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## Govt touts PIA deal as 'best possible outcome'

**A**s the PIA privatisation received criticism from different quarters, the federal government on Wednesday 24 Dec defended the transaction that paved the way for a successful bid of Rs135 billion, saying it retained a 25pc share in the national airline, which translates into Rs45 billion.

On Tuesday 23 Dec., the Arif Habib-led consortium won the auction for a controlling stake in the PIA after a competitive bidding process, including two other entities. Under this deal, about Rs10 billion will go to the national exchequer while the rest of the money will be funnelled into the PIA for its revival.

Against this backdrop, the government on Wednesday 24 Dec. appeared to be defending the deal as the best possible option.

Aviation Minister Khawaja Asif said the government was content with the transaction and termed it symbolic. According to the aviation minister, "...This is the first biggest transaction of our privatisation process. This transaction has a great symbolic value."

He said the government still retained 25pc of PIA's shares and 92.5 of the amount from the sale being invested back into the airline was actually an investment in a national asset. "We did not give a handout to anyone," he asserted, adding that the country had borne losses for 50-55 years following nationalisation of businesses.

"We have to construct such transactions [as that of PIA's sale] to rid [the national exchequer] of these losses. We don't have a choice. We are beggars, not the choosers," Mr Asif said, adding that several other transactions were to be carried out in the future.

Meanwhile, Adviser to the Prime Minister on Privatisation Muhammad Ali, while addressing a post-PIA privatisation press conference in Islamabad, also dispelled the impression that the PIA was sold off without financial liabilities.

He said the government was transferring liabilities worth Rs180 billion to the new buyer, adding that the long-term debt of Rs650 billion was not passed on as no one would be interested in the deal due to such a debt that carried an annual interest of 15pc.

The winning bid was of Rs135 billion for 75pc shares, of which 92.5pc would go to the airline, he said, adding, "If we had not ensured this, PIA would never be revived."

Besides Rs10 billion, the government has the equity of Rs45 billion in the form of its 25pc share. If 75pc shares have the value of Rs135 billion,

then the value of all shares is Rs180 billion, he said, adding that if the private buyer wanted to acquire these shares, they would have to pay Rs45 billion to the government. He also clarified that non-core assets, including the two major hotels, were not part of the deal. Only the PIA aviation, engineering, training, handling, cargo, and flight kitchen were

part of the deal.

### 'Tremendous opportunity'

Mr Ali said the private sector had a tremendous opportunity to take the PIA to new heights. "We have delivered to them a positive balance sheet having equity of Rs9 billion, and the greatest needs are investment, acquisition of new aircraft and efficient management for the airline that has a vast market, demand and landing rights and air service agreements with 97 countries."

The main purpose behind the privatisation is that the private sector is the best-suited to run these businesses, he said, adding that the federal government would not engage in any sort of business in the aviation sector. However, there are no restrictions on provinces launching an airline.

In the past, the government could not run the national flag-carrier and faced a loss of Rs40 to Rs50 billion annually, he said, adding that between 2015 and 2024, the PIA suffered a loss of Rs500 billion.

Despite all odds, PIA has the capacity to grow to become a full-service carrier since it does not have long-term debt and investment can be increased beyond the commitment made by the bidder.

### 'Regional airline'

He said the PIA had been reduced to a regional airline, serving mostly the Middle East. Out of the 33 aircraft, 24 were inducted in the fleet before 2010, and these

were about 25 years old. Seven aircraft were almost 15 years old, while only two aircraft were from 2017.

Out of the 18 operational aircraft, 12 are leased while only six aircraft are owned by the PIA. He said the PIA had only 30pc of the domestic market share against 80pc in the past.

Meanwhile, the Privatisation Commission board recommended that the bid offer submitted by Arif Habib Consortium be sent to the Cabinet Committee on Privatisation for consideration and approval.

Separately, the Standing Committee on Defence, in its meeting on Wednesday 24 Dec. acknowledged the defence ministry's efforts for a transparent bidding process.

### Opposition rejects deal

The Tehreek Tahafuz Ayeen-i-Pakistan, a PTI-led opposition alliance, rejected the privatisation process, warning that any attempt to dispose of the national asset without public mandate, parliamentary oversight, transparency, and constitutional legitimacy would be unacceptable and void in moral and political terms.

It issued a warning to all local and international private parties, investors, lenders, and intermediaries that "any entity choosing to conduct business or enter into agreements with this illegal government does so entirely at its own risk".



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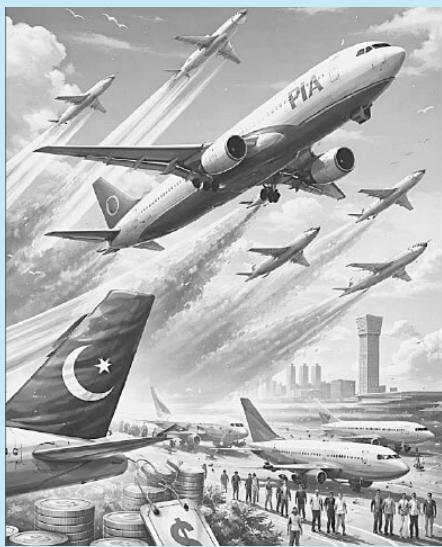
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## Time to make PIA a budget airline



HERE has been much controversy and debate over the privatisation of Pakistan International Airlines (PIA), with everyone having a view about how profitable, or unprofitable, the deal happens to be for the government. But there is hardly any discussion on what actually does the deal mean, or should mean, for the people of Pakistan.

Every single day, thousands of Pakistanis forgo air travel simply because it is too expensive. While neighbouring countries embrace budget carriers that make flying affordable, Pakistan remains stuck in an outdated aviation model. With PIA finally having been privatised, the country stands at a crossroads: continue patching the old model, or seize the opportunity to build a modern low-cost airline that serves ordinary Pakistanis.

Pakistan needs a fresh approach to air travel; one that reflects global trends and modern passenger needs. The federal government and the new stakeholders must re-establish PIA as a low-cost airline. Low-cost carriers, also known as budget or no-frills airlines, have transformed aviation worldwide by making air travel accessible. This concept is neither new nor experimental.

Let us take a look at the evidence. The world's largest low-cost airline, Southwest Airlines, accounts for 11 per cent of global available seat kilometres, which is a measure of passenger capacity. Europe's Ryanair represents another 10pc. Together, they demonstrate that disciplined, simple business models can

deliver both profit-ability and accessibility. If designed properly, PIA could follow these principles while serving domestic and regional routes. But management structure will determine success or failure.

For the first decade, the management contract should be einventory remains limited and predictable. PIA should adopt this strategy, selecting ontrusted to a reputable low-cost operator rather than any Pakistani entity. This would help insulate the airline from undue political pressures and ensure merit-based decision-making. An external management team with a significant, proven track record would bring the discipline, efficiency and transparency that Pakistan's aviation sector lacks.

Low-cost airlines succeed by reducing operational expenses through fleet standardisation. Southwest and Ryanair operate only Boeing 737 aircraft, creating unified fleets. This allows any pilot to fly any aircraft in the system, enhances crew flexibility, and reduces training costs.

Maintenance becomes cheaper because engineers specialise in a single model. Spare-parts ne aircraft type to minimise costs and streamline operations.

Operating through secondary airports offers another advantage. Many Pakistanis abroad live near secondary airports. These airports charge lower landing fee, allow faster turnaround times and enable airlines to offer competitive fares while maintaining reliable schedules.

Besides, the airline should rely entirely on its website for ticket sales, eliminating third-party commissions. True to the low-cost model, PIA should operate with a single-cabin configuration, maximising seating capacity. Food and beverages should be sold as add-ons rather than included in ticket prices. Baggage rules must be strict and transparent, with only small carry-on luggage included in base fares. A low-cost airline like PIA could make air travel more affordable, boost tourism, increase domestic travel, and create thousands of jobs in aviation and related sectors. Introducing such a carrier would expand travel options, encourage competition, and help restore public confidence in Pakistan's aviation industry. (Nabeel Badr Islamabad)

## PIA to resume direct flights to London from March 29



Pakistan International Airlines (PIA) announced on Tuesday 30 Dec. that it was resuming direct flights to London in March 2026, after a six-year hiatus.

In a statement, a PIA spokesperson said the national flag carrier was increasing its flights to the United Kingdom. He said the airline would operate four weekly flights from Islamabad to London from March 29, 2026.

He said the flights would be operated from Heathrow Airport's Terminal 4. "The flights are being resumed after a long gap of six years," he said.

The spokesperson further said that London was the airline's "first-ever" international destination and remained one of its most important routes.

He said that the national carrier was already operating three weekly flights to Manchester.

In June 2020, the European Union Air Safety Agency had barred PIA from operating in EU countries over safety concerns after a flight from Lahore to Karachi crashed near Jinnah International Airport, killing around 100 passengers.

The ban on flights followed the then-aviation minister Ghulam Sarwar Khan's statement on the floor of parliament, where he termed pilots' licences "dubious".

The European agency lifted the ban after more than four years on Nov 28, 2024. In July 2025, the UK removed Pakistan from its Air Safety List, allowing Pakistani airlines to apply to operate flights in Britain.

In September, PIA received the go-ahead to resume direct flights to the UK after a gap of nearly five years. Subsequently, the airline resumed flights to the UK, with flight operations to Manchester resuming in the first phase.

At the time, the airline had said it planned to extend operations to Birmingham and London as well.

## Ranking of Pakistani passport improves by five places on global index



Pakistan's passport ranking has improved on the Henley Index, rising from 103 in 2025 to 98 this year, according to figures released on Thursday 15 Jan.

According to the latest rankings, Pakistan's travel document was placed 98th on the list, improving by five places and tying with Yemen. The index ranked Pakistan above Iraq (99), Syria (100) and Afghanistan (101).

The ranking showed that the Pakistani passport allows visa-free access to 31 countries, including visa-on-arrival facilities.

Singapore topped the index with visa-free access to 192 countries, followed by Japan and South Korea with 188. Denmark, Luxembourg, Spain, Sweden and Switzerland jointly ranked third, with visa-free access to 186 countries.

*Singapore tops list with access to 192 countries*

According to the Henley Index, Pakistani passport holders have visa-free access to Barbados, Cook Islands, Dominica, Haiti, Micronesia, Montserrat, Rwanda, St Vincent and the Grenadines, Trinidad and Tobago, and Vanuatu.

Visa-on-arrival is available for Burundi, Cambodia, Cape Verde Islands, Comoro Islands, Djibouti, Guinea-Bissau, Madagascar, Maldives, Mozambique, Nepal, Niue, Palau Islands, Qatar, Samoa, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Timor-Leste and Tuvalu.

Pakistani passport holders can also avail an Electronic Travel Authorisation (ETA) for Kenya, Seychelles and Sri Lanka.

In a post on X, Interior Minister Mohsin Naqvi welcomed the

development, terming it a "strong achievement" and vowing that the "momentum will continue".

In October last year, the Pakistani passport ranked the fourth worst for the fifth consecutive year, with a ranking of 103.

Pakistan's passport has been declared the world's fourth worst since at least 2021 on the Henley Index, which calculates countries' "visa-free score" — the number of destinations travellers can access without a prior visa or with a visa on arrival.

The travel document was ranked 100th in 2024 and 2023, 109th in 2022, when it allowed entry into 32 countries without a prior visa, and 107th in 2021 with the same visa-free score.

## Sialkot International Airport becomes Pakistan's second cashless international airport

Sialkot, Pakistan, Sialkot International Airport Limited (SIAL) is proud to announce that it has successfully transitioned into Pakistan's second international airport, operating on a cashless payment system with the coordination of Meezan Bank.

This strategic move aligns with the directives of the State Bank of Pakistan and reflects SIAL's commitment to supporting the nation's drive toward a more transparent, secure, and digitally enabled economy.

With this implementation, all financial transactions within the airport across counters, concessions, lounges, parking, and retail will be conducted through digital channels, ensuring efficiency and convenience for passengers, business partners, and stakeholders.

Chairman SIAL, Mr. Hassan Ali

Bhatti, said, that the initiative is a significant step in strengthening modern airport operations. "Becoming a cashless airport is not just a technological shift; it is an investment in customer ease, financial accountability, and operational excellence".

Vice Chairman SIAL, Mr. Waqas Afzal stated that the transition reaffirms SIAL's commitment to innovation, digital transformation, and service enhancement, while positioning the airport among the country's aviation industry leaders adopting progressive reforms.

CEO SIAL AVM Tanweer Ashraf Bhatti (R) stated that Sialkot International Airport will continue to collaborate with regulatory bodies and industry stakeholders to expand digital accessibility and elevate the travel experience for millions of passengers in the years to come.



## Bangladesh, Pakistan set to resume direct flights after 14 years

Bangladesh and Pakistan will resume direct flights after more than a decade, with Dhaka's national airline set to operate its first Dhaka-Karachi flight on January 29, while Pakistan International Airlines (PIA) will restart direct Lahore-London flights from March 30.

Biman Bangladesh Airlines will begin operations between Dhaka and Karachi. The resumption of the route, with two weekly flights, will be the first since 2012, significantly improving connectivity between the two South Asian nations.

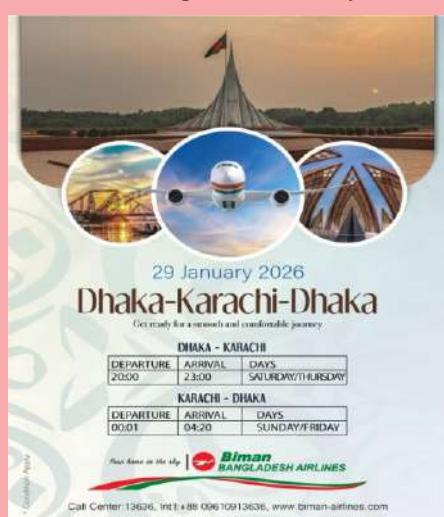
"We are relaunching the Dhaka-Karachi route with two weekly flights," airline manager Bosra Islam told media on Thursday 8 Jan..

"The resumption of direct flights will significantly improve connectivity between Bangladesh and Pakistan, supporting business travel, tourism, and family reunions," Biman Bangladesh Airlines said in a statement.

Travellers between Bangladesh and Pakistan must currently use connecting flights through Gulf hubs such as Dubai and Doha.

Cargo ships had resumed sailing from Karachi to Bangladesh's key port of Chittagong in November 2024.

Relations between Pakistan and Bangladesh remained shaky during the rule of ousted prime minister Sheikh Hasina. However, following the popular revolt against her government and her subsequent exile, relations between the two countries improved markedly.



## After off-loading spree, new desk to guide air travelers

The Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) has set up pre-departure facilitation desks at all its zonal offices nationwide to assist international travellers, Interior Minister Mohsin Naqvi said on Sunday 4 Jan., following widespread complaints over passenger offloading at airports.

The move comes after around 66,154 passengers were offloaded last year despite holding valid documents, particularly at Lahore and Karachi airports, amid a post-2024 Greece boat tragedy crackdown on migrant smuggling, which claimed several Pakistani lives.

Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif had ordered the formation of a special committee to probe the frequent offloading of travellers, which has triggered growing concern and criticism from affected passengers.

Taking to his X account, Mr Naqvi wrote: "Pleased to share that the Federal Investigation Agency has launched Pre-Departure Facilitation Desks across all zonal offices with immediate effect."

According to the minister, the initiative aims to provide guidance and assistance to international travellers on immigration procedures and clearances, ensuring a smoother and more hassle-free travel experience.

The desks have been established in eleven zones — including the Islamabad zonal office in Sector G-6 — and will be accessible for intending international travellers, as well as through helplines and email services.

An FIA spokesperson told media the desks will be operational for international

travellers — even over the weekend — with experienced immigration staff deputed to facilitate citizens.

"The immigration staff, headed by the assistant director and assisted by an inspector and a sub-inspector, will be available for citizens to provide them with details of visa documents required to travel, which visa is needed, a return ticket and how much currency they can keep with them, among other details," he said.

The spokesperson said the facilitation desks have been set up at FIA zonal offices for international travellers — both locals and foreigners — seeking travel-related information, with immigration staff available from 9am to 5pm, Monday to Sunday.

"Main zonal offices are located across the country, including Islamabad serving the federal capital territory, Karachi covering Sindh, Lahore covering Punjab, Peshawar covering Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Quetta covering Balochistan. Zonal offices are also located in Gujranwala, Faisalabad and Multan," he added.

Last month, FIA authorities told the National Assembly Standing Committee on Overseas Pakistanis and Human Resource Development that it offloaded 66,154 passengers from Pakistani Airports in 2025 compared to 2024's figure of 35,000.

Initially, FIA authorities were reluctant to share details of the large-scale offloading of international travellers, despite repeated media queries and complaints from passengers who said they were stopped despite holding valid travel documents.

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A SIGN displayed at Karachi airport provides travellers with contact information for the new pre-departure facilitation desk.



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# **New Gwadar International Airport successfully conducts first full-scale airport emergency exercise 2026**

**G**wadar - New Gwadar International Airport (NGIAP) successfully conducted its first Full-Scale Airport Emergency Exercise under the auspices of Pakistan Airports Authority (PAA).

The exercise was carried out in accordance with the guidelines of the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) and approved Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs). The primary objective of the exercise was to assess and enhance the effectiveness of the airport's emergency management system and to ensure a high level of preparedness in response to potential aviation emergencies. All relevant stakeholders and responding agencies actively participated in the exercise, demonstrating effective inter-agency coordination, professionalism, and timely response. The drill provided a comprehensive evaluation of airport emergency response mechanisms, safety procedures, and operational readiness.

The successful conduct of the Full-Scale Emergency Exercise reflects PAA's continued commitment to strengthening aviation safety, ensuring passenger protection, and aligning airport operations with international aviation standards.



## FFC joins winning consortium after PIA auction

FaujiFertiliser Company (FFC) on Wednesday 24 Dec. decided to join a consortium led by the Arif Habib Corporation Limited, which emerged as the winning bidder for the acquisition of a 75 per cent stake in Pakistan International Airlines (PIA) on Tuesday 25 Dec.

Confirming the development, Arif Habib told media that FFC had joined his consortium and that discussions were under way to finalise the terms and conditions of the partnership. FFC was one of the four bidders for the acquisition of a 75pc stake in PIA, but it withdrew from the bidding process ahead of the submission and opening of bids.

Under the conditions, a bidder that withdraws has the right to join the winning consortium, subject to meeting the criteria set by the Privatisation Commission.

Adviser to the Prime Minister on Privatisation Muhammad Ali welcomed the move, saying it would strengthen the consortium both financially and in terms of management depth, expertise and global linkages.

'PIA will require a financially and operationally sound consortium if we want to make it a global leader in aviation.

'The participation of FaujiFertiliser will help in achieving this ambition and is an encouraging development,' he said.

Earlier, during a press conference, Mr Ali described FaujiFertiliser as a sound and strong group with management expertise and presence.



Of the stranded containers, around 3,000 originate from Malaysia and contain palm oil intended for edible use in Afghanistan.

## Govt allows re-export of transit cargo

The government has allowed the re-export of transit cargo stuck at Pakistani ports to save Afghan importers from rising demurrage charges.

At a time when there is no indication that the border with Afghanistan will reopen soon, importers engaged in Afghan Transit Trade (ATT) have requested that the Ministry of Commerce grant a one-time waiver for the re-export of over 6,500 containers stuck at Karachi ports, as they are incurring rising demurrage charges.

The need for re-export arose after the border crossing between Pakistan and Afghanistan was closed on Oct 11, 2025 leading to a near-complete halt of bilateral trade and movement of transit cargo.

Pakistan-Afghanistan relations have deteriorated amid tensions over the banned Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). After successive rounds, Pakistan declared the talks effectively over on Nov 7, after which Afghanistan suspended trade ties. Pakistan had already closed its border following the October clashes.

"Yes, we have issued letters to individual importers who are approaching the ministry to re-export their cargo," an official at the Ministry of Commerce told media on Tuesday 13 Jan. The official added that the commerce minister had the power to grant a one-time exemption.

Interestingly, the commerce ministry has not officially announced the decision but has begun issuing letters to intended importers who approached the ministry for re-export permission.

The largest number of stranded containers — approximately 3,000 — originates from Malaysia and contains palm oil intended for edible use in Afghanistan. "We have already issued letters to most palm oil importers to re-

export their containers," the official said. But he declined to specify the exact number of palm oil containers approved for re-export.

Re-export is subject to approval from the Ministry of Commerce on a case-by-case basis.

A customs official told media that the number of containers stranded at the Chaman and Torkham borders was not big, ranging between 600 and 700.

Instead, the bulk of transit cargo was stuck at the two ports in Karachi.

### Envoy's plea to Islamabad

The cargos, sourced mostly from China and Vietnam, are currently stranded at Karachi, the official said. He added that the ambassadors of these countries had approached the government to seek approval for re-export.

Following these consultations, the government has decided to allow all importers to re-export their cargo from Karachi.

This move offers Afghan importers an opportunity to use alternative ports or routes to transport their goods to the Afghan market.

This decision, according to the official, will allow importers to use other ports for the transportation of their goods to Afghanistan.

On Dec 3, Islamabad allowed clearing of consignments imported on humanitarian grounds. In the first phase, 143 containers carrying such goods were given permission for transit at Chaman and Torkham.

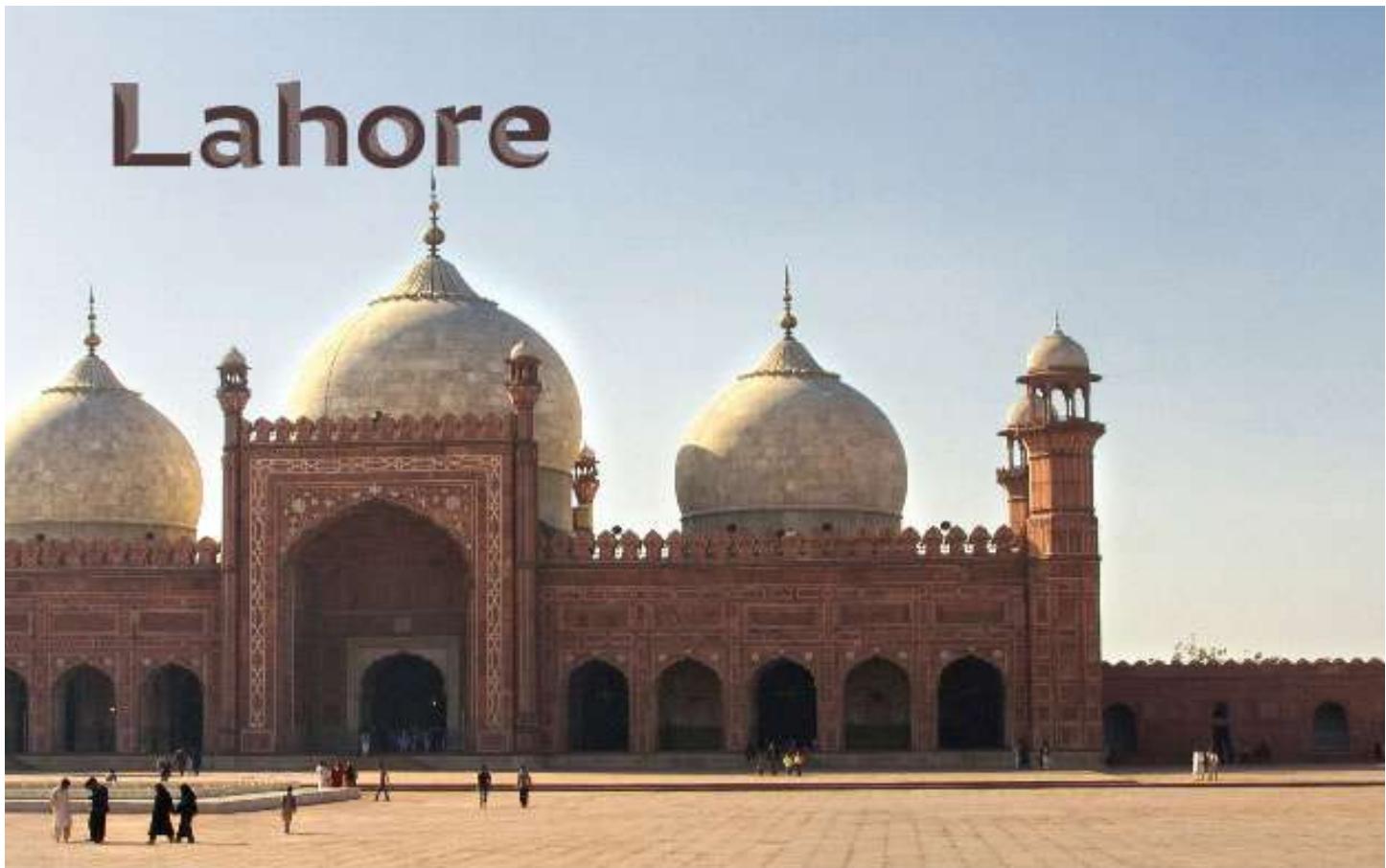
A breakdown shows that 67 of the containers carried assistance from the World Food Programme, 74 were loaded with supplies for children donated by Unicef, and two containers had healthcare and family support items from another UN agency.

According to the customs official, since the Taliban government has barred the entry of these containers, none had crossed the border for the past three months.

The volume of Afghan imports transiting through Pakistan has declined sharply over the past two years falling to \$2.4 billion in FY24 from \$6.7bn in FY23, and dropping further to \$1.01bn in FY25.

With the current suspension of trade, industry estimates suggest the figure could slip below the \$1bn mark during the current fiscal, deepening the shift in Afghanistan's import routes and suppliers.

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## PIA lost over Rs30bn due to negligence, PAC told

The Pakistan International Airlines Corporation (PIACL) lost over Rs30 billion due to the alleged negligence of its management, resulting in the prolonged grounding of aircraft and the failure to dispose of spare parts and retired aircraft.

Officials from the Auditor General's office informed the Public Accounts Committee (PAC) that PIA aircraft took an extended time in routine maintenance ranging from 44 to 239 days. The audit officials stated that this delay resulted in substantial operational and financial losses in 2022.

While discussing audit objections of the Aviation Division and the Ministry of Defence for the fiscal year 2023-24, officials revealed that one aircraft was grounded for 652 days.

The audit department was of the view that due to the negligence of the management, extended delays occurred which resulted in unjustified losses amounting to Rs21.82bn.

Similarly, PIA picked up further losses of Rs8.6bn due to the non-disposal of spare parts and retired aircraft.

The audit observed that the management had held an inventory of spare parts for retired aircraft valued at Rs8.566 billion since 2015 to 2021, which had not been disposed of in violation of rules.

These spares included parts from 747, 707, Cessna, SA-310 and WB-737 aircraft. It observed that the failure to dispose of spare parts showed negligence and inefficiency.

Besides losing Rs2.61bn due to the non-implementation of the board of directors regarding properties, and another Rs1.669bn due to irregular payments made without validation of the user department, PIA also suffered a loss of Rs0.112bn from the irregular procurement of stores and spares. The audit pointed out that PIA management had procured various items without observing Public Procurement Regulatory Authority rules and through non-prequalified vendors.

In justification to these objections raised by the Auditor General's office, defence ministry officials said aircraft were grounded due to restrictions following the coronavirus pandemic. They contended that grounding aircraft became necessary due to global supply chain issues. Officials attributed the grounding to structural repairs, financial constraints and payment issues affecting the ability to conduct timely maintenance.

"The delays in the roll-out of these aircraft were caused by unscheduled repairs in the fuselage structure," the defence ministry said. "Structural repairs

are both unforeseen and require additional time and materials."

The ministry added that leases on these aircraft were also reduced to a minimum.

Likewise, the defence ministry said that parts worth Rs3.8bn had already been disposed of and the remaining inventory would be sold according to procedure. The meeting was further informed that the

spare parts would be acquired by the bidders that purchased PIA.

Regarding the purchasing disputes, the defence ministry said that procurement of parts became necessary to keep operations running.

"Mission/flight critical equipment, which was highly expensive and specified by the original equipment manufacturers was necessary," a senior defence ministry official said.

Several other audit objections raised during the session were referred to the departmental accounts committee to handle fact-finding inquiries.

## PM Shehbaz directs speedy refunds to boost exports

Amid falling merchandise exports for the fifth consecutive month, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif said on Wednesday 7 Jan. that no negligence would be tolerated in the timely payment of tax refunds to exporters.

Reviewing the commodities exports, especially a decline in rice shipments, the premier directed to expedite institutional reforms, augmenting exports, and provision of facilities to exporters.

Two years after the government introduced legislation mandating sales tax refunds to exporters within 72 hours, the law remains unimplemented. In practice, the Federal Board of Revenue (FBR) continues to disburse refunds on a monthly basis, contrary to the stipulated time frame.

Exporters estimate that outstanding sales tax refunds have reached approximately Rs50 billion, while the FBR typically releases around Rs35bn per month. In addition to the sales tax backlog, exporters have also raised concerns over mounting income tax refund claims for the current fiscal year, further straining their cash flows.

The meeting was convened at a time when Pakistan's merchandise exports

dipped 20.41 per cent to \$2.317bn in December 2025 from \$2.911bn over the corresponding period last year, making it the fifth consecutive month of decline in the current fiscal year. In the first half (July-December), the export proceeds recorded a negative growth of 8.70pc to \$15.184bn from \$16.631bn in the corresponding period last year.

An official announcement of the Prime Minister's Secretariat said Mr Shehbaz emphasised the need to expedite institutional reforms aimed at boosting exports and providing maximum facilitation to exporters.

The premier directed to prepare a plan of action pertaining to enhancing exports, especially agricultural exports, and reducing the trade deficit. He said achieving export-led development goals was the government's priority.

However, he directed that a strategy should be devised in collaboration with the Rice Exporters Association to boost paddy exports, which had been declining for the past few months.

It is worth noting that rice remains one of Pakistan's major export commodities to Afghanistan. However, all trade had been suspended with Kabul since Oct 11, 2025.



Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif chairs a meeting on promotion of export in Islamabad on Jan 7.

## Pakistan, Saudi may turn loan into JF-17 deal, sources say



Pakistan and Saudi Arabia are in talks to convert about \$2 billion of Saudi loans into a JF-17 fighter jet deal, two Pakistani sources said, deepening military cooperation months after the two nations signed a mutual defence pact last year.

The talks underscore how the two allies are moving to operationalise defence cooperation at a time when Pakistan is facing acute financial strain and Saudi Arabia is reshaping its security partnerships to hedge against uncertainty about US commitments in the Middle East.

The mutual defence deal was signed following Israel's strikes on what it said were Hamas targets in Doha, an attack that shook the Gulf region. One of the sources said the discussions were limited to the provision of JF-17 Thunder fighter jets, the light combat aircraft jointly developed by Pakistan and China and produced in Pakistan, while the second source said the jets were the primary option among others under discussion.

Sources said the total deal was worth \$4bn, with an additional \$2bn to be spent on equipment over and above the loan conversion. The sources close to the military with knowledge of the matter spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorised to speak on the deal.

Air Chief Zaheer Ahmed Baber Sidhu was in Saudi Arabia for bilateral talks including on "military cooperation between the two sides", Saudi media outlet SaudiNews50 said on social media platform X.

### Tested in combat

Amir Masood, a retired Air Marshall and analyst, said Pakistan was in talks about or had finalised deals with six countries to provide equipment including

JF-17s and electronic systems and weapons systems for the jets. He said those countries included Saudi Arabia, but could not confirm any details about the negotiations. The JF-17s marketability has been increased

because "it is tested and has been used in combat," he said, adding that it's also cost effective. Pakistan has said the aircraft was deployed during its conflict with India in May last year, the heaviest fighting between the neighbours in decades.

Pakistan's military and finance and defence ministries and military did not immediately respond to requests for comment. Saudi Arabia's government media office also did not respond.

The mutual defence pact, signed in September, committed both sides to treat any aggression against either country as an attack on both, significantly deepening a decades-old security partnership.

Pakistan has long provided military support to the kingdom, including training and advisory deployments, while Saudi Arabia has repeatedly stepped in to support Pakistan financially during periods of economic stress. In 2018, Riyadh announced a \$6bn support package for Pakistan, including a \$3bn deposit at the central bank and \$3bn worth of oil supplies on deferred payment. Saudi Arabia has since rolled over deposits multiple times, including a \$1.2bn deferment last year, helping Islamabad stabilise its foreign exchange reserves amid chronic balance-of-payments pressures.

### Arms sales outreach

Pakistan has in recent months stepped up defence outreach as it seeks to expand arms exports and monetise its domestic defence industry. Last month, Islamabad struck a weapons deal worth more than \$4bn with Libya's eastern-based Libyan National Army, officials said, one of the country's largest-ever arms sales, which includes JF-17 jets and training aircraft. Pakistan also held talks with Bangladesh on the possible sale of JF-17s.

On Tuesday 7 Jan., Pakistan's defence minister said the success of its weapons industry could transform the country's economic outlook.

"Our aircraft have been tested, and we are receiving so many orders that Pakistan may not need IMF in six months," Khawaja Asif told.

## Bangladesh eyes JF-17 purchase

Bangladesh has expressed an interest in the "potential procurement" of JF-17 Thunder aircraft — jointly developed by China and Pakistan — the military's media wing said on Tuesday 6 Jan.

The development came as Bangladesh Air Force Air Chief Marshal Hasan Mahmood Khan called on Pakistan Air Force (PAF) Air Chief Marshal Zaheer Ahmed Baber Sidhu in Islamabad, Inter Services Public Relations (ISPR) said.

"The meeting focused on strengthening operational cooperation and institutional synergy, with emphasis on training, capacity building, and collaboration in aerospace advancements," it said.

The Bangladeshi air chief was leading a high-level defence delegation, ISPR said.

During their meeting, Air Chief Marshal Sidhu briefed his Bangladeshi counterpart on PAF's recent advancements and reaffirmed Pakistan's commitment to supporting Bangladesh Air Force through a comprehensive training framework from basic to advanced flying and specialised courses across PAF institutions, it said. "He also assured fast-tracked delivery of Super Mushshak trainer aircraft, along with a complete training and long-term support ecosystem," it added.

"The Bangladeshi air chief praised PAF's combat record and expressed interest in benefiting from its operational expertise, seeking assistance in maintenance support for Bangladesh Air Force's aging fleet and integration of air defence radar systems to enhance air surveillance," the statement said.

"Detailed discussions were also held on the potential procurement of JF-17 Thunder aircraft," it said, adding that the delegation also visited key PAF facilities. The multi-role fighter has proven its combat capabilities during recent conflicts with India.

## Pakistan emerges as main recipient of Chinese combat aircraft



JF-17 Thunder jets, single-engine multi-role fighter jets that were jointly developed by China and Pakistan.

China continues to strengthen its position as a major global arms supplier, with Pakistan emerging as its most significant and trusted partner in the air combat domain, according to a Pentagon report sent to the US Congress this week.

The report states that as of December 2024, China remained the world's fourth-largest arms exporter, relying primarily on state-owned defence companies such as the Aviation Industry Corporation of China (AVIC) and North Industries Corporation (Norinco).

It notes that China's arms exports are closely linked to its broader foreign policy and development outreach, including initiatives associated with the Belt and Road framework, and are particularly attractive to developing countries due to affordability and flexible terms.

According to this report, Pakistan figures prominently in China's aviation exports. Beijing currently offers three fixed-wing combat aircraft for export: the fifth-generation FC-31 stealth fighter, the fourth-generation J-10C multirole combat aircraft, and the JF-17 Thunder, which is jointly developed and produced by China and Pakistan.

Importantly, the report confirms that Pakistan is the only country to which China has exported the J-10C. As of May 2025, China had delivered 20 J-10C aircraft to the Pakistan Air Force under two orders placed since 2020, with total orders amounting to 36 aircraft. While several other countries — including Egypt, Uzbekistan, Indonesia, Iran and Bangladesh — have expressed interest, no J-10C exports beyond Pakistan have taken place.

The report also highlights the JF-17

programme as a successful example of defence collaboration between two developing countries. Jointly produced by Pakistan and China, the aircraft is already in service with multiple air forces.

As of 2024, Azerbaijan, Myanmar and Nigeria were operating the JF-17, while Iraq was reported to be in discussions. For Pakistan, the aircraft remains a central component of its air force as well as an important defence export.

In addition to manned aircraft, the Pentagon report notes that China has supplied Pakistan with advanced, strike-capable unmanned aerial vehicles, including the Caihong and Wing Loong series. These systems have also been exported to several other countries, reflecting China's growing role in the global UAV market.

Beyond aviation, the report says China exports a wide range of military equipment across land, air defence and naval domains. Pakistan is identified as a long-standing recipient of Chinese naval platforms, including four frigates delivered in 2017 and 2018. The report adds that China is expected to expand its naval exports in the coming years, with Pakistan remaining among its core partners.

The Pentagon assessment attributes China's growing appeal in the global arms market to competitive pricing, flexible financing and the absence of restrictive political conditions.

For Pakistan, the defence relationship with China is not limited to arms purchases but reflects a mature partnership encompassing joint development, production and long-term strategic cooperation, the report notes.

## Why aircraft store fuel in the wings

Fuel is stored in aircraft wings by design—not by necessity—and it is one of the most intelligent structural decisions in aviation. On modern airliners, the wings themselves form sealed, integral fuel tanks. This approach is driven by physics, weight efficiency, and structural longevity rather than convenience. Using the wing structure as the fuel tank eliminates the need for heavy, standalone containers, saving thousands of kilograms before the aircraft even leaves the runway. The structural benefits are even more important. In flight, aerodynamic lift bends the wings upward. Fuel weight inside the wings applies a downward force that counteracts this bending moment. The result is reduced stress at the wing root, lower fatigue loads, and a significantly longer airframe service life. In effect, wing fuel acts as a built-in structural counterbalance. Storing fuel primarily in the fuselage would have the opposite effect. It would increase wing bending forces, demand heavier wing structures, complicate centre-of-gravity management, and introduce additional plumbing and weight penalties. Cars use fuel tanks because they operate on the ground; aircraft place fuel where it actively contributes to structural efficiency in flight. Both Airbus and Boeing rely on integral wing tanks for this reason. Centre tanks are used only when additional range is required, with fuel carefully sequenced to manage wing loads throughout each phase of flight. Different architectures, same engineering principle. Wing fuel storage is neither a compromise nor a risk. It is a key reason large aircraft can operate efficiently and safely for decades while enduring repeated stress cycles. Aircraft don't store fuel in the wings because there is nowhere else to put it—they do it because it makes the entire airplane lighter, stronger, and safer.



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## Over 50,000 travellers stopped for lacking paperwork

At least 51,000 passengers were offloaded at airports this year after failing immigration checks, with a large number of them being offloaded at Lahore and Karachi airports, a meeting of the National Assembly Standing Committee on Overseas Pakistanis was told on Wednesday 17 Dec.

"Passengers are offloaded on the basis of document verification, data checks, and online authentication," Director General of the Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) Riffat Mukhtar Raja told the committee, chaired by Agha Rafiullah.

He said that a total of 66,000 passengers were offloaded at different airports of the country this year.

Of those, 51,000 were stopped for 'insufficient or unverified documentation'. He told the parliamentary panel that many of those offloaded lacked complete information related to their courses, universities or employment details abroad.

"In many cases, passengers attempt to travel through agents using incomplete or incorrect information," the FIA DG added.

The parliamentary committee was told that all major airports had been connected to Nadra's online database to strengthen immigration controls. "No passenger was cleared under political influence or VIP pressure," he said. However, he added, as many as 180 FIA officials involved in corruption had been dismissed from service.

The officer informed the lawmakers that monitoring was being carried out through cameras installed at immigration counters. Also, he said, "The immigration system is using artificial intelligence to identify suspicious cases in advance."

He added that most offloaded passengers belonged to the visit, Umrah and work visa categories.

Over the past few months, numerous incidents have been reported of travellers being offloaded from flights at various airports, despite possessing valid travel documents. These actions followed a crackdown on migrant smuggling launched after the 2024 Greece boat tragedy, which claimed several Pakistani lives.

Earlier this month, Interior Minister Mohsin Naqvi said, "No passenger with complete travel documents is being

stopped from travelling, and they will not be stopped," adding that, however, passengers in possession of "incomplete or bogus" documents would definitely not be allowed to travel.

"No passenger who brings disrepute to the country can be allowed to travel," he continued.

Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif had also ordered the formation of a committee to investigate the frequent offloading of passengers from international flights.

### 8.5m travelled abroad

During the current year, 8.5 million people travelled abroad from Pakistan, while 226 cases were registered for various offences.

"Over the past three months, 450 people were arrested while attempting to cross into Iran illegally," the DG FIA told the committee. He also revealed that several Bangladeshi nationals were found attempting to travel illegally to Europe via Pakistan. "Bangladeshi citizens travelling on Pakistani tourist visas were caught while heading to Europe," he said.

He said 287 people were deported last year and 170 this year over the use of fake documents. The parliamentary panel was also told that 24,000 accused of begging have been deported from Saudi Arabia this year.

### Opportunities

Secretary for Ministry of Overseas Pakistanis Nadeem Aslam Chaudhry informed the committee that investment worth \$1 trillion is coming to Saudi Arabia under Saudi Vision 2030, creating multiple employment opportunities.

"If we can provide better training to skilled manpower, Pakistan can benefit from these opportunities," he added.

The secretary told the committee that 451,000 Pakistanis travelled to Saudi Arabia last year, while more than 500,000 Pakistanis have been sent to Saudi Arabia during the current year.

Committee Chairman Agha Rafiullah observed that the National Vocational and Technical Training Commission was "not functioning [properly] at all", adding that officers posted there were temporarily fixing matters instead of resolving them permanently.

Member Ilyas Chaudhry said drivers were provided to community welfare attachés, questioning how grade 17-18 officers were being assigned drivers in Europe. He said "more than 50pc of community welfare attachés have been provided drivers", asking whether the ministry was aware of the cost of providing a driver to a grade 17 officer in Europe.

## PIBTL to handle RekoDiq's copper-gold exports

International Bulk Terminal Ltd (PIBTL) on Monday 15 Dec. signed an agreement with Reko Diq Mining Company (RDMC) for the handling and export of its copper-gold concentrates.

The signing follows PIBT's execution of a Supplemental Implementation Agreement with the Port Qasim Authority (PQA), enabling PIBT to handle, store, and export copper-gold commodities, including minerals, metals, and other natural earth resources, said a press release.

PIBT will serve as the primary logistics and export gateway for Reko Diq's mineral output, reinforcing Pakistan's position as a regional mineral hub. The project is scheduled to commence operations from 2028 onwards.

PIBT CEO Sharique Azim Siddiqui said this agreement would enable exports from one of the world's most significant mining projects and serving as a cornerstone for national economic growth.

Barrick Mining Corporation's Group COO and Interim President and CEO Mark Hill said the agreement with PIBT marks another step forward in ensuring that Reko Diq delivers lasting value to all our stakeholders but particularly the people of Balochistan and Pakistan.





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## PIA privatisation challenged in Lahore High Court

A constitutional petition has been filed in the Lahore High Court (LHC) challenging the recent privatisation of Pakistan International Airlines (PIA).

Filed by Advocate Nabeel Javed Kahloon, the petition seeks to set aside the sale of the national carrier, describing it as illegal and unconstitutional.

The Cabinet Committee on Privatisation (CCoP) had endorsed a Rs135 billion bid from an Arif Habib Group-led consortium for a 75 per cent stake in the airline.

The winning bid was approximately 35pc higher than the government's reference price of Rs115bn. The consortium has pledged to invest an additional Rs80bn to Rs125bn into the airline for fleet modernisation and operational restructuring.

The petitioner argues that the privatisation process, specifically the Expression of Interest (EOI) published on May 7, 2025 and the subsequent sale on Dec 23 violates the Pakistan International Airlines Corporation (Conversion) Act, 2016.

He states that the federal government, while issuing the EOI, did not appreciate the legal fact that PIA is a trans-provincial institution included in the Federal Legislative List, Part II, hence without the approval of the Council of Common Interests (CCI) as mandated under Article 154 of the Constitution, since no privatisation could take place.

He argues that the government, through its cabinet committee, passed an order illegally for the privatisation of PIA without the approval of CCI and Parliament.

He contends that any restructuring or transfer of assets should remain within government-controlled entities as per the sections 3 and 4 of the 2016 Act.

The petitioner claims that massive public funds have been injected into the airline over decades and its sale to a private group is a matter of significant public interest.

He contends that the respondents, to justify privatisation, falsely portrayed PIA as a burden on the public exchequer and wrongly stated that its value is five times less than its accumulated losses (approximately Rs800bn).

In fact, he claims, PIA has not been receiving grants or subsidies from the

government as its financial difficulties are due to debt servicing, mismanagement and policy failures.

He argues that the process for the sale of the asset adopted by the respondents amounts to misuse of authority, lack of transparency and arbitrary.

The lawyer argues that an amendment made to Section 28 of the Privatisation Commission Ordinance on Dec 14 2023, to oust jurisdiction of high courts, does not apply to the case in hand, since the petition challenges constitutional and legal violations, not private disputes between bidders.

He asserts that the sale of a national asset like PIA falls under judicial scrutiny under Article 199 of the Constitution.

Advocate Kahloon, who is known for representing aviation industry's

### AirSial starts flights from Karachi to Peshawar

AirSial expands its domestic operations by launching four weekly flights between Karachi and Peshawar, starting January 10.

The service operates on Tuesdays, Thursdays, Saturdays, and Sundays using an Airbus A320.

Flight PF181 departs Karachi at 12:40 pm and reaches Peshawar at 2:30 pm, while the return flight PF182 leaves Peshawar at 3:20 pm, arriving in Karachi at 5:20 pm.

This new schedule provides travelers with more convenient options and improved connectivity between the two major cities.



employees before courts, alleges that he has been subjected to harassment for raising the issue of the PIA's privatisation.

The lawyer asks the court to declare the sale null and void, specifically the agreement reached on Dec 23, 2025. He also urges the court to suspend all further steps, halt any actions arising from the May 2025 EOI and order that any necessary restructuring be kept strictly within state-owned entities

### AirSial to expand its fleet

Pakistan's private airline AirSial has announced plans to expand its fleet to 13 Airbus A320 aircraft by mid-2026, signaling the next phase of growth for Pakistan's private airline. The Sialkot-based carrier, which launched operations in 2020, currently operates a A320 fleet on domestic and select international routes.

The additional aircraft are expected to support higher flight frequencies, improved operational reliability, and potential expansion into new regional and Middle Eastern markets as travel demand continues to recover. AirSial has gradually strengthened its network since launch, positioning itself as a full-service airline focused on service quality and connectivity.

With the fleet expansion, AirSial aims to boost capacity and flexibility while reinforcing its presence in Pakistan's competitive aviation market and advancing its long-term growth ambitions.



## AirSial starts flights from Karachi to Quetta

Quetta International Airport, under the management of Pakistan Airports Authority (PAA), has successfully facilitated the commencement of AirSial Airline's flight operations between Karachi and Quetta, further strengthening air connectivity for Balochistan.

The airline operates three weekly flights on this route on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, providing additional travel convenience to passengers using Quetta International Airport.

The inaugural flight, operating as AirSial 161 on an Airbus A320, landed at Quetta International Airport on 16 Jan. at 03:15 PM with 180 passengers on board. The return flight departed for Karachi at 04:32 PM, carrying 199 passengers.

An inauguration ceremony was held attended by the Airport Manager, Chief Security Officer (CSO) of ASF, COO ATC, officials of Pakistan Airports Authority (PAA), AirSial representatives, flight crew, and other airport stakeholders. On the occasion, the Airport Manager expressed appreciation to AirSial's initiative on behalf of PAA's higher management for utilizing Quetta International Airport to facilitate the traveling public of Balochistan. He highlighted the airport's operational readiness and encouraged further expansion of services, including the introduction of flights from Lahore and Islamabad. Quetta International Airport possesses considerable passenger potential, and all allied aeronautical and passenger handling facilities are fully available to support additional flight operations and future network expansion.

## AirSial and Turkish Airlines

AirSial has extended its aircraft maintenance agreement with Turkish Technic for another five years. The move ensures continued technical support and safety standards.

The partnership strengthens AirSial's operational reliability and supports fleet expansion plans. It reflects long-term cooperation in aviation services.



**AirSial extends aircraft maintenance agreement with Turkish Technic for five years**

*Chairman AirSial Mr. Fazal Jilani shakes hand with his Turkish Airlines counterpart at the time of signing the agreement.*

# **Sialkot international airport welcomes U.S. Charge d'Affaires H.E. Natalie Baker**

**S**ialkot, Pakistan; Sialkot International Airport had the privilege of hosting U.S. Charge d'Affaires, Natalie Baker, during her visit to Sialkot.

Chairman Sialkot International Airport, Mr. Hassan Ali Bhatti; Vice Chairman SIAL, Mr. Waqas Afzal; members of the Board, including former Chairmen; and Chief Executive Officer SIAL, AVM Tanweer Ashraf Bhatti (R), extended a warm and gracious welcome upon her arrival.

Ms. Baker was accompanied by U.S. Consul General Lahore, Mr. Stetson Sanders; Political Officer, Mr. John Skerry; Public Diplomacy Officer, Ms. Raquel King-Nicudemus; and other officials. Ms. Baker was presented with a concise yet comprehensive briefing by Chairman Bhatti, highlighting SIAL's unique origin, operational excellence, and pioneering model as Pakistan's first privately built and operated international airport.

Following the presentation, Ms. Baker was taken on a guided tour of the airport, where she had the opportunity to observe SIAL's infrastructure, services, and ongoing operational developments.

Ms. Baker appreciated the efforts of the local business community in bringing this exemplary vision to life. Commenting on the enduring partnership between the United States and Pakistan, Ms. Baker noted that thriving business hubs such as Sialkot play a vital role in strengthening economic and trade relations between the two countries.

Chairman SIAL, Mr. Hassan Ali Bhatti, expressed his appreciation for her visit and reaffirmed SIAL's openness to future cooperation. "We are proud of where Sialkot stands today and even more hopeful for what the future holds. We look forward to exploring areas of mutual interest and collaboration," he said. Sialkot International Airport remains committed to serving as a gateway of opportunity for Pakistan and the wider region, built by the community, powered by ambition, and driven by growth.



*Group photo taken on the occasion*

## **SIAL holds 155th Board of Directors meeting**



*Chairman Sialkot International Airport Limited, Mr. Hassan Ali Bhatti, chaired the 155th Board of Directors meeting. The meeting was attended by Vice Chairman SIAL, Mr. Waqas Afzal, along with esteemed members of the Board, CEO SIAL, and senior management of Sialkot International Airport. During the session, the worthy Board deliberated in detail on matters related to SIAL's operations, performance, and future course of action, reaffirming its collective commitment to the continued growth and excellence of the airport.*

## What are the benefits of flying on Emirates Airbus A 380?



For many travelers, the **Airbus A380** has become more than just another aircraft type. Even as airlines around the world have retired the superjumbo, Emirates has continued to operate the world's largest A380 fleet and position it as a defining part of its long-haul product. This has led to a common question among passengers and aviation enthusiasts alike: what are the real benefits of flying on Emirates' Airbus A380, and do they genuinely make a difference compared with other modern widebody aircraft?

This article explores why the Emirates A380 experience feels distinct, looking beyond headline features to examine how aircraft design, cabin layout, and operational strategy shape the overall journey. By breaking down the physical characteristics of the A380, Emirates' approach to configuring and deploying it, and how the experience compares with alternatives such as the **Boeing 777**, the article clarifies when the A380's advantages are most noticeable and when they matter less.

**Unlike anything else in the sky**



The key benefit of flying on Emirates' Airbus A380 is that it delivers a noticeably calmer, more comfortable long-haul experience than most other widebody aircraft. This is not simply because the A380 is larger, but because its design

creates more usable space per passenger, reducing noise, congestion, and the feeling of crowding.

Even before considering premium features, the aircraft feels fundamentally different once onboard when compared with other airline products or aircraft types.

Emirates has amplified these advantages more than any other airline by treating the A380 as more of a flagship rather than a mere capacity tool. The airline's cabin layouts, upper-deck design, and onboard amenities are built around passenger comfort, regardless of whether that be in economy, business, or first class. As a result, travelers often describe the A380 as quieter, smoother, and less fatiguing on long sectors compared to aircraft like the **Boeing 777**, even when flying in the same cabin class.

This experience is rooted in how the A380 was originally conceived. Airbus designed the aircraft around cabin volume and stability at a time when congestion and passenger comfort were growing concerns, while Emirates structured its network to take full advantage of those characteristics. The combination helps explain why the A380 remains a standout experience at Emirates today, even as many other airlines have moved away from the type.

**Engineered for success?**



Several design and operational factors combine to shape why flying on Emirates' A380 feels different from other long-haul aircraft. While size plays a role, the experience is more heavily influenced by how that space is used, how the aircraft behaves in flight, and how Emirates has configured its cabins around passenger flow rather than maximum density. Together, these elements affect everything from boarding to how the aircraft feels hours into a long journey.

One of the most important factors is cabin volume. The A380's wide fuselage allows for broader aisles, larger galleys, and more open seating areas, which helps reduce congestion during boarding, meal

services, and, very importantly, lavatory queues. The aircraft is also inherently quieter and more stable in cruise, thanks to its size and four-engine configuration, which dampens vibration and turbulence. Emirates further enhances these characteristics through consistent seat layouts and upper-deck zoning that separate premium cabins from the main-deck economy flow. Emirates has effectively mastered the A380 experience through consistent refinement of the aircraft's internal space.

These factors are especially noticeable on long-haul sectors, where small comfort differences compound over time. Passengers frequently report that boarding feels less chaotic, cabin movement is easier during the flight, and the overall atmosphere is calmer compared to similarly long flights on narrower widebodies. While Emirates' service and amenities play a prominent role in making A380 services so different from competitors, much of this experience is rooted in the A380's physical design, which gives the airline more flexibility to prioritize comfort without sacrificing capacity.

## Nawaz, opens state lounge at All Airport

PML-N President Nawaz Sharif, Defence Minister Khwaja Asif and Chief Minister Maryam Nawaz on Thursday 15 Jan. inaugurated the renovated State Lounge at Allama Iqbal International Airport.

Defence Secretary Muhammad Ali welcomed the guests and participants to the inauguration ceremony.

Pakistan Airports Authority Director General Air Vice Marshal Zeeshan Saeed briefed them on the airport upgradation project, highlighting the key improvements carried out under the scheme. He said the Ravi Lounge, entrance lobby, main hall and other sections had been reconstructed.

The State Lounge has been given a modern and aesthetically enhanced look following the renovation, aimed at improving facilities and services for state guests and dignitaries, he added.



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## PAF successfully tests air-launched cruise missile



A PAF fighter jet equipped with a Taimoor air-launched cruise missile.

Pakistan Air Force (PAF) has successfully conducted the flight test of the indigenously developed "Taimoor" weapon system, the military's media affairs wing said on Saturday 3 Jan.

In a statement, the Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) said the development marked another significant milestone in the advancement of national aerospace and defence capabilities. "Taimoor air-launched cruise missile is capable of engaging enemy land and sea targets with high precision at a range of 600 kilometres, carrying a conventional warhead," it added.

"Equipped with state-of-the-art navigation and guidance system, Taimoor is designed to fly at very low altitudes, enabling it to effectively evade hostile air and missile defence systems. Its precision-strike capability significantly enhances the conventional deterrence and operational flexibility of PAF, further strengthening the country's overall defence posture," it said.

"The successful flight test underscores the technical maturity, innovation and self-reliance achieved by Pakistan's defence industry. The launch was witnessed by senior officers of the armed forces, along with distinguished scientists and engineers who played a pivotal role in the development of this advanced weapon system," the ISPR said.

*Taimoor capable of engaging enemy land and sea targets with high precision*

PAF chief Air Marshal Zaheer Ahmed Baber Sidhu extended congratulations to the scientists, engineers and PAF team on the achievement, the statement said. "He lauded their professional excellence, dedication and unwavering commitment to strengthening Pakistan's defence capabilities," it added.

The air chief also reaffirmed that such accomplishments "are a testament to the nation's resolve to achieve technological self-sufficiency and maintain a credible conventional deterrent in the evolving regional security environment.

## Iraq expresses keen interest in JF-17 during ACM Sidhu visit

In a meeting with Pakistan's air chief, the commander of the Iraqi Air Force expressed a "keen interest" in JF-17 Thunder fighter jets and praised the Pakistan Air Force's (PAF) professionalism, the military's media wing said on Saturday 10 Jan..

According to a statement issued by Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR), PAF Air Chief Marshal (ACM) Zaheer Ahmed Baber Sidhu, who was on a visit to Iraq, called on Iraqi Air Force Commander Lt Gen Staff Pilot Mohanad Ghalib Mohammed Radi Al-Asadi.

The two met at the Iraqi Air Force headquarters, where ACM Sidhu received a guard of honour upon his arrival, it said.

"Discussions focused on enhancing bilateral military cooperation, with emphasis on joint training, capacity building and improving operational cooperation," ISPR said.

During the meeting, ACM Sidhu "highlighted the deep-rooted religious, cultural, and historical ties between Pakistan and Iraq".

He also "reaffirmed PAF's commitment to support the Iraqi Air Force in training and capacity development".

The statement said the pair "agreed to pursue joint exercises and training initiatives to strengthen interoperability".

Meanwhile, the Iraqi air chief commended PAF's "professionalism and technological advancement".

The statement added that he also expressed "interest in benefiting from PAF's world-class training and expressed a keen interest in JF-17 Thunder fighter jets, Super Mushshak trainer aircraft".

The commander also appreciated Pakistan for its role in regional stability, it said.

"The visit underscored the shared resolve of both air forces to further strengthen defence ties and professional collaboration," ISPR added.

The JF-17 Thunder aircraft are jointly developed by Pakistan and China. Earlier this week, Bangladesh had expressed an interest in the "potential procurement" of JF-17 Thunder aircraft.

In the meantime, reports have emerged stating that Pakistan and Saudi Arabia are in talks to convert about \$2 billion of Saudi loans into a JF-17 fighter jet deal, deepening military cooperation months after the two nations signed a mutual defence pact last year.

## Several nations eying JF-17 jets, says PM

As a number of nations show interest in buying JF-17 Thunder jets from Pakistan, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif on Wednesday 14 Jan. confirmed that several countries were in active talks with Islamabad to procure the fighter aircraft, which became a centre of attention following the India-Pakistan conflict in May last year.

Addressing the federal cabinet meeting in the capital, PM Shehbaz recalled Pakistan's victory in a war last year, an apparent reference to the four-day military conflict with India, and said the demand for Pakistan's fighter jets had increased since then. The premier said there were several states "actively engaged" in talks with Pakistan—a move that would boost the country's economy and its defence production.

Indonesia, Bangladesh, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia have expressed interest in buying the fighter jets, while Azerbaijan inducted this aircraft into its air force in 2024. Azerbaijan had become the third country to acquire JF-17 fighters after Myanmar and Nigeria.

### Battle-tested

As JF-17 attracts more buyers Defence Production Minister Raza Hayat Harraj said China was on board with the sale of these aircraft. Mr Harraj told BBC Urdu that the jets were battle-tested during the four-day conflict with India last year. "The entire world's air forces saw these jets' performance during that time and praised it."

The minister termed the price of the jet "an important" aspect, saying it was valued at "\$40-50m; this depends on the jet's features, and the price can also be higher than this". According to the minister, "some portion of the jet is readied in Pakistan, and some portion is readied in China".

Einar Tangen, a senior fellow at China's Centre for International Governance Innovation (CIGI), told BBC Urdu that "technology" involved in the jet was likely controlled by China. Therefore, any sale pact would be a joint agreement, with Beijing being a "senior partner".

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# Pakistan signs MoU with Donald Trump-linked World Liberty Finance



PM Shehbaz Sharif and Field Marshal Asim Munir look on as Zachary Witkoff, CEO of Trump family-owned World Liberty Financial, and Finance Minister Muhammad Aurangzeb sign an MoU regarding digital payment architectures for cross-border transactions.

Pakistan said on Wednesday 14 Jan. it had signed an agreement with a firm connected to World Liberty Financial, the main crypto business of US President Donald Trump's family, to explore using World Liberty's stablecoin for cross-border payments.

The Pakistan Virtual Asset Regulatory Authority (PVARA) said in a statement that a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with SC Financial Technologies, a little-known company it described as an "affiliated entity" of World Liberty, would enable "dialogue and technical understanding around emerging digital payment architectures".

The announcement represents one of the first publicly announced tie-ups between World Liberty, a crypto-based finance platform launched in September 2024, and a sovereign state. It also comes amid a warming of ties between Pakistan and the United States.

Under the agreement, SC Financial Technologies will work with Pakistan's central bank to integrate its USD1 stablecoin into a regulated digital payments structure, allowing the token to operate alongside Pakistan's own digital currency infrastructure, a source involved in the deal said.

## World Liberty CEO visits Pakistan

The announcement of the memorandum came during a visit to Pakistan by Zach Witkoff, son of US special envoy Steve Witkoff and co-founder and chief executive of World Liberty.

Zach Witkoff is also CEO of SC Financial Technologies. The company, registered in Delaware, co-owns with World Liberty the USD1 stablecoin brand, according to documentation on the stablecoin's reserves from July 2025.

Field Marshal Asim Munir, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif, Finance Minister Muhammad Aurangzeb and others at the signing ceremony of a memorandum of understanding with SC Financial Technologies on January 14. — Photo via PVARA

Witkoff met with "senior Pakistani stakeholders" to discuss how digital payment infrastructure, cross-border settlement and foreign exchange processes, the statement said.

"Our focus is to stay ahead of the curve by engaging with credible global players, understanding new financial models, and ensuring that innovation, where explored, is aligned with regulation, stability, and national interest," said Finance Minister Muhammad Aurangzeb.

Separately, the federal government said in a post on X that a delegation of World Liberty Financial called on Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif, who shared his vision for Digital Pakistan, particularly the importance of digital payments and financial innovation for connectivity, transparency and growth.

He also appreciated the rising global interest in Pakistan's digital financial markets.

Stablecoins, digital tokens typically pegged to the dollar, have ballooned in value in recent years. Under Trump, the United States has introduced federal rules widely seen as beneficial to the sector, and countries across the world are beginning to examine the potential role of stablecoins in payments and financial systems.

World Liberty fuelled a sharp increase in income for the Trump family business, known as the Trump Organisation, including from foreign entities, in the first half of last year, Reuters reported in October.

Last May, MGX, a state-controlled Abu Dhabi investment company, used the World Liberty stablecoin to buy a \$2 billion equity stake in Binance, the world's largest crypto exchange.

Pakistan has been exploring digital currency projects as it seeks to reduce cash usage and improve cross-border payments such as remittances, a key source of foreign exchange.

Its central bank governor said in July it was preparing to launch a pilot for a digital currency and is finalising legislation to regulate virtual assets.

## Witkoff calls on Field Marshal Munir

In a statement later, the Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) said that a delegation led by Witkoff called on Chief of Defence Forces and Chief of Army Staff Field Marshal Asim Munir.

According to the ISPR, their meeting reflected the growing interest of foreign private investors in Pakistan's economy and signalled rising global confidence in the potential of financial technology in the country, alongside aims to strengthen financial inclusion and cross-border digital finance.

"Mr Witkoff highlighted the immense economic potential Pakistan holds and lauded the efforts of Pakistan's leadership in embracing futuristic technologies to realise the full possibilities of its economic prowess," the statement read.

The ISPR said that Field Marshal Munir emphasised Pakistan's commitment to economic stability, investor confidence and enabling a conducive environment for responsible private sector participation in national development.

World Liberty CEO Zachary Witkoff and Chief of Defence Forces and Chief of Army Staff Asim Munir shake hands during a meeting in Rawalpindi on January 14. — Photo courtesy ISPR

## Shipping lines adopt official exchange rates

Pakistan Customs has claimed the implementation of official bank exchange rates for shipping charges, effectively ending the long-standing practice of arbitrary and excessive billing by international shipping lines.

An official announcement of the Federal Board of Revenue (FBR) has termed this a historic and industry-wide breakthrough by ensuring the application of official bank exchange rates for shipping charges.

The All Pakistan Shipping Association through a formal communication on Jan 12, has confirmed that all member shipping lines are now charging shipping fees strictly on the basis of exchange rates provided by their respective authorised commercial banks, in accordance with State Bank of Pakistan (SBP) regulations.

This decisive development follows sustained engagement by a high-level committee constituted by Pakistan Customs, which held extensive consultations with shipping agents, terminal operators, trade bodies, and international shipping lines.

As a key milestone, Maersk — the largest shipping line operating in Pakistan and handling nearly 26 per cent of the country's total cargo — earlier began applying official bank exchange rates.

According to the announcement, written confirmations of compliance have been received from major international shipping lines and their local agents, including Hapag-Lloyd, Ocean Network Express, COSCO Shipping, CMA CGM, Mediterranean Shipping Company, OOCL, and United Marine Agencies, among others, establishing full industry-wide adherence to SBP-compliant exchange rates.



The implementation of official exchange rates has ended arbitrary dollar charges

## Premier approves halal meat export policy

Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif on Thursday 18 Dec. approved the Halal Meat Export Policy and issued special instructions to officials concerned to present, within two weeks, a three-year comprehensive strategy comprising practical measures to increase halal meat export.

“A comprehensive strategy, formulated through coordination among all relevant federal ministries and provincial governments, is essential to make Pakistan's share in the halal meat market of Muslim countries and the global market, significant,” the prime minister said while presiding over a meeting on meat export policy and sector's reforms.

He asked the committee established to enhance Pakistan's halal meat export market to present doable proposals to improve production, cold storage, and other related factors.

He also directed to take special measures to increase halal meat production in the livestock in accordance with international standards and to remain competitive with regional production volumes.

PM Shehbaz said that the organised centers, developed through cooperation between relevant federal ministries and provincial governments, were urgently needed to enhance the production and nutritional value of halal meat.

“There is considerable potential to increase Pakistan's export share not only in Muslim countries but also in the global halal meat market,” he said.

He said the government will provide full support for international certification of slaughterhouses in Pakistan and for bilateral registration with other countries.

He stressed the need for establishing special zones and centers to increase exports of disease-free halal meat from the country. During the briefing, the prime minister was informed that Pakistan's total halal meat production stood at 6 million metric tons, and after fulfilling domestic requirements, a substantial quantity was

available for export.

### Raast board meeting

Presiding over a separate meeting with members of Raast Board, PM Shehbaz emphasised that Raast — the country's national payment system — was playing a key role in promotion of cashless economy and financial inclusion in the country.

He stressed the need to further expedite efforts aimed at encouraging the country's businessmen to use Raast platform for their payments. He congratulated the board members on assuming their new responsibilities.

PM Shehbaz expressed the hope that board members will help improve working of this important department.

During the meeting, the board members briefed the prime minister about the performance of Raast and informed him that so far, some three billion transactions worth Rs80 trillion had been completed in the country.

The meeting was informed that there were more than 48 million Raast consumers whereas 53 financial institutions of the country were Raast's partners.

### IT export

Meanwhile, PM Shehbaz appreciated the gradual increase in IT exports and directed relevant authorities to take steps to create employment opportunities for the youth, improve IT infrastructure and enhance internet access to achieve the objective of the digital economy.

Chairing a meeting with the private sector working group formed for IT sector-related economic growth, PM Shehbaz appreciated the progress shown by the country's IT sector despite economic challenges. He said the government was actively working on technical training of the workforce in the IT sector, tax facilitation, and improvements in other related matters.

In the meeting, the working group, headed by Asif Peer, presented to the prime minister the recommendations focusing on expansion of digital economy, increasing IT exports, and other reforms in the IT sector, which he welcomed. He said that the promotion of the digital economy depended on consumers' access to the internet.

The prime minister directed the high-level committee headed by the finance minister to review the working group's recommendations and submit a report within two weeks.

## Pakistan begins construction of PNSC container ship of Karachi Shipyard



Pakistan on Tuesday 6 Jan. launched the construction of a 1,100 twenty-foot equivalent unit (TEU) container ship for the Pakistan National Shipping Corporation (PNSC) at Karachi Shipyard, in a move aimed at reducing reliance on foreign shipping lines and strengthening the country's maritime capacity.

The project was formally inaugurated by Federal Minister for Maritime Affairs Junaid Anwar Chaudhry at a steel-cutting ceremony held at the shipyard.

Addressing the ceremony, the minister said the container vessel would be built entirely using domestic resources, reflecting growing confidence in Pakistan's shipbuilding industry. He added that the project would help save foreign exchange while enhancing the operational capacity of the PNSC fleet.

Chaudhry said expanding the national maritime fleet was essential to strengthening the supply chain and supporting trade activity across the country. He noted that the shipbuilding initiative would also create employment opportunities for skilled workers and contribute to the development of the maritime workforce.

The minister said Karachi Shipyard was emerging as a key hub for national maritime development, adding that shipbuilding and ship repair remained central pillars of Pakistan's maritime policy.

Highlighting the sector's importance, he said around 95% of Pakistan's trade is conducted through sea routes, underscoring the need for a strong and self-reliant maritime industry to support sustainable economic growth.

## EU lauds Pakistan's progress under GSP+

The European Union has welcomed Pakistan's progress in implementing 27 international conventions under the Generalised Scheme of Preferences Plus (GSP+) framework, the Foreign Office said in a statement.

According to the EU, GSP+ status is a special incentive awarded to developing countries to "pursue sustainable development and good governance" in exchange for cutting import duties to zero on two-thirds of the tariff lines of its exports.

Governments with this status need to implement 27 international conventions on human rights, labour rights, good governance and the environment.

The FO noted that the 15th Pakistan-EU Joint Commission meeting was held in Brussels on Dec 17 and that cooperation between Islamabad and the bloc in several different fields was discussed. The meeting "reviewed Pakistan's progress on the implementation of the 27 international conventions as required under the GSP+ framework," the statement read, adding that Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Ishaq Dar attended the meeting of the Sub-Group on Democracy, Governance, Rule of Law and Human Rights on Dec 1.

"The EU welcomed progress made in bringing Pakistan's application of the death penalty in line with international standards and encouraged further steps in this regard. It also recognised important first steps against torture, as well as the creation of a Commission on Minorities."

### Monitoring report

However, the FO observed that the EU encouraged Pakistan to take further short-term steps ahead of the upcoming GSP+ Monitoring Report, which will scrutinise the country's progress. The EU also "reiterated the need for further reforms in the medium and long term".

"The EU and Pakistan notably exchanged views on freedom of expression and media, enforced disappearances, the independence of the judiciary, freedom of religion or belief, anti-Muslim hatred [and] the rights of persons belonging to minorities and vulnerable groups," the statement read.

"Both sides underlined the importance of proportionality and appropriate safeguards and the need to continue dialogue on these concerns."

Pakistan updated the EU on progress under the National Action Plan on Human

Rights and the National Action Plan on Business and Human Rights, additionally outlining the actions of various national institutions in charge of promoting and protecting human rights across the country.

"The EU reiterated its commitment to supporting Pakistan's efforts to guarantee the protection of all human rights, including women and children's rights, minorities' rights, labour and migrant rights, as well as fundamental freedoms, such as freedom of expression and opinion, including [the] growing problem of disinformation," the FO stated.

The GSP+ status was granted to Pakistan by the EU in 2014, resulting in a 108 per cent increase in Pakistani textile exports to the EU due to concessional tariffs.

In October 2023, the European Parliament unanimously voted to extend the GSP+ status for another four years until 2027 for developing countries, including Pakistan.

According to the EU's GSP Convention Compliance Database, Pakistan has ratified 27 international conventions, most recently ratifying the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1976) and the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (1987) in 2010.



A woman takes a selfie beside the recently launched Thar Train Desert Safari at Hyderabad station on Saturday 20 Dec. The tourist train runs on Karachi Khokhrapar (Zero Point Karachi route.



An eye-catching view of Nathiagali, Abbottabad, after heavy snowfall.



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## PM seeks timely completion of CPEC-II

Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif on Thursday 15 Jan. reaffirmed Pakistan's unwavering commitment to the One China Policy and lauded China's generous support Pakistan, especially through CPEC, and stressed the need for timely implementation of the next phase of CPEC.

The prime minister was talking to members of a Chinese delegation, led by Vice Minister of International Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (IDCPC), Sun Haiyan, who called on the prime minister at the PM House.

The prime minister was assisted during the meeting by SAPM Tariq Fatehi, PM's Special Representative on China, Amb. Zafar Uddin Mahmood, and Foreign Secretary Ambassador Amna Baloch, a Prime Minister's Office news release said.

While welcoming the Chinese dignitary and her delegation to Pakistan, the prime minister said it was particularly auspicious that the visit was taking place amid bilateral celebrations of the 75th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries.

PM Shehbaz said the year had

commenced with the successful visit of the deputy PM to Beijing, followed by a visit by the interior minister to Shanghai. The speaker of the National Assembly of Pakistan was also expected to visit China in the coming days, he said.

The prime minister also reiterated his most cordial invitation to President Xi Jinping to undertake an official visit to Pakistan this year, as this was a special year and a milestone for both countries.

The Chinese vice minister thanked the prime minister for his warm welcome and said that China was committed to strengthening its long-standing, time-tested relations with Pakistan across all spheres.

### New ferry terminal opens at Karachi port

Maritime Affairs Minister Muhammad Junaid Anwar Chaudhry on Thursday 8 Jan. inaugurated a new ferry terminal at Karachi Port by unveiling a commemorative plaque.

Addressing the ceremony as the chief guest, he said that the terminal marked the

revival of maritime passenger services in Pakistan after the discontinuation of the historic Safina-i-Arab service in 1976.

The terminal is designed to accommodate up to 200 to 250 passengers at a time and supports the national vision of promoting sustainable and economical transportation through sea, he said.

The minister stated that the inauguration of the terminal is fully aligned with the strategic guidance of Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif which is translated into the Maritime Vision 2047-2147.

He emphasised that the initiative reflects the ministry's strategic focus on promoting connectivity, facilitating passenger movement and religious tourism through sea routes.

He described the commencement of ferry terminal operations as a significant milestone towards harnessing the potential of the Blue Economy, opening new avenues for maritime tourism and diversifying port activities beyond traditional cargo handling.

Earlier, Karachi Port Trust (KPT) Chairman (retired) Rear Admiral Shahid Ahmed, informed the audience that the terminal has been developed with a strong focus on passenger convenience, safety and operational efficiency, while engaging all national stakeholders.

He said that the terminal is equipped with modern facilities in line with international standards.



FEDERAL Minister for Maritime Affairs Chaudhry Junaid Anwar and senior officials of his ministry pose for a group photo after inauguration of the Ferry Terminal at the Karachi Port on Thursday 8 Jan.

## View from the 'Double decker' after 65 years in Karachi



THE buses will run between Zainab Market in Saddar and Model Colony.

“Double Decker buses introduced again in the city after 65 years. GETTING around Karachi without a car — or at least a bike — is not for the faint of heart. Options are limited; from ride-sharing apps with eye-watering fares to rickshaws that will leave you with a persistent itch in the back of your throat. And then, there are the buses.

Until recently, taking a bus in Karachi meant embarking on a battered hull adorned with kaleidoscopic patterns that emitted plumes of acrid black smoke — some of which makes its way into lungs of hapless passengers.

This is why the city's new double-decker buses, which launched on Jan 1, are a breath of fresh air. The Sindh government had announced the initiative in Oct 2024, and on Sunday, it came to fruition.

The towering red buses are an unfamiliar sight — being the hallmark of cities like London and Hong Kong — on Shareea Faisal, but they've only been in regular service for three days. Intrigued and always up to try a new mode of transportation, I caught one of the red giants from Press Club Chowrangi — known best for its proximity to Zainab Market — all the way to Malir.

Earlier, Hussain Mansoor — spokesperson for Sindh Senior Minister Sharjeel Inam Memon — told media that the buses would run between Zainab Market in Saddar and Model Colony.

Stops were designated for double-decker buses along this route at/near Malir Halt, airport, Colony Gate, Natha Khan Bridge, Drigh Road, Nursery, Baloch

Colony and the Finance and Trade Centre (FTC), he said.

Boarding the vehicle, one finds the lower deck reserved for women. Upstairs, a collection of men, children and a few whole families populate the two compartments — an enclosed cabin and an open-air space with a retractable canopy.

As children marvelled at the cars driving by below and most adults held up their phones to take photos or videos, the conductor came by to collect the fare — Rs80 for anyone stepping off before the Natha Khan bridge, and Rs120 for everyone traveling further.

After that, we were off, cruising along Karachi's main thoroughfare as the open canopy let in a cool breeze.

Seated next to me was Khurram, who usually gets around on a bike. Today, however, he was curious to see what the hype was about.

He said the new double-deckers were a significant improvement over local buses — known on the street as Mazdas. “The fare is reasonable, matching that of local Mazdas, but with a smoother ride and a better environment,” he said.

While calling on the government to bring more such buses on the roads, Khurram said that it was the people's responsibility to take care of them.

Mohammad Ismail, a student who was riding with his friends, said the bus was nice, but the upper deck lacked straps for people to hold on to, should they need to stand while the bus is moving.

Ismail's friends, Akram and Mohammad Sharif, noted that the fare was

higher than local buses. Sharif told me that for Rs50, one can get as far on a local bus as Rs80 will get you on the Peoples' Bus Service (PBS).

However, they quickly admitted that the new buses were far more comfortable, and devoid of “pickpockets”, at least for now.

Ali Raza, who regularly commutes to work via bus, advised the authorities to extend the bus route from Malir Halt to Gulshan-i-Hadeed in line with the R-1 route of the PBS.

Shabana, who was travelling with her daughter, said she used to take a bus a long time ago, but could see the improvement in the quality of public transport in Karachi.

“We didn't have many facilities back in the day, but that's gotten better,” she said, adding, “We have comfortable seats, the drivers cooperate with us, and the main thing is that it's not heavy on the pocket.”

The pair were seated on the upper deck, so I asked whether they felt there should be more space designated for women. Shabana responded that she didn't really mind and found the journey comfortable and safe.

Habib, an office worker who drives usually himself to work, said he had lived in Dubai and found Karachi's new buses comparable to the mass transit system in the Gulf city. He said he and his colleagues would take the bus regularly if they didn't need to visit clients in different parts of the city.

“Quality-wise, I think everything is okay because it's just started. Let's see what will become of them after six months,” he said. Recalling the local buses he had travelled on as a student, some 20 years ago, he said those were neither safe nor hygienic.

Mohammad Nasir, a regular PBS rider, said the double-deckers were better than other buses on the R-1 route because they had ample seating for passengers.

The smaller buses, he lamented, were usually packed to the brim, meaning that those in the back would always have to jostle to get to the door when they reached their stop.

In all, given Karachi's patchy history with public transportation, any additional services are bound to be welcomed by the populace. But with key projects, such as the Red Line along University Road, facing persistent delays, there is still a long way to go.



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## The third BYD Karachi Marathon held



Participants in action during the BYD Karachi Marathon at the Abdul Sattar Edhi Avenue on Sunday 4 Jan. Israr retains Karachi Marathon crown, Sara claims women's title.

Some 7,000 runners from across Pakistan, and more than 120 international participants representing over 25 countries, were up, stretching and warming up on Abdul Sattar Edhi Avenue even before the sun came up. They were all there for the third BYD Karachi Marathon from the A.K. Khan Park at Nishan-i-Pakistan to DHA Club, with various distances and U-turns marked for the running categories, here on Sunday 4 Jan.

There was a men and women's category for the full marathon, which spanned 42.195km. A relay also boasting the same distance, though divided into four parts for four members of a team, saw each of them running a distance of about 10.5km.

A half marathon of 21.1km length also saw many enthusiastic participants though the biggest number of runners, including women, children and elderly runners, were witnessed in the 5km fun run designed for beginners and community groups. While, all the other categories started at 6:30am, the fun 5km run began at 10:00am.

According to Shoaib Nizami, CEO Sports in Pakistan and Race Director, the individual running time for each and every registered runner was being recorded.

"So those who started a few minutes late need not worry," he told media.

"The progress of the participants can also be checked through an app. There are also Radio Frequency Identification (RFID) chips in their number bibs," he added.

Still, most of the runners were not really looking for glory as many of them said they were not there to win but finish the race, or just for fun and not hard

competition.

And yet there were runners like nine-year-old Kainat Khalil, looking forward to hard competition. Even after the National Games fiasco where she was barred from running in the 5,000m race after winning bronze in the 10,000m race, she was registered for the half marathon.

Of course achieving best time there, she was discovered again and presented with an honorary prize in the end. The organisers called out her coach for doing an injustice to a child this young by entering her in long races.

"A nine-year-old's body is not yet ready to take on such challenges of endurance. The allowed age for the full marathon is 13 years and above," it was pointed out.

Meanwhile, the top male and female runners of the full marathon, Israr Khattak (2 hours, 59 minutes and 58 seconds) and Sara Lodhi (3 hours, 33 minutes and 51 seconds) got more than just the prize purse of Rs500,000.

The marathon's official partners announced that in alignment with Vision 2032, which aims to prepare Pakistani runners to qualify and compete at the Olympics, they will sponsor them to participate at this year's London Marathon.

While thanking the organisers and sponsors, Israr said that he was happy to have won the marathon though he had slightly fallen behind on his last year's timing of 2:30:13.

Sara, who had flown in from Dubai to run in the marathon, her first in Karachi but 11th altogether, said that she loved the running environment of Karachi alongside beach, with people of all ages taking part in the various distance marathons, running alongside her.

Besides, the Rs500,000 for first place, there was Rs250,000 for second place, and Rs125,000 for third place finishers in the full marathon.

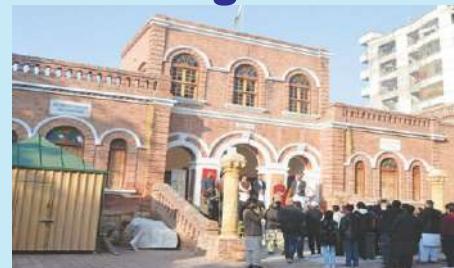
In the relay category, the Dalmia Strike team was first to take home the top prize of Rs50,000, as Zamaray Athletics was second to receive Rs30,000 and The Young Incredibles were third to claim the Rs20,000 prize.

In the male category of the half marathon Mohammad Akhtar (1 hour, 19 minutes and 29 seconds) was first, Atta Us Samad was second (1 hour, 19 minutes and 48 seconds) and Faizan Faiz was third

(1 hour, 20 minutes and 11 seconds).

In the female category of the half marathon Kaukab Sarwar was first (1 hour, 53 minutes and 57 seconds), Dr Rabia Naeem second (1 hour, 58 minutes and 0.4 seconds) and Dr Zoha Poonawala was third (1 hour, 59 minutes and 20 seconds).

## Walk held for preservation of Hyderabad heritage sites



PARTICIPANTS of the walk for heritage preservation visit Besant Hall in Hyderabad on Friday 9 Jan.

A walk was held in the city for the preservation of Hyderabad's rich cultural heritage which faces threat of destruction or demolition by vested interests.

The idea of holding the walk was coined by City Taluka Assistant Commissioner Syed Noor Hussain who has established the Heritage Preservation Cell in his office.

Commissioner Fayyaz Abbasi and Deputy Commissioner Zainul Abiden Memon also joined in the walk.

Tour guide Siraj Bhagat, volunteered to share his knowledge about the history of the sites. The walk started from Besant Hall at around 9am and ended at Pucca Quila Chowk at about 12:30pm.

The participants visited about a dozen sites and received briefings about them. Besides Besant Hall, the sites included Radio Pakistan building and the 1920s' Seth Moolchand Dialdas Club. Some pre-partition era buildings around Hyder Chowk were also covered in the tour.

The participants took keen interest in the Mitharam Hostel and Khan Bahadur Azeem Khan Library before proceeding to Sindh University's old campus.

They were taken to the Mukhi House (now a museum), Hasrat Mohani Library and Pucca Qila Chowk, where the walk culminated.

## Rare Buddha relics add to Taxila Museum's appeal



ONE of the relics of Lord Buddha.

The Taxila Museum has one of the most sacred relics of Buddhism, the relics of Lord Buddha, on display, making it the only museum in Pakistan to hold such a rare object connected to the Gandhara age.

After the authorities showcased them in 2022, hundreds of followers of Buddhism, especially monks and religious scholars, have visited the museum to witness the bone relics and offer religious rituals before them.

These were the same objects twice sent to Sri Lanka for public exhibition in the past. During the first tour, then Sri Lankan president Maithripala Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, along with members of the Buddhist clergy and other dignitaries, inaugurated the exposition in Colombo.

Punjab Department of Archaeology Director Mohammad Iqbal Manj is credited with the plan to display these items. Since the inauguration of the Taxila Museum in 1928, the holy Buddhist relics had been kept in secret chambers to prevent their theft, he told media.

For their display, the Thai government recently gifted a gold-plated, bulletproof showcase equipped with multilayer security protocols and then-Thailand envoy Chakkrid Krachaiwon formally inaugurated the showcase.

Senior Thai monk Most Venerable Arayawangso, along with his disciples, also visited Pakistan and the museum for these relics.

Speaking about their importance, Mr Manj said only a few "original" Buddha relics exist in the world. He said the department was cautious about their safety and security, especially in view of the mysterious theft of 81 rare antiquities in 1999.

Dr Abdul Ghafour Lone, a senior official of the Federal Department of Archaeology, Islamabad, who also conducted successful excavations, particularly at the Buddhist site of Jinan Wali Dehri, told media that these relics were discovered by Sir John Marshall during the excavation of the Dharmarajika Stupa in Taxila between 1912 and 1916.

The relics were found in a small golden casket wrapped with inscriptions in the ancient Kharosthi script of Gandhara. It was inscribed on the silver wrapping foils around the Buddha relics that Urusaka of Noacha placed the bone relics of Lord Buddha in his chapel at Dharmarajika.

He said that the stupa is considered one of the eight largest Buddhist stupas in South Asia, built by Emperor Ashoka in the 3rd century BC.

"The stupa, along with the large monastic complex that later developed around it, forms part of the Ruins of Taxila, which were inscribed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1980," Mr Lone added.

Abdul Nasir Khan, former curator of the Taxila Museum, said that these bone relics hold immense importance for followers of Buddhism. He said that Buddhists thronged the venues where these relics were exhibited in Sri Lankan cities of Gampaha, Kurunegala, Kalutara, Hambantota, Monaragala, Ampara, Badulla, Polonnaruwa and Anuradhapura.

Curator of the Taxila Museum, Humera Naz, told media that this valuable record was dated to the year 136 (78 AD). She said the inscription confirmed that the relics belong to the Buddha.

"This inscription records that on the 15th day of Ashadha, in the 136th year of Azes, the sacred relics of Buddha were enshrined by the venerable Sion, a Bactrian inhabitant of Noacha."

She said that the display of these holy relics has not only boosted religious tourism but has also helped promote the country's soft image. She added that since their display, the museum has witnessed

visits by Most Venerable Arayawangso, who offered the religious rituals of Kathina — a Buddhist festival — for the first time in Pakistan's history.

This was followed by visits from chief monks and monks from South Korea, Sri Lanka and other Buddhist countries, as well as scholars from across the globe.

## Year's first supermoon lights up sky



This year's first supermoon lights up the night sky in Karachi on Saturday 3 Jan.

The first supermoon of 2026 was observed across Pakistan on Saturday 3 Jan., as a larger and brighter than usual moon illuminated the night sky.

Traditionally referred to as the 'Wolf Moon', the supermoon started to rise in Pakistan at 5:51 pm, with lunar illumination reaching 99.8 per cent, a Suparco spokesperson said in a statement. The astronomical event also marked the last supermoon in a series that began in October 2025, it added.

According to the space agency, the next series of supermoons is expected to begin in November 2026, offering further opportunities for astronomical observation later in the year.

On Saturday 3 Jan., the 14th of the lunar month Rajab, the moon was visible in the evening across the country.

Unlike Friday 2 Jan., when there was a bright halo around the moon due to refraction, the supermoon appeared larger than usual and was clearly visible in the sky.

At the time of the event, the distance between the Earth and the moon was approximately 362,000 kilometres, making the moon appear 6 to 7 per cent larger and about 10 per cent brighter than an average full moon. Suparco stated that the Quadrantids meteor shower would also be at its peak during this period.

## Heritage lovers call for restoring rusting Indus Queen



A replica of Indus Queen on the lawns of Noor Mahal.

The heritage and culture lovers, including intellectuals, scholars and former members of Bahawalpur Museum's defunct board of governors have reiterated their demand for relocation of the Indus Queen to the Bahawalpur Museum for its preservation and exhibition for the public.

Over a century-old Indus Queen's skeleton is presently rusting near Kot Mithan along the deserted place of the Indus River.

Media learnt that during the past few years, some measures were taken by former South Punjab Additional Chief Secretary (ACS) Saqib Zafar and former Commissioner Raja Jahangir Anwar to shift its skeleton to the museum but the task could not be completed during their tenures. As a result, the Indus Queen is still rotting near Kot Mithan.

Raja Anwar, in his capacity as the chief of the then BoG of Bahawalpur Museum, had sent the board's former members' delegation to the ship to examine the possibility of shifting its wreckage to Bahawalpur. But after the transfers of Mr Anwar and Mr Zafar from Bahawalpur, the earlier proposal was not implemented, raising the heritage lovers' concerns.

Media learnt from historic facts that the steamer, Indus Queen, was built in 1867 by Thomas Reid & Sons in the port city of Paisley, Scotland. It was commissioned by Nawab of Bahawalpur Sadiq Muhammad Khan Abbasi-IV and was used for transportation of the royal family when the river Sutlej was in full swing and flowed near the city. Initially, it was named as the Sutlej Queen with reference to the River Sutlej.

The three-story ship had separate male and female sections and could accommodate 400 guests at a time. However, after the Partition of India in 1947 and signing of the Indus Waters Treaty between Pakistan and India during the dictatorial regime of Gen Ayub Khan,

the River Sutlej started drying up as its water was given to India. Nawab Sadiq Abbasi-V shifted the steamer to the river Indus and was renamed as the Indus Queen.

The late Nawab gifted the ship to the devotees of poet Khawaja Ghulam Farid of Koth Mithan Sharif for their transportation from Kot Mithan to Chachran Sharif in Rahim Yar Khan district. Once, the ship caught fire that badly damaged it, making it unserviceable. After the construction of Ghazi Ghat Bridge, the Indus Queen was docked. Presently, it is in a ruined condition at Kot Mithan in the Rajanpur district.

It is amusing for thousands of visitors of historical Noor Mahal that the Pak Army, custodian of the Noor Mahal, had sometime back installed the replica of Indus Queen on the lawns of the palace. The replica has also three storeys with a restaurant at its second floor, which is opened for the general public. The palace's caretakers also hold light and sound shows at Noor Mahal for the entertainment of visitors.

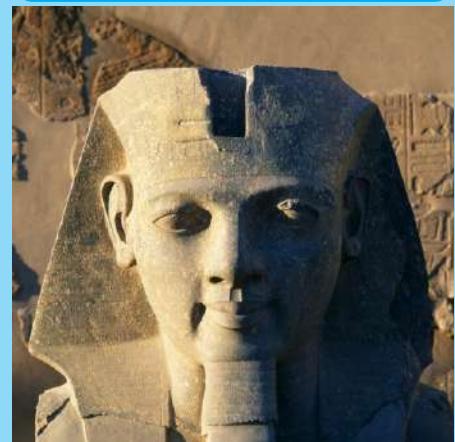
The skeleton of the ship at Mithan Kot.

The heritage lovers think that the Indus Queen lying is the heritage of the State of Bahawalpur and that it should be shifted back and preserved at the Bahawalpur Museum for future generations. In a meeting here the other day, they drew the attention of Punjab Archives, archaeology department and Commission, Musarrat Jabeen to the Indus Queen and appealed for its shifting to Bahawalpur for preservation for future generations.

Some years back, the antique steam engine was shifted from Panjnad Headworks for exhibition on the premises of Bahawalpur Museum where it attracts a large number of visitors. This steam engine was used to transport stones, iron bars and girders and other construction material to build the Panjnad Headworks.

The Bahawalpur Museum has already preserved treasures of hundreds of artefacts of Cholistan desert in addition to the late Nawab's vintage vehicles and buggies.

## Archaeologists finally found the missing part of a legendary statue



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Here's what you'll learn when you read this story:

In 1930, German archaeologists uncovered the lower half of a massive statue, estimating that it likely originally stood some 23 feet tall.

Now, U.S. and Egyptian archaeologists have announced the discovery of the long-missing top half in thankfully pristine condition.

A proposal has already been submitted to unite the bottom with the long-missing top half, and the discoverers are confident of its approval.

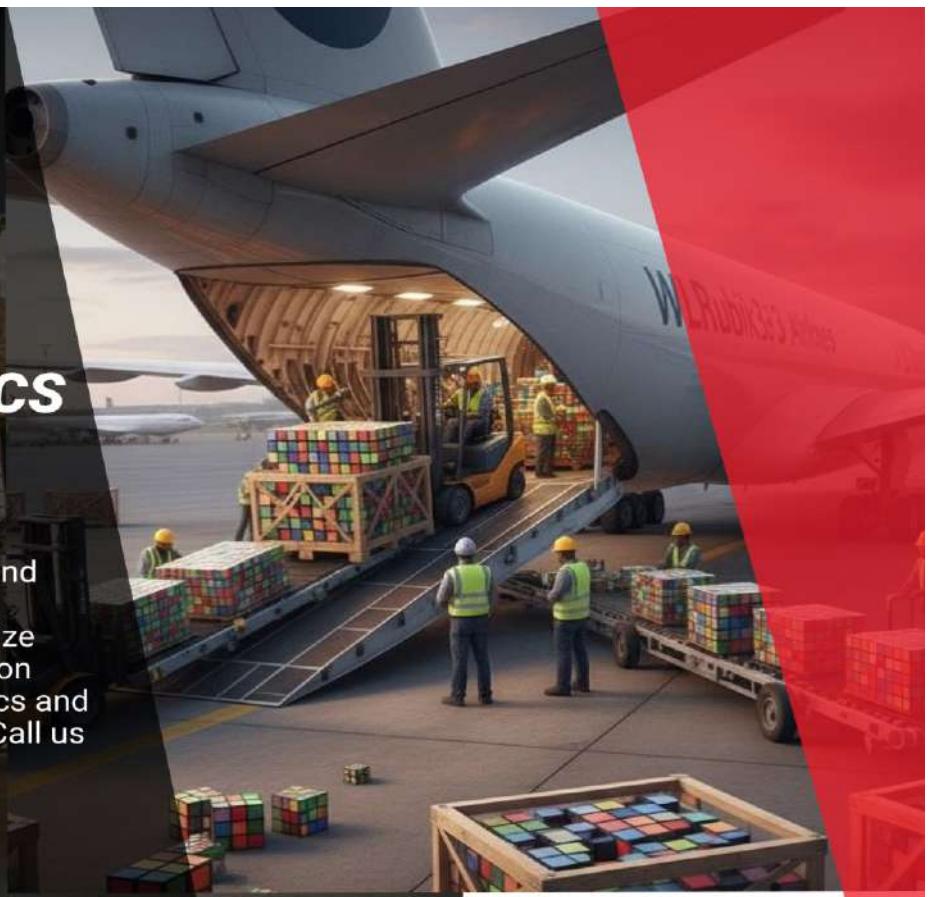
Some 96 years ago, German archaeologist Gunther Roeder unearthed the lower half of what would've been a massive, 23-foot-tall statue of Ramesses II —one of the most celebrated pharaohs throughout all 31 dynasties of Ancient Egyptian history. Roeder found the statue 150 miles south of Cairo in the Minya Governorate, near the modern-day city of El Ashmunein. In ancient times, this area along the Nile was known as Khemnu. It served as a provincial capital in the Old Kingdom of Egypt (2649–2130 BCE), and was later called Hermopolis Magna when Romans ruled the Mediterranean.

Many treasures of the region's illustrious past were known to be buried in the surrounding desert, and while Roeder's discovery proved remarkable, the rest of the enormous [statue](#) he found remained lost to time ... until now.



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# **Spiritual fervour marks Guru Gobind Singh's birth anniversary at Gurdwara Panja Sahib**

The historic Gurdwara Panja Sahib reverberated with hymns, prayers and spiritual fervour on Monday 5 Jan. as Sikh devotees gathered to celebrate the birth anniversary of Guru Gobind Singh Ji, the tenth and last Guru of the Sikh faith.

The 360th birth anniversary, known as Prakash Purab in the Sikh religion, was marked with special prayers, continuous recitation from the Guru Granth Sahib and devotional kirtan, creating an atmosphere of deep reverence and communal harmony.

Devotees paid homage to the Guru's timeless teachings of courage, equality and justice, which continue to inspire generations across the world.

Rituals began early in the morning as worshippers assembled at the revered shrine to offer ardas, listen to recitations from the Guru Granth Sahib and participate in devotional kirtan. A colourful procession was also taken out within the gurdwara premises to mark the birth celebrations. Langar was arranged for all visitors, reinforcing the Sikh tradition of equality and community service, as the celebrations concluded with prayers for peace and unity.

Gullbeer Singh, granthi (caretaker) of the Sikh temple, while shedding light on the life of the last Sikh Guru, said that Guru Gobind Singh Ji, born in 1666, played a pivotal role in shaping Sikh identity. He said the historic establishment of the Khalsa Panth in 1699 transformed the Sikh community into a collective bound by faith, discipline and a commitment to stand against oppression.

"His message of fearless spirituality and selfless service remains relevant far beyond religious boundaries," he added.

"The birth anniversary of Sri Guru Gobind Singh Ji reminds us of his message of courage and equality. Coming to Panja Sahib on this sacred day strengthens our spiritual bond and pride in our heritage," said local community leader Sardar Jaggi Singh. Another attendee, Balbir Kaur, described the celebration as a link between past and present. "Observing Prakash



*Devotees offer rituals in connection with the birth anniversary of Guru Gobind Singh at Gurdwara Panja Sahib in Hassanabdal on Monday 5 Jan.*

Purab at this historic gurdwara connects us with our ancestors and the values the Guru taught us to uphold," she said.

Young participants also highlighted the broader message of harmony. "Panja Sahib is a symbol of unity. People from different faiths joining us today shows that Guru Ji's teachings of peace and service are still alive," said Sukhdev Singh.

Evacuee Trust Property Board (ETPB) official Asmat Ullah said the event reflected Pakistan's commitment to preserving religious heritage and promoting interfaith harmony.

"The celebration at Gurdwara Panja Sahib carries deep historical resonance, not only as a reminder of Guru Gobind Singh Ji's teachings but also as an expression of Sikh heritage in Pakistan, a country where Sikh historical sites are treasured by global pilgrims," he added.

Such observances also enhance Pakistan's image as a site of religious pluralism, particularly in Hasanabdal, where Sikh and other minority communities actively contribute to social cohesion. Officials and community representatives said events like these underscore shared values of peace, unity and mutual respect.

## **'Tuna king' pays record \$3.2m for bluefin at Tokyo auction**



*KIYOSHI Kimura poses with the 243-kilogram bluefin tuna.*

A Japanese sushi entrepreneur paid a record \$3.2 million for a giant bluefin tuna Monday 5 Jan. at an annual prestigious new year auction in Tokyo's main fish market, smashing the previous all-time high.

Dave Gershman at the Pew Charitable Trusts' international fisheries team used news of the auction to highlight that stocks of Pacific bluefin tuna were improving after being "near collapse".

Self-styled "Tuna King" Kiyoshi Kimura's sushi restaurant chain paid the top price for the 243-kilogram (536-pound) fish that was caught off Japan's northern coast.

"I'd thought we would be able to buy a

little cheaper, but the price soared before you knew it," Kimura said after the pre-dawn auction at Tokyo's main fish market.

"I was surprised at the price...I hope that by eating auspicious tuna, as many people as possible will feel energised," he told reporters.

The 510.3 million yen price at the new year's auction was the highest since comparable data started being collected in 1999.

The previous high was 333.6 million yen for a 278 kilogram bluefin in 2019, after the fish market moved from its traditional Tsukiji area in central Tokyo to a more modern facility.

The top bidder last year paid 207 million yen for a 276-kilogram bluefin.

Shortly after this year's auction, the tuna was butchered and turned into sushi, selling for around 500 yen (\$3) per roll.

"I feel like I've begun the year in a good way after eating something so auspicious as the year starts," 19-year-old Minami Sugiyama said from a table in one of Kimura's restaurants in Tsukiji.

Fellow customer Kiyoshi Nishimura agreed.



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## Signs of forgotten city found beneath Taxila's first settlement



Archaeologists carry out excavation at Bhir Mound remains on Friday 26 Dec.

**A**n excavation team working at the ancient remains of Bhir Mound, recognised as the first city of the Taxila Civilisation, has made a major archaeological breakthrough, uncovering compelling evidence of a well-organised urban settlement that predates the sixth century BC.

This significant discovery holds the potential to rewrite the early history of civilisation in the region, suggesting that Taxila was a thriving city centuries earlier than scholars previously believed, existing even before the emergence of Achaemenid or Greek influence.

Mr Dogar described the current discovery as one of the most important in recent decades. He said the evidence confirms Taxila's role was not merely that of a centre of learning or military activity, but as a fully developed urban civilisation that flourished in the region's earliest historical phases.

Officials from the Punjab Department of Archaeology, who are currently conducting the extensive excavation at the ancient site, told *media* on Friday 26 Dec. that the newly unearthed remains point definitively to continuous human habitation.

The findings reveal a sophisticated civic structure, placing Taxila among the earliest known urban centres of South Asia.

Archaeologists at the site have uncovered specific remnants such as stone and mud-brick walls, carefully planned street and an advanced drainage system. These structural findings clearly indicate an organised and forward-looking society.

Aasim Dogar, the deputy director of the Punjab Department of Archaeology, said that the current evidence points towards a much older timeline than

traditional historical accounts suggest.

"Evidence of second century, fourth century and sixth century culture deposits are found, and the further deep trench may lead to discovery beyond the sixth century," Mr Dogar said.

He explained that pushing deeper into the stratigraphy may rewrite the history of the first city of Taxila beyond the sixth century BC, creating a historical profile "resembling it to Harappa and Gandhara grave culture".

Beyond the structural discoveries, a significant number of physical artifacts have been recovered from the site.

Mr Dogar revealed that the team has found finely crafted pottery bearing intricate designs, ancient coins, and seals dating back to the second century B.C. These items reflect established trade networks and include stone and metal tools used in construction and daily life.

These findings collectively demonstrate that the settlement supported a complex social and economic system long before the period traditionally associated with Taxila's rise.

Mr Dogar noted that the site flourished during the periods of Achaemenid, Greek, and Mauryan influence and was occupied at the time of Alexander the Great's arrival in 326 BC.

The deputy director provided a detailed history of the exploration at Bhir Mound to contextualise the current success.

He noted that the first extensive archaeological investigations were conducted by Sir John Marshall between 1918 and 1934, work that formed the basis for the original chronological and cultural interpretation of the site. A later excavation was led by Sir Mortimer Wheeler in 1944-1945.

According to Mr Dogar, Wheeler focused on stratigraphic clarification and introduced modern excavation techniques to the region. These methods heavily influenced subsequent archaeological work in Pakistan.

After a hiatus of nearly two decades, renewed archaeological work is now being carried out by the Punjab Department of Archaeology..

Mr Dogar believes the breakthrough will draw international scholarly attention and significantly enhance Taxila's standing on the global archaeological map.

Mr Dogar said that for the first time in excavations in Taxila, the latest Japanese and Chinese software and hardware technology are being utilised. This includes advanced GPS technology and scanners, alongside the geo-mapping of the city through the use of drone technology.

"This is just the tip of the iceberg," Mr Dogar said. "There are likely many more layers of history buried beneath Bhir Mound waiting to be uncovered."

## Local hunter takes ibex trophy



**A** young local hunter from Lower Chitral, Hamad Mumtaz Baig, successfully completed the first trophy hunt of the season in Rosh Gol, Terich Turkho Conservancy located in Upper Chitral.

The hunter had obtained permit from the wildlife department by paying Rs148348, while the shooting distance was recorded at 342 meters and the horn length of the harvested ibex was measured at 45.2 inches.

An official of CGNP told media that this successful trophy hunting event reflected the principles of scientific and sustainable wildlife management while the revenue generated from trophy hunting played a significant role in community development and the conservation of natural resources.

He commended the efforts of the local community particularly the Village Conservation Committee (VCC) Zondrangram, which played primary role in the conservation process and efforts.



**A** Russian hunter with his Kashmir Markhor trophy in Gahirait-Golen conservancy in Lower Chitral on Wednesday 31 Dec. the hunter having paid \$68.000 for the non-exportable trophy hunting permit, was successful in tracing the nine-year-old animal after a two-day search. In the non-exportable trophy category, the horn and the head are retained by the wildlife department.

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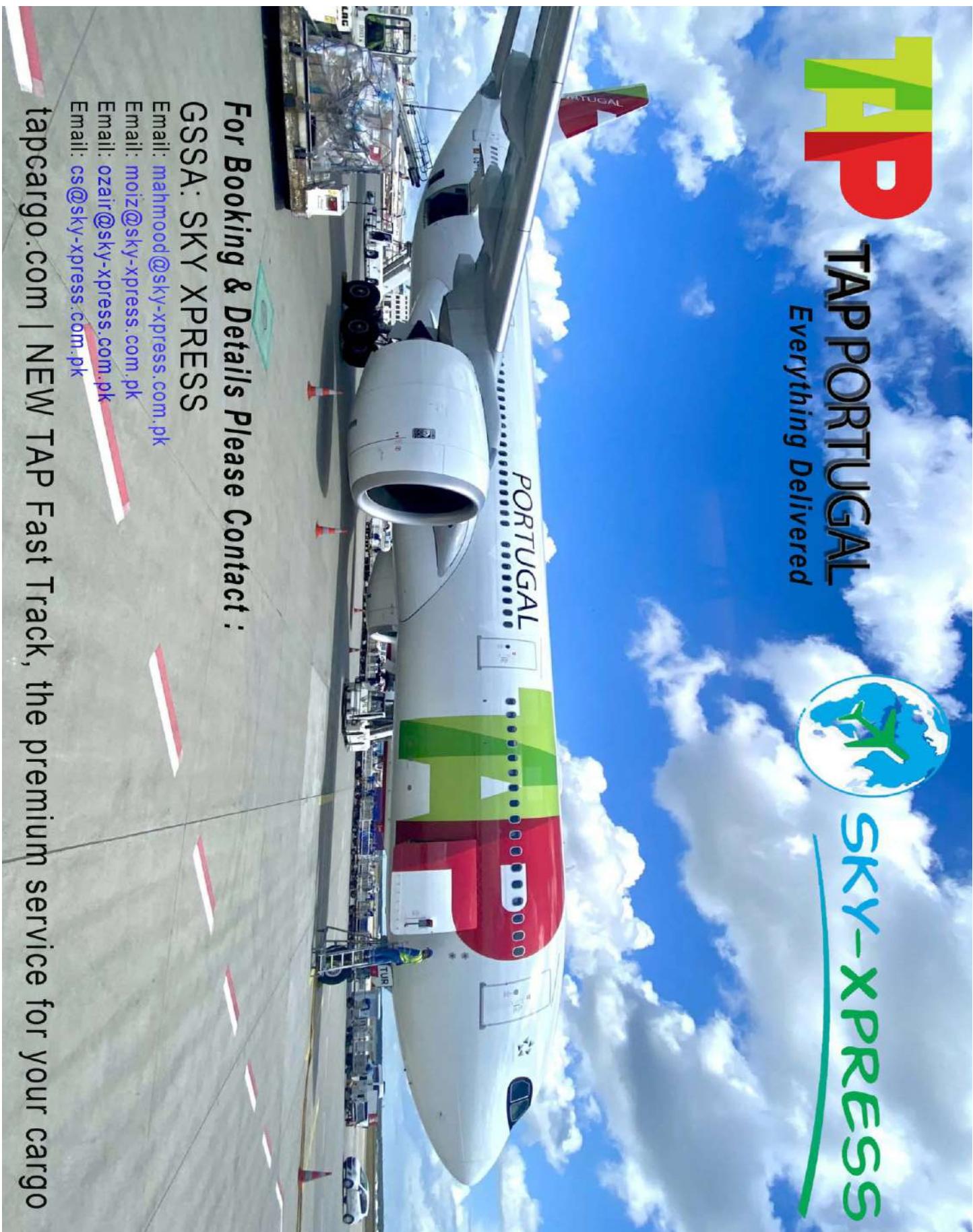
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