

Independent

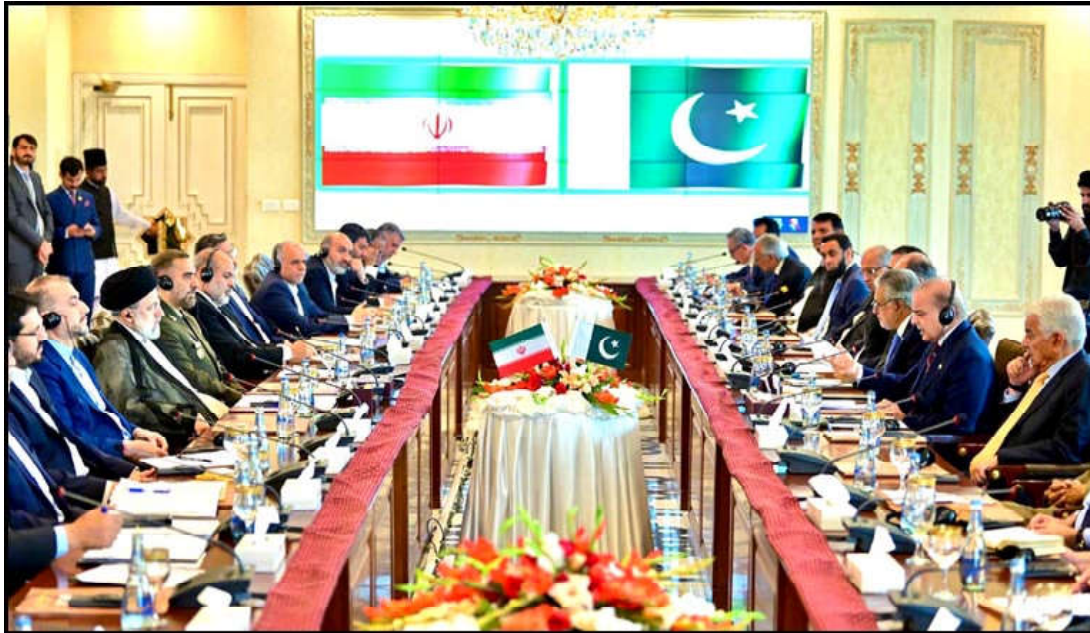
dailyindish@gmail.com

Chief Editor: Syed Farooq Shah

www.dailyindependent.com.pk

Gwadar

Ph: 2841470/2841473 Vol: XIX No. 301, Shawwal 14, 1445 AH Tuesday April 23, 2024, Pages 04, Price Rs.15



ISLAMABAD: Prime Minister Muhammad Shehbaz Sharif and Iranian President H.E. Dr. Seyyed Ebrahim Raisi in a delegation level talks between Iran and Pakistan.

Pak, Iran for promoting bilateral trade ties, business activities at border areas

ISLAMABAD (APP): Pakistan and Iran on Monday agreed to enhance bilateral trade ties and promote business activities at the border areas to ensure development and prosperity of the people of two countries.

Prime Minister Muhammad Shehbaz Sharif, in a press talk along with President of Iran Dr Ebrahim Raisi after witnessing the signing of bilateral agreements and MoUs at the PM House, said under the leadership of the Iranian President, the two countries could bring development and prosperity in their respective sides by turning their borders into hub of business activities.

He said during their meeting, the two sides held detailed discussions on various fields of mutual interests including economy, trade, investment, diplomacy, security and culture.

The Iranian President, who arrived here on Monday on three-day official visit to Pakistan along with a high-powered delegation, said that the trade volume between the two brotherly countries was not below the existing potential and they wanted to increase the volume to US

\$10 billion annually.

He stressed that steps were needed to enhance border markets to give spur to the business and trade activities at the border areas, besides enhancing security.

He said that the two countries shared common affinities and no one could separate them, adding the two sides in their meetings, decided to further promote the bilateral ties between the two countries in trade and economic sectors.

President Dr Raisi said that there were a number of common issues including fight against terrorism, efforts to curb organized crimes and smuggling, in which the two sides could enhance their cooperation.

The president stressed that it was significant to further broaden the bilateral ties for the benefits of the two countries, besides continuity of cooperation at the highest level.

He said that the historic and durable ties between Iran and Pakistan provided them opportunity to fully utilize them for the welfare and prosperity of the two nations.

Zia urges masses to back institutions for restoration of peace in Balochistan

Independent Report
QUETTA: The Provincial Minister for Home, Mir Ziaullah Langove has urged the masses to back their institutions for restoration of peace in the province.

The Minister said that he can't see the people being killed anymore, therefore, we have to strengthen the institutions now.

Mir Ziaullah Langove was chairing the meeting held to review the security measures here on Monday.

The Additional Chief Secretary Home, Zahid Saleem briefed the meeting about security measures.

The meeting focused on how to tackle the security issues besides improving security in the province.

The meeting also re-

viewed the targeted attacks on the security forces.

Besides, the strategy of zero tolerance against terrorism, law and order situation and anti-smuggling activities were also reviewed.

Speaking on the occasion, Minister Home said that no negligence would be tolerated in the mandate given by the masses.

He said that there are clear directives of the Chief Minister that no negligence would be tolerated in maintaining law and order.

He said that law and order is priority of the government.

He stressed the need to maintain better coordination between police and levies forces to maintain peace.

He also stressed to

strengthen local intelligence network for information sharing.

He asserted that the action would be taken against the concerned high ups of area where incidents of terrorism would occur.

He directed to take legal action against the display of arms in Quetta.

He said that terrorism would be uprooted from the province.

He also stressed that it is necessary to eliminate corruption from the security forces.

He said that action would be taken against any personal involved in corruption.

The Minister also directed to ensure enforcement of biometric system in all the institutions.

Reiterate call for immediate ceasefire PM, President Raisi condemn Israel's indiscriminate use of force in Gaza

ISLAMABAD (APP): Prime Minister Muhammad Shehbaz Sharif and Iranian President Dr. Seyyed Ebrahim Raisi on Monday expressed strong and unequivocal condemnation of the indiscriminate use of force by Israeli occupation authorities in Gaza for over seven months.

They reiterated the call for international efforts to an immediate and unconditional ceasefire, lifting the siege and provision of humanitarian relief to the people of Gaza.

The two leaders, in a meeting, discussed the entire range of bilateral relations and exchanged views on important regional and global developments, PM Office Media Wing said in a press release.

Underlining the rich history of relations between Pakistan and Iran, they also reaffirmed commitment to expand wide-ranging bilateral cooperation, particularly in the areas of trade, energy, connectivity, culture and people-to-people contacts.

Ministers and senior officials from both sides were present in the meeting.

Both sides agreed to increase the volume of bilateral trade to US \$10 billions in the next five years.

They also agreed to cooperate in developing joint approaches to confront common challenges including the threat of terrorism.

Pakistan, Iran agree to ban terrorist organizations

ISLAMABAD (APP): Pakistan and Iran on Monday decided in principle to ban terrorist organizations in their respective countries.

The decision to the effect was taken in a meeting between Minister for Interior Mohsin Naqvi, and his Iranian counterpart Dr Ahmad Vahidi and Law Minister Amin Hussain Rahimi.

The two sides agreed on a joint plan of action to deal with the menace of terrorism being a common problem, with further improving mutual support and exchange of intelligence information. It was decided to sign a security agreement in that regard at the earliest.

It was also decided to provide all possible facilities to the Pakistani pilgrims on the occasion of Arba'een. The Iranian Interior Minister extended an invitation to his Pakistani counterpart to visit Iran in that regard where the Iraqi counterpart would also be invited.

The two sides observed that joint initiatives would help ensure the provision of best facilities to the pilgrims.

Interior Minister Naqvi thanked his counterpart for the invitation to visit Iran.



ISLAMABAD: President Asif Ali Zardari and the Iranian President, Dr. Seyyed Ebrahim Raisi, held a meeting, at Aiwan-e-Sadr.

Zardari, Raisi pledge to strengthen bilateral ties

ISLAMABAD (APP): Pakistan and Iran on Monday reiterated the resolve to further broaden mutually beneficial cooperation in various areas of common interest.

Both sides underscored the need for operationalizing bilateral trade mechanisms to boost the volume of trade up to \$10 billion, and also urged the need to work together to overcome the challenges being faced by the region.

This was discussed between President Asif Ali Zardari and visiting Iranian President Dr Seyyed Ebrahim Raisi during a meeting held at the Aiwan-e-Sadr.

The two leaders also discussed key regional and global developments, particularly the situation in the Middle East.

President Zardari expressed deep concern over the worsening humanitarian situation in Gaza and strongly condemned

Israel's military aggression against its people of Gaza that had resulted in the killing of thousands of innocent Palestinians. He said that Pakistan would consistently and unequivocally support the Palestinian cause.

Both the presidents reiterated the need for enhanced international endeavours to bring an end to the Israeli suppression of the Gaza people, and for enhanced humanitarian relief and assistance.

President Zardari said that Pakistan and Iran enjoyed close fraternal ties based on shared religion, culture, and history, which needed to be further strengthened for the mutual benefit of the two brotherly countries.

He thanked Dr Seyyed Ebrahim Raisi for being the first Head of State to visit Pakistan after the general elections, which reflected his deep personal commitment to Pakistan.

Eleven terrorists killed in two separate operations in KP

RAWALPINDI (APP): The security forces have killed some eleven terrorists in two separate operations conducted on April 21-22 in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

According to the Inter Services Public Relations (ISPR) news release issued on Monday, an intelligence-based operation was launched in Dera Ismail Khan (D.I.Khan), district on reported presence of terrorists.

During the operation, and after an intense fire exchange, ten terrorists were killed.

In another encounter that held in North

Waziristan district, the Army troops effectively engaged the terrorists' location as a result of which one more terrorist was sent to hell.

The terrorists were found involved in numerous criminal activities in the area against security forces as well as the innocent civilians. Arms and ammunition were also recovered after the operation.

"Locals of the area appreciated the operations conducted by the Security Forces, who are determined to eliminate the menace of terrorism from this country," the ISPR said.



QUETTA: Provincial Minister Mir Ali Madam Jattak and Advisor Dr. Rubaba Khan Buledi meeting with Chief Minister Balochistan Mir Safaraz Bugti

Rahila Durrani calls on acting Speaker BA

Independent Report
QUETTA: The Provincial Minister for Education, Ms Rahila Hameed Khan Durrani called on the Speaker Balochistan Assembly, Ms Ghazala Gola at her chamber here on Monday.

During the course of meeting, different matters about the functioning of Assembly and others of mutual interests were discussed.

They also discussed the matters about women empowerment in the province.

Government announces to launch air ambulance service in Balochistan

Independent Report
QUETTA: The Government of Balochistan has announced to launch air ambulance in the province.

According to the official handout issued here on Monday, the Chief Minister Mir Sarfraz Ahmed Bugti said that the provincial government has decided to initiate the air ambulance for the first time in history of the province.

The Chief Minister said that the Peoples air ambulance would be available for shifting of the patients on an emergency basis.

He said that the provincial government decided to use the airplane for public instead of selling it.

He said that one of the

PM welcomes Iranian President in Persian language

ISLAMABAD (APP): Prime Minister Muhammad Shehbaz Sharif on Monday welcomed Iranian President Dr Seyyed Ebrahim Raisi in the Persian language.

During their joint press stakeout, the prime minister recited Allama Taqi Bahar's Persian verses about Pakistan, in which the poet had invoked divine blessings for the country, the PM Office Media Wing said in a press release.

The prime minister, on the occasion, read out a Persian couplet for the visiting President which warmly welcomed his arrival in Pakistan.

The prime minister's eloquence in the Persian language brought smiles on the faces of the Iranian President and other participants who were pleased to hear such remarks.

They also applauded the prime minister's gesture.



ISLAMABAD: Federal Minister for Interior Mohsin Naqvi in a meeting with his Iranian counterpart Dr. Ahmad Vahidi and Iran's Justice Minister Amin Hosein Rahimi.

CJP gives indication to change the period of filing appeal in SC

KARACHI (Online): Chief Justice of Pakistan (CJP) Qazi Faez Isa has given indication to change the period of filing appeal in Supreme Court (SC).

The CJP remarked don't make fun of the court. The application for adjournment is given repeatedly.

During the hearing of 15 years old case the CJP got annoyed.

The CJP sought opinion from senior lawyers in the matter of change of period in the case of ownership of plot against the citizen in SC Karachi registry.

The CJP inquired during hearing of plot dispute case what should be time limit for appeals against the decisions of high courts.

The lawyers replied decision of SC is there regarding period of appeal.

Farooq Nasim said decision of 5-member bench is limited. You will have to review it afresh.

During the hearing of the case barrister Salah ud Din Farogh Nasim, Khalid Javed and others said to review the matter administratively.

The CJP remarked ok we see this matter. This will be solved administratively or on judicial side.

Earlier the CJP expressed annoyance over seeking time by counsel for city government during the hearing of case in Karachi registry.

SC has summoned mayor Karachi Murtaza Wahab immediately.

Secretary local government has also been directed to appear forthwith.

The CJP remarked during the hearing of the case that you people have made fun of the court. Run the case if you file it.

The CJP remarked the case has been filed since the last 15 years. Why do you not run it.

PML-N clinches landslide victory in by-election

Monitoring Desk
ISLAMABAD: The ruling PML-N on Monday emerged victorious in by-elections held on 21 national and provincial seats, according to provisional results released by the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP).

On Sunday, by-polls were held across the country amid allegations of "record rigging", temporary suspension of cellular services in specific districts of Punjab and Balochistan and multiple incidents of violence, leading to the death of a PML-N supporter in a clash outside a Narowal polling station.

By-elections were held on five NA seats, including two from Punjab, two from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and one from Sindh. Further, 12 provincial seats were also up for grabs in Punjab as well as two each in KP and Balochistan.

Separately, re-polling in

all constituencies of Balochistan's PB-50 (Qila Abdullah) was also held.

According to the provisional results (Forms-47) issued by the ECP, out of the five NA seats, the PML-N won two from Punjab while the Sunni Ittehad Council (SIC) and an independent candidate won one each from KP. Meanwhile, the PPP clinched the NA-196 seat from Sindh. In Punjab, the PML-N grabbed 10 provincial seats while the PPP and the Istehkam-i-Pakistan Party (IPP) won one each. In KP, one provincial seat each went to the SIC and an independent candidate.

In Balochistan, the PML-N and the Balochistan National Party-Mengal (BNP-M) won one provincial seat each. Separately, the Awami National Party (ANP) also won a provincial seat from PB-50, where re-polling was conducted.

Three killed, one injured as train hits motorcycle in Naseerabad

QUETTA (APP): At least three people, including a girl, were killed when a train hit a motorcycle near Naseerabad in Balochistan on Monday.

The accident occurred when the Quetta-bound Bolan Mail train hit a motorcycle, resulting in the death of three people and leaving one woman injured, private news channels reported.

Upon receiving the information, police and rescue teams rushed to the accident site and launched a rescue operation.

Younas Zehri declared as Leader of Opposition in BA

Independent Report
QUETTA: The Member of Provincial Assembly, Mir Younas Aziz Zehri has been declared as Leader of Opposition in Balochistan Assembly with immediate effect and until further orders.

This was announced in an official notification issued here by the Provincial Assembly's secretariat on Monday.

According to the notification, the acting Speaker of Provincial Assembly, Ms Ghazala Gola declared Mir Younas Aziz Zehri as Leader of Opposition in pursuance of Rule 19-C of the Provincial Assembly of Balochistan, Rules of Procedure and Conduct of Business 1974.

It may be mentioned here that Mir Younas Aziz Zehri belongs to Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam (JUI).



QUETTA: Home Minister Mir Ziaullah Lango presiding over a meeting regarding law and order situation in the province



LAHORE: Provincial Minister for Health and Emergency Services Punjab Khawaja Salman Rafique addressing the participants of 6th VCs, Principals and MSs conference.

CM emphasizes completion of tourism-related projects, activities on emergency basis

PESHAWAR (APP): Advisor to the Chief Minister Khyber Pakhtunkhwa on Tourism Culture, and Archeology, Zahid Chanzeb has stressed on the urgent completion of tourism activities and projects to achieve 100 percent set goals for the development of tourism.

He indicated that the government would evaluate the performance of the departments based on the achievement of the targets and would release funds as per the performance,

adding that the institutions with perform would be strongly encouraged and funded. He expressed these views while presiding over a meeting of Kaghan Development Authority (KDA) at Pakhtunkhwa, said a press release issued here Monday. The Tourism Adviser issued clear instructions to the KDA to take concrete steps to develop tourism in the area and provide more facilities to tourists. He said that the development strategy should include provision of quality services in hotels

and restaurants, washrooms and drinking water to tourists at the spots as well as on the sides of the highways at a suitable distance.

He said that the owners of the local hotels and restaurants should be asked to manage the facilities on road side.

He said the provincial government and the Department of Tourism and Culture were committed to promoting tourism on a solid basis throughout the province and working on a five-year

Punjab govt working to improve people's quality of life: Minister

SIALKOT (APP): Provincial Minister for Local Government Zeeshan Rafique has said that the provincial cabinet under the leadership of Punjab Chief Minister Maryam Nawaz Sharif is working day and night to improve the quality of life of the people of the province and fruitful results have started appearing in the form of reduction in the prices of flour and bread (roti) and the provision of best municipal services in urban and rural areas.

Punjab Governor says: PAS has important role in running the country's admin affairs, development

Independent Report
LAHORE: A delegation comprising participants of 47th Specialized Training Program and the first Specialized Training Course called on Governor Punjab Muhammad Balighur Rehman. The delegation was led by Director Civil Services Academy Dr. Sajid Mahmood Chauhan. Governor Punjab welcomed the delegation to Governor House Lahore and informed them about the history of Governor House.

Speaking on this occasion, Governor Punjab

Muhammad Balighur Rehman said that Pakistan Administrative Service has an important role in running the country's administrative affairs and development. He said that civil servants should serve the people. He said that while performing their professional responsibilities, they should strive for the welfare and betterment of general public. He said that success depends not only on individual abilities and resources, but also on how effectively these resources are used.

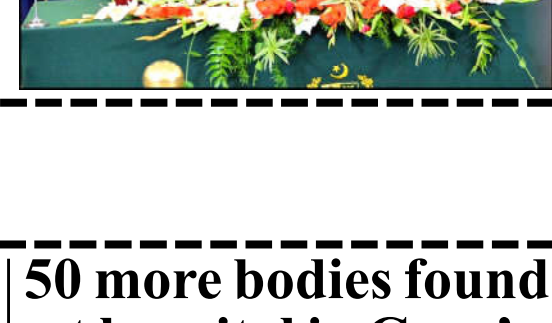
Minister reviews projects of Food Safety and Halal Food Authority

Independent Report
PESHAWAR: Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Minister for Food, Zahir Shah Toru on Monday presided over a comprehensive review meeting regarding the performance and ongoing projects of Food Safety and Halal Food Authority.

The minister emphasized ensuring the supply of quality and adulteration-free food products to citizens in the markets and directed the relevant officials to take necessary steps in this regard. Zahir Shah highlighted that the provincial government was taking priority actions to enhance the capacity of the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Food Safety and Halal Food Authority.

The minister extended that seven mobile food testing laboratories were working in the fields and soon five more mobile food labs along with a state-of-the-art lab soon would be inaugurated.

Glimpses of Iranian President H.E. Dr. Seyyed Ebrahim Raisi's visit to Pakistan



Chaos party coming to an end: Azma

LAHORE (APP): Punjab Information Minister Azma Bukhari said on Monday that yesterday in by-polls the people of Punjab had once again rejected the agenda of unrest.

Talking to media here, she said, "It is a wrong impression that governments win by-elections and the fact is that people only vote to those parties which deliver."

Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf was habitual of making hue and cry whether they win or not, she said and added that chaos party was coming to an end.

She said that soon Punjab CM would give a comprehensive plan for farmers.

Azma said how unfortunate it was that Moonis Elahi could see rigging while sitting in Spain but could not see misery of his father.

International News

Greek and Turkish delegations meet in Athens as part of efforts to improve often strained ties

Monitoring Desk
ATHENS: Delegations from Greece and Turkey were meeting in Athens on Monday as part of long-standing efforts to improve often tense relations between the two neighbors, days after Turkey voiced objections over Greece's plans to create marine nature reserves in the Ionian and Aegean seas.

The two regional rivals are NATO allies but have been at odds for decades over a series of issues, including territorial claims in the Aegean and drilling rights in the Mediterranean, and have come to the brink of war three times in the last 50 years. A dispute over energy exploration rights in 2020 led to the two countries' warships facing off in the Mediterranean.

Monday's meeting in the Defense Ministry in Athens was to discuss confidence-building measures, following a similar meeting in Ankara last November. The two countries have engaged in the confidence-building process on and off for years, trying to seek common ground on a series of lower-key issues as a means of improving ties. The meeting comes ahead of planned talks in Ankara on May 13 between Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis.

Tense ties have improved significantly over the past year, with Erdogan visiting Athens in December and signing a raft of trade, energy and education deals.

But Mitsotakis' announcement last week that

Greece will create two marine parks for the protection of sea mammals and birds — one in the Ionian Sea in western Greece and one in the central Aegean — has angered Turkey.

Omer Celik, spokesman for Erdogan's ruling party, said last week that Ankara considers the creation of the marine parks "a step that sabotages the normalization process" in relations, and said Turkey would "in no way allow actions toward the declaration of marine parks in the Aegean Sea."

Mitsotakis, speaking last week after a meeting of European leaders in Brussels, expressed surprise at what he described as "Turkey's totally unjustified reaction to an initiative which at the end of the day is of an environmental nature."



A grieving woman is consoled by a man after the body of her relative was discovered, buried by Israeli forces in a mass grave in the Nasser hospital compound in Khan Younis.

50 more bodies found at hospital in Gaza's Khan Younis

Monitoring Desk
GAZA: Health workers have uncovered at least 50 bodies of people killed and buried by Israeli forces at a hospital, in the southern city of Khan Younis.

But while Israeli military said it was checking reports about the recovery of 50 bodies, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu appeared far from being willing to respect the United Nations resolution calling for a ceasefire, saying he would fight against sanctions being imposed on any Israeli army units.

Israel's invasion has so far killed 34,097 people in Gaza, mostly women and children, according to the health ministry.

Separately, the Palestinian Red Crescent said on Saturday that at least 14 people were killed

during an Israeli raid on a refugee camp in the occupied West Bank.

The Israeli army said it killed 10 people during the operation at Nur Shams camp. "Inside the Nasser Medical Complex there are mass graves dug by the Israeli occupation... we were shocked by the presence of bodies of 50 martyrs in one of the pits yesterday," said Mahmud Bassal, spokesman for the Gaza civil defence agency.

"We are continuing the search operation today and are waiting for all graves to be exhumed in order to give a final number of martyrs." He said some of those killed had been tortured. "There were no clothes on some bodies, which certainly indicates (the victims) faced torture and abuse," Mr Bassal said.



Officials count votes during the parliamentary elections, at a polling station in Maldives's capital Male.

Landslide win for pro-China leader's party in Maldives vote

Monitoring Desk
MALE: The party of Maldives President Mohamed Muizzu won control of parliament in a Sunday election landslide, results showed, with voters backing his tilt towards China and away from regional powerhouse and traditional benefactor India.

Muizzu's People's National Congress (PNC) won 66 of the first 86 seats declared, according to the Elections Commission of Maldives results, already more than enough for a super-majority in the 93-

member majlis, or parliament. The vote was seen as a crucial test for Muizzu's plan to press ahead with closer economic cooperation with China.

The PNC and its allies had only eight seats in the outgoing parliament, with the lack of a majority stymieing Muizzu after his presidential election victory in September.

The main opposition Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) — which had previously had a super-majority of its own.

First Iran group in nine years heads to Saudi Arabia for Umrah pilgrimage

Monitoring Desk
DUBAI: The first group of Iranian pilgrims in nine years made its way to Saudi Arabia on Monday for the Umrah, or minor pilgrimage, Iran's official news agency reported, as a result of improving ties between the two Middle Eastern powers.

Iranian media had said in December that Saudi Arabia had lifted restrictions on Iranians wanting to perform Umrah but flights were delayed until now due to what Tehran called "technical problems".

In March 2023, China mediated an agreement under which Iran and Saudi Arabia restored full diplomatic relations that were cut since 2016 over Riyadh's execution of a Shi'ite Muslim cleric and the subsequent storming of the Saudi embassy in Tehran.

Iran says nuclear weapons have no place in its nuclear doctrine

Monitoring Desk
DUBAI: Nuclear weapons have no place in Iran's nuclear doctrine, the country's foreign ministry said on Monday, days after a Revolutionary Guards commander warned that Tehran might change its nuclear policy if pressured by Israeli threats.

"Iran has repeatedly said its nuclear programme only serves peaceful purposes. Nuclear weapons have no place in our nuclear doctrine," ministry spokesman Nasser Kanaani said

West Bank camp mourns Palestinians killed in Israeli raid

Monitoring Desk
TULKAREM: Families kissed the faces of the dead and neighbours cried in the streets after one of the worst Israeli raids anyone in the Nur Shams refugee camp can remember. On Sunday a funeral procession for 13 Palestinians killed in the army's West Bank operation passed through roads piled with rubble from Israeli bulldozers and rocket fire. Israeli forces carry out regular raids on towns and cities in the occupied West Bank.

Poland's prime minister celebrates after his party wins a string of cities in mayoral votes

Monitoring Desk
WARSAW: Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk expressed satisfaction on Monday after a series of candidates supported by his party won weekend races for mayor. Candidates from his pro-European Union centrist Civic Coalition, or running with the party's backing, won in a series of cities in the second round of local elections held on Sunday, among them Krakow, Poznan, Wroclaw and Rzeszow.

"It is very difficult to clearly say who won and

Ukraine says it damaged Russian rescue ship in Crimea

Monitoring Desk
KYIV: Ukraine's military said on Sunday it had struck and damaged a long-serving Russian rescue vessel in Sevastopol, the headquarters in occupied Crimea of Moscow's Black Sea Fleet. Navy spokesperson Dmytro Pletenchuk said the vessel, the Kommuna, had been hit in Sevastopol Bay on Sunday morning and it was "clear that the ship is no longer in a state to carry out assignments." A post on the Ukrainian Armed Forces Telegram channel said the ship was one of the oldest operated by the Russian navy.

Philippines, US troops begin annual combat drills

Monitoring Desk
MANILA: Nearly 17,000 Filipino and American troops will begin a three-week joint combat training exercise in the Philippines on Monday involving maritime drills in the South China Sea where Manila and Beijing have sparred over maritime borders. France and Australia, which have ramped up defence ties with Manila in the face of China's aggressive behaviour in the South China Sea, will join the maritime exercises to be conducted for the first time outside Philippine territorial waters.

The annual Balikatan or "shoulder-to-shoulder" drills, which will run from April 22 to May 10, come amid an escalating diplomatic row and maritime encounters between the Philippines and China including the use of water cannon and heated verbal exchanges.

Beijing's increasing

pressure in the South China Sea has alarmed Manila, rival claimants to disputed maritime territory, and other states operating there, including the United States which has reaffirmed its commitment to defend the Philippines against armed aggression in the South China Sea.

China claims most of the South China Sea, which is a conduit for more than \$3 trillion of annual ship-borne commerce. Beijing has criticised the joint drills, saying they aggravate tensions and undermine regional stability.

The Permanent Court of Arbitration in the Hague ruled in 2016 that Beijing's expansive claims to the sea had no basis under international law. China rejects the ruling and has built military facilities on disputed atolls to back up its claims.

