakistan as the two countries seek to calm tensions, which have risen amid the conflict in Gaza.

Hossein Amirabdollahian landed in Islamabad before dawn on Monday for "in-depth talks" with Pakistani counterpart, Jalil Abbas Jilani, Pakistan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs said. Tehran and Islamabad are seeking to calm relations after carrying out tit-for-tat air strikes on each other's territories earlier this month.

The attacks, which each country claimed targeted terrorists in border regions and killed at least 11 people, came as Israel's bombardment of Gaza escalated tension across the region. However, the elevated threat of a full-blown conflict appeared to send Islamabad and Tehran scrambling to pull back and rebuild diplomatic relations.

The two ministers insisted following their meeting that close relations between Pakistan and Iran are an important source of stability for the region, and resolved to expand political and security cooperation. Both spoke of respect for one another's sovereignty and territorial integrity.

The pair agreed to confront the "menace of terror-

ism" together, especially in the mountainous region on their shared border, which was the location of both air strikes. They also pledged to lift the regions economically.

Iran's Amirabdollahian added that "terrorists" in the border areas are supported by third countries. He did not offer any details on the claim. Western countries accuse Tehran of supporting several groups that they designate as terrorist.

Iran's foreign minister is also set to meet Pakistan's caretaker Prime Minister Anwaar-ul-Haq Kakar during his visit. Amirabdollahian said that Iran's President Ebrahim Raisi will visit Pakistan soon, adding that a date was yet to be determined.

Iran and Pakistan have long been wary of armed groups in their borderlands, and it is thought that internal political pressures, as well as the spillover of Israel's war with Hamas in Gaza, helped push them over the edge.

Tension reached a nadir on January 17, when Iran struck a target in Pakistan's southwestern Balochistan province. Tehran said it was a hideout for anti-Iran armed group Jaish al-Adl (the Army of Justice).

Islamabad, in retaliation, recalled its ambassador



from Tehran. Two days later it launched an air strike against what it alleges were hideouts of armed groups in Iran's Sistan-Baluchestan province.

Pakistan said it targeted Baloch groups with separatist aims, in an attack that killed at least nine people.

The attacks sent concern spiking regarding a regional escalation of the Gaza war. Iran and Pakistan, however, quickly made a joint decision to de-escalate tensions and resume diplomatic links, with their respective ambassadors returning to their posts and Amirabdollahian's visit arranged.

Courtesy: www.aljazeera.com

National Economic Council set to assess cuts to uplift funding

With the IMF estimating a Rs175 billion cut in the consolidated development programme of the federal government and provinces, the caretakers in the Centre are seeking over Rs201bn reduction in the federal development budget alone for the current fiscal year, including Rs121bn allocated for the federal-funded provincial projects.

On Monday (today), the National Economic Council (NEC), chaired by Prime Minister Anwaarul Haq Kakar, is set to take up a six-point agenda, including a cap on federal financing to provincial projects and proposing priorities and guidelines for the Public Sector Development Programme (PSDP) for the next fiscal year.

The discussion takes place even as an elected government is expected to be well in place within the first half of February, almost three months ahead of the next year's budget.

This also comes amid strong opposition from caretaker governments of the three smaller provinces Sindh, Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa that want such matters to be better left to the soon-coming elected governments and because of their own financial constraints.

Punjab, while highlighting the challenges of legal, contractual, and financial liabilities, has not openly opposed the Centre's move to scale down funding to provincial projects.

Strangely, though, the planning and finance ministries at the Centre have proposed approval for at least a Rs201bn cut in the current year's budgetary allocations of Rs940bn for PSDP. They want about Rs121bn worth of 76 provincial projects off-the-book of the federal government and transferred to the provinces to finance and complete if they so desire.

Another Rs30bn saving is proposed by freezing the parliamentarians' scheme under the so-called SDGs Achievement Plan (SAP) at Rs61bn, already authorised by the previous PDM government for disbursement and Rs53bn under the prime minister's initiatives already taken out of the PSDP.

Interestingly, the IMF had estimated a few days ago the overall development programme, comprising both the centre and four provinces, to be slashed by Rs175bn to Rs2.108 trillion to contain develop-

ment spending at 2pc of GDP instead of 2.1pc.

According to the IMF, the federal PSDP should have been down Rs61bn to Rs782bn instead of Rs843bn in the budget. The Fund did not consider the government's Rs950bn budgeted PSDP due to about Rs100bn block allocations for unspecified projects. On the other hand, the Fund had projected the provincial development plans to be lowered by Rs115bn to Rs1.325tr instead of the budgeted Rs1.44tr.

NEC meeting

Under the proposal to be considered today by the NEC, the country's highest economic development forum, all provincial projects with zero financial progress would not be implemented and ministries and divisions would be ordered not to make or initiate any expenditure on such projects.

These included 68 projects involving about Rs32.55bn allocations. These funds could be diverted to other important projects, especially where additional foreign components are required within the overall PSDP for the ongoing fiscal year.

Also, according to a summary, there would be no further authorisation for the SDGs programme. Instead, the cabinet division would prioritise the completion of ongoing schemes within the already authorised amount.

The savings of Rs28.74bn may be diverted to other important projects within the PSDP, especially where additional foreign components are required.

Moreover, projects under the prime minister's initiatives that have not been given any funding so far would be capped at the current expenditure level. Provincial governments would be free to take these up as per their priority.

"All ongoing projects may be completed to avoid waste of investment already made and due to possible legal/contractual issues," the planning division said.

The authorisation of allocated funds for such projects should be made to ensure their timely implementation. These cuts would not apply to projects in KP's newly merged districts (formerly Fata).

As part of the IMF's structural benchmarks, the



NEC will also review the Public Investment Management Assessment (PIMA), Climate-Public Investment Management Assessment (C-PIMA), and their action plans, besides discussions on socioeconomic objectives of the 13th five-year plan currently under preparation.

Additionally, the meeting will include a mid-year review of the 2023-24 annual plan and a progress report on the SDGs subcommittee.

In its recent report, the IMF found federal spending aligned closely with the initial Standby Arrangement projections, with some under-spending on power subsidies and PSDP attributed to technical delays.

The government had reported to the Fund that the federal government had contained spending, but provincial current spending increased 57 per cent year on year, partly explained by the Punjab provincial government payment of Rs115bn related to commodity transactions, while development spending increased 61pc year on year.

"To ensure that provincial governments remain within their initial budget plans, the provinces have amended their memorandums of understanding signed with the federal government to include the estimated federal revenue, annual provincial revenue, and total expenditure plans, in line with the agreed surplus.

Moreover, the Punjab provincial government has committed through a supplemental MoU to restrict its spending in the remainder of fiscal 2024 by Rs115bn to achieve a surplus of Rs336bn as committed in the memorandum associated with this fiscal year's budget.

Additionally, the provinces committed to refraining from increasing their commodity debt and adopting a definition of provincial surpluses, the caretaker finance minister, Dr Shamshad Akhtar, reported to the IMF.

Courtesy: Dawn

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