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ISLAMABAD: President Asif Ali Zardari address to the joint session of parliament Speaker of National Assembly Ayaz Sadiq presiding the session in Parliament House

Calls for steering country out of political crisis

President calls for meaningful dialogue, consensus to take Pakistan forward

Says institutional harmony required for development; Calls for turning new page, making a fresh start; We have little time to waste. Country needs us to move on from the polarisation so common now to contemporary politics; House turns into fish market during address of president Asif Ali Zardari

ISLAMABAD (APP): President Asif Ali Zardari on Thursday, stressing for turning a new page and making a fresh start, called for a meaningful dialogue, parliamentary consensus and fostering an atmosphere of mutual respect and political reconciliation to do away with the polarisation and overcome the challenges pervading the country.

"In my considered view, it is time to turn a new page... The challenges we face are not impossible to overcome. They just require the fundamentals of a meaningful dialogue and parliamentary consensus... We can effectively tackle our challenges and foster an atmosphere of mutual respect and political reconciliation," the

president said addressing the Joint Session of the Parliament. Chaired by National Assembly Speaker Sardar Ayaz Sadiq, the joint sitting was attended by members of the National Assembly and Senate, while in the galleries were provincial chief ministers and legislators, diplomats, and representatives from political parties.

The president's address was in pursuance of Article 56 (3) of the Constitution which marked the beginning of the first parliamentary year, following the general elections.

The address encompassed major national and international matters, and challenges from economy, poverty, social welfare, women empowerment and foreign policy to Kashmir

and Palestine as well as climate change.

He said having given away his powers to the Parliament, his role was as a unifying symbol of a joint robust federation, where all people and provinces should be treated as equal before the law. As a new beginning, he said, the country needed to build its strengths by investing in people, focusing on public needs, and harnessing its resources to create pathways to inclusive growth.

"We have little time to waste. The country needs us to move on from the polarisation so common now to contemporary politics," he remarked and sought the role of two Houses of the Parliament in rebuilding public confidence in the parliamentary process. Calling for resetting the

political atmosphere with "more light than heat", he emphasised reforms to promote good governance and turn challenges into opportunities. President Zardari said that by embracing the visions of the great leaders Quaid-e-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah, Shaheed Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, and Shaheed Mohtarma Benazir Bhutto, "we can effectively tackle challenges and foster an atmosphere of mutual respect and political reconciliation".

The president emphasised that in order to align the country with the 21st Century requirements, it was imperative to move forward on reforms with good governance for the provision of optimal social entitlements to the citizens.

He said besides working on economic reforms,

spurring jobs, reducing inflation and expanding the tax net, the Federal Government should also promote positive working relationships and effective coordination, within the constitutional framework, with the provinces.

"This is absolutely essential for promoting an inclusive national development agenda and rolling out policies that execute tangible action on the ground."

President Zardari stressed the government to intensify its efforts for attracting foreign direct investment, implementing comprehensive ease-of-doing-business reforms and simplifying the existing regulations to provide an enabling environment to both foreign and domestic investors.

He said besides working on economic reforms,

Will personally monitor Saudi investment projects; no laxity to be tolerated: PM

ISLAMABAD (APP): Prime Minister Muhammad Shehbaz Sharif on Thursday said that he would personally monitor the Saudi investment projects and warned against any laxity due to red tape or outdated procedures.

The prime minister, chairing a meeting to review the matters related to the recent high-powered Saudi delegation and Saudi investment in different sectors, thanked Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman for sending a high-level Saudi delegation that would usher new era of Saudi investment in Pakistan, trade partnership as well as business ties.

He lauded the relevant federal ministers, Special Investment Facilitation Council and relevant senior officers for their efforts for

converting the Saudi delegation's visit into a mutually beneficial partnership.

The prime minister instructed the authorities concerned to engage world-class experts to execute the foreign investment projects and called for capacity building of the ministries to achieve the desired results.

He asked the Board of Investment, SIFC and relevant ministries to devise a mechanism to ensure execution of the projects agreed with the Saudi delegation.

He told the expected visit of a delegation of prominent Saudi businessmen to Pakistan was welcoming and that further investment opportunities would also be explored during his visit to Saudi Arabia to attend the World Economic Forum to be held in the Kingdom.

Secretary Information said that a third party audit firm is being hired to clear the liabilities of media houses by ascertaining the genuineness and verification of the claim bills accordingly and the payment details will be uploaded on the website. Stressing on early submission of the

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Pakistan, Turkiye vow to expand bilateral defense collaboration

COAS, Turkish general discuss matters of mutual interest; General Gürak lauds Pakistan's efforts in fostering regional peace; Both sides agree on forging deeper strategic ties.

RAWALPINDI (APP): Chief of the Turkish General Staff General Metin Gürak met Army Chief General Syed Asim Munir in Rawalpindi on Thursday.

The discussion encompassed various topics of mutual interest, spanning defence, training, and initiatives aimed at bolstering regional peace and stability.

Both sides acknowledged the robust relationship between their nations and committed to expanding defense collaboration further. The Army Chief underscored the imperative of advancing existing military cooperation between their armed forces.

The visiting dignitary commended Pakistan's efforts in fostering regional

peace and stability, as well as the Pakistan Army's role in combating terrorism.

Earlier, upon arrival at GHQ, the Chief of the General Staff of the Turkish Army paid respects at Yadgar-e-Shuhada by laying a floral wreath. A well-presented contingent of the Pakistan Army rendered a guard of honour to the esteemed visitor.



RAWALPINDI: Chief of the Turkish General Staff General Metin Gürak meeting with Army Chief General Syed Asim Munir

Justice Hashim, Justice Ishtiaq appointed BHC, PHC CJs

ISLAMABAD (APP): The Ministry of Law and Justice on Thursday notified the appointment of Acting Chief Justice of the Peshawar High Court (PHC) Ishtiaq Ibrahim, as PHC Chief Justice and Acting Chief Justice of the Balochistan High Court (BHC) Muhammad Hashim Khan Kakar as BHC Chief Justice.

The ministry, in its notifications, said that the appointments were made by the President of Pakistan in exercise of the powers conferred under clause (1) of Article 193 of the Constitution with effect from the date they would take oath of their offices.

Similarly, the Law Ministry also notified the appointment of three additional judges Justice Fazal Subhan, Justice Shahid Khan and Justice Dr. Khurshid Iqbal as the PHC judges.

Sindh Tourism Minister calls on Governor

KARACHI (APP): Sindh Minister of Tourism, Culture, and Antiquities Syed Zulfikar Ali Shah called on Governor Sindh Kamran Khan Tessori at the Governor's House here on Thursday.

In the meeting, the improvement of tourist places, measures to promote the culture of the province and other issues were discussed.

The governor said that steps should be taken to provide better facilities at the tourist places of the province.

He further said that countless tourists' attractions were available across Sindh.

Kamran Khan Tessori said that integrated measures were also necessary for promoting culture of the province.

Earlier, Provincial Minister Syed Zulfikar Ali Shah gave a detailed briefing to the Sindh Governor about his departments.

Badar Shahbaz appointed PM's media coordinator

ISLAMABAD (APP): Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif on Thursday appointed Badar Shahbaz, a member of the Pakistan Muslim League-N's media team, as his Media Coordinator.

"The Prime Minister has been pleased to appoint Mr. Badar Shahbaz as Media Coordinator to Prime Minister with immediate effect. The Prime Minister has further been pleased to desire that all relevant stakeholders shall extend full cooperation to the Coordinator in discharging the official business," according to a notification issued by the Cabinet Division on Thursday.

Interior Minister orders blocking SIMs issued on invalid, expired ID cards

ISLAMABAD (INP): Interior Minister Mohsin Naqvi has ordered National Database Registration Authority (NADRA) to block all mobile phone SIMs issued on invalid and expired identity cards.

Mohsin Naqvi on Thursday visited the entire building of NADRA headquarters in Islamabad and inspected all sections including printing. Mohsin Naqvi instructed for setting up model NADRA offices across the country on the pattern of model police stations established in Punjab.

He said establishing model NADRA offices will improve service delivery and provide convenience to the public.

NADRA Chairman Lieutenant General

Muhammad Munir Afzar welcomed Federal Interior Minister Mohsin Naqvi on his arrival at the National Database and Registration Authority Headquarters.

Federal Interior Minister Mohsin Naqvi also presided over an important meeting at NADRA headquarters. During meeting Mohsin Naqvi directed that SIM cards issued on ineffective and expired identity cards should be closed as soon as possible.

The death certificate fee is being abolished for the convenience of the people, Mohsin Naqvi said.

He said that the establishment of model police stations in Punjab improved the image of the public along with convenience.

ISLAMABAD: President Asif Ali Zardari being received by the Prime Minister of Pakistan Muhammad Shehbaz Sharif upon his arrival at Parliament House.

Five customs officials martyred, two others injured in firing incident

DERA ISMAIL KHAN (APP): At least five customs officials were killed as their moving vehicle was ambushed by unidentified terrorists near Saggu area here on Thursday.

According to the police control room, the Customs Intelligence vehicle was on its routine patrol within the limits of Darban police station when the armed assailants targeted it by opening fire indiscriminately, leaving five customs officials

martyred. The moving vehicle collided with another vehicle coming from the opposite direction, resulting in injuring two persons including a child.

The attackers managed to escape after the incident. As information was received about the incident, a heavy contingent of police and Rescue 1122 teams rushed the site and shifted the injured and the bodies to the hospital.

Tarar condemns PTI for jeopardizing national interests, irresponsible statements

ISLAMABAD (APP): Federal Minister for Information and Broadcasting, Attaullah Tarar, criticized Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) Thursday, stating that individuals involved in last year's May 9 attacks are now jeopardizing national interests.

Speaking to the media, Tarar emphasized that those who undermined the country's interests were adversaries of Pakistan.

He expressed dismay at prioritizing political agendas and ego over national interests, highlighting the regrettable pattern

of PTI leadership disowning statements against the country's interests.

Tarar noted that PTI leaders were embroiled in corruption cases, lamenting that enemies of Pakistan struggle to accept investments in the country. He prayed for divine guidance for such individuals to speak in the country's favour. The minister condemned the actions stooping to anti-national levels, stressing that while criticism of the government and its policies is acceptable, criticizing Pakistan is intolerable.



ISLAMABAD: Prime Minister Muhammad Shehbaz Sharif chairs a meeting regarding Saudi Investment in Pakistan following the recent visit of Saudi Delegation.

60% recommendations of water commission implemented: CS Sindh

Independent Report HYDERABAD: The Chief Secretary (CS) Sindh Syed Asif Hyder Shah said that during the last three weeks, 138 RO (Reverse Osmosis) plants have been activated in Sindh.

He informed the honorable court that the recommendations of the Water Commission are being implemented, which include short-term, mid-term and long-term measures and about 60 per cent of the water commission's recommendations have been implemented in the province, but some projects have faced delays due to resource shortages.

Speaking to the media after a hearing in Hyderabad on Thursday regarding the implementation of the water commission's report, Syed Asif Hyder Shah said that due to a lack of funds, complete implementation of the recommendations could not be achieved. However, we will submit progress reports to the honorable court every three months as per directives.

He revealed that between the last and current hearings, as many as 138 RO plants have been revived within three weeks, and another 200 will be activated by June.

The judges who are hearing cases against politically victimized PTI leaders and workers whenever insist on deciding the cases in the light of law instead of taking dictation from secret agents of state are targeted. The judges are being subjected to fear through references and state campaigns of character assassination besides using kidnapping and violence as weapon against the family members and relatives of judges.

Instead of taking decisive action on the letter written by 6 judges of IHC the matter is being prolonged and this way the state rogues are being given chance to play at their will



HYDERABAD: Chief Secretary Sindh Asif Hider Shah talking to newsmen after court hearing from High Court Hyderabad circuit.

Three abducted people rescued in police operation

KANDHKOT (INP): Three people abducted for ransom were rescued after minor resistance during police operation in Kacha area of Kandhkot on Wednesday-Thursday night.

According to details, the police on a tip-off regarding presence of kidnappers launched a crackdown for recovery of abducted people in Durrani Mehr Kacha area of Kandhkot. Over sight of police, the abductors started firing and retaliatory action of police forced the abductors to flee leaving behind their three hostages.

The police took the rescued people Ali Bahar, Shaman and Zeeshan Sehriani and shifted them to an undisclosed location.



Advertising Agencies, which are on the panel of Information Department in his office on Wednesday. He said that the effective mechanism for early payment to media houses has been devised in the department in order to avoid the outstanding liabilities at

maximum level. Secretary Information said that a third party audit firm is being hired to clear the liabilities of media houses by ascertaining the genuineness and verification of the claim bills accordingly and the payment details will be uploaded on the website. Stressing on early submission of the

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IMF's projections

The next few years are likely to see Pakistan trapped in low-growth mode. International lenders maintain that economic growth in the country will remain subdued, hovering in the range of 1.8pc-3.5pc in the medium term because of plummeting investment, persisting fiscal and external imbalances, and a large state presence in the economy.

In its flagship World Economic Outlook 2024, released on the eve of the spring meetings of the World Bank Group, the IMF has predicted Pakistan's economy will grow by 2pc this year and 3.5pc in the next. The estimates are based on the Fund's recently concluded review of Pakistan's macroeconomic position under the \$3bn Stand-by Arrangement. Even these projections hinge on continued fiscal consolidation and a new IMF bailout. No wonder Finance Minister Muhammad Aurangzeb is in Washington to lobby for a larger, three-year Fund programme of \$6bn-8bn to support planned economic reforms.

As stated by him, the country will request a three-year programme "to help execute the structural reform agenda". Referring to reduced market volatility and economic stabilisation achieved under the SBA, he said that market sentiment was more positive in the current fiscal year. "It's really for that purpose that we have initiated the discussion with the Fund to get into a larger and an extended programme," he explained. If approved, it will be Pakistan's 24th engagement with the IMF since 1958. Will this new programme break what the minister was reported to have referred to as the "chain of financial struggles and bailouts"? The fact is that Pakistan has never been able to complete a longer programme with the Fund because of a breach in policy goals thanks to political reasons. What will be different this time around? So far, the minister has shown an understanding of the issues that have dragged the economy down and his commitment to implementing long-delayed structural reforms without any proviso.

"If we do not go through the structural reforms, unfortunately, we will still be looking at another programme," he told an Atlantic Council meeting. He knows what needs to be done and said that Pakistan does not require "too many policy prescriptions". The problems are well-known and the country is aware of what is needed to stabilise the economy. The challenge is follow-through and implementation.

Unlike his predecessors, Mr Aurangzeb intends to discuss the programme's "growth aspects" with the IMF as well. But he has not elaborated on how he plans to grow the economy without breaching the programme policy steps that must focus on tough stabilisation reforms.

With the economy going through its worst crisis, the budget for next year is set to reveal how steadfast the government will be in its commitment to undertaking reforms, and how Mr Aurangzeb balances stabilisation with relatively faster growth.

Shahab Usto

It was on Ashura, Aug 19, 2021, when nine-year-old Priya Kumari went missing. Just before her disappearance or abduction she had been happily helping her father — a syncretic Hindu who runs a sabel every year in Muharram in San-grar, a small town near Sukkur — serve sherbet to thirsty mourners. It is a curious case. For one, she "disappeared" from a place that was thro-ngeed with hundreds of people, and yet, reportedly, the police found little by way of evidence or even a witness. And for another, her tragedy touches upon every element that has rent apart society, ie, faith, gender, class, and abuse.

Faith: Priya, a Hindu girl, was targeted when she was engaged in religio-cultural services for Muslims. She symbolised a tolerant tradition that goes back centuries, ie, peaceful cohabitation of various communities in Sindh, and beyond. In defiance of an obscurantist mindset that has spawned violence against religious minorities, she and her father transcended

faith-driven fault lines. Her victimhood, therefore, not only exposes a corroded criminal justice system, but goes deeper into the conceptual recesses of a state caught between two conflicting philosophies. The state can either be viewed in terms of a benevolent democracy that accords equality before the law, and grants freedom of worship to every citizen, regardless of colour or creed. Or it can be seen as an ideological tool cast in the mould of a particular policy strand. Priya and many other individuals, groups and communities come under the latter.

Gender: Priya's tragedy shows the threat to 'gender justice', which envisages the systemic removal of inequalities between men and women in both law and practice. She is among the countless children and women who are targeted for their gender, in different forms and to varying degrees. Thus, many of the better educated and more aware urban women are less vulnerable to extreme forms of gender crimes, though they may also face incidents of violence, abuse, or harassment. But the hotbeds of gender-

based crimes are largely located in the rural and tribal areas where a combination of feudal, tribal, and obscurantist elements continue to regulate rural life, aided by an ineffectual or complicit state machinery.

Even here, the ratio of gender-based crimes — forced marriages, 'honour' killing, domestic violence, kidnapping for ransom, etc — is relatively higher among the half-literate and poorer sections. Clearly, the state has been criminally negligent in enforcing the rights of these hapless women — largely on account of the substantial influence that the local feudal-tribal patriarchy exercises over social policy and governance. But can the state flout local and international laws — particularly the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women that obligates states to protect women's rights — just to appease its local surrogates?

Class: Priya's plight also highlights the social angle of crimes against women. She comes from a poor family and is possessed of all the vulnerabilities that accompany indi-

and disempowerment. Statistically, a majority of sexually victimised children come from poorer and underprivileged classes. Perhaps the offenders are emboldened both by the victim's incapacity to bring them to justice, and the state's routinely tepid response. As a result, these 'ordinary' cases are left undetected, or invariably 'settled'.

Recently, we saw two instances of our lame-duck criminal justice system. In 2021, Nazim Jokhio, a wild-life activist, was brutally murdered near Thatta when he tried to stop the hunting of protected birds. His was, as they say, an open-and-shut case. But the powerful offenders were 'pardoned' by the victim's family out of desperation and helplessness. In August last year, Fatima Farro, a nine-year-old maid, died in mysterious circumstances in Ranipur, located near Khairpur. The investigation report (including the video footage of the crime scene) has attributed the cause of her death to the abuse and torture allegedly committed by her employer, an influential pir. But the prosecution remains to be con-

cluded, despite the lapse of many months. It is feared that the delay, even if not intentional, will be used to settle the matter out of court.

Abuse: Priya's case pertains to 'disappearance' or 'abduction', but abuse cannot be excluded. Child abuse is on the rise. Of the 2,227 abuse victims reported in 2023, more than half (54 per cent) were girls. Let's not forget that children, like women, enjoy multiple protections under general, special, and international laws. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, in particular requires the state to ensure the civil, political, economic, social, health and cultural rights of children. But it is unfortunate that child abuse, like forced disappearances, is rampant and neglected — more so if the victim comes from a poorer background. In fact, most successfully prosecuted cases are those vigorously pursued by the victim's family; otherwise, they end up in the amnesiac entrails of our criminal justice system.

Priya is lucky that the media, civil society and political activists have kept

her case alive. Recently, the government constituted another JIT under public pressure. But will the new JIT bear fruit in terms of recovering her and ensuring justice for her? The answer hinges on many variables, including the victim's perseverance, the investigator's diligence, the suspect's clout, the prosecutors' capacity, and more importantly, the court's willingness to decide the matter expeditiously and justly.

In a curious way, Priya's unexplained disappearance, Fatima's unending prosecution, and the 'pardoning' of offenders by Nazim's family reflect respectively the incapacity, dysfunctionality, and discomfiture of the entire criminal justice system — the law, police, investigation, prosecution, and adjudication. Ergo, a perception is gaining ground that our legal order has lost its effectiveness, hence, legitimacy. Desperate people are taking the law into their own hands. 'Mob justice' and vigilantism are on the rise. Which raises the critical question: can a state see stability and advancement without an effective and legitimate legal order?

Shifting gears

Khurram Husain

After many years of extreme uncertainty and political instability, it now seems like things are finally starting to move.

Two developments this week point to this. First is the visit of the foreign minister of Saudi Arabia, during which the talks seem to have focused in significant measure on some form of economic engagement between Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. The language used by the Saudi foreign minister at the joint presser at the conclusion of the visit was also unusually bullish on the prospects of growing the ties between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia.

The second development is Finance Minister Muhammad Aurangzeb's round of engagements in Washington, D.C., where he is attending the spring meetings of the IMF and World Bank.

One thing he made clear in all his public engagements was the urgent need for a successor programme with the IMF as soon as the ongoing Stand-by Arrangement ended. He also made clear that talks on this had be-

gun, and outlined three key areas that will be targeted for "structural reforms": taxation, power and state-owned enterprises. His emphasis was on execution, indicating that he will press hard on the matters he commits to.

These are two very critical developments, although how far they are beneficial for the general populace remains an open question. For now, it is clear that the storms of uncertainty and the perilous brushes with default that have marked the preceding two years are now receding. This does not mean the country is in the clear. Any country that is busy negotiating a programme with the IMF cannot be described as being in the clear.

What it means is that sanity is returning, decision-making is beginning to articulate itself at the top, the correct priorities are being talked about by people who have clout and credibility within their own circle of peers, and foreign investors are beginning to look again at Pakistan's prospects. In short, it means the gears are shifting.

There is a temptation that some in government

are succumbing to. This is the temptation to declare victory. It is entirely premature for that at this point, and it is important to bear in mind that a country that is struggling to enter a long-term IMF programme cannot be described as a country that is in good health, or one whose authorities have much reason to celebrate. It means the bulk of the hard work lies ahead, and that the chances of failure are legion.

The finance minister said during one of his interviews in Washington that everyone knows what all needs to be done. The problem is in execution. He should have been asked what prevented preceding governments from executing the agenda he is chalking out, and what makes him so sure he will succeed where they failed. Sadly, this question never arose. Perhaps some TV anchors at home will pose this question to him upon his return.

But for now, without popping any corks or fueling undue optimism, it is possible to say that a direction is becoming visible. Three questions now arise. What exactly is the shape of the Saudi 'investment package' that we are

told totals \$5 billion? How far will the Saudi or perhaps more broadly, the Gulf interest in Pakistan go? And most importantly, will all this really be beneficial for Pakistan?

Or are we simply going to repeat an old story where the government of the day fetches dollars from abroad, whether borrowed or begged, and burns them in the furnace of the country's economic dysfunctions to produce a short-lived, feel-good, growth experience followed by a massive crash?

Twice we have repeated this story. First during the Pervez Musharraf years, and second in the years running from 2013 to 2017, when the third PML-N government of Nawaz Sharif ran the country. The problem is in execution. He should have been asked what prevented preceding governments from executing the agenda he is chalking out, and what makes him so sure he will succeed where they failed. Both these periods were unique in one sense: the country was on an IMF programme, yet it registered high rates of economic growth. These are two antithetical outcomes. Fund

programmes are designed to slow the economy to allow it to build reserves and fiscal buffers, while undertaking deeper reforms.

What happened in both these periods was that geopolitics trumped economics. The problem is in execution. He should have been asked what prevented preceding governments from executing the agenda he is chalking out, and what makes him so sure he will succeed where they failed. In the first period, it was the post-9/11 bonanza and its associated inflows that were used to power an economic boom, with which a dictator struggling to find his feet procured his legitimacy.

In the second period, an elected government borrowed heavily from bilateral donors, especially China and the Gulf monarchies, to power a growth boom that clearly could not last, and whose bills would weigh heavily on the country for years thereafter, but nevertheless gave the government of the time enough material with which to portray itself as the party of growth and development.

It is critical that this story not be repeated one

more time. The temptation to see the dollar inflows that may perhaps be materialising soon (there is as yet no guarantee that this will happen, but the indications are there) as fuel for a short-lived growth boom must be resisted. It should be the success of the underlying reforms, especially the extent to which they enable investment, whether foreign or domestic, that should be the driver of the growth to come.

A liquidity-fuelled boom could well break the Imran Khan fever that has gripped the electorate and weighs so heavily on the shoulders of the current rulers. But this will be much the same folly as the dictator using a short-lived economic boom to procure for himself an equally short-lived legitimacy.

The finance minister is right to point to the deeper reform agenda as the key to unlocking the economy's potential. He is right to place the emphasis on execution, rather than endlessly discussing policy options. But it seems the most important constituency that needs to be persuaded of this may be his own cabinet members.

Three to tango

F.S. Aijazuddin

It takes three to tango in our part of the world. The US-Pakistan duo and the Saudi-Pakistan pair has become a threesome, choreographed by the US.

In 1950, prime minister Liaquat Ali Khan met US president Harry Truman in Washington, D.C. Three years later, in 1953, governor-general Ghulam Muhammad was hosted by King Ibn-e-Saud in Saudi Arabia. Since then, bilateral relationships between Pakistan and these countries, while shifting and erratic, have nevertheless maintained one golden vein of consistency: Pakistan has remained a poor supplicant and the richer two, patrons of the last resort.

US attitudes towards Pakistan have usually been determined by the policies of its presidents and by State Department mandarins. Occasionally, they would agree to disagree. The most notable occasion occurred in the 1970s during the Richard Nixon vs William Rogers bouts over contacts with China.

Saudi monarchs as a whole have remained partial towards Pakistan. Among them, the most unconditionally generous was King Faisal bin Abdul Aziz. It is said that he funded the 1974 Second Islamic Summit held in Lahore. He conceded its stage management to PM Zulfikar Ali Bhutto who acknowledged that concession by renaming Charing Cross as Faisal Square.

Few will be aware that in 1974 King Faisal gave \$100 million to be disbursed to any projects of PM Bhutto's choice. The money went straight into the projects, without deductions for middlemen. Half of that — \$50m — was given to the Mirpur Mathelo fertiliser project, which, even though it was not a joint venture, was re-

named Pak-Saudi Fertilisers Ltd.

Again, in January 1975, King Faisal gave \$10m for Pakistan's earthquake victims in the Karakoram. (The US pledged only \$25,000.) Such generosity did not go unpunished. King Faisal was shot four months later by his US-educated nephew Faisal bin Musaid Al Saud.

More recently, the Bin Abdul Aziz dy-na-s-t-y and Pakistan's inextinguishable Sharif family have shown that they enjoy an almost umbilical relationship. Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman has famously called Pakistan his second home. To the Sharif family, Saudi Arabia is their first haven.

In 2019, the Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman visited Pakistan during the tenure of PM Imran Khan. Their bromance appeared to yield the prospect of \$20 billion in investments. Deals were signed, sealed but remained undelivered. As Napoleon once advised: "Promise everything, deliver nothing."

Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif has received fresh assurances of financial support — this time \$5bn — from the same crown prince. During their recent meeting, the prince reaffirmed Saudi Arabia's resolve never to leave Pakistan's side and expressed his government's boundless affection for the nation.

He sent a high-powered Saudi delegation led by Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan bin Abdullah to grout that commitment. The composition of the delegation underscored the seriousness of its mandate. It consisted of the Saudi ministers of water and agriculture, of industry and mineral resources, the deputy minister of investment, and senior officials from its ministry of energy and the Saudi Fund for General Investments. It

visited Pakistan this week, in the absence of our finance minister.

The Saudis came just when Pakistan genuflects before the IMF for the 24th time.

In 2023, the IMF agreed to the Stand-by Arrangement of \$3bn, to rescue PM Shehbaz Sharif's government. The Saudis greased the rails with a reclaimable deposit of \$2bn to window-dress Pakistan's foreign exchange reserves.

This year, on March 13, ahead of the IMF mission's visit to Pakistan from March 14 to 18, the finance ministry cheerfully announced that it had "met all targets for successful completion of the programme".

Two days later, on the 15th, the IMF team expressed its displeasure over the ministry of finance's announcement "that it had materialised all structural benchmarks, quantitative and indicative targets even prior to scrutinising and completion of the review by the Fund staff".

According to one news report, the IMF review mission "grilled the finance ministry team in the maiden session of the review talks and everyone seemed clueless how to respond". Finance Minister Aurangzeb assured the IMF that "such an episode would never be repeated in future".

Shakespeare foresaw the IMF's seemingly open-ended commitment to Pakistan: "'Tis not enough to help the feeble up, but to support them after".

The fate of our application to the IMF will be known very soon, after April 20. The US will decide its next president at year end. Meanwhile, the US, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan continue to cavort in a three-party tango. To paraphrase the US singer Melody Gardot, Pakistan, on its own, may be "a bad walker [but] it can dance the tango".

Ali Burhan Mustafa

The illicit global drug market, which is valued over \$400 billion, is second only to the counterfeit products market in terms of the world's main crime rackets. Cocaine, heroin, cannabis, and amphetamines are top sellers. Afghanistan leads in opium and heroin production, while Bolivia and Brazil are at the forefront of cocaine production. Mexico is a key player in cannabis and heroin circulation. The US is a leading market, which mainly receives drugs through Mexico. Canada is another market, to a smaller degree though.

The Golden Crescent, which includes Afghanistan, Iran, and Pakistan, serves as a significant centre for opium and heroin trade, fuelled as it is by regional politics and a legacy of conflict. In Afghanistan, the grip of the Afghan Taliban over key drug-producing regions further complicates the issue. Meanwhile, the international pressure is on Pakistan to escalate its anti-drug campaigns. The ANF aims to stop poppy farming and drug trafficking. Besides prevention and global partnerships, the ANF runs Model Addicts Treatment and Rehabilitation Centres, which have been treating over 14,000 people since 2005 by combining enforcement with rehabilitation.

A recent study has focused on Pakistan's escalating drug overdose emergency, revealing that 700 people die each day due to drug overdose complications. Faced with around 7m regular drug users, 4m of whom favour cannabis and another 2.7m struggling with opioid addiction, Pakistan is grappling with a significant problem. Tackling this issue calls for a unified strategy that includes strict regulation, improved medical training, and a thorough revision of public health initiatives.

Centres for the treatment of drug addiction in

Fighting addiction

mon. Additionally, the recent World Drug Report of 2022 points to a worldwide uptick in the use of substances such as cannabis and amphetamines, which coincides with a rise in health emergencies, including hepatitis C and HIV, particularly among individuals who use drugs via syringes. This situation underscores the critical need for widespread public health strategies to address the alarming level of substance abuse in the country.

Founded in 1957, the Pakistan Narcotics Control Board has been pivotal in the crackdown against illegal drugs. It joined the interior ministry in 1973 and went through several transformations before emerging as the Anti-Narcotics Force in 1995. In Afghanistan, the grip of the Afghan Taliban over key drug-producing regions further complicates the issue. Meanwhile, the international pressure is on Pakistan to escalate its anti-drug campaigns. The ANF aims to stop poppy farming and drug trafficking. Besides prevention and global partnerships, the ANF runs Model Addicts Treatment and Rehabilitation Centres, which have been treating over 14,000 people since 2005 by combining enforcement with rehabilitation.

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Pakistan face substantial challenges. Both public and private facilities struggle with inadequate infrastructure, a lack of skilled professionals, and weak enforcement of sound management practices. Although we live in the 21st century, Pakistan still has not recognised drug addiction and rehabilitation as an official speciality in psychiatry, while the absence of qualified health strategies to address the alarming level of substance abuse in the country.

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Centres for the treatment of drug addiction in



ISLAMABAD: Prime Minister Muhammad Shehbaz Sharif chairs a meeting regarding Power Sector.

PM orders for boosting privatization, outsourcing process of power Discos

ISLAMABAD (APP): Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif on Thursday directed the relevant authorities to accelerate the process of privatization and outsourcing of the power distribution companies (Discos). Chairing a high-level meeting regarding power sector here, the prime minister said the assistance of private sector experts and globally accepted models should be taken to improve the management affairs of the distribution companies (DISCOs). He also directed to prepare and present a comprehensive plan in the next meeting to improve the power system in the country. The prime minister said reforms in the power sector would help reduce the country's circular debt. He also vowed not to allow electricity thieves and other elements to harm the country's treasury. In the meeting, the recommendation and measures with respect to prevent the power theft, reorganization of National Transmission and Dispatch Company (NTDC) and new projects of the electricity transmission were presented.

The meeting was told that Matiari-Rahim Yar Khan transmission line and Ghazi Barotha-Faisalabad line will be constructed to ensure the power transmission from Southern part of the country. The meeting was further informed that a comprehensive strategy had been evolved for the reorganization of NTDC to bring reforms in the power transmission system and to minimize the government's circular debts. The prime minister directed to complete all the reforms' initiatives within the stipulated time. The meeting was attended by the federal ministers Mohammad Ishaq Dar, Khawaja Muhammad Asif, Ahmad Khan Cheema, Sardar Awaiz Khan Leghari, Dr Musadik Malik, Abdul Aleem Khan, Ataullah Tarar, Syed Mohsin Raza Naqvi, former power minister Muhammad Ali, Deputy Chairman Planning Commission Jehanzeb Khan, Member of National Assembly Bilal Azhar Kayani, Engineer Qamar ul Islam, Rana Ehsan Afzal, Salman Ahmed and other concerned officials.

Prudent policies, reforms poised to result in sustainable economic growth: Governor SBP

Independent Report
KARACHI: Governor State Bank of Pakistan (SBP) Jameel Ahmed highlighting country's substantial improvements in macroeconomic outlook hoped that time bound reforms will put the economy on the path of sustainable economic growth. Governor SBP expressed the views during his meetings with key international investors during multiple events organized by leading global banks and financial firms, including JP Morgan, Citibank and Jefferies, on the sidelines of the IMF-World Bank Spring Meetings in Washington DC, said a statement issued here.

He informed the participants about the substantial improvement in Pakistan's macroeconomic outlook achieved over the past year as a result of a prudent monetary policy, backed adequately by fiscal consolidation and beginning of the implementation of key structural reforms. Governor referring to sharp decline in inflation over the past year from a peak of 38 percent in May 2023 to the two-year low of 20.7 percent in March 2024 explained that the deceleration in inflation is broad-based, reflecting the combined impact of monetary tightening, fiscal consolidation, ease in

import supplies, improved agriculture output and base effect. "More importantly, core inflation declined markedly, reaching 15.7 percent in March, after persistently staying above 20 percent throughout last year," he added. The governor informed the participants that the external sector has also stabilized, as reflected in the sharp reduction in the current account deficit (CAD) to \$1 billion during Jul-Feb FY24 from \$3.8 billion in the same period last year. In addition to stabilization policies, improved agriculture output has contributed to higher food exports.

MoU signed for skilled manpower in AJK: PM lauds initiative

MIRPUR (APP): Azad Jammu Kashmir Prime Minister, Chaudhry Anwar ul Haq Thursday termed signing of a memorandum of understanding (MoU) between state-run TEVTA and NAVTTC as a significant development. He emphasized the importance of talented and educated individuals, particularly the youth, leveraging this opportunity for skill development. The AJK PM highlighted that the MoU would contribute to

reducing unemployment in the region. The signing ceremony, held at Jammu Kashmir House in the federal metropolis and Executive Director NEVTC Aamir Jan and TEVTA Chairman Chaudhry Farid Ahmed present on the occasion. Senior Minister Col. (retd) Waqar Ahmad Noor, Minister TEVTA Sardar Amir Altaf, Chief Secretary Dawood Muhammad Burich, Chairman NEVTC Ms. Gulmina Bilal, and other officials attended the event.

Finance Minister rules out rupee devaluation in talks with IMF

ISLAMABAD (Online): Finance Minister Muhammad Aurangzeb has ruled out any further significant rupee devaluation ahead of talks with International Monetary Fund. Speaking at roundtable meeting with Bloomberg team in Washington, he said there is no reason for rupee devaluation as Pakistan has solid foreign-exchange reserves, stable currency, rising remittances and steady exports.

FPCCI waives off 50% membership fee of women chambers

Independent Report
ISLAMABAD: The Federation of Pakistan Chamber of Commerce and Industry (FPCCI) on Thursday announced waiver off 50% membership fee for women chambers. President FPCCI Atif Ikram Sheikh in a statement issued here said that the country and society cannot progress without the full role of women, adding the initiative of reducing membership fee was important for women empowerment. "We have fulfilled our promise, for which the full credit goes to the leadership of United Business Group (UBG), who had promised this during the election campaign," he added. Ikram said that Pakistani women were extremely talented and the chamber was striving to empower them in the economic field. "If Pakistan is to progress, we have to make our women educated, skilled and empowered to business women," he added.



HYDERABAD: Farmers are busy in their works to earn their livelihood for support their families, at a field located on Tando Jam near Hyderabad.

Country prepared to become tech hub: Shaza Fatima

LAHORE (APP): State Minister for Information Technology and Telecommunication Shaza Fatima Khawaja on Thursday said that the country was prepared to become regional tech hub and IT leader. She said this while addressing a press conference along with Digital Cooperation Organization (DCO) Secretary General Deemah Al Yahya at a local hotel. She said, "Youth is our asset and we have strong connectivity," adding that Pakistan had partners like Saudi Arabia and other countries which wanted to strengthen this sector. The State Minister said that recently Saudi Arabia foreign minister and representative of Investment Ministry visited Pakistan, adding that country's IT sector was also highlighted during meetings with the delegation from Saudi Arabia.

She further said that Digital Foreign Direct Investment conference would be organized at the end of this year, adding that World Economic Forum, Digital Cooperation Organization and Pakistan would host conference every year to bring investment in the country for IT sector, manufacturing, software and telecommunication sides as well. She further said that these initiatives and the policies of Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif aimed at supporting private sector would yield positive results to put the country on road to progress. Shaza Fatima said that the incumbent government was working on various policies and legislation whether it was related to data protection, cyber security, cloud policy to create feasible environment for growth of IT, tech and telecom sectors. She said, "Pakistan is a founding member of



WASHINGTON: Federal Minister for Finance and Revenue, Muhammad Aurangzeb interacted with representatives of Deutsche Bank.

ICCI pledges to have a female president soon

ISLAMABAD (APP): Islamabad Chamber of Commerce and Industry (ICCI) has pledged to have its first female president soon followed by other chambers across the country. The facilitation centers for women home-based workers would be established in all the provincial capitals. This was disclosed by the Chairperson National Commission on the Status of Women (NCSW), Nilofar Bukhtiar during the Eid Milan and Award Ceremony held here Thursday. On this occasion, Lansana Wonehe, Country Representative of UN Women Pakistan, also praised the National Commission on the Status of Women (NCSW) efforts in the Economic Growth of Women at the Eid Milan and Award distribution event.

KP Govt decides to establish Gem Processing & Export Centre

Independent Report
PESHAWAR: The government of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa has decided to develop gemstone sector as formal export sector and for this purpose the gemstone cluster at Namak Mandi would be developed in the shape of Gems Processing & Export Centre. The Gem Export Center will be redesigned and shifted to a spacious and suitable building equipped with all international standards. In this regard, a high-level meeting was held on Thursday in the committee room of the Industries Department here at Civil Secretariat, Peshawar with Special Assistant to Chief Minister Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Commerce

and Technical Education Abdul Karim Tordhir in the chair. Besides, Secretary Industries, Syed Zulfiqar Ali Shah and Special Secretary Muhammad Anwar Khan, Chief Executive Officer (CEO) Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Economic Zones Development and Management Company (KP-EZDMC) Javed Iqbal Khattak, Executive Director of Federal Export Development Fund (EDF) Samiullah Khan and Director Zafar, PDA and Local Government Officers, representatives of Sarhad Chamber of Commerce & Industry (SCCI) Gemstones Association and officers of other relevant departments also attended the meeting.

PTCL posts 14 % revenue growth

Independent Report
ISLAMABAD: Pakistan Telecommunication Company Limited (PTCL) has announced its financial results for the first quarter of 2024 posting 14 per cent revenue growth Year-on-Year basis to Rs 49 billion, mainly driven by strong performance in the consumer segment led by fixed broadband, mobile data, and wholesale & business solutions. The announcement was made during a board of directors meeting on Thursday. PTCL continued its strong performance throughout Q1, 2024 and achieved revenue of Rs 26 billion for this quarter,

which is 13% higher than last year, mainly driven by growth in fixed line and business solutions segments, said a news release. Flash Fiber, PTCL's premium Fiber-To-The-Home (FTTH) service, continues to show tremendous growth with the highest Net adds share within the FTTH market (since Dec'23) and now stands as the leading FTTH service provider in Pakistan. This phenomenal growth has been possible through the aggressive expansion of PTCL Flash Fiber and dedicated customer experience throughout the country.



LAHORE: Minister of State for IT and Telecommunication Ms. Shaza Fatima Khawaja and Ms. Deemah Al-Yahya, Secretary General Digital Cooperation Organization (DCO) cutting ribbon to inaugurate 24th ITCN Asia 2024 at Expo Centre.

Zong business revolutionizes digital landscape for CGCMS through recent partnership

ISLAMABAD (APP): Zong Business, Pakistan's leading telecom operator has joined hands with China Gezhouba Group Corporation (CGGC) is a key subsidiary of China Energy Engineering Group Co., Ltd., a prominent state-owned enterprise, said a news release issued here on Thursday. CGGC specializes in

ambitious goals without hindrance. Founded in 1970, China Gezhouba Group Corporation (CGGC) is a key subsidiary of China Energy Engineering Group Co., Ltd., a prominent state-owned enterprise, said a news release issued here on Thursday. CGGC specializes in

various sectors including water conservancy, power generation, infrastructure construction, and real estate development, encompassing design, construction, investment, and operation services. CGCMS' expertise combined with Zong 4G's proficiency in network architecture, security,



SIALKOT: A person filling water in pot at water filtration plant with petrol pump style water nozzle at Mubarak Pura.

SAARC BAZAAR – A way Forward for South Asian Businesses

Independent Report
ISLAMABAD: SAARC BAZAAR: Empowering Trade, Fostering Growth, and Celebrating Diversity. WWW.SAARCBAZAAR.COM, the innovative e-commerce platform designed to revolutionize trade within the SAARC region, is now officially live. With a vision to connect global consumers by providing a 100% free-of-cost, user-friendly e-commerce portal that bridges traders across the SAARC region, including MSMEs (Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises) and entrepreneurs, particularly women who own home-

based industries, SAARCBAZAAR is strategically positioned to capitalize on this growth by fostering regional economic integration and empowering businesses and consumers alike. The SAARC region, projected by the World Bank to be the world's fastest-growing region in 2024 with a 6% output growth, is poised for a significant economic leap. SAARCBAZAAR goes beyond commerce by highlighting the rich cultural heritage and tourist attractions of each SAARC country. Explore the best of art, cuisine, and history while conducting business.

Businesses from all corners of the SAARC region can now showcase their products, services, and source materials effortlessly. The platform facilitates direct connections between traders, manufacturers, and consumers with just a click. SAARCBAZAAR serves as an invaluable resource for accessing up-to-date economic data, news, and information on trade events and exhibitions within the SAARC region. It is committed to fostering self-employment and entrepreneurial opportunities. For women entrepreneurs, especially

those in peri-urban and remote areas, the platform provides a level playing field to showcase their talents and products. Businesses registered with regional commerce chambers and women entrepreneurs receive distinctive identity badges. This spotlight feature enhances visibility and credibility, promoting trust among consumers. SAARCBAZAAR proudly pioneers a first-of-its-kind reporting mechanism for NTMs and NTBs. An open database system ensures prompt resolution of potential trade issues through formal channels. "SAARCBAZAAR

is more than an e-commerce platform; it's a gateway to economic prosperity. By connecting businesses, celebrating diversity, and addressing trade barriers, we aim to transform the SAARC region." – Zohaib Mushtaq, Project Co-ordinator, SAARCBAZAAR. ABOUT SAARCBAZAAR: SAARCBAZAAR is a non-profit initiative supported by trade bodies, and development agencies. Its mission is to create a vibrant ecosystem that fosters economic growth, inclusivity, and cross-cultural exchange within the SAARC region.

Mobilink Bank registers solid start to year by doubling its revenue in Q1 2024

ISLAMABAD (APP): Pakistan's leading digital microfinance institution, Mobilink Bank, has reported a staggering 97% increase in revenue during Q1 2024 compared to the same period last year, marking a powerful start to the year. The Bank's Profit before Tax (PBT) also witnessed 110% growth, said a news release. The substantial increase in the revenue and PBT underscore the Bank's robust financial performance, heightened customer & stakeholder confidence, and the positive momentum within the country's economic

and business environment at the outset of the year. Mobilink Bank is part of the VEON group, a global digital operator that provides converged connectivity and digital services to nearly 160 million customers in six dynamic markets that are home to 7% of world's population. Mobilink Bank champions financial inclusion and works to advance the growth and sustainability of micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs), particularly those owned and run by women. The Bank leverages microfinance and fintech to foster access to finance.

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QUETTA: Deputy Commissioner Quetta Lt (retd) Saad Bin Asad presides over the meeting of Poultry Farms and Shopkeepers Association.

