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PPP's Aseefa Bhutto Zardari secures NA-207 seat unopposed

Simultaneously Publishing from Islamabad, Sargodha and Karachi

LHC seeks report on threats to life of PTI founder



Soon Times Correspondent
LAHORE

The Lahore High Court (LHC) on Friday sought a report from the Punjab Advocate General regarding threats to the life of PTI founder in prison. The directive was issued by LHC Court Chief Justice Malik Shahzad Ahmed Khan while hearing a petition of Threcek-e-Insaf Lawyers Forum President Afzal Azim for provision of security in jail to the PTI founder.

Advocate Afzal submitted that the jail authorities banned meeting with the PTI founder citing security concerns to him as a reason and prayed the court to order strict security for him.

As proceedings started, Advocate General Khalid Ishaq questioned maintainability of the application. He submitted that he would ask for a report on security concerns as it was the duty of the Punjab government to ensure his protection.

Chief Justice Khan remarked that we cannot afford any more major accidents. Liaquat Ali Khan and Benazir Bhutto had been assassinated, while PTI founder has escaped an attempt on his life.

He directed the advocate general to check what level of security concerns the PTI founder has.

China joins probe into deadly Pakistan suicide attack on its nationals



Soon Times Correspondent
ISLAMABAD

Chinese investigators arrived in Pakistan on Friday to join a probe into the killing of five Chinese nationals in a suicide attack, Pakistan's interior ministry said, seeking to stem assaults threatening Islamabad's drive to modernise the economy.

Tuesday's incident was the third major attack in little over a week on China's interests in the South Asian nation, where Beijing has invested more than \$65 billion in infrastructure projects as part of its wider Belt and Road initiative.

Pakistan's Interior Minister Mohsin Naqvi met the Chinese team of investigators at Beijing's embassy and briefed them on the investigation so far, the statement said.

Pak-China cooperation won't affect after Shangla attack: Chinese embassy



Soon Times Correspondent
BEIJING

The Chinese embassy reaffirmed its pledge to Pakistan-China cooperation, stating that any effort to sabotage their ties will go in vain.

The Chinese embassy emphasised its ongoing support for Pakistan's social and economic development works and reiterated its commitment to collaborating closely with Pakistan.

The statement further stressed the continued efforts to enhance the well-being of the people of Pakistan. Earlier, Federal Interior Minister Mohsin Naqvi also visited the Chinese embassy. He updated the Chinese ambassador and the investigative team on the progress of the investigation into the Shangla attack that killed five Chinese nationals.

In a first, foreign minister replaces finance minister in CCI

Body's reconstitution done on advice of president. Notification is issued after PM Shehbaz's approval.



Islamabad: Prime Minister Muhammad Shehbaz Sharif chairs a meeting on measures against the spectrum of illegal activities on 29 March 2024.

Soon Times Correspondent
ISLAMABAD

Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif approved reconstitution of the Council of Common Interests (CCI) on Friday, replacing the finance minister with the foreign minister. President Asif Ali Zardari, on the advice of PM Shehbaz, constituted the eight-member CCI under Article 153 of the Constitution, said a notification.

The CCI is being headed by PM Shehbaz and all four chief ministers are among the council's members. The notification read that Foreign Minister Ishaq Dar, Defence Minister Khawaja Asif and Saffron Minister Amir Muqam are also included in the CCI.

disagreement between the centre and provinces.

This is not the first instance that PM Shehbaz has snubbed the finance minister and given a task to Foreign Minister Ishaq Dar. Last week, PM Shehbaz constituted six separate cabinet committees on economic coordination, energy, Chinese investment projects, privatisation, State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs) and disposal of legislative cases.

In his decision, the PM decided to keep the ECC with himself while he tasked Foreign Minister Dar to head the Cabinet Committee on Privatisation.

Traditionally these committees have been headed by the finance minister. However, a day after the announcement and receiving backlash PM Shehbaz reshuffled the ECC and tasked Finance Minister Aurangzeb as head of the key

Biden extends congratulations, commits support to new Pakistan govt

In letter to Shehbaz, he says Washington will continue to stand with Islamabad to tackle 'pressing challenges'

Soon Times Correspondent
ISLAMABAD

US President Joe Biden wrote a letter to Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif on Friday, stating that Washington will continue to stand with Pakistan to tackle the most 'pressing global and regional challenges'.

This marked Biden's first official communication with any Pakistani prime minister in years.

President Biden broke with tradition by not engaging with any of the prime ministers in Pakistan during his tenure. He neither telephoned former prime minister Imran Khan after his election victory nor spoke to Shehbaz when he succeeded him in April 2022.

According to the contents of the letter shared by the US Embassy, President Biden wrote: "The enduring partnership between our nations remains critical to ensuring the security of our people—and people around the world—and the United States will continue to stand with Pakistan to tackle the most pressing

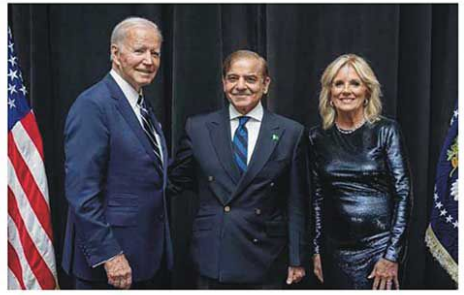
global and regional challenges of our time."

"That includes advancing our shared vision for a future of greater health security, economic growth, and access to education for all. Through our US-Pakistan 'Green Alliance' framework, we will also continue to strengthen our climate resilience, support sustainable agriculture and water management, and assist with Pakistan's recovery from the devastating floods in 2022," Biden said.

"Together, we will continue to forge a strong partnership between our nations, and a close bond between our people," he concluded.

Biden's letter suggested that despite allegations of ballot fraud, the US government is ready to work with the new government.

Although Pakistan is no longer a priority for the US after its withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021, the South Asian nation remains key in terms of regional security and counter-terrorism efforts.



While American civilian leaders have shown indifference towards Pakistan in recent years, the American military establishment still seeks a working relationship with Pakistan. In some of the recent testimonies before

the US Senate committees, US CENTCOM chief Michael Kurilla stressed the importance of Pakistan and said the US must evaluate ties with Islamabad on their own merit.

Meeting with IMF scheduled on April 14-15: Finance Minister Aurangzeb



Karachi, 29th March, 2024. Federal Minister for Finance & Revenue Mr. Muhammad Aurangzeb speaking to media during the 10th US-Pakistan Business Council meeting in Karachi to oversee the implementation of the enhanced Ramadan Relief Package.

Soon Times Correspondent
KARACHI

Minister for Finance and Revenue Muhammad Aurangzeb on Friday said the government was going to hold a meeting with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) on April 14 and 15 in Washington.

Addressing journalists during his visit to the Pakistan Stock Exchange (PSX) in Karachi today, Aurangzeb said features of the new programme will be discussed during the meeting, while detailed talks would be held in Pakistan. He also reiterated the government's

plans to enter a major programme with the global lender, whereas, the microeconomic stability would also continue with the Fund.

Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif had on March 21 signalled that the new IMF programme was likely to be continued for three years. "New tranche of loan is likely to be received from the IMF in a few days, however, we would need another programme," he had said while addressing a session of the Special Investment Facilitation Council's (SIFC) apex committee attended by civil-military

leadership. Responding to a query regarding IMF, Aurangzeb said the size of the IMF programme had not been discussed, but it was decided that the staff level agreement on the new programme was reached by the end of this financial year. Shedding light on the agriculture sector, the finance and revenue minister said growth in the agriculture sector remained at 5%. "We have a bumper rice crop this season and are receiving good news about wheat as well," he added.

Federal, Balochistan govts unite to address province's challenges, says Bugti



Soon Times Correspondent
ISLAMABAD

Balochistan Chief Minister Sarfraz Bugti stated on Friday that both the federal and Balochistan governments were on the same page in their commitment to addressing the issues confronting the province. Speaking at a press conference alongside leaders of allied political parties in Islamabad, the chief minister said that the state was employing appropriate measures to counter threats

and root causes of insurgency in Balochistan.

Bugti highlighted the unified leadership in Balochistan dedicated to resolving the province's challenges. He underscored the efforts of the provincial government to foster good governance, noting that the primary beneficiaries were the ordinary people who suffered most from poor governance.

Bugti noted the active involvement of all parties in providing relief to the populace in Balochistan. He highlighted the historic unopposed election of senators from the province as a significant milestone.

During the meeting, Chief Minister Maryam Nawaz gave approval to issue 'Nawaz Kisan Card'.

In this regard, the chief minister said 500,000 farmers will be given loans of Rs150 billion in a year on easy terms through Kisan Card. The farmers will be given agriculture loan to the tune of Rs30,000 per acre for purchase of best seeds, fertilizers and

Punjab CM Maryam approves 'Nawaz Sharif Kisan Card'



Soon Times Correspondent
LAHORE

Punjab Chief Minister Maryam Nawaz has approved 'Nawaz Sharif Kisan Card'.

A special meeting regarding agricultural reforms was held with Punjab Chief Minister Maryam Nawaz in chair.

The meeting reviewed a proposal to bring a law to stop the use of agricultural land for residential purposes and restructuring of Punjab Seed Corporation and Punjab Agricultural Research Board. During the meeting, Chief Minister Maryam Nawaz gave approval to issue 'Nawaz Kisan Card'.

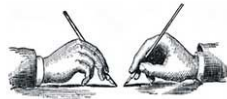
Directions for pesticides ESTABLISHMENT OF MODEL AGRICULTURE CENTERS She said government will give various types of subsidies through Nawaz Sharif Kisan Card. She said model agriculture centers will be established in collaboration with the private sector across Punjab. Modern agricultural machinery, training, pesticides, seeds and model plots will be established at the model agriculture centers. She further said that in the first phase, a model agriculture center will be established in each district of the province. These steps will help farmers to get rid of fake fertilizers and medicines. DIRECTIONS FOR

COMPILATION OF CROP YIELD DATA

The chief minister directed the Agriculture Department to compile complete data on production and demand of each crop.

The meeting also approved creation of a state-of-the-art center of excellence for research and development of cotton, wheat and rice crops.

It was approved in the meeting to control the administrative affairs of the center of excellence through a board and to link the research center with regional universities.



Sustainable Economic Recovery

The country's economic and financial position continues to improve with each passing month of the current fiscal year, attributed to prudent policy management and the resumption of inflows from multilateral and bilateral partners, finance ministry said in a recent report. According to monthly Economic Update and Outlook for March, Pakistan reached a Staff-Level Agreement in its final review successfully concluding the International Monetary Fund's (IMF) Stand-By Arrangement (SBA) program and securing a disbursement of \$1.1 billion. The ongoing efforts in policy and reform are easing out pressures on the gross financing needs, which has been intensified by increased external and domestic financing demands and an uncertain external environment. These positive developments have led to a sustained economic recovery and an uplift in the country's overall economic confidence. In real sector, agriculture outlook is promising, it says adding in Rabi season 2023-24, the wheat sowing has surpassed the target

of 8,998 million hectare. The farm inputs also showcased an impressive growth in FY2024 with tractor production and sales up by 68.6 percent and 67.6 percent, respectively. Agriculture credit disbursement also rose by 34.7 percent to Rs 1,279.4 billion. The Large Scale Manufacturing (LSM), observed a marginal decline of 0.5 percent during July-January FY2024, compared to a contraction of 2.7 percent last year. However, LSM output increased YoY by 1.84 percent in January 2024 when compared with January 2023. During July-January FY2024, 12 out of 22 sectors witnessed positive growth. Headline inflation is on a downward trajectory; it dropped to 23.1 percent in February 2024 from 31.5 percent in February 2023. To reduce the inflationary impact, the federal government has provided the Ramadan Relief Package of Rs 12.5 billion, targeting low-income groups with food subsidies through various measures.

On the fiscal front, the primary surplus increased to Rs 1939 billion during July-January FY2024 from Rs 945 billion last

year. The fiscal deficit during July-January FY2024, however increased to 2.6 percent of GDP as compared to 2.3 percent recorded last year. The government is putting all its efforts to ensure prudent fiscal management through cautious expenditure and effective resource mobilization. Current Account posted a deficit of \$1.0 billion for July-February FY2024 as against a deficit of \$ 3.9 billion last year, with largely reflecting an improvement in trade balance. In February 2024 current account posted a surplus of \$ 128 million as against a deficit of \$ 50 million same period last year. Year-on-Year Exports increased by 16.2 percent to \$ 2.6 billion in February 2024 as compared to \$ 2.2 billion in February 2023 owing to ease in imports restriction and exchange rate stability which resulted in smooth supply of raw material for export-oriented industries.

The YoY imports also increased by 10.2 percent to \$4.3 billion in February 2024 as compared to \$3.9 billion same month last year. The Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) witnessed an inflow of \$ 131.2

million in February 2024 compared to an outflow of \$173 million in last month. Remittances also show an upward trend, it increased by 13.0 percent in February 2024 (\$ 2.2 billion) as compared to February 2023 (\$ 1.9 billion). SBP has maintained the policy rate at 22 percent on 18th March, 2024 - due to susceptible inflation outlook to risks amidst elevated inflation expectations. During 01st July-01st March, FY24 money supply (M2) registered growth of 3.8 percent (Rs 1192.1 billion) compared 1.14 percent growth (Rs 313.9 billion) in last year. To maintain the policy and reforms, efforts are vital to entrench economic and financial stability during last quarter of on-going fiscal year. Moreover, sustaining the pace of external inflows to meet upcoming gross financing needs and external sector stability is inevitable. According to the report, sustainable economic recovery requires continuation of fiscal consolidation and prudent policy stance, timely and adequate financial inflows to meet gross financing needs and external sector stability.

Alarming rise of kidnapping in the Philippines



Dr. Muhammad Akram Zaheer

Chinese women are reportedly being targeted in a new wave of gambling-related kidnappings in the Philippines, alarming Beijing's ambassadors in Manila and the local Filipino Chinese community. The Philippine Daily Inquirer reported that the Chinese Embassy has also investigated and verified specific cases to protect the legitimate rights and interests of Chinese citizens in the country. The victims are "mostly Chinese women, and recently Cambodian and Vietnamese," said Teresita Ang-Sec, founding president of the Movement for the Restoration of Peace and Order (MRPO). Several organized crime syndicates focusing exclusively on kidnap for ransoms operate in and around the National Capital Region. Some criminal groups target workers or customers of POGO companies, Chinese nationals, East and South Asian expatriates, short-term travelers, and members of the Chinese-Filipino business community and their families. Criminal abductions of Westerners occur less frequently, though the threat remains. Most victims are

rescued by authorities or released unharmed relatively quickly after the abductors receive a ransom payment. In the past three years, the Philippines has emerged as a major hub for online gaming, according to Filipino officials, attracting more than 100,000 Chinese nationals who work in virtual casinos catering to players back in China where gambling is illegal. The online casinos generate tax revenue and desperately needed jobs in Manila's crowded downtown area. But at the same time, they've pushed up rents and created new challenges for the Philippine National Police. Online gaming platforms allow players to gamble remotely. They sign up, choose a game and it is played over a livestream in another jurisdiction. Manila has become the number one hotspot worldwide for online gaming, in front of Malta, the Isle of Man and Curacao, according to David Lee, a lawyer at Taiwanese firm Lin & Partners who specializes in gaming laws. "The Philippines pioneered online casinos in the early 2000s, when Cagayan, a province to the north of the country, started awarding licenses to a handful of operators," explains Ben Lee, the founder of GamiX, a Macao-based consultancy firm focused on the gaming industry in Asia. "But they really took off in 2016, when President Rodrigo Duterte came into office."

Duterte handed the right to issue offshore gambling licenses to the Philippine Amusement and Gaming Corporation (PAGCOR), a government entity that operates casinos and regulates the industry. "It began to aggressively develop the industry by awarding dozens of licenses," said lawyer David Lee. Chinese businessmen were quick to seize the opportunity and the number of

POGOs mushroomed. Last November, Manila expelled hundreds of Chinese nationals who had been arrested in a series of raids against online gaming operations and other cyber-crimes in Palawan province, for allegedly working illegally in the country, according to CNN Philippines.

Many Chinese nationals working in the Philippine casino industry are attracted by the promise of jobs not available at home, experts say. "These are mostly young people, in their 20s, with little job prospects in China," said Ben Lee. Some are lured to the Philippines with the promise of high-paying jobs in prestigious tech companies, but upon arrival they discover they will be working for an online gambling platform and paid a fraction of what they were promised, he added. "The workers frequently have their passports confiscated, are crammed 10 to a room meant for three to four people and have to work 12-hour shifts, with only one day off per month," said Pito. On the job, they are expected to approach prospective players in social media chat groups and convince them to give online gaming a try, according to Lee. Once players are hooked, they are encouraged to wager increasing amounts of money, he added. POGOs cater to foreign customers and thus employ foreign nationals as customer service representatives to "effectively invite players and attend to their needs and concerns," the PAGCOR spokeswoman said. Most of these foreigners are Chinese nationals, she said. "But we can't categorically say they are based in China or are targeting players in China," she added. "They might be catering to Mandarin speaking people in other countries."

"In their free time, their Chinese employees often gamble at the casinos and end up in debt," explained Elmer Cereno, a spokesman for the Philippine National Police-Anti Kidnapping Group. "They are then approached by loan sharks who offer to lend them money. When they fail to pay it back, the loan sharks kidnap them and try to get ransom from their relatives back home, he said. On October 2019, police rescued two Chinese POGO workers, whose families had been asked to pay ransoms ranging between 68,000



The Ambassador of Iran to Pakistan, Dr Reza Amir Moghadam, called on President Asif Ali Zardari, at Alwan-e-Sadr, on 29-03-2024.

All 11 Senate candidates from Balochistan elected unopposed

Soon Times Correspondent

QUETTA: There will be no polling for the 11 Senate seats from Balochistan as all the candidates — seven on general seats and two each on seats reserved for women and technocrats — have been elected unopposed ahead of the election slated for April 2. Nine senators were declared winners a day earlier while the result was awaited on the two remaining technocrat seats. According to a Geo News report, Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam Fazl's (JUI-F) Maulana Abdul Wasey and Pakistan Peoples Party's (PPP) Bilal Khan Mandokhail have been elected on the reserved seats.

Moreover, the other nine candidates elected unopposed to the Senate from Balochistan include former caretaker prime minister Anwar-ul-Haq Kakar who has returned to the upper house as an independent candidate on a general seat. Similarly, Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz's (PML-N) Syed Nasir and Agha Shahzad Durani, PPP's Sardar Umar Gorgej, National Party's John Buleci, Awami National Party's Aimal Wali and JUI-F's Ahmed Khan have also been elected on general seats. Additionally, PML-N and PPP have secured the two women's seats that were up for grabs in the



province. The candidates that have been elected are PML-N's Rahat Jamali and PPP's Hasna Bibi.

In total, PML-N and PPP managed to get 5 seats each while JUI-F got two and ANP and National Party bagged each one seat each. Punjab senators elected unopposed. Earlier, seven candidates were elected unopposed as senators from Punjab on general seats. Those who have been elected as senators without facing any contest include PML-N leaders Pervaiz Rasheed, Nasir Mehmood and Talal Chaudhry. Subsequently, Interior Minister Mohsin Naqvi and Federal Minister for Economic Affairs Ahad Cheema were also elected unopposed as senators. Moreover, Sunni Ittehad Council

(SIC)-backed Raja Nasir Abbas, and Hamid Khan were also among the newly-elected parliamentarians. However, in Punjab, not all senators have been elected unopposed as elections will be held on the five seats reserved for technocrats, women and minorities. The Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) had announced holding the Senate elections on April 2 in order to fill 48 vacant seats. 52 seats in the upper house of parliament fell vacant after the expiration of the 6-year term of the incumbent senators last week. However, the ECP had announced polls for 48 seats as the four reserved seats for the erstwhile Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) had been abolished after the 25th Constitutional amendment.

APPOINTMENT

TANZEELA

Joined Daily Soon Times as
Correspondent from Nankana Sahib

All govt, non-govt and private offices are requested to cooperate with scribe for journalistic assignment

YouTube
DailySoonTimes
03218881125



Federal Minister for Finance and Revenue, Muhammad Aurangzeb, Inaugurating the gong ceremony during his visit Karachi Stock Exchange (PSX) on March 29, 2024

BISP points become hotbed of corruption; The beneficiaries face difficulties

Soon Times Correspondent

Sargodha: Deductions have been made on the amount given at Benazir Income Support Program points set up in different areas of Sargodha city. 1500 to 2000 rupees are being deducted from women per capita. Agent Mafia is active in this regard. The administration of Benazir Income Support Program Sargodha has become

a silent spectator. Non-payment of money to several women has also been revealed. Women say that we come from far away and agent mafia deals with us to get money. If the money is not given, we are sent back on the pretense of not having received the money. Apart from this, we are also pushed and abused. Action should also be taken against the agents mafia imposed on us by the government. Women often faint due to rush and sun exposure.

The women said that Chief Minister Punjab Maryam Nawaz has made many claims that the poor people will be benefited, but her claims have not come true. They have demanded from the Prime Minister of Pakistan Shehbaz Sharif that the money of the beneficiaries should be sent in their own bank accounts so that they can receive their money whenever they want from wherever they want. So that they can get rid of the agent mafia.

No discussion on China-Pakistan deals in negotiations: IMF

Soon Times Correspondent

ISLAMABAD The International Monetary Fund (IMF) has said that there was no discussion regarding Pakistan's agreements with China.

The IMF sources revealed inside story of the meetings held with political parties in July 2023.

They said the IMF does not discuss bilateral agreements of member countries.

During the meeting, the stand-by arrangement agreement was discussed



and it was suggested to freeze development budget to reduce the deficit. If the circular debt is not controlled, Pakistan would have to increase rates of utilities, the sources added.

They said the IMF termed Pakistan's

economic progress "encouraging," but pointed out the challenges it was still facing. It urged Pakistan to deal with political instability for sustainable growth. The donor expressed satisfaction at implementation of its recommendations in the stand-by agreement.

The sources said on-going stand-by arrangement agreement will expire in April after which new programme will be discussed. It is too early to say anything about the new loan programme, they added.

Social media savvy and pragmatic: The rise of Hafiz Naeem ur Rehman within JI ranks

Soon Times Correspondent

ISLAMABAD

Jamat-e-Islami (JI), the oldest religious-political party in Pakistan, is set to elect its new emir (leader) in early April for the next five years. Among the three names suggested by the party's shura (decision-making executive council), Hafiz Naeem ur Rehman, the current emir of the JI Karachi chapter, holds prominence for a couple of reasons — he has rejuvenated the party in the country's commercial hub and provided it with a "liberal, progressive and secular Islamic" outlook.

Unlike most Pakistani political parties,

in which the top slots are reserved for the party founder or their family members and relatives, JI has a worker to leadership ladder in place. Hafiz is a beneficiary of the same system and is among the few top politicians who come from a middle-class background.

Big Picture explores his journey from being a student activist to his current position of power, analysing the impact he has had on the party.

Road to party leadership

Hafiz's political career began at 16 when he joined the Islami Jamiat-e-Talaba (IJT), the student wing of JI, in 1988. Already drawn to the religious political ideology

espoused by JI founder Syed Abul Ala Maududi, he quickly rose through the ranks. This was the time when ethnic violence and fascism were escalating in the port city and other urban centres of Sindh.

By the age of 20, he had been beaten up, arrested, and booked in numerous cases. His leadership qualities, honed through clashes with rival student groups, propelled him to become the "nazim" (president) of his college and later, the head of IJT Karachi and Sindh. By 1998, he had reached the national level, becoming the Nazim-e-Aala of IJT Pakistan.

Aseefa Bhutto elected unopposed in NA-207 vacated by President Zardari

Soon Times Correspondent

NAWABSHAH:

Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) candidate and President Asif Ali Zardari's youngest daughter Aseefa Bhutto has been elected unopposed on the NA-207 Shaheed Benazirabad (former Nawabshah) 1 constituency.

The Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) has notified the election of Aseefa as National Assembly lawmaker without any contest.

It is noteworthy to mention here that 11 candidates, including Aseefa, had filed their nomination papers to contest the by-poll on the aforementioned seat vacated by Zardari who became president of Pakistan after being jointly nominated by the ruling coalition.

Three candidates withdrew their nomination papers, whereas, seven nominations were rejected, as per the top electoral authority.

Earlier, Aseefa had been declared the country's First Lady after Zardari sworn in as country's 14th head of state a day after he swept the presidential election after obtaining 411 electoral votes on March 9. The decision was taken by the PPP co-chairman after consulting the party leaders on recognising the scion of Bhutto family as



the first lady.

A first lady is the president's wife, however, in this case, President Zardari is a widower after his wife, former prime minister Benazir Bhutto, was martyred in 2007.

Since then, the president did not remarry and the position of the first lady also remained vacant during his first tenure as the country's president — from 2008 to 2013.

However, back then time it was different, as Aseefa was a teenager during her father's first tenure as the head of state, and currently, she is 31 years old.

Aseefa had actively been involved in the party's electoral campaign in the run-up to the February 8 polls and was seen leading various rallies in a bid to seek support for her brother Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari — the party's then-candidate for the prime minister's post.

Aseefa made her political debut at a PPP

'JI doesn't take decisions under pressure': Liaquat Baloch refutes PTI chairman's claim

Soon Times Correspondent

Islamabad

Jamat-e-Islami leader Liaquat Baloch Friday refuted claims made by Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) Chairman Barrister Gohar Khan regarding his party being "under pressure" and their failed meeting plans in Islamabad for talks on government formation following the February 8 general elections.

After the polls, the two parties were reportedly mulling to unite with PTI's successful independent candidates looking to join other parties in the parliament, so that they could jointly form a government in the provinces and Centre where they could have possessed a majority number of parliamentarians.

Gohar, however, claimed that the JI was "under pressure" not to talk to PTI on the said matter and the party's leadership was avoiding meetings with him.

The PTI lawmaker's comment came during his appearance in Geo News programme 'Capital Talk' in which he said the JI leaders did not attend a meeting that was decided to take place between him, Liaquat Baloch and other leaders of both parties.

However, in a video released by JI, Baloch said: "There was no pressure on us, JI doesn't take decisions under pressure."

In the wake of his several failed attempts to meet with Gohar and PTI's plans to only talk regarding a government formation in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, the JI veteran maintained that his party's central majlis-e-shura considered it right to welcome whatever decision the PTI made, as there was divisiveness amongst its leadership on matters.



The politician added that JI unconditionally wanted to facilitate PTI across the country and that the party would again hold consultations on the new proposal shared by PTI. Despite Gohar's claim, the senior politico has shared his willingness to still meet with the PTI chief. "Insha'Allah, I would meet Barrister Gohar myself and we want contact to increase between Opposition parties."

He added that there is no room for any misunderstanding among Opposition parties, which could benefit the "establishment and anti-Opposition" powers.

At the start of the video, Baloch said that the stance shared by Barrister Gohar Khan was not completely true.

"The truth is that KP Chief Minister Ali Amin Gandapur had contacted JI chief Siraj-ul-Haq after the February 8 elections, seeking JI's support in providing a platform for the independent candidates backed by the PTI."

He added that the party conducted [internal] consultations following Gandapur's request and a committee was formed as a result that decided that they would gather in Islamabad on February 12.

'Culprits of Bisham attack to be brought to justice', security czar assures Chinese team

Soon Times Correspondent

Islamabad

Briefing an special investigation team of China, Interior Minister Mohsin Naqvi Friday expressed the government's resolve to bring culprits of Besham terrorist attack to justice at all costs.

The development comes after a terror attack in Shangla's Besham city claimed the lives of at least six people, including five Chinese engineers, working on the Dasu Dam, earlier this week.

The victims were killed when an explosive-laden vehicle hit the bus carrying them on the Karakoram Highway in the Bisham area on Tuesday.

During his interaction with the Beijing's probe team at Chinese Embassy in Islamabad, the security czar informed them about the progress made so far in the investigations into the tragic incident.

Measures pertaining to protection of Chinese nationals and overall security were also discussed on the occasion.

The federal minister also met the Chinese

ambassador and updated him on the probe into Besham incident.

In the meantime, civil work at the sites of the Dasu and Diamer-Bhasha Dams has been temporarily suspended by the Chinese companies overseeing operations due to security concerns.

Approximately 991 Chinese engineers were working on both projects, while the local staff has been told to stay at home till further instructions, an official working on the project confirmed to the publication.

Similarly, GM Diamer-Bhasha Dam (DBD) Nazakat Hussain also confirmed that the Chinese company had suspended work on the dam. He said around 500 Chinese nationals were engaged in DBD but the FWO staff continues to work. Around 6,000 locals are busy in dam construction.

He hoped that the situation would normalise in a few days, leading to the return of Chinese employees. The Diamer-Bhasha Dam would produce 4,800 MW of electricity through hydropower generation.



Ambassador of Azerbaijan to Pakistan H.E. Khazar Farhadov called on Minister of State for IT and Telecommunication Ms. Shaza Fatima Khawaja in Islamabad on March 29, 2024.



Palestinian PM Mustafa forms cabinet, calls for immediate ceasefire in Gaza



RAMALLAH Palestinian Prime Minister Mohammed Mustafa formed a new cabinet on Thursday in which he will also serve as foreign minister, making an immediate ceasefire and Israeli withdrawal from Gaza a priority. Palestinian news agency Wafa reported. Mustafa, an ally to President Mahmoud Abbas and a leading business figure, was appointed premier this month with a mandate to help reform the Palestinian Authority (PA), which exercises limited self-rule in the Israeli-occupied West Bank. He was also assigned to lead the relief and rebuilding of Gaza, which has been shattered by more than five months of war, while he performs double-duty as foreign minister, replacing Riyad al-Maliki who had served in the position since 2009. Abbas, who as president remains by far the most powerful figure in the PA, appointed the new government in a demonstration of willingness to meet international demands for change.

Russia attacks Ukrainian energy sector with missiles, Kyiv says



KYIV (Reuters) - Ukraine's energy facilities were the target of an overnight Russian missile and drone attack in which thermal and hydro power plants were damaged, Ukrainian power grid operator Ukrenergo said on Friday. The sweeping attacks, the biggest of which came last Friday, have already caused major damage to generating and transmission Ukrainian facilities, forcing Kyiv to halt power exports and rely on imports. "During the night, the Russians struck again at energy facilities in a massive and combined attack," Ukrenergo said on the Telegram messaging app. "Thermal and hydroelectric power plants in the central and western regions were damaged," it said. Ukrenergo noted that emergency shutdowns were applied in the country's south-eastern Dnipropetrovsk region. Ukrainian television reported this morning that explosions were heard in Ukraine's Ivano-Frankivsk and Khmelnytskyi regions and the city of Dnipro as Russian cruise missiles were spotted in Ukrainian airspace.

Bangladesh peg hopes on Shakib return for Test lift



Bangladesh were counting on the return of veteran all-rounder Shakib Al Hasan for a much-needed energy lift ahead of the second and final Test against Sri Lanka, stand-in coach Nie Pothas said Friday. Sri Lanka thrashed Bangladesh by 328 runs in the first match of the series, with the hosts failing to post 200 in either innings. Shakib is returning to the Test squad for the Chittagong match starting Saturday after more than a year's absence, and after being elected to the Bangladesh parliament in January. "I think any team that has Shakib in it is very fortunate. We welcome him back," Pothas told reporters. "It is always great to have him in the change room. His energy is very infectious," he said. "He has a lot of experience for the guys to learn from, and whenever Shakib is back, he's a giver. So we really enjoy having him around the group." Pothas also defended Bangladesh's under-fire batsmen, saying the team was in the middle of a generational change. "We have a very young and inexperienced group. There was a very elite group before this. Now we have to build," he said. "The only thing that we request is that people be patient. These are very good young players, but they are young, and they're playing against an experienced team, and it will take time."



Rybakina roars back to end Azarenka's Miami dream

Rybakina beat Victoria Azarenka 6-4, 0-6, 7-6 (7/2) to reach the Miami Open WTA final

MIAAMI World number four Elena Rybakina was pushed all the way by veteran Victoria Azarenka before reaching the Miami Open WTA final with a 6-4, 0-6, 7-6 (7/2) victory on Thursday. Rybakina will meet the winner of Thursday's other semi between American Danielle Collins and Russian Ekaterina Alexandrova. The 24-year-old returns to the Miami final for the second straight year after losing to Czech Petra Kvitova in 2023. Her form -- and the absence of any of the top three in the world -- suggests she will be the strong favorite whoever makes it to face her in Saturday's title showdown. So far this year, the Kazakhstan player has won titles in Brisbane, Abu Dhabi and her first WTA 1000 final of the year in Doha. Her serve looked too much for Azarenka in the first set but then faded badly in the second before breaking to go 3-2 up in the third. But the 34-year-old Azarenka, a three-times winner at Miami, showed all her dogged spirit as she broke back to make it 5-5 and keep alive her hopes of an unlikely run to the final. But in the tie-break, Rybakina found her serve in spectacular fashion, leaving Azarenka helpless with a fearsome ace to go 3-0 up. The outcome never looked in doubt from that point on but 2022 Wimbledon champion Rybakina, who withdrew from her Indian Wells title defense this month because of illness, said she had been in trouble physically in the second set. "There was a pause where I stayed on the court and I think I should have maybe left (for) a bit because it was really humid and tough conditions, the energy just went down and Vika came back very aggressively. "After three games when I lost so easily it was very difficult to regroup so I knew there would be a third set and I was just trying to prepare for it," she added.

Taiwan's navy chief to visit US next week, sources say



WASHINGTON-TAIPEI Taiwan's navy chief, Tang Hua, will visit the United States from next week to attend a military ceremony and discuss how to boost bilateral naval cooperation as China raises threats toward the island, six people briefed on the trip said. While Taiwan and the United States have a close relationship, it is unofficial, as Washington formally recognizes China, not the democratically governed island that Beijing claims as its own territory. Taiwan rejects China's territorial claims. The six security sources said Tang would visit Hawaii, home of the US 10th Fleet Command, for a Pacific Fleet change-of-command ceremony. Three of them said Tang was then expected to attend the April 8-10 Sea-Air-Space conference near Washington and that talks were under way to arrange a meeting with the US chief of naval operations, Admiral Lisa Franchetti. The sources spoke to Reuters on condition of anonymity given the trip's sensitivity. Taiwan's navy and the Pentagon declined to comment. Unlike visits to the US by senior officials from allies like Japan and Britain, conducted openly, those of Taiwanese officials, especially military, are kept low key and often not officially confirmed.

A growing number of Americans end up in Russian jails. The prospects for their release are unclear



TALLINN, Estonia A journalist on a reporting trip in a Ural Mountains city. A corporate security executive traveling to Moscow for a wedding. A dual national returning to her hometown in Tatarstan to visit her family. All of them are U.S. citizens, and all are behind bars in Russia on charges of varying severity. Arrests of Americans in Russia have become increasingly common as relations between Moscow and Washington sink to Cold War lows. Washington accuses Moscow of targeting its citizens and using them as political bargaining chips, but Russian officials insist they all broke the law. Some have been exchanged for Russians held in the U.S., while for others, the prospects of being released in a swap are less clear. "It seems that since Moscow itself has cut off most of the communication channels and does not know how to restore them properly without losing face, they are trying to use the hostages. ... At least that's what it looks like," said Boris Bondarev, a former Russian diplomat who quit after Moscow invaded Ukraine in 2022.



Venezuela's huge diaspora struggles to register to vote

Buenos Aires Millions of Venezuelans who fled economic misery in their country could find themselves unable to vote in key July presidential elections, as complaints mount over hurdles at consulates abroad for those seeking to register. "We want to vote, we want to vote!" I chanted a small group of Venezuelans protesting outside their consulate in Argentina's capital in recent days, holding mock-ups of urns and ballot papers after being unable to sign up. Election registration was meant to start on March 18 and will run for a month, before the July 28 vote in which President Nicolas Maduro is seeking a third term. But in some countries in Latin America and Europe, the process hasn't even started yet. "Each consulate has its demands, there is nothing official... no uniform criteria" to register, said Venezuelan Adriana Flores outside the consulate in Buenos Aires. "Ridiculous" excuses The United Nations estimates that almost eight million Venezuelans have fled their country since 2014 -- the year after Maduro took office. The past decade has seen a severe economic crisis marked by runaway inflation and food and medicine shortages, plunging the population into misery. The Venezuelan civil rights NGO

US provides Maryland \$60 million to start rebuild of collapsed Baltimore bridge



BALTIMORE The US government awarded the state of Maryland an initial \$60 million in emergency funds to clear debris and begin rebuilding the collapsed Francis Scott Key Bridge in Baltimore, an extraordinarily fast disbursement after such a disaster. The bridge came tumbling down early on Tuesday after a massive cargo freighter that had lost power plowed into the structure in Baltimore Harbor. Two bodies have been recovered and four others are missing and presumed dead, believed to be trapped in a vehicle beneath concrete and steel that fell into the water. Maryland Governor Wes Moore had requested the \$60 million earlier on Friday, and within hours the US Department of Transportation's Federal Highway Administration approved the request to fund emergency work. Such funding typically takes days, but President Joe Biden told reporters on Tuesday he directed the federal government to "move heaven and earth" to quickly rebuild the bridge, which forms part of a highway looping around Baltimore. Moore told a press conference the top priority was to recover the missing construction workers who were conducting repairs on the bridge when the vessel known as the Dali struck a support column around 1:30 a.m. Tuesday morning. Officials then hope to clear the channel in order to resume shipping operations, tend to workers, families and first responders affected by the tragedy, and rebuild the bridge. But first a team of experts must assess how to remove the stuck vessel, loaded with thousands of containers and trapped by bridge debris. The US Army Corps of Engineers was bringing in the largest crane on the Eastern Seaboard to remove pieces of bridge, Moore said.

Erdogan to visit US on May 9, security official says



ANKARA Turkey's President Tayyip Erdogan will visit the United States on May 9, a Turkish security official said on Friday, setting the stage for his first White House meeting during the Biden administration. Yet strains persist, including over northern Syria, where US forces are allied with Kurdish militants that Ankara deems terrorists. Washington has also pressed Ankara to do more to halt goods transiting to Russia that it says are used in Moscow's war effort in Ukraine. The official did not provide any further information on the visit, but said Turkey's top intelligence official

Ibrahim Kalin will meet with members of the U.S. House of Representatives for talks on the planned visit and other bilateral issues. On Thursday and Friday, Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan and Defence Minister Yasur Guler also met the U.S. delegation. There was no immediate comment from Washington or the U.S. Embassy in Ankara on the visit. Analysts say that Biden and Erdogan will also likely discuss the Israel-Hamas war - amid strongly critical remarks by Erdogan of Israel's actions - and also defence industry cooperation including Turkey's recently-approved purchase of U.S. F-16 fighter jets.