

# Independent

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## PM orders inquiry, crackdown on human traffickers

Announces day of mourning over death of Pakistanis in Greece shipwreck incident

ISLAMABAD (APP): Prime Minister Muhammad Shehbaz Sharif on Sunday announced the observance of a day of mourning on June 19 over the death of Pakistani nationals who lost their lives after a ship carrying migrants sank off the coast of Greece on June 14. "Tomorrow, the national flag will fly on half-mast and special prayers will be offered for the deceased," PM Office Media Wing said in a press statement issued in the Urdu language.

Moreover, according to another notification of the PM Office, the prime minister has constituted a high-level four-member committee to conduct an

inquiry into the tragic incident.

"In an unfortunate incident on 14th June, 2023, a boat carrying migrants capsized off the coast of Greece resulting in the deaths of Pakistani/AJK nationals along with other nationals. The number of casualties are being still ascertained. The prime minister, while expressing his grief over the incident and also taking a serious note of it, has been pleased to constitute an inquiry committee," the notification said.

The committee will be headed by its chairman Director National Police Bureau Ehsan Sadiq and Additional Secretary Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Africa) Javed Ahmad

Umrani, DIG Azad Jammu and Kashmir Police Region Poonch Sardar Zaheer Ahmad and Joint Secretary Interior Division, FIA Faisal Nisar Ch. as its members.

The inquiry committee would submit its report within one week.

According to the notification, the inquiry committee would ascertain facts of the Greece boat tragedy, identify loopholes and lapses in the legal/enforcement mechanism in Pakistan that exposed precious human lives to the vagaries of human trafficking in this particular case and similar incidents in the past.

The committee is tasked to analyze similar past incidents and action

taken so far and to take stock of the existing legal framework, enforcement measures (in the country) and international coordination to prevent, control and punish human smuggling and to prepare short- and long-term recommendations (including legislation, enforcement measures, awareness campaigns and improvement of national and international coordination) to apprehend agents, facilitators, masterminds, rackets and for the eradication of the menace of human trafficking.

Online adds: Chief secretary Azad Jammu and Kashmir had also tasked a focal person to contact Pakistan embassy and Greek authorities in Greece regarding the latest information on the casualties and injuries.

According to the latest media reports, at least 78 people died after an overcrowded vessel went down on Wednesday.

A total of 104 passengers were rescued and sent to Kalamata, Greece.

The people rescued so far included 43 Egyptian nationals, 47 Syrian nationals, 12 Pakistani nationals, and two Palestinians, the Hellenic Coast Guard were quoted by international media outlets. Eight of those rescued were minors.



ISLAMABAD: Ms. Marriyum Aurangzeb, Federal Minister for Information and Broadcasting addressing the NASFF's high achievers who are leaving for Australia to participate in the National Amateur Film Festival Award.

## Info Minister terms screen tourism as best way to propagate Pak narrative

ISLAMABAD (APP): Minister for Information and Broadcasting Marriyum Aurangzeb on Sunday said that the revival and expansion of Pakistan's film industry were vital to project the national narrative through screen tourism.

"Screen tourism presents an opportunity to spread the narrative of Pakistan, as seen in the successful examples of Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Iran, where budding film industries have thrived", she said while addressing 25 high achievers of the National Amateur Film Festival Award bound to leave for Australia on Monday.

The minister recalled that Pakistan's film industry faced a significant setback between 1970 and

2000, causing its growth to stagnate. However, since 2000, the industry has experienced a boost, although its progress has been hindered by the absence of cinemas and affordability issues, which limited access for the general public, she maintained. The minister said the government introduced a film policy in 2017 to address these challenges.

She said that extensive research and consultations with relevant stakeholders and experts were conducted to develop this comprehensive policy. Lessons, she added, were learned from countries with flourishing film industries or successful revivals, providing valuable insights.

Marriyum Aurangzeb said that incentives for the film industry were included in the 2018 budget, and after coming into power again last year, the coalition government established a dedicated film division in the ministry.

The film sector currently enjoyed zero taxation, with income tax exemptions for individuals and production houses. Import of equipment for film and drama production had also been tax exempted, she said.

The minister disclosed that the corporate entities providing funds for film production can claim CSR tax credits from the Federal Board of Revenue (FBR), making it a significant incentive.



LAHORE: Special Assistant to the Prime Minister on Religious Harmony Maulana Tahir Ashrafi addressing a press conference at Begumpura.

## Ashrafi urges political dialogue for stability in country

LAHORE (APP): Special Representative on Interfaith Harmony and Middle East and Central Chairman of Pakistan Ulema Council Hafiz Tahir Mahmood Ashrafi called upon political parties on Sunday to hold dialogue for restoring stability and peace in the country.

Addressing a press conference at Baitul Aman here, he said investors were ready to come to Pakistan, but they wanted peace in the country. He said it was good that Pakistan's relations with Russia and other countries were improving. He said the supremacy of the law required everyone to avoid playing with the Constitution. The ulema of the country did not approve of political fights, he added.

Expressing his grief over the loss of human lives

in a boat, which capsized near Greece, he said peace would have to be restored in Pakistan if the youth were to be stopped from leaving the country for such job opportunities in other countries. He demanded the prime minister and the interior minister should take action against those involved in sending Pakistani citizens abroad illegally. He also appealed the chief justice of Pakistan to take suo moto notice of such events. He also expressed condolences to those who lost their lives in a bus accident near Kallar Kahar.

He said protests continued in the country throughout the year, but what happened on May 9 was first incident of its kind. "Does anyone in anger ever insult their martyrs," he questioned.

## Elections should be held as per constitution: Kaira

ISLAMABAD (APP): Special Assistant to Prime Minister (SAPM) Qamar Zaman Kaira Sunday said that the general elections in the country should be held according to the Constitution and not on the will and whims of a single party as PPP believes in democratic norms. "Any political party achieved people's mandate in free and transparent election would have all the right to form government and address the country's problems", he said while talking to a Private news channel.

PPP has strong roots in masses that would win the general elections and complete the mission of former prime ministers Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and Benazir Bhutto Shaheed, he added.

He said the PPP believes in services to people, not abusive politics, adding, PPP is not fighting against any political party but against poverty and inflation. PPP government had always worked for poor people and downtrodden segments of the society, he added.

## PM orders action against unfit vehicles

ISLAMABAD (INP): Expressing condolences to the bereaved families of passengers who lost their lives in the ill-fated Kallar Kahar bus accident, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif has expressed his deep anguish over the occurrence of repeated traffic accidents near the Salt Range on motorway. "My sympathies and prayers are for those families who have lost their dear ones in this painful accident," he said in a tweet.

Motorway authorities should ensure that vehicles plying on Motorways have the required fitness and compatibility, besides, the drivers meet all the driving requirements, he stressed.

The prime minister observed that with strict implementation of rules and regulations, traveling could be made safer.

## BLF Commander Nawaz Rind killed outside Pakistan

RAWALPINDI (Online): Nawaz Ali Rind, the commander of the banned militant outfit Baloch Liberation Front (BLF), was killed in an internal fight outside Pakistan.

Rind, who belonged to Awaran district of Balochistan and a leading BLF member since 2014, was involved in several attacks on security forces. He was killed mysteriously at a neighbouring country.

After Gulzar Imam alias Shambe's arrest, there has been a split in the militant groups operating in Balochistan.

## Budget approved with allies consensus: Ahsan Iqbal

PML-N decides to address PPP concerns on budget

ISLAMABAD (INP): Planning Minister Ahsan Iqbal shooting down the concerns of ally party PPP about federal budget for fiscal year 2023-24, clarified that the budget was approved by the consensus of the allies.

Ahsan Iqbal said that Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif always included allies in his decisions.

Ahsan said when the PMLN government came into power along with it sallies, there were two ways in front of the PMLN leadership, saving politics or the state, and the PMLN choose the latter

option.

He alleged that 'change' of 2018 has become a nightmare for Pakistan. "Terrorism was eradicated from Pakistan under the leadership of Nawaz Sharif but the journey of progress from Pakistan was ended under conspiracy. PML-N gave CPEC as a gift to the country but a clumsy, inexperienced worker was given a certificate of trustworthiness," he said.

Planning minister said "inexperienced worker" was made the country's prime minister and that person had not planned a single project in four years stint in power.

## Rana Tanveer says: Imran played with country's interests

SHEIKHUPURA (APP): Federal Minister for Education and Professional Training Rana Tanveer Hussain has said that Pakistan did not need any enemy in the presence of Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) Chairman Imran Khan, as he had been playing with the country's interests continuously.

He was talking to the media after inaugurating Sui gas supply to Manjhr Road Noorpur here on Sunday. He said Pakistan was on the verge of bankruptcy when the Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM)

coalition government took over the country through a no-confidence move against Imran Khan.

The minister claimed that Imran Khan looted the national kitty ruthlessly and caused irreparable damage to the country, adding that the PTI chief broke all records of obtaining the foreign loans.

Rana Tanveer said as 'dacoits and thieves', but his cronies Farah Gogi looted the national wealth with great impunity and shifted it abroad.

## Pakistan activating 'Plan-B' as stalemate with IMF talks persists

ISLAMABAD (Online): The Shehbaz government is reportedly moving ahead with the 'Plan B' (The arrangement referred to by both Finance Minister Ishaq Dar and his deputy dr Aysha Gahus pasha on several occasions) under which it is requesting the friendly nations to plug the up to \$4 billion financial gap as the negotiations with the IMF (International Monetary Fund) aren't going nowhere.

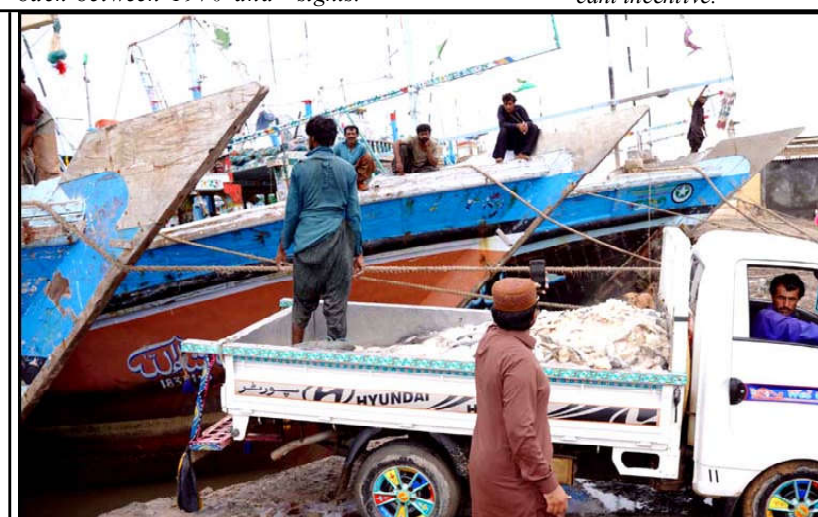
With the IMF programme set to expire on June 30, the government believes it can meet all the financial needs, sources say, if the countries like China, the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia agree for addi-

tional deposits.

Earlier, Dar had said after presenting the 2023-24 budget that the government was working on a Plan B if the IMF did not release the pending loan.

He had, however, avoided explaining or sharing any details, saying, "Plan-B is always there". He stated that the features of the plan could not be talked about in public and again reiterated that Pakistan would not default.

Separately, the finance minister had also said that those behind the running the "Reimagining Pakistan" movement should stop frightening the people with the notion that the country would soon default, just hours after Miftah Ismail



THATTA: Fishermen are anchoring on shore as they are returning to their homes after fishing at Keti Bandar Beach after removed ban on fishing on subsided of Cyclone Biporjoy, in Thatta.

## CTD arrests 'terrorist' in DG Khan

LAHORE (APP): The Counter-Terrorism Department (CTD) Punjab, during an operation in Dera Ghazi Khan, arrested an alleged terrorist, who's a member of a banned outfit.

According to the spokesman, the CTD DG Khan received information from a reliable source that an active member of proscribed organisation, Baboch Liberation Army, Muhammad Rashid Bashmani, was present in the area and was sharing controversial content against the government and the law-enforcement agencies through the social media. A team of CTD police station Sadar reached the spot and arrested the terrorist, the spokesman said and added that police also registered a case against the terrorist and started investigation.

## Terrorist commander among three killed in Dara Adam Khel IBO

ISLAMABAD (APP): The security forces in a successful intelligence based operation on Sunday killed the most wanted terrorist commander Zafar alias Zafari and two of his group members in Dara Adam Khel.

According to the security sources, on the night of June 16th and 17th, security forces in a highly planned intelligence-based operation killed a most wanted Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) terrorist commander Zafar Khan alias Zafari son of Ghulam Siddique in Dara Adam Khel whereas two of his members identified as Hasan Khan son of Mohammad Imran (Resi-

dent of Bazi Khel, Dara Adam Khel) and Anas alias Ali (Resident of Nangarhar Afghanistan) were sent to hell.

The intelligence agencies and security forces hunt down terrorists by adopting unconventional operational procedures based on corroborated intelligence.

The slain terrorist Zafri was a resident of village Malan in Dara Adam Khel and reached Peshawar from Nangarhar province of Afghanistan on 22nd May 2023.

Terrorist Zafri was also a former member of Tehreek-e-Taliban Afghanistan (TTA) and was involved in 26 grenade attacks in Pakistan.



ISLAMABAD: A large numbers of vehicles stuck in traffic jam during arrival at Shahdara picnic point during hot weather, in the Federal Capital.



## Measures taking to develop underprivileged, neglected districts in KP: Governor

PESHAWAR (APP): Governor Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Haji Ghulam Ali, on Sunday said that steps are being taken to bring underprivileged and neglected districts on par with developed areas of the province.

The Malakand Division, particularly the district Dir, is blessed with natural beauty, and promoting tourism in the region will create employment opportunities for the local population.

In this regard, it is crucial for local officials and youth to play their role in promoting tourist activities.

Governor Haji

Ghulam Ali expressed these views during a meeting here at Governor House with a 28-member delegation, consisting of elected chairpersons, councilors, and representatives from political parties, including the Peoples Party of Pakistan, Jamaat-e-Islami, and Awami National Party.

The delegation, led by Chairman Maulana Ashfaq Hanafi, apprised the Governor of various issues related to the Dir district and highlighted the challenges faced by local municipalities. Governor Haji Ghulam Ali assured the delegation of his full cooperation in finding solutions to their problems.

He said that the provincial government is committed to ensure equal development in all urban and rural areas of the province.

Furthermore, the federal government is also providing assistance to expedite the development process.

The Governor said that local representatives are closest to the people and, therefore, funds have been allocated in the budget for elected municipal representatives to initiate developmental projects at the grassroots level.

Governor Haji Ghulam Ali urged the elected representatives from all districts.



PESHAWAR: Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Governor Haji Ghulam Ali talking to 28-member delegation, consisting of elected chairpersons, councilors, and representatives from political parties.

## Baligh permits recruitment of homeopathic doctor for hospitals

**Independent Report**

LAHORE: Governor Punjab Baligh Ur Rehman has allowed the recruitment of 'homeopathic' doctors in government hospital to treat patients.

According to private TV channel a group of national council of homeopathy met governor Punjab Baligh Ur Rehman and brought his attention towards empty seat of homeopathic doctors in government hospitals.

Group said seat of Homeopathic doctors are empty in district headquarter hospitals

## Electoral rolls to be frozen after July 13: DEC

MIRPURKHAS (APP): District Election Commissioner (DEC) Mirpurkhas Khalid Hussain has urged the people to get their votes registered before July 13 as the electoral rolls will be frozen after the date.

In a statement on Sunday, DEC asked the people of Mirpurkhas to register, transfer and validate their votes before July 13 and can contact the district Election Commission office Mirpurkhas. In this regard, especially women, transgender and persons with disability are requested to check their votes through SMS by sending their National Identity Card number to 8300, if any kind of correction is required.

## KP CM finalizes proposals of expenditures for development

PESHAWAR (APP): Caretaker Chief Minister Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Muhammad Azam Khan on Sunday chaired a high-level meeting in which he finalised proposals regarding the proposed expenditures both of current and development sides during the first four months of the upcoming financial year.

The proposed expenditures would be presented to the caretaker provincial cabinet for authorisation. Besides caretaker cabinet members Hamid Shah and Himayatullah Khan, the meeting was also attended by Chief Secretary Nadeem Aslam Chaudhry, Additional Chief Secretary Planning and Development, Zubair Ashgar Qureshi, Secretary Finance, Muhammad Ayaz and other relevant high ups.

The meeting was given detailed briefing about various aspects of the current and development expenditures to be incurred during the first four months of the fiscal year 2023-24.

The meeting also finalised various proposals regarding austerity measures with the aim to create maximum fiscal space for development.



LAHORE: Chairperson Almarah Foundation Mrs. Sofia Warriach, Pakistani Singer Abrar ul Haq and Dy. Inspector General of police Mehboob Lilla cutting ribbon during the completion of 100 kids and inauguration the 5th house of Almarah Foundation.

## Youngster shot dead by unknown outlaws

KHANEWAL (APP): A youngster was shot dead by unknown outlaws at Village 42/10-R on Sunday.

According to police sources, Imran Khan s/o Musa Khan resident of Village 42/10-R in premises of Sadar police station was standing outside his house when unknown armed outlaws shot him dead.

The criminals also managed to escape from the scene.

Taking notice of the incident, the District Police Officer (DPO) Rana Omer Farooq directed officers concerned to arrest the criminals as early as possible.

The forensic team have collected the evidences from the crime scene and started search operation in the area after registration of the case, police sources added.

## Forests preservation, growth mandatory to mitigate climate change impacts

PESHAWAR (APP): Where climate change issue is affecting the whole world, its impacts in Pakistan are also increasing by each passing year as according to a study Pakistan is among the list of countries vulnerable to climate change if timely measures are not taken.

As many other measures are necessary to mitigate the effects of climate change, the most important one is to grow more trees besides controlling deforestation.

No doubt, there are many other challenges being faced by the country but this issue requires special attention of the current governments, both central and provincial.

Keeping in view the gravity of the issue, the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa government has taken numerous measures for sustainable growth and preservation of forest resources of the province by ensuring careful utilization and protection of forest lands.

"Considering forests a rich potential of the province, the government is giving due consideration to its protection and sustainable growth through different measures including setting up of enclosures, protection from fire, prohibition in cutting of trees and safety from livestock grazing," informed Ibrahim Khan, Senior Officer of the KP Forest Department.

Taking to APP, Ibrahim Khan said all the departments concerned had been taken on board for preempting fire incidents in forests due to heatwave during summer season.

The department had constituted teams in all the forest areas for round the clock monitoring, while a new system of fire line technology had been introduced for developing distance among trees by removal of weeds and bushes which usually catch fire and spread the blaze instantly, he mentioned.

Ibrahim said awareness material in shape of printed pamphlets was also distributed among people living in forests and in its vicinity to educate them about response in case of fire. The same material was also shared with tourists visiting scenic sites with a request to avoid fire lit in forests.

The provincial government, he added, also enacted Forest Amendment Bill 2022 for protection of forests, in which, penalties in shape of imprisonment and fines had been enhanced for those found involved in destruction of government controlled forests.

In the law, rules were introduced to increase sentence of two years imprisonment to three years and fine from Rs. 50,000 to Rs. 500,000 for the violators. The law also enabled Divisional Forest Officers serving in newly merged districts to punish those found involved in degradation of forest.

According to the law, the government would also take necessary measures for protection of forest carbon rights, besides having the right to declare any forest or nearby area as national park.

The ongoing Ten Billion Tree Tsunami Project was initiated in 2019 with a total cost of Rs.125.184bn for four years to plant and regenerate 3.296bn trees in the country, Ibrahim said, adding under the project, 650.14 million trees were planted in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa while 146.2 million trees in merged districts.

During the plantation drive, focus was also given on growing Miyawaki forest by planting 207661 trees on 280 kanals of land.

He said majority of trees planted in Miyawaki forests were Chir, Eucalyptus, Amlook, Phulai, Anar dana, Bottle Brush, Shisham, Wild anar, Kachnar.

## PML-N steers out country of difficulties: Muqam

PESHAWAR (APP): President Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Engineer Amir Muqam on Sunday said that under the leadership of Muhammad Nawaz Sharif and Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif, the country was steered out of difficulties; otherwise, the Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) had plunged the nation into chaos.

Addressing at Shakas district Khyber after Alhaj Shaji Gul joining PML-N,

Amir Muqam said that during Imran Khan's government, the prices of all commodities, including essential items were out of control but when PML-N came into power, the economic situation was stabilized. He said that Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif effectively managed the prices of essential items, resulting in a noticeable decrease, and during Ramadan, free flour was distributed among the poor and needy.

# International News

## Putin warns NATO over being drawn into Ukraine war, says Russia has more nuclear weapons

**Monitoring Desk**

MOSCOW: Russian President Vladimir Putin has warned there is a "serious danger" of NATO being drawn further into the Ukraine war if members of the alliance continue to supply military weaponry to Kyiv. "NATO, of course, is being drawn into the war in Ukraine, what are we talking here," Putin said at the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum on Friday.

"The supplies of heavy military weaponry to Ukraine are ongoing, they are now looking into giving Ukraine the jets."

The comment appeared to be a reference to the F-16 fighter jets some members of the NATO alliance are making plans to supply Ukraine with.

NATO, or the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, was formed in the aftermath of World War II to defend Western nations from the Soviet Union and the alliance contains a mutual defense clause where an attack on any one member is considered an attack on all. While Ukraine is not a member of NATO, some NATO members have been supplying Kyiv with tanks, armored vehicles and other weaponry - prompting threats of retaliation from Russia.

German Leopard 2 tanks, British Challenger 2 tanks and American Bradley and Stryker vehicles are among the Western equipment that has been sent to Ukraine.

In late April, NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg said that NATO allies and partners had delivered more than 1,500 vehicles and 230 tanks to the country.

During his speech in St. Petersburg, Putin said Russia had destroyed tanks "including Leopards" at the front lines.



President Joe Biden speaks at the Philadelphia International Airport in Philadelphia after an aerial tour of the Interstate 95 highway collapse.

## Biden strikes economic populist tone during campaign rally before exuberant union members

**Monitoring Desk**

PHILADELPHIA: President Joe Biden delivered an unapologetically economic populist message Saturday during the first rally of his reelection campaign, telling an exuberant crowd of union members that his policies had created jobs and lifted the middle class.

Now, he said, is the time for the wealthy to "pay their fair share" in taxes.

Biden spotlighted the sweeping climate, tax and health care package signed into law last year that cut the cost of prescription drugs and lowered insurance premiums - pocketbook issues that advisers say will be the centerpiece of his argument for a second term.

"I'm looking forward to this campaign," Biden said to cries of "four more years!" before adding, "We've got a record to run on."

His choice of Philadelphia and Pennsylvania - and a friendly union audience - as his first official campaign stop reflected their crucial role in his reelection effort. The city was the site of his 2020 campaign headquarters and the state was one of a handful that had voted for Republican Donald Trump in 2016 but flipped back to Democrats four years later.

Until the rally, Biden's primary reelection campaign activity had been fundraising as the campaign tries to amass an impressive fundraising haul before the year's second quarter concludes at the end.

## Uganda sends more troops to pursue attackers who killed 37 students

**Monitoring Desk**

KAMPALA: Uganda's President Yoweri Museveni on Sunday ordered more troops to western Uganda where attackers from a group with links to Islamic State killed at least 37 secondary school students. Members of the rebel Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) killed the students late on Friday at Lhubirira Secondary School in Mpondwa, near the border with the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Military and police said the attackers had also abducted six students and fled towards the Virunga National Park across the border. Their fate is unknown. Museveni said more soldiers had joined the pursuit in the area, which includes Rwenzori Mountain, from where the ADF launched their insurgency against Museveni in the 1990s. "We are now sending more troops into the area south of Rwenzori Mountain," he said in a statement.

"Their action, the desperate, cowardly, terrorist action, therefore, will not save them. We are bringing new forces to the Uganda side as we continue the hunting on the Congo side."

On Saturday, privately owned NTV Uganda television said the death toll stood at 41, while the state-run New Vision newspaper said it was 42. New Vision said 39 of the dead were students, and some were killed when the attackers set off a bomb as they fled.

## Evidence suggests Russia blew Kakhovka dam in Ukraine, reports NYT

**Monitoring Desk**

KYIV: Evidence suggests this month's destruction of the huge Kakhovka dam in a Russian-controlled area of Ukraine resulted from an inside explosion set off by Russia, The New York Times said. Citing engineers and explosive experts, the newspaper said on Friday that its investigation found evidence suggesting an explosive charge in a passage-way running through the dam's concrete base detonated, destroying the structure on June 6.

"The evidence clearly suggests the dam was crippled by an explosion set off by the side that controls it: Russia," The Times said.

Separately, a team of international legal experts assisting Ukraine's prosecutors in their investigation said in preliminary findings on Friday it was "highly likely" the collapse in Ukraine's Kherson region was caused by explosives planted by Russians. The Kremlin accuses Kyiv of sabotaging the hydroelectric dam.

## Heavy rains lash east Nepal; one dead, 25 missing

**Monitoring Desk**

KATHMANDU: One person was killed and at least 25 others were missing in flash floods and landslides triggered by heavy rains that battered east Nepal, officials said on Sunday, the first known fatality since the annual rains began last week. Heavy rains washed away a hydroelectric project under construction on the Hewa River in Sankhuwasabha district in eastern Nepal where 16 workers have gone missing, said Bimal Paudel, a government official.

## Blinken starts rare China trip with hopes low for any breakthrough

**Monitoring Desk**

BEIJING: US Secretary of State Antony Blinken began meetings in Beijing on Sunday, the first top American diplomat to visit China in five years, amid frosty bilateral ties and dim prospects for any breakthrough on the long list of disputes between the world's two largest economies.

Having postponed a February trip after a suspected Chinese spy balloon flew over US airspace, Blinken is the highest-ranking US government official to visit China since President Joe Biden took office in January 2021.

Chinese Foreign Minister Qin Gang greeted Blinken and his group at the door to a villa in the grounds of Beijing's Diaoyutai State Guest House, as the two made small talk in English before shaking hands in front a Chinese and an American flag.

After heading into a meeting room, neither Blinken nor Qin made comments in front of reporters who were briefly allowed in.

## Europeans scramble on air defence after decades of complacency

**Monitoring Desk**

PARIS: The intensity of the drone and missile war in Ukraine has laid bare gaps in European states' air defences that experts say will be difficult, time-consuming and costly to plug.

Anti-air systems will likely have a starring role at the Paris Air Show starting on Monday, predicts Richard Aboulafia, managing director of AeroDynamic Advisory.

"You're going to see a lot of talk about production capacity for missiles. The market for missiles is easily the fastest growing segment of the industry and yet the manufacturers simply can't keep up," Aboulafia told AFP.

Western countries had enjoyed total mastery of the skies since the end of the Cold War and largely dropped the powerful defences once designed to protect NATO forces from Soviet aircraft.

France got rid of eight of its nine anti-aircraft artillery regiments, MPs flagged up in a recent report.

But NATO countries have been turning to air defence again in recent years as more states have acquired cruise missiles, short-range ballistic missiles and drones, said Mark Cancian, a retired US marine colonel who is a senior adviser at the US-based Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS).

"They started it, but basically didn't get too far," Cancian told AFP.

"In another five years, I think there'll be a lot more out there, but that doesn't help Ukraine right now," he added.

With anti-air systems and the missiles they fire lacking, the West is struggling to respond to Ukraine's pleas for supply - whether for short- or long-range defences.

Berlin plans to spend five billion euros on anti-air from a 100-billion-euro (\$110 billion) fund for rebuilding its armed forces in the coming years, with the same amount budgeted in Paris for the period to 2030.



Plane leaves Yemen capital for Saudi, first since 2016.

