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World Bank Group President Ajay Banga, Mrs Ajay Banga, and Sindh Chief Minister Syed Murad Ali Shah pose for a photograph in front of the stupa at the UNESCO World Heritage site of Mohenjo-daro.



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Karachi-Dhaka direct flights resume after 14 years

After a hiatus of 14 years, direct flights between Pakistan and Bangladesh commenced on Thursday 29 Jan. as Biman Bangladesh Airlines inaugural flight from Dhaka landed at Karachi Airport on Thursday 29 Jan. night.

Biman Bangladesh Airlines Flight BG-341, operating from Dhaka, landed in Karachi at 11:00 p.m. and was accorded a traditional water salute on arrival, marking the significance of the occasion. A high-level welcome ceremony was held at the airport, attended by Governor Sindh Mr. Kamran Khan Tessori, High Commissioner of Bangladesh to Pakistan H.E. Muhammad Iqbal Hussain Khan, Director General Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) Mr. Nadir Shafi Dar, Director AVSEC Air Commodore (R) Shahid Qadir, along with the Chief Operating Officer / Airport Manager Adnan Khan, Deputy Airport Manager Qasim Khilji, and representatives of airport stakeholders, airline officials and Mr. Ghouse Akber Chairman of Akbar Group GSA for the Airlines.

Sindh Governor Kamran Tessori welcomed the passenger and crew upon their arrival.

The resumption of the direct flight marks a significant milestone in strengthening connectivity and bilateral engagement between the two countries.

According to Pakistan's High Commission in Dhaka, the fully packed inaugural flight departed from Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport, Dhaka, for Jinnah International Airport, Karachi.

The direct flight was seen off by adviser for Civil Aviation and Tourism, Sheikh Bashir Uddin, High Commissioner of Pakistan to Bangladesh Imran Haider, secretary of Ministry of Civil Aviation and Tourism, chairman Civil Aviation Authority of Bangladesh and managing director and CEO of Biman Bangladesh Airlines.

The launch of the direct flight is being hailed as a positive and long-awaited development.

Addressing the inaugural ceremony, the adviser for civil aviation and tourism underscored the importance of the Dhaka-Karachi route in enhancing connectivity, promoting tourism and strengthening people-to-people links.

He said Biman Bangladesh Airlines would gradually increase flights' frequency and reduce airfares to make travel more affordable for the people.

Bashiruddin expressed hope that people of Bangladesh will visit Pakistan and explore its natural beauty, cultural heritage and diverse cuisines.



Speaking on the occasion, the Pakistan high commissioner recalled the vision of Professor Muhammad Yunus, Chief Adviser of Bangladesh and Pakistan's Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif aimed at enhancing connectivity between Pakistan and Bangladesh.

"In view of the vision of the leadership and aspirations of the people of our two countries, during the visit of Deputy Prime Minister Ishaq Dar to Dhaka in August last year, both sides agreed to take immediate measures for resumption of direct flights. Its

operationalisation today would play a key role in enhancing youth, academic, cultural, business, people to people and familial exchanges," he added.

The high commissioner expressed gratitude to the government of Bangladesh, Biman Bangladesh Airlines, and the Civil Aviation Authority for making the launch of the flight possible. Passengers travelling on the inaugural flight expressed happiness and enthusiasm over the restoration of the direct air link, describing it as a milestone towards bringing the two countries closer.

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Deal signed to officially put PIA under new management



Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif on Thursday 29 Jan. said the “glory days” of Pakistan International Airlines (PIA) would return under the new management, as the government signed transaction documents for the airline’s privatisation.

“PIA will reach new heights under the leadership of the Arif Habib Consortium. The airline will improve its performance, punctuality, cabin service and professional standards,” the prime minister said while speaking at the signing ceremony.

The ceremony was attended by Chief of Army Staff and Chief of Defence Forces Field Marshal Syed Asim Munir, Deputy Prime Minister Ishaq Dar and federal ministers.

PM Shehbaz congratulated the nation on the signing of the transaction and said Arif Habib and his team were among Pakistan’s “distinguished business ambassadors” who had contributed to the country’s progress. He said the new owners’ first priority would be passenger comfort and safety.

Recalling the airline’s past, the prime minister said PIA had been at its peak in the 1960s, with a recognised presence across Pakistan and in world capitals. He also praised the role of federal ministers and Adviser to the Prime Minister on Privatisation Muhammad Ali in completing the transaction.

The prime minister said the privatisation process was conducted transparently and telecast live. He said the bidding closed at Rs180 billion, of which the consortium would spend Rs135bn on improving PIA.

He hoped that the new PIA owners would help the airline regain its past glory through “untiring efforts and innovation”.

Mr Ali explained the salient features of PIA’s privatisation and said the public would benefit from improved services.

NA body seeks details

Meanwhile, the National Assembly Standing Committee on Privatisation on Thursday 29 Jan. sought further clarification and comprehensive information on the transaction from the Privatisation Commission.

Chaired by Dr Muhammad Farooq Sattar, the committee asked the commission to submit a comprehensive report at its next meeting, including employee participation, consultation mechanisms and grievance redress.

The meeting was convened to review ongoing privatisation transactions. The secretary of the privatisation ministry briefed the committee on the PIA process, including its stages and the current status of the deal.

The committee was also briefed by the power ministry on the installation of Advanced Metering Infrastructure (AMI) meters.

It was told that as of Jan 9, a total of 1,614,296 AMI meters had been installed across distribution companies, surpassing the target of 1.5 million.

The panel was also briefed on Pakistan Re-Insurance Company Limited (PRCL), which is listed on the Pakistan Stock Exchange and remains majority-owned by the government.

The committee was told that PRCL is

planned for partial privatisation through a secondary public offering, but the transaction has been deferred due to unfavourable market conditions and valuation concerns.

Regarding Sukkur Electric Power Company Limited (Sepco), the committee was informed that the government was considering private-sector participation as part of power sector reforms, given the utility’s high losses, weak recovery and governance issues.

Outright privatisation was not considered feasible at this stage, while options under consideration included a management contract or partial privatisation, supported by preparatory reforms and financial restructuring.

The committee stressed that consumer protection, Nepra oversight and employee safeguards must remain integral to any reform process.

Amin Ahmed also contributed to this report

Major airports gets up gradation with bird repellent system

Several major airports across Pakistan—including Islamabad, Karachi, Peshawar, Faisalabad, and Multan—have received upgraded with new bird repellent systems.

These installations aim to improve flight safety by reducing bird strikes, which can cause significant damage to aircraft and disrupt operations.

The enhanced systems use modern technologies such as ultrasonic devices and visual deterrents to keep birds away from critical airspace.



Charg d'Affairs H. E. Natalie A. Baker visits AirSial Head Office

Sialkot, Pakistan – 13 January 2026 – AirSial Ltd. was honored to host a delegation from the United States Embassy, led by H.E. Ms. Natalie A. Baker, Charge d'Affaires and Acting Ambassador of the United States to Pakistan. The delegation, which included Mr. Stetson Sanders, U.S. Consul General in Lahore, and Mr. Jhon Skerry, Political and Economic Chief, among other officials, visited the airline's Corporate Head Office in Sialkot.

The distinguished guests were warmly welcomed by AirSial's senior leadership, including Chairman Mr. Fazal Jilani, Senior Vice Chairman Mr. Qaiser Iqbal Baryar, Vice Chairman Mr. Muhammad Umer Mir, and Chief Executive Officer Mr. Ameen Ahsan.

Following the presentation of bouquets, the Acting Ambassador participated in a cake-cutting ceremony to commemorate AirSial's 5th Anniversary.

A formal meeting was subsequently held in the Board Room. Chairman Mr. Fazal Jilani recounted the airline's origins, explaining that the concept was conceived during his tenure as President of the Sialkot Chamber of Commerce & Industry. The goal was to facilitate the local export industry by ensuring timely shipment of consignments and conserving foreign exchange for Pakistan. The leadership team provided a comprehensive briefing on the company's journey, current operations, and strategic vision.

Outlining future plans, Mr. Jilani disclosed that AirSial is considering expansion of its flight operations to include destinations in the United States. In this regard, he requested the Acting Ambassador's assistance in the acquisition of widebody aircrafts.

The U.S. delegation expressed keen interest in AirSial's progress and activities and extended their best wishes for the potential commencement of U.S. flights.

The visit concluded with an exchange of souvenirs and a photography session.



Chairman AirSial Mr Fazal Jilani presents a souvenir to the visiting honourable guest.

AirSial leadership meets with Irish Pakistani ICT Professionals in Dublin



An AirSial delegation, led by Chairman - Mr. Fazal Jilani and Vice Chairman - Mr. Muhammad Umer Mir, engaged in a productive dialogue with the Irish Pakistani ICT Professionals (iPIP) network during a recent visit to Dublin.

The discussions focused on Ireland's ICT sector, the European innovation landscape, and potential collaborations between Pakistani enterprises and European technology markets. The shared values of entrepreneurship and private-sector leadership formed a strong basis for the exchange.

AirSial appreciated the bridge-building role of organizations like iPIP and views this engagement as a positive step toward fostering future partnerships in technology and innovation between Pakistan and Ireland.

AirSial expands fleet



AirSial welcomed its 9th bird, AP-BPJ, as it touched down at Jinnah International Airport, Karachi. With this latest addition to the fleet, its ambitions are climbing even higher! The future is bright, and it is ready to soar.

Senate defence committee inspects Islamabad International Airport

Senate Standing Committee on Defence Chairman Senator Talha Mahmood and Senator Attaur Rehman Darwish on Tuesday 27 Jan. inspected Islamabad International Airport, where they were given a detailed briefing on various issues, including immigration counters, commercial areas, the ATC tower and the fire station.

At the state lounge, the deputy DG airports briefed the visiting senators on PAA operations, airport infrastructure development, management and major projects. Pakistan's first greenfield airport, built in May 2018, has a capacity of nine million passengers and 100,000 metric tons of cargo per year, with plans to expand capacity to 25 million passengers.

The deputy DG CAA highlighted regulatory affairs, standards and norms set by the International Civil Aviation Organisation, as well as safety and security measures. The airport manager presented details on passenger comfort, facilities and various initiatives.

Passenger amenities include digital lost and found services, cashless transactions, grievance redressal and resolution initiatives through QR codes, fast-track services for diplomats and business-class passengers, charging points, free Wi-Fi, mosques, modern baggage handling systems, rainwater harvesting facilities, LED lighting and electric airside vehicles. The director commercial briefed the senators on the airport's commercial potential, including the upgradation of duty-free shops, food outlets, branded automobile display spots, restaurants, car parking automation, movie theatres, gaming zones and CIP lounges to increase non-aeronautical revenue.

It was stated that prompt action is taken on passenger complaints related to prayer areas, cleanliness, washrooms and leakages, while all 2025 PMDU complaints (41 out of 41) have been resolved. Islamabad International Airport currently maintains a three-star Skytrax rating among Asian airports.

The director security briefed the delegation on security measures, screening procedures and coordination with the Airport Security Force (ASF).

The briefings were followed by an airport tour during which immigration

counters, commercial areas, the ATC tower, the fire station and other facilities were inspected. Senator Talha Mahmood appreciated the efforts of PAA, particularly in improving passenger facilities, grievance redressal, infrastructure, security and commercial development.

He said these measures were in line with the development of national civil aviation and international standards.

Airports outsourcing shifted to open bidding

The Privatisation Commission announced on Saturday 24 Jan. that the outsourcing operation for the country's three major airports — Islamabad, Lahore and Karachi — will move to an open bidding mode following a high level of interest from various investors.

The commission said the shift from a government-to-government (G2G) mode to open bidding aims to generate a competitive process wherein all domestic and foreign investors will have a level playing field to participate in the bidding process.

According to a commission statement, the envisaged competitive process priorities inclusivity by welcoming participation from all eligible entities, including those from partner nations, while affording equal opportunities to local and foreign investors.

This approach is designed to promote transparency and fair competition, deliver the most advantageous results for Pakistan's economy and reinforce relationships with international partners, the commission said.

The government has been actively considering options for Islamabad International Airport, Karachi's Jinnah International Airport and Lahore's Allama Iqbal International Airport through appropriate modes, including management contracts and long-term commercial concessions.

As part of this strategy, the Islamabad airport has been included in the active privatisation program, consistent with the ongoing process for the airports at Karachi and Lahore.

This follows constructive dialogue with entities from partner nations, including the United Arab Emirates, Turkiye and Saudi Arabia, as well as other

international stakeholders.

The commission noted that the primary objectives are to enhance efficiency, improve service delivery, maximise revenue generation, upgrade infrastructure and attract private sector investments. These efforts align with the nation's economic vision to cultivate collaboration to modernise the aviation sector.

PIA enters air cargo partnership with Air France-KLM

The Pakistan International Airlines (PIA) has signed a cargo partnership with Air France-KLM to expand its global freight reach.

A PIA spokesman said the agreement, which became effective from Jan 15, allows PIA cargo to access the Air France-KLM global network, enabling exporters to ship goods across Europe and the US using a single air waybill covering both airline systems.

The agreement will give PIA cargo access to Air France-KLM's global network and because of this deal a significant improvement is expected in exports of Pakistani products and their access to global markets.

The exporters will now be able to use PIA and Air France-KLM networks on a single airway bill.

Under the pact, PIA cargo will connect through Dubai, Riyadh and Dammam, offering access to major destinations such as Amsterdam, Paris, Brussels, Frankfurt, Stuttgart and Düsseldorf.

US cities New York, Atlanta and Los Angeles are also part of the network.



New Domestic Airline South Air to Start Commercial Flights Next Month

South Air, a new domestic airline, is set to begin commercial flight operations next month. The airline aims to improve connectivity between major cities.



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PAF contingent in Saudi Arabia for combat exercise



F-16 Block-52 fighters are seen on the tarmac during the Spears of Victory 2026 exercise.

A contingent of Pakistan Air Force (PAF) arrived in Saudi Arabia to take part in a multinational aerial combat exercise, the military's media affairs wing said on Monday 19 Jan.

The PAF contingent, comprising F-16 Block-52 fighter aircraft alongside dedicated air and ground crew, arrived at King Abdulaziz Air Base to participate in the exercise 'Spears of Victory 2026'.

"The exercise is witnessing the participation of fighter jets and combat support elements from Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, France, Italy, Greece, Qatar, Bahrain, Jordan, the United Kingdom and the United States," the Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) said in a press release.

"It offers a robust platform to enhance interoperability, operational synergy, mutual understanding and capacity building among participating air forces, particularly in large force employment, night composite air operations, integrated ISR (Intelligence Surveillance Reconnaissance), and operations in advanced electronic warfare environments," it added.

Through participation in this multinational forum, PAF seeks to enhance interoperability with partner air forces and "validate its operational preparedness in a contested, technology-driven battle space".

The ISPR said the PAF fighter aircraft undertook a non-stop flight from their home base in Pakistan to Saudi Arabia, "demonstrating the long-range operational reach and expeditionary capabilities of Pakistan Air Force".

"During the conduct of the exercise, PAF pilots flying advanced F-16 Block-52 aircraft equipped with modern avionics and Beyond Visual Range capabilities will be pitched against air crew members

of participating air forces operating a wide array of sophisticated combat aircraft," the ISPR added.

It said the participation of the PAF contingent in the exercise not only reflected its firm commitment to regional and international military cooperation, but also underscored its "professional excellence and proven capability to operate effectively in diverse and demanding operational environments alongside leading contemporary air forces".

Istanbul Airport likely to overtake Heathrow in passenger handling

London Heathrow remained the busiest aviation hub in Europe last year but Istanbul Airport was nearly neck-and-neck and is likely to overtake it soon, an industry group said on Thursday 5 Feb.

With 84.48 million passengers, Heathrow had a 0.7 per cent increase in traffic last year, ACI Europe reported, citing the use of larger planes by airlines at "the capacity-constrained British hub".

British authorities say a third runway will be added at Heathrow but it is not expected to be ready before 2035.

Istanbul Airport, where traffic has surged since its inauguration in 2018, saw passenger growth of 5.5pc to 84.44 million — just 40,000 behind Heathrow.

Turkey has benefitted as a gateway between Europe and Asian destinations as well as being a hub for flights between Russia, subject to Western sanctions over its war in Ukraine, and the rest of the world.

Rounding out the top five European airports were Paris-Charles de Gaulle (72 million), Amsterdam-Schiphol (68.8m) and Madrid (68.1m).

Overall, passenger traffic across Europe climbed 4.4pc last year to 2.6 billion people, "entirely driven by international traffic", ACI Europe said.

"Travel remains among consumers' top discretionary spending priorities — even as geopolitics and geoconomics are likely to further test the sector's resilience," ACI Europe's director general Olivier Jankovec said in a statement. The sector continues to benefit as well from the post-Covid pandemic travel restrictions, and traffic growth is expected to "normalise" at around 3.3pc this year, Jankovec said.

Biman to increase its flights to Pakistan

Biman Bangladesh Airlines is set to increase its direct flight operations to Pakistan following fresh approval from the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA). The airline has been cleared to operate three weekly flights on the Dhaka-Karachi route, up from the current two. This expansion comes just days after direct air travel between the two nations resumed after a 14-year suspension, marked by a celebratory water cannon salute at Jinnah International Airport.



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IBIMAN BANGLADESH INCREASES DIRECT FLIGHTS TO KARACHI AFTER CAA APPROVAL

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Airports as Mirrors



Hamad International Airport, Doha | Qatar.

I am an airport person — not because I travel often, but because I love their peculiar atmosphere: the sense of transition, the emotion of crossing borders. Yet I have come to recognise another dimension: airports often capture the essence of the society that built them.

Earlier in October, I booked my flight from Berlin to Karachi after completing my postgraduation in Germany. This was not my first time travelling the Berlin-Doha-Karachi route and, like every time, I looked forward to my three-hour layover at the Hamad International Airport in Doha, Qatar.

Doha's Double-Edged Luxury

A brief stay at this airport feels like a delight for the senses; an artificial tropical garden, endless dining options and other curated attractions look like something from a fairytale.

I realise that my liking sits at odds with my sociological leanings. The Doha airport represents all that I dislike about the region's neoliberal culture: hyper-consumerism, late-stage capitalism and an undue fixation on aesthetics.

Yet the airport's commercial excess coexists with a highly efficient service apparatus. The wait times at immigration and baggage claim in Doha are virtually nonexistent. It is difficult not to appreciate the passenger experience, but anyone critical of the neoliberal paradigm is forced to confront certain questions: who built these terminals, who cleans the facilities, and who helps achieve such a high level of service?

What do airports reveal about the societies that build them? Comparing Doha's opulent excess, Berlin's democratic modesty and Karachi's perpetual stagnation offers unexpected

insights

The answer is clear: migrant workers from South Asia, Southeast Asia and Africa form the backbone of Gulf infrastructure. They work long hours constructing these expansive environments, while living under conditions marked by vulnerability, if not outright abuse.

In 2022, the kafala [sponsorship] system, which tied workers' legal status to their employers, was officially abolished in Qatar. Nevertheless, the overall labour rights conditions are still far from adequate. The large migration of workers from other countries also speaks to a reality about where they come from: the lack of employment opportunities and survival options available to Pakistanis, Indians, Filipinos and Ethiopians compel them to migrate to the Gulf.

Berlin's Old School

In contrast to Doha airport, Berlin's Brandenburg Airport, though modern and efficient, is considerably smaller, with fewer shops and only two or three dining options per terminal. Just like its airport, there is certainly nothing in Berlin approaching the scale of luxury found in Gulf megacities.

My two years as a student in Berlin surprised me on several fronts: remarkably few shopping malls, dated infrastructure and the metropolis seemed to be perpetually under construction, with dug-up roads and building sites scattered across neighbourhoods.

Local friends explained that this was due to long-delayed government development projects, as a result of which fibre-optic cables were only now being laid beneath the city. For me, this reflected Germany's adherence to older systems and strict bureaucracy.

The story of Brandenburg Airport has parallels to these characteristics: the airport, which was scheduled to open in 2012, missed seven scheduled opening dates and finally opened in 2020.

Yet Berlin's pace of modernisation isn't just about the challenges of the scale of reconstruction. The city residents, too, have made a choice. Time and again, they have resisted the capitalist development model that prioritises profit over public access.

Unlike Gulf cities, Berlin resists excessive consumerism. Leisure isn't gatekept by wealth: museums offer free entry days, galleries and exhibitions operate on donation, making cultural participation possible.

The political systems of the two regions come into play here. As a strong democracy, the German state, which charges high taxes from its citizens, is also accountable to them. Gulf states, as described by UK-based Adam Hanieh, the author of Capitalism and Class in the Gulf States, operate as capitalist monarchies. By channelling their oil wealth into urban development, the ruling regimes have successfully built tourist economies, cultivated international investment hubs and, most recently, expanded toward knowledge economies.

Without elections or citizen-funded taxes, accountability does not operate through the public. Instead, the state strictly regulates chosen domains: food businesses face hefty fines for violations, littering incurs penalties. The resulting order and efficiency create comfortable conditions, selectively benefitting white-collar expats and wealthy natives.

Homecoming Realities

When I landed at the airport of my home city after a 12-hour journey, I was overcome with nostalgia for a few seconds, as Karachi is the city where I spent my early childhood.

But as my nostalgia faded, I felt the contrast between Karachi airport and any other international airport, including those of Doha and Berlin. The infrastructure was dated and the stores felt like relics of a bygone era. I saw my suitcase after nearly an hour of waiting, although there were only three flights at 7am on a Saturday.

Why does the transport hub of Pakistan's largest city feel frozen in time? What has prevented its renovation or the construction of a contemporary facility? Jinnah Airport, which opened in 1992, has remained unchanged since its founding. It is, in many ways, a microcosm of Karachi itself: perpetually stuck between what it actually is and what it struggles to become.

Major governance challenges

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dominate Karachi's urban landscape, where crumbling infrastructure frequently results in life-threatening accidents. Unchecked projects are often abandoned with little consequence. A clear blame rests on the shoulders of negligent authorities, but it is no less true that the general public in Karachi also suffers from an almost criminal lack of civic sense.

Yet for all its flaws, Karachi is a city whose capacity to receive, absorb and sustain people from all walks of life is remarkable. Home to at least 21 million people, Karachi has, for generations, accepted people from across Pakistan. Punjabis, Pakhtuns, Sindhis, Baloch, Mohajirs, and Bengalis have all found their way here to seek opportunity, refuge, or simply to survive, and the city has given them space to build lives, however precarious.

much said about the need for Pakistan to have an international-standard airport, there is a story to be told about the new Islamabad airport, too. When it was opened in 2018, the Islamabad International Airport, described as 'world-class' and 'state-of-the-art', was a celebration for Pakistanis. After years of unpleasant experiences at the former Benazir Bhutto International Airport, the consensus was that Islamabad deserves a transportation facility that offers, at the very least, a positive first impression of the capital city.

Admittedly, the new airport is a significant step up from its predecessor; it is much larger, better-designed and more efficient. Yet one cannot help but notice the substandard quality of construction and other characteristics that fall short of qualifying it as a truly 'world-class' airport. The roofs have a tendency to leak when it rains and the elevators accommodate barely four passengers.

A 2025 case study by Dr Bilal Karim, Engr Muhammad Arif and Engr Zafar Ali Khan deemed the airport a "project success" for meeting budget and schedule, but a "business failure" for missing air traffic projections. I contend it fails as a project, too. Aesthetically, the truck art offers a slight saving grace, as it shows an appreciation of the creative labour of local painters and calligraphers.

With ample to complain about on the infrastructural front, in truth, my relationship with Karachi — my birthplace — and Islamabad, where I've lived, is more fundamental in shaping how I feel about their respective airports. Many hellos and goodbyes have been said here, and my associations are about personal memories, and significant life moments more than anything else.

So yes, I'm still an airport person — though the term now encompasses many different meanings.((Zoya Nazir)

Interior minister orders strict screening of travel documents at airports

While chairing a meeting to review the performance of the Immigration Wing of the Federal Investigation Agency (FIA), Interior Minister Mohsin Naqvi on Friday 9 Jan. issued orders for strict screening of travel documents at airports.

The ongoing campaign to prevent illegal immigration and human smuggling, as well as actions against the professional beggar mafia, came under detailed discussion during the meeting.

The interior minister's order came amid complaints of arbitrary offloading at airports despite travelers carrying valid documents.

In the first week of December, Naqvi had said that 50–70 passengers were being offloaded daily from flights to protect the country's passport reputation, which, at an average of 60 per day, comes to fewer than 22,000 in a year. However, official figures showed that the actual number of offloaded passengers in 2025 was three times higher, at 66,000.

During the meeting today, the interior minister ordered the continuation of relentless and strict action against the mafia involved in illegal immigration.

"Elements involved in human smuggling do not deserve any leniency," he said, making it clear that no one would be allowed to tarnish Pakistan's image.

He directed the FIA to effectively implement immigration laws and make

the immigration checking system at airports more efficient.

Naqvi also directed an effective crackdown against the professional beggar mafia and their backers.

The meeting was attended by federal secretary interior, additional secretary interior, director general FIA, directors Karachi and Lahore Zones.

Amid fears that genuine travellers would be given a tough time at airports in the name of "strict screening," an official said there were clear directions from the interior minister that no passenger with complete and valid travel documents should be stopped.

He added that strict screening, coupled with a crackdown against fraudulent visa agents exploiting citizens, was meant to curb attempts to use fake or unverified documents, since such practices damage Pakistan's image abroad. Following months of growing public fury and social media outrage, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif finally took notice of questionable offloading in mid-December and formed a "special committee" to look into the issue and ensure safe migration.

Disclosing this, Federal Minister for Overseas Pakistanis Chaudhry Salik Hussain said, "By the end of January, we will prepare proposals to address these issues," stressing that safe migration is a "fundamental right."

Constructive Dialogue with Consul General of Türkiye on Pak-Türkiye Tourism



Upon invitation of TAAP, H.E. Mr. Ergul Kadak, Consul General of Türkiye visited the TAAP (Travel Agents Association of Pakistan) Head Office. A productive discussion was held on boosting Pak-Türkiye tourism, promoting diverse destinations, easing travel facilitation, and encouraging reciprocal tourism to further strengthen people-to-people ties between the two brotherly nations.

Sialkot International Airport welcomes H.E Albert P Khorev, Russian Ambassador to Pakistan

Sialkot International Airport (SIAL) had the honour of hosting H.E. Albert P. Khorev, Ambassador of the Russian Federation to Pakistan, during his official visit to Sialkot International Airport.

The distinguished guest was warmly received by 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), who collectively extended a gracious welcome on behalf of the SIAL.

H.E. Albert P. Khorev was accompanied by Russian Trade Representative Denis Nevezorov.

During the visit, H. E the Ambassador was presented with a comprehensive briefing by Chairman SIAL, Mr. Hassan Ali Bhatti, highlighting the unique origin of Sialkot International Airport, its operational excellence, and its pioneering model as Pakistan's first privately built and operated international airport which is a symbol of visionary leadership and collective effort by the local business community.

Speaking on the occasion, H.E. Albert P. Khorev appreciated the remarkable initiative of the Sialkot business community in transforming a bold vision into a nationally and regionally admired institution. He emphasized the enduring partnership between Russia and Pakistan, noting that dynamic business hubs such as Sialkot play a vital role in deepening economic, industrial, and trade cooperation between the two nations.

The Ambassador remarked that Sialkot is a well-known city in Russia, widely respected for the quality of Pakistani products, and expressed admiration for Sialkot International Airport as an exemplary aviation infrastructure in the region. He further stated that both countries look forward to materialising free trade opportunities between Pakistan and Russia, while expressing a shared ambition to initiate direct passenger and cargo flights between Sialkot and Russia, opening new corridors of connectivity, commerce, and cultural exchange.

Chairman SIAL, Mr. Hassan Ali Bhatti, expressed gratitude for the visit of H. E the Russian Ambassador and reaffirmed SIAL's openness to future cooperation and collaboration.



Chairman & CEO SIAL meet Chairman Arif Habib Group



Chairman Sialkot International Airport Limited (SIAL), Mr. Hassan Ali Bhatti, along with Chief Executive Officer SIAL, AVM Tanweer Ashraf Bhatti (R), held a meeting with Mr. Arif Habib, Chairman Arif Habib Group and head of Consortium acquiring Pakistan International Airlines Corporation Ltd (PIAC). The meeting focused on matters of mutual interest, with

particular emphasis on expanding business cooperation between Pakistan's national flag carrier, PIA, and Sialkot International Airport. Both sides acknowledged the longstanding and strong institutional ties between PIA and SIAL, and reaffirmed their commitment to further strengthening collaboration to enhance connectivity, operational synergy, and future growth opportunities.

Originally designed to carry 300 passengers, this Boeing 747 jet was refitted for 60 guests and used by the Las Vegas Sands to fly its high rollers across continents. The VIPs enjoyed a grand salon, dining room, and private suites designed to mimic the opulent Venetian



There is something quietly revealing about the way ultra-expensive machines end their careers. They do not retire into museums or monuments. They drift into listings, databases, and broker websites, reduced to technical descriptions and “call for price” footnotes. The Boeing 747SP that once ferried Las Vegas Sands executives and high-roller gamblers across continents has now reached that stage, offered to the market not as a symbol of power but as a complicated asset in search of a new patron. Its availability marks more than the sale of an aircraft. It signals the fading relevance of a certain idea of prestige, one built on size, spectacle, and the belief that true status required a private jumbo jet.

Delivered to Trans World Airlines in March 1980 as N58201, the aircraft began life in the most conventional way possible, configured for around 279 passengers and deployed on high-yield long-haul routes. Known among enthusiasts as the “Boston Express,” it represented TWA’s attempt to extract maximum value from premium transatlantic travel in an era when American carriers still dominated global aviation. This was its democratic phase, flying business travelers, families, and corporate elites in equal measure.



That chapter closed in early 1985, when the jet was sold to the Dubai Royal Air Wing and re-registered as A6-SMR. It was soon converted into a VIP platform and absorbed into the Gulf’s expanding infrastructure of royal mobility. For more than 20 years, it operated as a flying



extension of court life, appearing regularly at major European and American airports. Long before today’s customized BBJs became commonplace, this 747SP functioned as a mobile palace, establishing a template for the region’s later obsession with airborne grandeur.

Also read- Breitling’s new Las Vegas boutique is the third one to open in the U.D

In 2007, the aircraft entered its third and final identity. Las Vegas Sands acquired the jet, transferred it to the Bermuda register as VP-BLK, and placed it into service as a long-range corporate and VIP shuttle. From August that year until May 2024, it moved the Adelson family, senior executives, and high-value gambling clients between Las Vegas, Macau, Singapore, and select international destinations.

Spotted reports and charter records sketch this period in fragments. The aircraft appeared in Los Angeles during the UFC 246 weekend in 2020 to collect VIP guests. It was observed crossing Canada on Rome-to-Las Vegas flights, likely carrying casino whales or Middle Eastern patrons. In 2019, a video tour posted by Kim Kardashian and Kanye West briefly exposed its interior to a mass audience, offering a rare glimpse into a normally sealed world.

This 747SP began by carrying middle-American travelers, then spent two decades as a Gulf royal transport, and

finally became a tool of global casino capitalism. Few aircraft trace the movement of elite power so clearly across continents and generations.

By the time Las Vegas Sands took control, the aircraft had already been transformed for private use, but its interior continued to evolve. Early in its Sands service, it reportedly featured around 157 seats, combining VIP zones with a conventional aft cabin, supported by multiple galleys and seven lavatories. It was designed to move large groups in comfort without abandoning efficiency.

That balance gradually disappeared. Current listings indicate a final configuration of roughly 60 seats, an

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extraordinary reduction for a widebody designed for nearly 300 passengers. Space replaced density, while privacy replaced capacity.

The major refit was handled by EdéseDoret Industrial Design, a New York studio known for head-of-state aircraft and work on the VC-25A Air Force One fleet. Their portfolio includes a 747SP corporate project completed in



2011, widely associated with the Sands jet. The resulting interior reflects an older conception of luxury, featuring high-gloss wood veneers, cream leather, gold accents, and formal room divisions rather than open-plan minimalism.

Also read - A \$35 billion mini-Las Vegas strip planned for Spain.

The layout resembles a private residence more than an airliner. A grand salon anchors the main deck, while a formal dining room supports boardroom-style meals. Private suites include full beds and ensuite bathrooms. Multiple lounges, seven lavatories, and large



galleys enable full-service operations on long sectors. Instead of functioning as a flying hotel, the aircraft operates as a multi-level townhouse in the sky.

This intimacy carries heavy financial consequences. Industry observers consistently note that operating costs dwarf realistic purchase prices. Four-engine fuel consumption, specialized maintenance, scarce parts, and dedicated crews make ownership viable only for buyers with exceptional resources.



That reality underscores the jet's symbolic position. The other surviving 747SPs now serve as engine test platforms

in Canada, stripped of luxury and status. VP-BLK remains the last intact, purpose-built VIP example of the type.

The official listing does not disclose an asking price, instead inviting interested parties to contact the seller directly. As it waits for a buyer, it stands as a relic of an era when wealth was expressed through physical scale and mechanical excess. It embodies a time when influence was measured in square footage and range charts, and when the ultimate statement



was not discretion, but a private jumbo jet capable of carrying an entire lifestyle across oceans.

The Qatar royal family's \$200 million ultra-luxurious Boeing 747-SP private jet is listed for sale for the price of a tiny Cessna jet. It offers a \$70 million interior with a throne, a spacious private bedroom with a remote-controlled bed, a gold toilet, and a dining hall.

A generation ago, this aircraft embodied the outer limits of state luxury and aviation ambition. Today, it sits on Controller.com with an asking price of \$15 million, described in the plain language of aircraft brokerage as a 1995 Boeing 747-SP. Once valued at close to \$200 million, with \$70 million spent on its interior alone, it now trades for less than the price of a new long-range business jet. Few listings illustrate the depreciation of airborne prestige quite as starkly.

On paper, the offering is more serious than its price suggests. The aircraft is listed as operational and ferry-capable rather than destined for dismantling. Buyers are offered the option of delivery fresh from a C-check and paint, or in



and a large inventory of parts included. With roughly 68,700 flight hours, the airframe remains well within the extended structural limits of the 747 family, which were designed for nearly double that figure. This is not a worn-out relic, but a maintained asset still positioned for use.

The jet was a part of the Qatar royal family's Amiri fleet. Image - Sam Chui Its identity as a 747-SP remains central to its appeal. Developed as a shortened, high-performance variant, the SP was engineered to fly higher and faster than standard jumbos, cruising near Mach 0.86 and reaching service ceilings around 45,000 feet. In its prime, it represented the fastest and most prestigious form of subsonic long-haul travel available to governments and elites. The seller's comparison to Gulfstream G650 performance is not entirely misplaced in cruise terms, even if the comparison collapses when scale and operating costs are considered.

Also read - Take a look inside Kylie Jenner's \$73 million private jet. Equipped with an entertainment room, a master suite, a massive closet, and pink mood lighting, this aircraft epitomizes luxury.

Converted into a VVIP configuration around 1995, the aircraft entered service with Qatar Amiri Flight by 1997. For roughly two decades, it carried members of the Qatari royal family and senior officials under Bermuda registrations VR-BAT and VP-BAT, a structure commonly used to preserve regulatory flexibility. Spotter records place it frequently at major European hubs, typically unbranded or minimally marked, reflecting the fleet's preference for discreet movement.





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PM forms committee to probe frequent offloading of travelers

Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif has ordered the formation of a committee to investigate the frequent offloading of passengers from international flights, an issue that has affected numerous travellers despite them holding valid documents, a federal minister said on Monday.

Over the past few months, numerous incidents have been reported of travellers being offloaded from flights at various airports, despite possessing valid travel documents.

The actions came after a crackdown was launched on migrant smuggling following the Greece boat tragedy in 2024, one which claimed several Pakistani lives.

Speaking at an event, Federal Minister for Overseas Pakistanis Chaudhry Salik Hussain said PM Shehbaz took notice and formed a “special committee” to look into the issue of offloading passengers at airports and to ensure safe migration.

“Recently, despite having complete documentation, some passengers have still been offloaded,” the minister said. “People who held valid visas were offloaded as well.”

The committee will prepare “recommendations regarding the safe migration of people,” the minister was quoted as saying. He detailed that a meeting of the committee is expected recently.

“By the end of January, we will prepare proposals to address these issues, “ he shared, stressing that safe migration was a “fundamental right”.

The issue has drawn attention from multiple government bodies, including the Federal Investigation Agency (FIA), which is responsible for immigration control.

In November, FIA Director General Riffat Mukhtar said the agency was investigating reports of workers being offloaded at Lahore and Karachi airports.

“If any FIA officials are found involved, strict action will be taken against them,” Mr Mukhtar said during a meeting chaired by Hussain.

The FIA has maintained that its actions are justified. In a Nov 27 clarification, the agency stated that passengers were only denied boarding if they lacked valid documents or were suspected of working with migrant smugglers.

The agency also initiated legal action against individuals it accused of spreading “fabricated information on social media regarding the offloading of passengers,”

aimed at damaging its reputation.

Interior Minister Mohsin Naqvi has also weighed in, stating after a visit to the Islamabad airport last month that no passenger with “genuine and complete documents” should be prevented from travelling.

He ordered a “strict crackdown against visa agents exploiting innocent people”.

Reports indicate the problem is persistent and widespread. In one of the earlier instance reported in February, at least 36 passengers were offloaded from

various international flights at Sialkot International Airport.

The offloaded passengers and a separate group of deportees largely hailed from the districts of Gujranwala, Gujrat, Sialkot, and Mandi Bahauddin. Most were destined for Saudi Arabia, the UK, Oman, Spain, and Bahrain.

Immigration authorities have imposed stricter scrutiny on travellers heading to at least 15 countries, particularly affecting genuine travellers such as students and religious pilgrims.

Sabre official visits Qatar Airways office



Sabre official visited the Qatar Airways Karachi office to congratulate Ms. Maryam Khan on her appointment as Country Manager. They Wished her continued success in this new role.

Trains run to capacity as Basant lovers leave for Lahore



Passengers throng Rawalpindi Railway Station on Thursday Feb. 5 to catch a train for Lahore to participate in Basant Festival.



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Biman Bangladesh Airlines will operate **twice weekly** flights on Fridays and Saturdays, opening a new chapter of connectivity, cooperation, and shared growth between Bangladesh and Pakistan.

Smart Bombs: Military Defense and National Security

China's New J-35 stealth fighter has a special message for the U.S. Air Force and F-35



J-35A Fighter from China.

Synopsis: The J-35 is China's latest fifth-generation stealth fighter, designed as a medium-weight, multi-role platform to complement the heavy J-20 and operate from the new Type 003 Fujian aircraft carrier.

-While visually similar to the U.S. F-35, the J-35 features a twin-engine configuration that may offer advantages in carrier-launch weight, though analysts believe it still lags Western jets in sensor fusion and stealth technology.

-With mass production ramping up, the J-35 marks a critical shift in Beijing's ability to project "blue-water" power and challenge U.S. air dominance in the Indo-Pacific.

J-35 vs. F-35: Inside China's Bid to End US Air Superiority

The J-35 is China's most recent fifth-generation fighter. Originally intended for export only, the aircraft gained favor from both the PLAAN and the PLAAF, who have since adopted the fighter.

The J-35 is designed as a medium-weight, multi-role stealth fighter capable of operating from China's future aircraft carriers, thereby expanding the CCP's power-projection capabilities.

The aircraft is undoubtedly one of the most advanced fighters in China's current inventory, but is it enough to challenge American air superiority in the Pacific?

China's Newest Naval Fighter

The J-35 is often compared to the F-35 due to the external similarities, but the two fighters are quite different under the surface. The J-35's twin-engine design, for example, offers advantages in flight performance and potentially greater launch weight from carrier decks.

Conversely, the F-35 retains the clear advantage in sensor fusion, network integration, and proven combat performance.

Most analysts agree that while the J-35 narrows the gap significantly, it still

lags behind in electronics and stealth features. That being said, China's rapid industrial development suggests that future iterations of the J-35 could gradually close some of these performance disparities.



China J-35 Fighter. Image Credit: Creative.



J-35 flying at Zhuhai Airshow 2024.

What's more, the J-35 has undergone testing aboard the Type 003 Fujian aircraft carrier, according to Chinese sources. The Fujian, as China's third aircraft carrier and first to field catapult launch technology, is expected to embark a complement of approximately 48 J-35 aircraft.

Early estimates also suggest that the Liaoning and Shandong carriers, which operate via ski-jump systems, may carry smaller numbers if modified or if the J-35 is adapted for STOBAR operations, though this remains speculative.

Beyond naval aviation, the PLAAF's induction of the J-35A in October 2025 signals the establishment of a dual-stealth fighter strategy in which the J-20 performs long-range interception and air dominance missions, while the J-35A fulfills multirole and regional air superiority roles.

Will the J-35 Win the War Over Taiwan?

With its integration into a new generation of Chinese carriers, the J-35 enables the PLAN to conduct extended maritime operations with reduced detectability.

The shift from J-15 fighters derived from the Russian Su-33 airframe to an indigenous stealth platform marks a 'generational leap' in China's naval aviation capabilities.

Maharashtra deputy CM killed in plane crash



Emergency personnel and onlookers gather next to the smouldering wreckage of Maharashtra Deputy Chief Minister Ajit Pawar's plane.

Deputy chief minister of India's wealthiest state of Maharashtra, Ajit Pawar, died on Wednesday 28 Jan., along with four other people on board, when his charter aircraft went down in flames, the aviation regulator said.

Pawar, who hailed from a top political family, was en route to his home region to canvass in local body elections, media said.

Two of his staff and two crew members were also aboard the VSR Ventures-operated Learjet 45 aircraft, the directorate general of civil aviation said. "No person on board has survived," it added in an initial statement.

VK Singh, the director of VSR Ventures, told broadcaster India that the plane crashed during its approach to the city of Baramati, but the cause was not clear.

"The aircraft is 100pc safe," he said. "The crew was fairly experienced."

Video images showed smoke billowing from some of the burning wreckage of the plane, scattered across an open field.

"At first it was on fire, after that there were four or five more explosions," an unidentified witness told the ANI news agency, after seeing the plane crash and explode. But the flames were too fierce to pull anyone out, he added.

Pawar backed Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party in the state government, leading a faction that split in 2023 from the opposition Nationalist Congress Party.

In a post on X, Modi said Pawar's death was "shocking and saddening". He said Pawar's aircraft, travelling from the financial capital of Mumbai, tried to make an emergency landing in the family stronghold of Baramati, 250km (155 miles) away, where he was set to canvass in the elections.



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Pakistan, Uzbekistan aim to take trade to \$2bn mark



President Asif Ali Zardari and Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif receive Uzbekistan's President Mirziyoyev Shavkat Miromonovich at Nur Khan Airbase.

Pakistan and Uzbekistan on Thursday 5 Feb. signed a protocol aimed at materialising their commitment to boost bilateral trade to \$2 billion, as Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev arrived in Islamabad on a two-day official visit.

The protocol was signed following talks between Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif and President Mirziyoyev, marking a key step towards implementing an understanding reached in February last year to significantly scale up trade ties. An earlier agreement in 2023 had set a target of \$1 billion in bilateral trade.

Trade between the two countries, however, currently stands at about \$434m, according to official figures, despite steady growth in recent years.

Under the newly signed protocol, Islamabad and Tashkent will establish a joint working group tasked with formulating a detailed action plan to identify priority sectors and remove bottlenecks to trade and economic cooperation. The working group will prepare a five-year roadmap covering a wide range of economic activities.

Speaking at a joint press stakeout, PM Shehbaz said the signing of the protocol reflected both sides' resolve to translate political goodwill into concrete economic outcomes.

"Today's signing is a manifestation of our shared commitment to enhance and expand our economic relations," PM Shehbaz said, adding that Pakistan and Uzbekistan would work closely to meet the \$2bn trade target. He said cooperation would span sectors such as agriculture, pharmaceuticals, textiles, leather and footwear, tourism and information technology.

"Today's signing of this protocol ... is a great manifestation of our

commitment to work together and enhance and expand our economic relations in the fields of agriculture, pharmaceuticals, textiles, leather, footwear, tourism, IT and so on and so forth," Uzbek president said.

PM Shehbaz also said the inaugural meeting of the High-Level Strategic Cooperation Council was held during the visit, describing it as a structured mechanism that "heralds a very bright future" for bilateral ties.

He reiterated that both sides were aligned on regional connectivity initiatives, including the Uzbekistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan railway project, which he called a potential "game changer" for the wider region.

President Mirziyoyev echoed the emphasis on economic cooperation, describing Pakistan as a reliable and close partner in South Asia. He welcomed the creation of the joint working group and said sustained engagement would be key to achieving the agreed trade targets.

During the visit, President Mirziyoyev also expressed interest in deepening defence and industrial cooperation. He toured Global Industrial and Defence Solutions (GIDS) facility in Rawalpindi, where he was received by Chief of Army Staff and Chief of Defense Forces Field Marshal Asim Munir and briefed on Pakistan's indigenous defence production, industrial capabilities and technological innovations.

Officials said the GIDS visit underscored the two countries' shared interest in expanding collaboration in defence technology, knowledge exchange and potential joint ventures, as part of a broader effort to strengthen strategic ties.

The Uzbek president's visit has also seen the signing of 28 agreements and memoranda of understanding across sectors ranging from trade and agriculture to defence cooperation and transport.

Pakistan's critical minerals need value addition to boost exports

To boost foreign exchange and drive sustainable economic growth, Pakistan must focus on transforming its raw minerals into processed and value-added products that meet global Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) standards, rather than merely exporting raw critical minerals.

In a policy note following Pakistan's first shipment of critical minerals to the United States in October last year, Institute of Cost and Management Accountants of Pakistan (ICMA) said the export of critical minerals marked a historic milestone but its research emphasised that "the real opportunity lies in turning raw minerals into processed, ESG-compliant products".

"Achieving this transformation requires the government to tackle fragmented governance, unclear regulations, poor infrastructure, limited local processing capacity, security and political risks, weak environmental and social oversight, and a shortage of skilled mining workers", it said, adding that addressing these issues was essential to

build investor confidence and fully unlock Pakistan's vast mineral wealth.

It said the mineral exports alone cannot drive economic transformation. Pakistan must move decisively from raw extraction to integrated, ESG-compliant value chains. Harmonised national mineral policy, transparent regulation, technology-enabled oversight, and strategic international partnerships are essential to convert the country's mineral wealth into sustainable economic growth, industrial diversification, and strengthened foreign exchange earnings.

Against this backdrop, Pakistan formally entered the global critical minerals market by dispatching its first shipment of enriched rare earth elements and critical minerals to Missouri-based US Strategic Metals (USSM) under a \$500 million agreement. The consignment sent on Oct 2, 2025, signalled Pakistan's evolution from a resource-rich yet underutilised economy into an emerging player in strategic global supply chains.

The shipment included antimony,

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copper concentrate, and rare earth elements such as neodymium and praseodymium, marking the start of a long-term collaboration between USSM and Pakistan's Frontier Works Organisation. Signed in September 2025, the deal envisioned an integrated domestic value chain spanning exploration, processing, and refining, designed to maximise local value addition.

Despite vast deposits of copper, gold, chromite, and rare earth elements, Pakistan's mining sector has historically contributed less than 3pc to GDP. ICMA research notes that the policy shift toward value-added mineral exports reflects a strategic reorientation, though tangible economic impact is expected to unfold gradually — over a 2-3-year demonstration phase, followed by 5-7 years of moderate scaling, with full impact expected in 10 plus years. "Full value addition in mineral exports could significantly increase Pakistan's industrial output and foreign exchange earnings over the next decade", it added.

Pakistan's mineral wealth is estimated at \$8 trillion, spread across 600,000 square kilometres and comprising 92 identified minerals, 52 of which are commercially extracted. At the heart of this potential is the Reko Diq copper-gold project, one of the world's largest untapped reserves, with production slated to begin in 2028, and capacity expansion planned through 2034, the ICMA study noted.

The ICMA said that initiatives such as the Pakistan Mineral Investment Forum and the National Mineral Harmonisation Framework, alongside growing international engagement under the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and interest from Saudi Arabia, were drawing global attention. "To fully seize this opportunity, Pakistan must ensure policy consistency, institutional coordination, and sustainable mineral governance".

It emphasised that the emerging partnership with the United States offered a robust framework for responsible exploration, processing, and refining, leveraging technical expertise and market access. By focusing on strategically critical minerals and embedding ESG principles across the value chain, Pakistan can strengthen bilateral cooperation, enhance investor confidence, and position itself as a responsible contributor to global critical mineral supply chains and the clean energy transition.

In late October, a leading delegation of the US government-funded Critical Mineral Forum (CMF) visited Pakistan to lobby for building "a secure and transparent mineral supply chain for American industry" amid Washington's growing concerns over China's upper hand in global rare earth materials.

The delegation had engagements

with finance minister Muhammad Aurangzeb and other stakeholders and 'discussed avenues of cooperation in the minerals and mining sector, strengthening

supply-chain security, and encouraging responsible and sustainable investment in Pakistan's critical minerals landscape'.

Pakistan, Uzbekistan eye \$2bn trade in two years



SAPM Haroon Akhtar Khan and Uzbekistan Minister of Investment, Industry and Trade Laziz Kudratov shake hands after signing protocols to expand economic collaboration.

Pakistan and Uzbekistan resolved on Monday 2 Feb. to expand the scope of their Preferential Trade Agreement to increase their trade beyond \$2 billion in two years — from around \$450 million last year — and to deepen cooperation in various economic fields.

At a meeting of the Pak-Uzbek Intergovernmental Commission (IGC), the two sides agreed to more than double the list of items for bilateral trade from 17 at present. The two sides had signed the agreement in March 2022 and it came into effect in 2023.

The 10th IGC on Trade, Economic and Scientific-Technical Cooperation was co-chaired by Haroon Akhtar Khan, Special Assistant to the Prime Minister for Industries and Production, and Uzbekistan's Trade Minister Laziz Kudratov.

"The engagement enabled a comprehensive review of bilateral relations and established a forward-looking roadmap to strengthen joint efforts in major economic and social sectors", a joint statement said.

The parties welcomed the progress on Phase II concessions of the Preferential Trade Agreement, the statement added.

The two sides "agreed to expedite institutional mechanisms to achieve the agreed target of \$2bn in bilateral trade".

Both sides expressed satisfaction over the steady progress achieved since the previous IGC session last year and reaffirmed their resolve to expand bilateral trade, investment, and economic engagement.

Emphasis was placed on trade facilitation, improved logistics, customs digitalisation, transit trade cooperation, development of regional trade corridors, and enhanced business-to-business engagement, supported by improved visa facilitation for business communities.

The two sides also agreed to establish a joint working group on labour relations,

tasked with addressing labour mobility, skills development, workplace safety, and practical considerations linked to employment visas.

Transport and communications

In transport and communications sector, the commission welcomed interest in launching direct air services, reviewed progress on regional railway and connectivity projects, and agreed to advance alternative transport corridors to improve regional trade and transit connectivity. Cooperation in agriculture and food security featured prominently, with both sides welcoming progress on phytosanitary protocols facilitating the export of fruits from Uzbekistan to Pakistan.

The parties agreed to expand collaboration through additional protocols, joint working groups, and technical cooperation in plant protection, livestock development, and agricultural research, with a shared focus on food security and sustainable agricultural growth.

In higher education, science, and technology, the commission welcomed progress on academic and research partnerships between leading institutions of the two countries.

Both sides agreed to promote joint research, faculty and student exchanges, vocational and technical training, innovation, and capacity building, supported by newly signed agreements in scientific, technical, and innovation fields to strengthen long-term knowledge cooperation and human capital development.

Environmental and climate cooperation was recognised as a shared priority, with both sides agreeing to collaborate on climate resilience, protection of glacial ecosystems, sustainable water management, environmental governance, gender-inclusive climate action, and community-based adaptation approaches.

"Saffronisation"-In Hinduism (Making pure by spraying 'Zafran')

(Prof. Safdar Sandal)



Subramanian Swamy, a hardline BJP leader and a member of 'Rajya Sabha' - India in 2016-2022, gave a shocking statement in an interview with an American media outlet 'VICE', as accordingly: [If] "Muslims become more than thirty percent (of a population); that country comes in danger", Swamy told so to 'Isobel Yeung' of 'VICE'(a Canadian-American magazine). He added that all people however, are not equal (bad) meaning thereby that there were Muslims who were not dangerous", gratefully leaving a space for some good Muslims in his opinion..

Since 'Partition of India in 1947-48', Hindu nationalists in India, have been plotting to make the country (or the Indian subcontinent) exclusively an ethnically Hindu land he seemed to claim so. The ideology called 'Hindutva', viewed Hindus as the only legitimate inhabitants of this vast territory of land. The non-Hindus have no right or place here, he seemed to plead quite blatantly. The present Prime Minister of India is the full representation of Swamy's ideology as he follows the rhetoric or agenda. Now the programmer and the practicing of it, was dubbed by these people as 'Saffronisation of India' (by having scented them with 'zafran'-(saffron), a special scent used for making them pure. The scent is obtained from the following poppy flower which is very rarely found and thus expensive.

The philosophy is based on divesting minority communities of all rights and privileges which are solely reserved for Hindus. In a previous article, I had quoted an incident where a Hindu person had refused to sit and dine with my elder brother Sarwar Sandal (late) because of the reason that he was a Muslim and where (in Johannesburg) he was invited as a main guest by a Hindu business counter-part, an



Importer of Sports Goods based in South Africa, on the occasion of my brother's business visit to him.

But as rightly said by Subramanian



Swamy that all Muslims are not equal; I may conclude that all Hindus are also not equal (or bad). I have happened to make friends with some Hindu families living in Europe who astonishingly, prefer to make friends with Pakistanis alone than with their own Hindu community-people; both of them living there. Below I wish to submit some pictures of a Hindu (Punjabi) family who give to us greatest respect and hospitality, whenever we visited them.



I call the madam as 'BhabhiJi' as per our common courtesies and culture, shared from centuries, by both Hindus and Muslims. I remember my father had appointed some Hindu-matriculates to work as our travelling agents to travel

throughout India and they were very nice, honest and serious in their liabilities. Most famous of them was Babuji Ram Chand. My own private teacher who also used to come to our house to teach me on private tuition basis and there were many Hindu teachers who had worked in this capacity. I am talking of the period between 1942-47 when I was between eight and half and have still memories afresh in my mind. We had Hindu tutors coming to our house on private tuition basis and they were really very nice teachers and a good people. In fact I have very positive memories of them and respect. Their kind faces are still in my mind. I also had Hindu friends who lived with us in Mohallah Rangpura or elsewhere in our city during our boyhood. When they departed from us for India; we in fact, were not happy, rather cried over some good friends departing in bloodshed. This happened all around not only in Pakistan but more savagely on the other line of the border, the Indian side.



Besides, I have also friendliest of relations with some European friends plus customers. I feel really very happy over this culture which in fact could be described as non-Swamy or non Modi era with an atmosphere of universal culture or belief which all civilized people of the world, must adopt for a happy and good living.

'Between love and life' I can assuredly believe that I have enjoyed both of them and on this page, there are only a fragment of my recreations alongside business activities. Both have will fully been run exquisitely well and successful together. This will be my cherished lesson to the younger generations, to build always, a fraternity among different peoples of the world with no communal, ethnic or religious prejudices, building affinities among all peoples of the world. This way, one will enjoy more his life..

Govt pushes development of new deep-sea ports

The government has emphasized the need to balance economic growth with strong environmental protections while developing new deep-sea ports along Pakistan's coastline.

Such ports are crucial to support rising industrial activity, regional trade, and increasing shipping volumes, as well as to ease pressure on existing facilities.

Plans include the development of both major and smaller business-model ports to prepare for the next century of maritime expansion and economic transformation, according to a press release issued.

Federal Minister for Maritime Affairs Muhammad Junaid Anwar Chaudhry, chairing a high-level, multi-agency committee meeting on the project, emphasized the importance of collaboration among stakeholders.

The meeting was attended by representatives from 10 organizations, including the Ministry of Maritime Affairs' Technical Advisor Jawad Akhtar, who briefed the minister on the committee's performance, site identification processes, and study methodology.

Committee members presented an assessment framework for three proposed sites Port 1, Port 2, and Port 3 focusing on technical feasibility, including natural depth, marine access, and coastal

conditions to determine operational suitability and long-term viability.

The framework also evaluated land availability, future expansion potential, environmental sensitivity, and potential impacts on local communities and livelihoods.

In addition, the committee reviewed hinterland connectivity through road, rail, and logistics networks, as well as the strategic and economic value of each port, covering trade facilitation, regional development, and risk management across environmental, technical, security, and regulatory domains.

The initiative is part of the government's long-term "Hundred Years Vision 2047-2147" to establish three to four deep-sea ports at strategic locations along the coastline, incorporating modern cargo handling, green energy integration, and digital port management systems.

Work is underway on a comprehensive feasibility report, including technical findings, hydrographic maps, satellite data, and investment recommendations, for submission to the Maritime Ministry.

Pakistan's coastline stretches over 1,000 kilometers from Sir Creek in Sindh to Jiwani in Balochistan, encompassing an Exclusive Economic Zone of 240,000 square kilometers and a continental shelf of nearly 50,000 square kilometers.

With GDP projected to reach \$1

trillion between 2030 and 2035, maritime trade and related industries are expected to experience significant growth, with Karachi Port, Port Qasim, and Gwadar Port projected to reach full capacity between 2035 and 2045.

AD Ports to review cargo charges

The Abu Dhabi (AD) Ports Group on Thursday 29 Jan. agreed to review the terminal cargo handling charges in response to Pakistan's demand to cut them.

The government has formed a committee to negotiate the cargo handling charges with the AD Ports Group to make port operations more business-friendly and competitive.

The committee, comprising Karachi Port Trust Chairman retired Rear Admiral Shahid Ahmed and the AD Ports Group country representative will submit its recommendations within 7 days.

The decision was taken at a meeting between the AD Ports delegation and Minister for Maritime Affairs Junaid Anwar Chaudhry to reduce cargo handling charges. Regional CEO Abdulaziz Zayed Al Shamsi led the AD Ports Group delegation.

The maritime minister emphasised the need to expedite the procurement of mechanisation and digitisation equipment, including cranes and loaders, to enhance efficiency and improve cargo handling at KGTL and KGML terminals.



Prime Minister Muhammad Shehbaz Sharif poses for a group photo with the country's leading exporters, underscoring the government's commitment to a strong and improving business environment in Pakistan. The Prime Minister highlighted ongoing economic reforms, ease of doing business, tax and energy facilitation, access to finance, and export-oriented policies aimed at boosting exports, attracting investment, and ensuring sustainable economic growth through close public-private cooperation.



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Islamabad, Astana to boost ties thru \$1bn trade target



PM Shehbaz Sharif looks on as President Asif Ali Zardari confers the Nishan-i-Pakistan on Kazakh President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, at a special investiture ceremony.

Pakistan and Kazakhstan have agreed to establish a strategic partnership and pledged to increase bilateral trade to \$1 billion, capping Kazakh President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev's two-day state visit with the signing of a joint declaration and several cooperation agreements.

"This visit is a historic milestone that elevates the traditional friendly relations between the two countries to the level of a strategic partnership," the joint declaration said, committing both sides to deepen cooperation in political, economic, defence and regional connectivity domains.

Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif described Kazakhstan as a "strategic and highly valued partner" in Central Asia, calling the joint declaration a major step forward in bilateral ties. Speaking at a joint press conference with President Tokayev, PM Shehbaz emphasised the importance of implementing the agreements reached during the visit.

"I am absolutely confident that with our collaboration and discussion with productive, encouraging outcomes and this signing ceremony, we will not only reinvigorate our relations but also give a huge impetus to our bilateral ties," the premier said.

He said his meeting with the Kazakh president had produced a clear direction for future engagement and provided a "roadmap for our future cooperation" covering trade, connectivity and regional integration.

The two countries also agreed to establish a working committee,

comprising senior ministers and officials, to develop a roadmap for expanding bilateral trade and economic cooperation over the next five years.

President Tokayev's visit, the first by a Kazakh president to Pakistan in 23 years, featured high-level discussions, including meetings with key ministers and military officials.

The leaders reviewed the full spectrum of bilateral cooperation and expressed satisfaction with the increasing frequency of high-level exchanges and the effectiveness of institutional mechanisms like Bilateral Political Consultations and the Joint Intergovernmental Commission.

In his remarks, President Tokayev said Pakistan was a reliable and important partner in South Asia and reaffirmed Kazakhstan's interest in expanding cooperation across multiple sectors.

He said the two leaders discussed the capabilities of Pakistan's ports of Karachi and Gwadar as priority issues, the development of the Trans-Caspian Transport Corridor and transit routes passing through Afghanistan, and exploring the resumption of direct air links between the two countries.

The two leaders oversaw the signing of 37 memorandums of understanding (MOUs) and agreements covering diverse areas such as trade and investment, petroleum and mining, transport and logistics, maritime affairs, agriculture, IT, education, culture, climate change and defence. Additionally, accords on extradition and transit trade were concluded to strengthen legal cooperation and facilitate the movement of goods.

Both nations agreed to work towards increasing bilateral trade to \$1 billion from its current level of around \$250 million. PM Shehbaz urged the business communities of both countries to take the lead in expanding commercial ties, assuring full facilitation to Kazakh investors.

To support this objective, the governments of both countries agreed to form a joint working group to develop a five-year roadmap for boosting trade, investment and industrial cooperation. Improved connectivity, particularly through improved rail and road links across Central Asia and Afghanistan, as well as greater use of Pakistan's ports, was highlighted as a central pillar of the partnership.

The two sides also agreed to establish a biennial strategic dialogue at the level of deputy prime minister or foreign minister to review and implement cooperation under the strategic partnership framework. Both leaders stressed the importance of regular political and consular consultations and welcomed the signing of an action plan for cooperation between the foreign ministries for 2025-26.

On security and defence, the leaders welcomed the signing of a treaty on extradition, an agreement on combating crimes and an MOU on joint deployment in UN peacekeeping missions, reflecting a growing convergence in security cooperation.

According to the Interfax-Kazakhstan news agency, Astana and Islamabad agreed that conflicts should be resolved through diplomatic efforts. It quoted President Tokayev as saying that during negotiations with PM Shehbaz, international and regional issues were discussed, focusing on joint efforts to promote peace and security.

The news agency also reported that PM Shehbaz had accepted an invitation from the Kazakh president to visit Astana this year.

Gwadar, Karachi ports

Later, PM Shehbaz offered Pakistan's deep-sea ports at Gwadar and Karachi as a vital trade outlet for Central Asian states, saying that this could change the fate of the entire region.

Emphasising plans to rapidly expand rail and road links via Turkmenistan and Afghanistan, the prime minister reaffirmed a strong commitment to a landmark connectivity project, terming it a potential game-changer that could transform economic integration between Pakistan, Kazakhstan and the entire

Central Asian region.

“Pakistan is fully committed to participate and contribute meaningfully in undertaking this project, as it will be a game changer,” PM Shehbaz said while addressing Pakistan-Kazakhstan Business Forum in Islamabad.

He said Pakistan's state-owned logistics entities are fully prepared to facilitate the movement of goods from Central Asia to Pakistani ports and onwards to international destinations.

Addressing the forum, President Tokayev said his state visit marked a turning point in Pakistan-Kazakhstan relations, adding that the business forum resulted in more than 30 commercial agreements worth around \$200 million.

President Tokayev said trade turnover between the two countries nearly doubled last year and over 200 Pakistani companies are currently operating in Kazakhstan in sectors, including construction, agriculture and food processing.

Potato imports

Meanwhile, Kazakhstan expressed interest in importing 50,000 tonnes of potatoes from Pakistan, with an export timeline set from April to June 2026. This agreement was seen as a significant development for Pakistani farmers, as it would boost exports while benefiting local agriculture.

The commerce ministry also announced that consultations on technical and commercial matters between both countries had been completed, paving the way for the potato exports.

In addition, Commerce Minister Jam Kamal held talks with Kazakhstan's Minister of Trade and Integration Arman Shaqqaliev to explore new opportunities for expanding economic cooperation. The meeting focused on improving connectivity and trade potential between the two countries, particularly through rail, road and multimodal transport links.

The ministers also discussed priority sectors for cooperation, including agriculture, pharmaceuticals, textiles, sports goods, leather products, mining and energy.

Separately, JazzWorld announced a partnership with Kazakhstan's QazCode LLP to accelerate AI and software exports, strengthen digital trade and build regional market access for Pakistani technology solutions.

Under the agreement, the partners will jointly develop and commercialise AI-driven products, exchange advanced engineering and delivery best practices, and establish structured innovation pipelines spanning telecom, enterprise and public-sector use cases.

China relaxes visa rules for British citizens



BRITAIN's Prime Minister Keir Starmer shakes hands with Chinese President Xi Jinping ahead of a meeting in Beijing.

Britain's Prime Minister Keir Starmer hailed “really good progress” on issues including visa-free travel and tariffs during talks with Chinese leader Xi Jinping in Beijing on Thursday 29 Jan.

Starmer's visit to China is the first by a British premier since 2018 and follows a slew of Western leaders seeking a rapprochement with Beijing recently, pivoting from an increasingly unpredictable United States.

Xi and Starmer met at the opulent Great Hall of the People and both stressed the need for closer relations in order to face geopolitical headwinds.

Starmer told Xi that China is a “vital player on the global stage” and that they needed to “build a more sophisticated relationship where we identify opportunities to collaborate”. The Chinese leader also stressed the need for stronger ties with a “long-term view” in the context of what he called a “complex” international situation.

Starmer, who is in China until



World Bank Group President Ajay Banga, along with Sindh Chief Minister Syed Murad Ali Shah, visits the community centre in Bahwal Jat village, where local women showcase traditional Sindhi handicrafts.

Saturday, later told reporters that the bilateral relationship was in “a strong place”, with progress made on issues such as whisky tariffs.

Downing Street said whisky exported to China would now be subject to a five-percent tariff, down from 10 percent. Starmer signed a series of cooperation agreements after meeting Premier Li Qiang, with Downing Street announcing Beijing had agreed to visa-free travel for British passport holders visiting China for under 30 days.

That brings Britain in line with about 50 other countries allowed visa-free access, including France, Germany, Australia and Japan, and follows a similar agreement made between China and Canada this month.

The agreements also included cooperation on targeting supply chains used by migrant smugglers, as well as on British exports to China, health and strengthening a UK-China trade commission.

The issue of irregular migrants is highly sensitive for Starmer, who has promised to crack down on people smugglers and stem a wave of arrivals that has fuelled rising support for the far right.

Li told Starmer that the resumption of “dialogue and exchanges in multiple fields... fully demonstrates that China and the UK are adhering to development and cooperation”. The British leader in turn reiterated his commitment to “find ways to work together”.

Starmer will also travel to economic powerhouse Shanghai on Friday Jan. 30 before making a brief stop in Japan to meet Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi.



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WB chief pays respects at Gurdwara Punja Sahib



WB President Ajay Banga, along with Finance Minister Muhammad Aurangzeb and local Sikh leaders, visits Gurdwara Punja Sahib.

World Bank President Ajay Banga on Sunday 1st Feb. visited Gurdwara Punja Sahib in Hassanabdal, the second holiest shrine of Sikhs, where he offered prayers and performed religious rituals.

Accompanied by his wife and family members, Mr Banga entered the sacred precincts and performed 'Matha Teki' (bowing of the head) and the sacred parikrama of the holy rock bearing the handprint of Baba Guru Nanak — the founder of Sikhism.

The World Bank president also listened to the sermon delivered by the Granthi and later sat with devotees to partake in langar, the communal meal that reflects the core Sikh values of selfless service and collective harmony.

During the visit, Mr Banga expressed appreciation for the remarkable uplift and beautification of the surroundings of Gurdwara Punja Sahib, terming it a commendable effort to honour the sacred heritage while enhancing the experience of pilgrims.

In a gesture steeped in tradition and goodwill, Finance Minister Muhammad Aurangzeb and Punjab Minister for Minority Affairs Sardar Ramesh Singh Arora, along with prominent members of the Sikh community, presented Mr Banga with a traditional siropa (robe of honour), symbolising reverence, affection and spiritual kinship.

Later, Mr Banga visited the archaeological museum in Taxila, where Punjab Department of Archaeology Deputy Director Aasim Dogar and other officials welcomed him upon arrival.

Strict security arrangements were put

in place in Hassanabdal, Taxila and other areas by the police to ensure the smooth conduct of the visit.

Mr Banga also visited the historic Jaulian Buddhist Monastery near Khanpur.

He appreciated the "excellent state of preservation" of the archaeological site and commended the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa government.

Water cross jeep race held in Swabi



A driver crosses the Indus River during a race in Swabi on Sunday 1st Feb.

The 4x4 Indus Water Cross Jeep Race under the auspices of Department of Tourism, Culture, Archaeology and Museums Khyber Pakhtunkhwa attracted large crowd from across the province, held in the Indus River here on Sunday 1st Feb.

Racing enthusiasts from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and other areas participated in the jeep rally, said tourism authority spokesperson Muhammad Saad. More than 50 4x4 jeeps participated in the race.

The race was held in three different categories. Category A was up to 6,000cc, Category B was up to 3,000cc and the third category (Category C) was for women racers.

The race was held at the Indus River in collaboration with Frontier 4x4 Club at Hund, the historic side, from where the Alexander the Great crossed the Indus River. In the first category, Brial Khan won first position, Baseer Khan second and Imran third.

In the second category, Abi Khan was number one, followed by Raza Jan and SS Raza. Marjan Yousafzai came first in the women's category as she displayed remarkable skills in the race, highly lauded by the participants.

The rough and rocky race track was three kilometres long and it was prepared during the last few days especially for the competition. The aim of the race was to promote adventure tourism.

Mayor Karachi inaugurates flower show at zoo



Artists perform during the flower show at the zoo.

Mayor Barrister Murtaza Wahab on Thursday 5 Feb. inaugurated a flower show and a Qawwali evening at Karachi Zoo.

Officials said that around 30,000 marigold plant, 10,000 Potonia and 40,000 various types of flowers including roses were put on display. Speaking on the occasion, the mayor said: "The purpose of organising the flower show is to increase public awareness of importance of plants, trees, and environmental protection, while cultural activities like Qawwali help restore Karachi's traditional vibrancy," he added.

He said that Karachi Zoo was being transformed into a more beautiful, recreational and family-friendly space through practical steps taken by the city administration. He said more cultural, recreational and environmental events would be organised across the city to revive Karachi's vibrant social life and provide healthy entertainment to citizens.

The mayor emphasised that such events not only provide entertainment but also promote environmental awareness and cultural revival. He appealed to citizens, organisations and institutions to organise their events at Karachi Zoo, adding that the revenue generated would be utilised for welfare and care of the animals.

"The zoo belongs to the people and every step we take here is for the benefit of citizens and well-being of wildlife," he said. He said there was visible increase in public participation at city events, adding that gatherings which previously attracted only a small number of people were now drawing thousands.

"This proves that the people of Karachi love their city. Karachiites take pride in their identity and this attachment to the city is its greatest strength."

He said that under the leadership of PPP Chairman Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari, all allied parties were united in implementing the party's manifesto for urban development, public welfare, and inclusive governance. City Council Parliamentary Leader Karamullah Waqasi, Deputy Parliamentary Leader Dil Muhammed, Jaman Darwan, representatives of civil society, party workers, media representatives and a large number of citizens were present on the occasion.

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Riot of colours in Lahore sky after 18-year-long hiatus

As the winter sun brightens Lahore's rooftops on Friday 6 Feb. morning, the city is once again ready to embrace the Basant frenzy after around a two decades long hiatus, with colourful kites adorning the clear sky, contrasting its usual blandness. The Basant celebrations this year, however, appear to be teetering on the edge as the Punjab government has declared the event as "sensitive", given the scale of participation and emotional attachment of people to the festival which is returning to Lahore after a hiatus of 18 years.

A large number of people from different parts of the country and abroad have travelled to Lahore filling the hotels and guest houses to their capacity and pushing the rents exorbitantly high. Many other are staying with their relatives and friends, multiplying the Basant joy.

From Friday 6 Feb. onwards, Lahorites will be displaying their characteristic zeal, crowding rooftops and streets, fully utilising the three holidays announced by the Punjab government for the Basant celebrations.

As the formal buying of kites and 'dor' (twine) began just six days ago, the manufacturers could not match the massive demand, leading to the skyrocketing prices of the available stock, which prompted the Punjab government to direct the deputy commissioners of four other districts to allow manufacturing of 'permissible' kite flying material after registering the makers. This 'permissible' material was supposed to reach the eager customers in Lahore through the already registered traders and sellers in Lahore through the already registered traders and sellers.

Youths and children are thronging the markets, particularly in the narrow streets of Walled City to buy kites and 'dor', but their excitement is marred by the reports that the sellers have been left with little stocks which are being sold at exorbitant prices. A kite buff, Muhammad Nasir, says he has been running from one bazaar to another to buy quality twine and 'permissible' guddas, only to find the material was available at mind-boggling prices – a 'dor' Pinna ranging between Rs10,000 and Rs25,000 and kites from Rs500 to Rs1,500. "Basant this time belongs only to the rich," he laments.

He blames the government for failing to assess people's frenzy when it comes to the Basant festival and just could not meet the demand. Mr Nasir is jealous of those who procured 'dor' and kites ahead of Basant and are now boasting about their stocks on social media.

An international hotel chain's general manager, Tahir Malik, told Dawn that every room had been booked for Basant days at rates up to Rs150,000 – five times



higher than the normal rates. He too deplores the shortage of Pinna and guddas in the market, saying a 1000-meter Pinna is being sold at Rs20,000 and 500-meter at Rs12,000. "There will be a lot of kite flying, but for most Lahorites Basant will be more of an experience of festivity, fun, parties, BBQ and music," Mr Malik comments. In the wake of high demand for kite-flying material, the Punjab government not only allowed manufacturing in the districts of Sheikhupura, Faisalabad and Multan as well, but also permitted stocks from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) and Azad Jammu & Kashmir (AJ&K), under the SOPs.

Police raided deliveries from KP and AJK and confiscated the over-size guddas and non-permissible 'dor' to ensure that the Basant festival should be a safe yet jubilant event for all, as envisioned by Chief Minister Maryam Nawaz.

In order to check the unbridled increase in kites and 'dor' prices, provincial minister Bilal Yasin and Home Secretary Dr Ahmad Javed Qazi held a meeting at the home department as the

chief minister, taking notice of the price hike, had sought that maximum material should reach the city from the districts well ahead of Basant to keep the prices in control. However, the buyers did not find any relief in prices and many returned home with cheap material, mostly to satisfy their children.

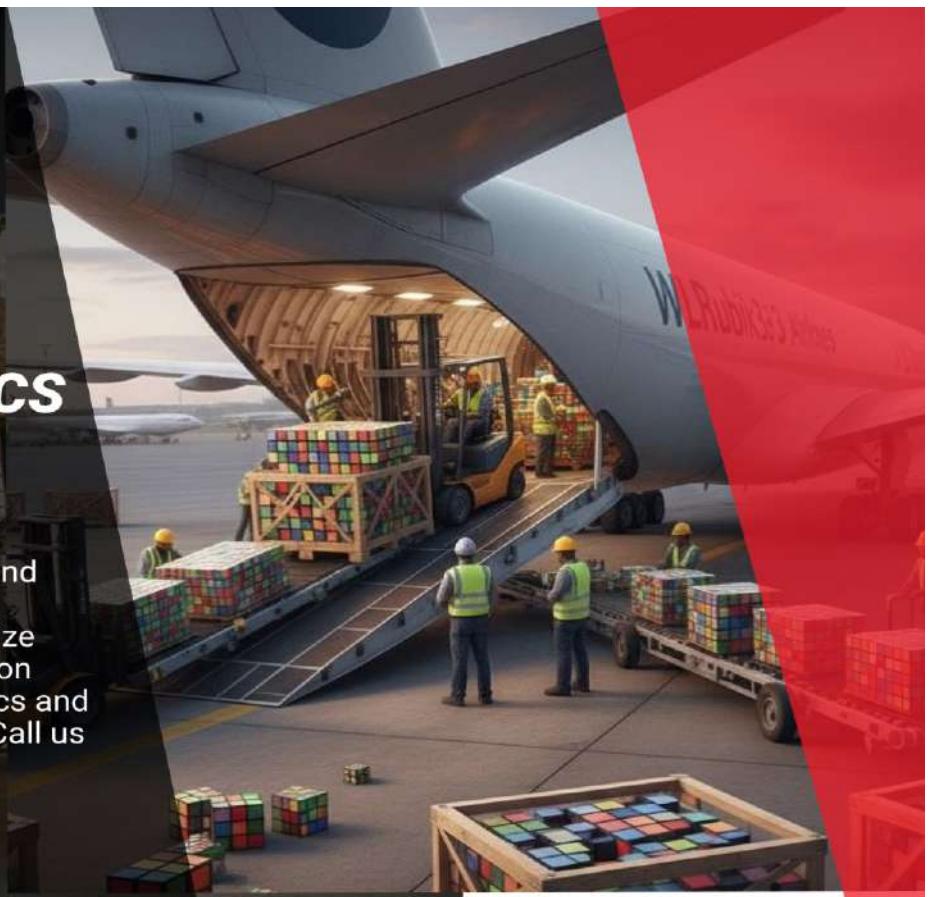
Amid the celebratory buzz, the Punjab home department declared the Basant as a "sensitive" event in view of a large number of people travelling to Lahore, massive gatherings at hotels, shopping malls, plazas, commercial buildings, farm houses and private residences, recent specific threat alerts and prevailing law and order situation.

The home department has instructed the Punjab Emergency Service department and all civil and police formations to ensure compliance with the provisions of the Punjab Regulation of Kite Flying Act 2025, the Punjab Regulation of Kite Flying Rules 2025, Lahore deputy commissioner's notification, restrictions imposed under Section 144 and guidelines issued regarding kite flying.



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In a 24-point security protocol, the home department has instructed strict checking and scanning of all vehicles entering and exiting the city; technical sweeping of venues of celebration; all movements of VVIPs must be fully coordinated, beefing up security at public places, police pickets; check on brandishing of weapons and aerial firing; zero tolerance against one-wheeling; close liaison between law enforcement, intelligence agencies; bomb disposal squads on high alert; deployment of quick response force at suitable locations; pre-emptive actions in view of threats; a comprehensive traffic plan; emergency evacuation, medical and contingency plans with designated hospitals on standby.

For kite-flyers, the Punjab government has imposed a ban on using kites carrying party flags, pictures of leaders, religious places and scriptures, to keep the festival apolitical and safe.

The Punjab government has announced plying buses and rickshaws offering free rides across Lahore during Basant days. In a telling sign of lingering safety concerns, the government, however, instructed the motorcyclists to install protective steel wires to shield themselves from stray kite twine to prevent any tragic incident. Lahore CCPO Bilal Siddique Kamyana on Thursday reviewed arrangements made to ensure a peaceful Basant and told the officers to obtain surety bonds from the owners of rooftops for compliance with the SOPs, including a zero-tolerance for aerial firing and violations of the Punjab Sound System Act 2025.

It may be mentioned that the government has not formally softened the sound system act during the Basant and it is yet to be seen how the police will respond to the playing of loud music on rooftops. Meanwhile, Lahore Deputy Commissioner on Thursday 5 Feb. evening issued an "addendum notification", disallowing kite flying in the areas of "Ali View", falling within the aircraft approach paths of the Allama Iqbal International Airport, on Feb 6, 7 and 8.

This addendum notification has been issued in continuation of DC Lahore's another addendum notification issued on Jan 30, saying that kite flying shall "NOT" be permitted in the areas falling within the aircraft approach and take-off paths of the Lahore airport, in pursuance of aviation safety requirements communicated by the Pakistan Airports Authority.

The DC has duly notified the areas under the kite flying ban, falling on aircraft's approach path, which include Nadirabad, Gulshan Ali Colony, Nishat Colony, Bhatta Chowk and DHA's R, S, P and Q blocks. Similarly, towards the aircraft take-off path, the areas of Al-Faisal Town have been mentioned.

The Basant-related activities will come to a halt at Sunday midnight, when the ban on kite flying across Punjab will again become effective.

AJK hails Pakistan's continued backing of Kashmiris



(LEFT) PM Shehbaz Sharif and AJK Legislative Assembly Speaker Chaudhry Latif Akbar stand in reverence during the national anthem at the outset of the assembly session in Muzaffarabad; while (right) two young students, attired in traditional Kashmiri dress, perform at a Kashmir Solidarity Day event in Keran, Neelum Valley.

Demonstrations, rallies, processions, and other events were held across Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK) on Thursday 5 Feb., with participants condemning India's brutal atrocities in occupied Jammu and Kashmir and highlighting the legitimacy of the anti-India struggle of Kashmiri people.

As these events, which took place in areas close to the Line of Control (LoC), where temperatures remain below freezing under a blanket of snow, the participants expressed full support and solidarity with the people of India-held Kashmir.

In Muzaffarabad, where a large rally and public gathering was held under the aegis of the All Parties Hurriyat Conference (APHC) and the Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Cell, people waved the national flags of Pakistan and AJK and chanted slogans against Indian atrocities.

Prominent attendees included AJK Prime Minister Raja Faisal Mumtaz Rathore, Jamaat-i-Islami Pakistan's deputy emir Liaquat Baloch, former national cricketer Shahid Afridi, and APHC leaders Ghulam Muhammad Safi, Pervez Shah, and Mahmood Ahmed Saghari.

Speaking on the occasion, PM Rathore said the day reflected the strong bonds between Kashmiris and Pakistan. Mr Baloch described the Kashmiri freedom struggle as 'a just and principled movement', and said his party would stand alongside the Kashmiris until they achieved freedom from India.

Declaring that the people of Pakistan stood wholeheartedly with Kashmiris, Mr Afridi urged young people to play a positive and meaningful role in support of the freedom movement.

Events were also held at the points linking AJK with Pakistan, where people from both sides formed symbolic human chains to reaffirm their historic ties.

The major event was held at Kohala, attended by Punjab Minister Mujtaba Shuja-ur-Rehman, Sindh Minister Muhammad Ali Malkani, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Minister Arshad Ayub

Khan, Gilgit-Baltistan Minister Abrar Ismail, and Balochistan's Parliamentary Secretary Sanjay Kumar as special guests.

Speaking on the occasion, they collectively affirmed that representing Pakistan's various provinces and diverse communities was a profound honour, especially when expressing unwavering solidarity with the Kashmiri people.

A flag-hoisting ceremony was also held in Kohala, followed by a one-minute silence. In snow-covered Leepa Valley, large crowds marched waving the flags of Pakistan and AJK, while in Neelum Valley, students participated in speech competitions wearing traditional Kashmiri attire, with prizes awarded by local officials. Poonch divisional commissioner thanked the people for setting aside political affiliations to express solidarity with the Kashmiris.

South Asia peace linked to Kashmir resolution: Aseefa

In her message on the occasion, First Lady Aseefa Bhutto-Zardari reiterated Pakistan's moral, diplomatic and political support and called upon the international community and the UN to honour their commitments and implement Security Council resolutions.

She stressed that durable peace in South Asia remains linked to a just and peaceful resolution of the Jammu and Kashmir dispute in accordance with the aspirations of the Kashmiri people.

She paid tribute to the resilience of Kashmiri women and youth living under occupation, reaffirming Pakistan's solidarity with the people of India-held Kashmir and their right to self-determination. She drew particular attention to the suffering and strength of Kashmiri women.

"The mass graves of their families represent only one part of a much larger reality. The silence imposed on entire communities is enforced through premeditated violence and brutal assaults against the women of the occupied valley. Despite this, the women of India-held Kashmir continue to stand firm as leaders at the forefront of what remains the longest resistance to the brute colonisation of a disputed region in the world."

Ms Bhutto-Zardari recalled that the observance of Feb 5 as a national day of solidarity was initiated 36 years ago by her mother and former premier Benazir Bhutto. While addressing the youth of Kashmir, she acknowledged their key role in sustaining the freedom movement and urged them not to lose hope.



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Mount Fuji cherry blossom festival cancelled due to over tourism



A VIEW of cherry blossoms, with Mount Fuji in the background.

A cherry blossom festival boasting a highly Instagrammable view of Japan's Mount Fuji has been cancelled after residents complained of overtourism fuelled by the weak yen.

The city of Fujiyoshida, in central Japan's Yamanashi region, said that the weeks-long event attracting around 200,000 people will be called off this year because "the quiet lives of local residents are threatened".

About 42.7 million tourists flocked to Japan in 2025, an all-time high, topping 2024's record of nearly 37 million as the weak yen boosted the appeal of the "bucket list" destination.

But complaints of overcrowding have grown in hotspots like Kyoto, where disrespectful tourists have been accused of harassing kimono-clad geisha performers in their frenzy for photos.

In Fujiyoshida, the influx of foreign tourists has seen traffic chronically jammed and cigarette butts tossed, with trespassing and even defecation in private gardens reported by its citizens, the city said.

"Behind (Mount Fuji's) beautiful landscape is the reality that the quiet lives of citizens are threatened. We have a strong sense of crisis," Shigeru Horiuchi, Fujiyoshida mayor, said in a statement.

"To protect the dignity and living environment of our citizens, we have decided to bring the curtain down on the 10-year-old festival." The city, however, admits that even if the festival itself is cancelled, its venue — a park overlooking Mount Fuji, cherry blossom trees and a five-story pagoda — may still see a spike in visitors as spring nears. Mount Fuji is a perennial tourist attraction.

To manage the influx of visitors, nearby towns have in the past erected a view-blocking barrier to dissuade photo-hungry tourists, introduced an entry fee for hikers and capped their daily numbers.

Macau hotel rips up gold bricks for \$13m payoff

The management of a hotel in Macau ripped up real gold bricks from its distinctive lobby floor and sold them for \$13 million in an attempt to cash in on the metal's market surge, the facility's parent company said in a filing on Wednesday.

Opened in 2006 in the semi-autonomous casino city, the Grand Emperor Hotel was known for its opulent "golden pathway", showcasing dozens of one-kilogram bars of gold studded into its entrance hall floor.

The feature had aimed "to create a sumptuous and resplendent atmosphere". But with the price of gold leaping in recent months as investors seek safe havens in turbulent geopolitical times, the company said it had recognised "a good opportunity".

The decision to sell the bricks was linked to a revamping of the hotel's facilities, said the company, Emperor Entertainment Hotel Limited.

In October, the Grand Emperor ceased its gaming operations following a tightening of rules around casino operations. In Wednesday's filing the group said the hotel had been actively planning for other entertainment and amusement facilities.

"Given that the relevant area is planned to undergo renovation and redevelopment, the precious metals that were originally part of the hotel's interior design and outfitting are no longer relevant to the theme of the hotel in the future," the firm said.

Thailand uses contraceptive to limit births of wild elephants

Thailand has given a contraceptive vaccine to wild elephants for the first time in an effort to control their ballooning population, a conservation official said on Wednesday 28 Jan.

Wildlife authorities and a veterinary team administered the shots to three female elephants in southeastern Trat province on Monday 26 Jan, said Sukhee Boonsang, a director of the Wildlife Conservation Office.

The aim was to manage the wild elephant population, he said, adding that the mammal's birth rate in five provinces of eastern Thailand rises about eight percent yearly compared to three percent in other regions.

This "will cause more conflict between humans and elephants in the long term if we let it continue", he said. Veterinarians and officials administered the vaccines this week using a dart gun without anaesthesia, the conservation office said in a statement.

Wild elephant numbers in Thailand rose from 334 in 2015 to almost 800 last year, with thousands more in captivity. Human-elephant conflict has caused almost 200 human fatalities and more than 100 elephant deaths since 2012, the conservation office statement said.

Asian elephants, Thailand's national animal, are classified as endangered globally by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature.

Sukhee said the three elephants had been checked for signs of infection, were well and "living their normal life", adding that his team will follow up with blood checks every six months. The vaccine was tested on seven captive elephants in northern Chiang Mai two years ago, he said.

Another 15 doses will be used on elephants in other herds in Thailand before this year's rainy season starts from May, Sukhee said.

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