

## Iran says ready for nuclear talks if West is 'serious'

Tehran(News Desk) Iran is ready to discuss its nuclear programme if Western countries show they are "serious", the foreign ministry spokesman was quoted as saying in an interview published on Thursday. "We have said several times that we are ready for discussions, but only if the other side is serious about this," Esmail Baqaei said. Tehran has signalled to the West several times recently indicating a willingness to reach an agreement over its nuclear programme. In an interview with Sky News posted to his official Telegram channel on Tuesday, Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi said the new US administration should work to win back Tehran's trust if it wants a new round of nuclear talks. In Thursday's interview, Baqaei expressed hope that new US President Donald Trump would adopt a "realistic approach" towards Iran. During his first term which ended in 2021, Trump pursued a policy of "maximum pressure", withdrawing the United States from a landmark nuclear deal which imposed curbs on Iran's nuclear programme in return for sanctions relief. Asked about the possibility of new talks, Baqaei was quoted on Thursday as saying Iran's policy would depend on "the actions of the other parties".

## Syria's Ahmed al-Sharaa declared president for transition, consolidating his power

Damascus(News Desk) Syria's de facto leader Ahmed al-Sharaa was declared president for a transitional phase on Wednesday, tightening his hold on power less than two months after he led a campaign that toppled Bashar al-Assad. Sharaa was also empowered to form a temporary legislative council for a transitional period and the Syrian constitution was suspended, according to an announcement made by the military command which led the offensive against Assad. The decisions emerged from a meeting of military commanders who took part in the assault, a campaign spearheaded by Sharaa's Islamist Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) group — a former al-Qaeda affiliate. Addressing the conference, Sharaa said the first priority in Syria was to fill a vacuum in government "in a legitimate and legal way". He also said civil peace must be preserved through transitional justice and preventing displays of revenge, that state institutions — foremost among them military and security forces — be rebuilt, and that economic infrastructure be developed. Sharaa has pledged to embark on a political transition including a national conference, an inclusive government, and eventual elections, which he has said could take up to four years to hold. Wednesday's announcement did not say when the new legislative body might be picked, or provide any new details for a timeline for the transition. Fawaz Gerges, Professor of International Relations at the London School of Economics, said the declaration had "formalised his status as the strongman ruler".

## FO shifts stance on US weapons in Afghanistan

ISLAMABAD:(News desk) The Foreign Office on Monday adjusted its position on US President Donald Trump's announcement about retrieving leftover American military equipment from Afghanistan, moving from a neutral stance to supporting the idea, citing security concerns. FO spokesman Shafiq Ali Khan, in a statement, said the presence of advanced US weapons in Afghanistan following the August 2021 withdrawal had become a "profound concern" for Pakistan's safety and security. "These weapons have been used by terrorist organisations, including the TTP, to carry out terrorist attacks in Pakistan," Mr Khan pointed out. "We have been repeatedly calling upon the de facto authorities in Kabul to take all necessary measures to ensure that these weapons do not fall into the wrong hands." The latest statement marks a departure from the FO's cautious stance on Thursday (Jan 23), when Mr Khan, during the weekly briefing, framed the issue as a bilateral matter between Washington and Kabul. Spokesman backs return of assets to America "This is essentially an issue between two governments, which is the United States and Afghan interim authorities," he had then said. However, he had acknowledged the regional implications, stating that the possibility of US weapons being used by militant groups was a concern for neighbouring countries, including Pakistan. President Trump, soon after taking office, called upon the Taliban authorities to return the weapons that US forces had left behind in Afghanistan at the time of their withdrawal, linking future aid to the fulfilment of the demand. The US has since its withdrawal made cash deliveries worth \$3 billion to support humanitarian programmes in Afghanistan. The Taliban, however, have rejected the demand, saying instead of taking back the weapons, the US should provide them with more advanced weapons to fight the militant Islamic State-Khorasan group.

## Unfazed devotees shrug off stampede at India's Kumbh Mela

Delhi(News Desk) Swarming throngs of devotees bathed in rivers at India's Maha Kumbh Mela festival on Thursday, undeterred by a stampede a day earlier that killed at least 30 people. The Kumbh Mela attracts tens of millions of Hindu faithful from around India every 12 years to the northern city of Prayagraj, but has a woeful record of deadly crowd incidents. Yesterday's pre-dawn disaster, which saw a surging crowd spill out of a police cordon and trample bystanders, prompted

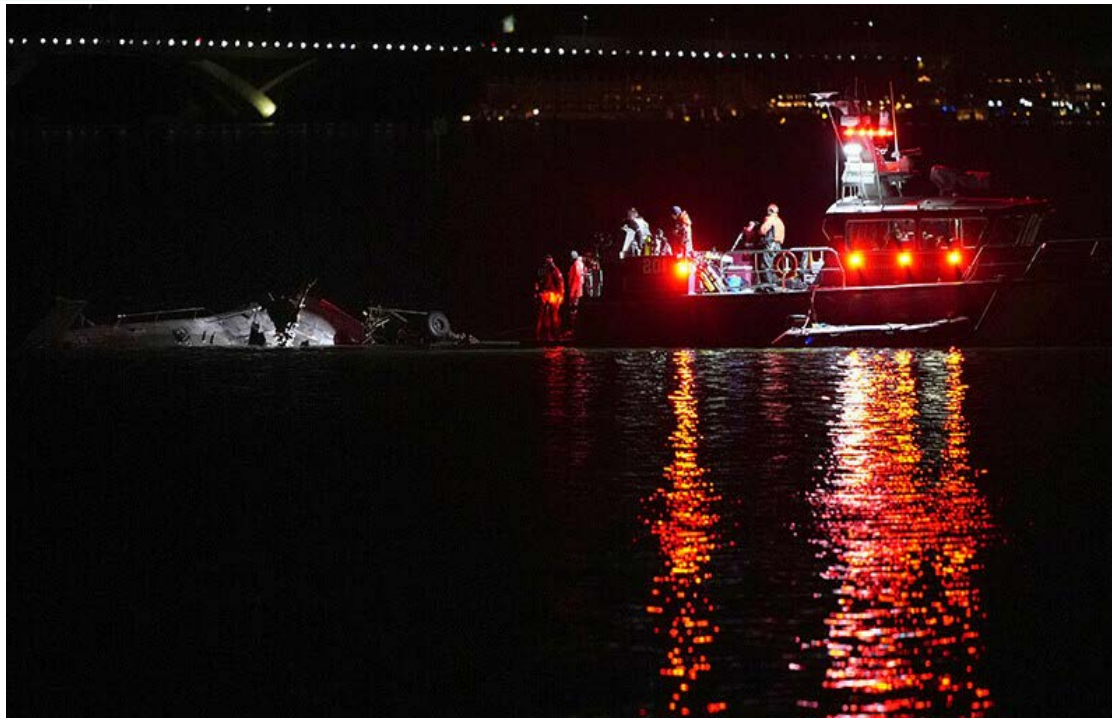
some spooked pilgrims to leave the festival. Police said 30 people were killed in the crush and 90 were injured, but sources told Reuters the death toll was nearly 40. But many more were still arriving in the stampede's aftermath to participate in what they said was a matter of religious obligation. "We've obviously heard about the stampede," 21-year-old Naveen Pradhan, who arrived at the festival with his family hours after the disaster, told AFP. "But this is a holy thing, a

religious thing, something we should do as Hindus, and my family wouldn't have missed this no matter what." The six-week Kumbh Mela is the single biggest milestone on the Hindu religious calendar, and Wednesday marked one of the holiest days in the festival, coinciding with an alignment of the Solar System's planets. Despite the early morning disaster, saffron-clad holy men continued with the day's rituals hours later, leading millions into a sin-cleansing bath by the

confluence of the Ganges and Yamuna rivers. "The journey was challenging — the trains were packed, the train stations were packed," pharmacist Padmabati Dam, who travelled by train for more than 1,000 kilometres to reach the festival, told AFP. "We were tired after such a long journey but as soon as we took a dip in the river we just felt so fresh and happy. It was as if all that inconvenience was really worth it." Probe ordered Indian authorities have ordered a

probe into the stampede. Police said 30 people were killed in the crush at the world's biggest gathering of humanity and 90 were injured, but sources told Reuters the death toll was nearly 40. Some witnesses spoke of a huge push towards the rivers that caused devotees to fall on each other, while others said closure of routes to the water brought the dense crowd to a standstill and caused people to collapse due to suffocation. "The government has decided that a judicial inquiry of the incident will

be done. For this, we have formed a three-member judicial commission," Uttar Pradesh state Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath told reporters late on Wednesday. "The judicial commission will look into the entire matter and submit its report to the state government within a time limit," he said. More than 76 million people took a dip at the confluence of three sacred rivers in Prayagraj in the northern state of Uttar Pradesh until 8pm (7:30pm PKT) on Wednesday alone, officials said.



Emergency response units assess helicopter wreckage in the Potomac River near Ronald Reagan Washington Airport on January 30, in Arlington, Virginia.

## 75 Pakistanis moved to Rwanda amid escalation of Congo conflict: FO

Islamabad(News Desk) The Foreign Office (FO) said on Thursday that 75 Pakistanis have been moved to Rwanda amid the ongoing conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). DR Congo's president has vowed a "vigorous" military response against Rwandan-backed fighters who advanced further in the mineral-rich east of the country after seizing

most of the region's main city, where residents tentatively ventured out today. The M23's capture of most of Goma, the capital of North Kivu province, is a dramatic escalation of a decade-long conflict that has seen it seize swathes of eastern Democratic Republic of Congo. It is one of a string of armed groups in eastern DRC that has been plagued by internal and

cross-border violence for the past three decades, partly traced back to the 1994 Rwandan genocide. In a press release issued today, the FO said around 150 Pakistanis were stranded in Goma following the conflict's escalation. "With the active engagement of Pakistan's High Commissioner in Kigali Ambassador Naeemullah Khan, the Rwandan au-

thorities have allowed the entry of stranded Pakistanis into Rwanda. So far, around 75 Pakistanis have moved to Rwanda." The FO added that the Pakistan High Commission in Kigali has arranged accommodation and food for those affected and is also reaching out to the Pakistani community to identify and gain access to any other citizens in difficulty.

## Quran-desecrating provocateur Momika shot dead in Sweden, five suspects arrested

Sweden(News Desk) An Iraqi refugee and anti-Islam campaigner was shot dead in Sweden hours before he was due to receive a court verdict following a trial over desecrating the Holy Quran, and five people were arrested on Thursday. The five were arrested in connection with the incident late on Wednesday and ordered detained by a prosecutor, Swedish police said on their

website. They did not say if the shooter was among those detained. Salwan Momika, 38, was shot in a house in the town of Sodertalje near Stockholm, public broadcaster SVT reported, citing unnamed police sources. Momika had burned copies of the holy book in public demonstrations in 2023 against Islam. "I can assure you that the security services are deeply involved

because there is obviously a risk that there is a connection to a foreign power," Sweden's Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson said at a news conference. A Stockholm court had been due to sentence Momika and another man today in a criminal trial over "offences of agitation against an ethnic or national group", but said the announcement of the verdict had been postponed. A police spokesperson con-

firmed a man was shot dead in Sodertalje, but gave no other details. The other defendant in the same court case was giving interviews on Thursday and posted a message on X, saying: "I'm next." The Security Service said that police were leading the investigation but "we are following the development of events closely to see what impact this may have on Swedish security", a spokesperson told Reuters.



Syria's de facto leader Ahmed al-Sharaa, also known as Abu Mohammed al-Golani waits to welcome the senior Ukrainian delegation led by Ukrainian Foreign Minister Andrii Sybiba, after the ousting of Syria's Bashar al-Assad, in Damascus, Syria.

## No survivors from plane, helicopter collision in Washington

Washington(News Desk) US officials said on Thursday that there were likely no survivors after an American Airlines passenger jet carrying 64 people collided in midair with a military helicopter and crashed into the icy waters of Washington's Potomac River. "We are now at a point where we are switching from a rescue

operation to a recovery operation," Washington DC Fire Chief John Donnelly told a news conference at Reagan National Airport, the intended destination of the passenger flight. "At this point, we don't believe there are any survivors," Donnelly said, adding that 28 bodies had been recovered — including one from the heli-

copter. There were no details on the cause of the crash, with transport officials saying both aircraft were on standard flight patterns on a clear night with good visibility. "Do I think this was preventable? Absolutely," Transportation Secretary Sean Duffy told the news conference. Scores of people were feared dead after the

regional passenger jet and a US Army Black Hawk helicopter collided and crashed into the frigid Potomac River. Officials provided no death toll from Wednesday night's collision but US Senator Roger Marshall of Kansas, from where the flight was travelling, suggested most if not all those on board had been killed.

## Israel has no right to shutter Palestinian aid agency, Munir Akram tells UNSC

UNITED NATIONS: (News Desk) With only two days before Israel bans operations of UNRWA, the UN aid agency for Palestinian refugees, Pakistan has warned that the move would cripple humanitarian work in war-shattered Gaza and undermine the ceasefire in the enclave. "For over seven decades, UNRWA has been a beacon of hope for millions of Palestinian refugees across the region," Ambassador Munir Akram, permanent representative of Pakistan to the UN, told 15-member Security Council's meeting convened on Tuesday to address the difficult situation that the agency is facing. With its extensive network of schools, healthcare facilities and humanitarian services, he said UNRWA remains indispensable in providing life-saving assistance, the resumption of education for children and the provision of healthcare for the suffering Palestinians, pointing out that it would also be critical for Gaza's reconstruction. UNRWA's viability and survival were being threatened by the implementation of last October's Israeli legislation banning the agency's activities, the Pakistani envoy said, adding that the move violates the UN Charter, international law and the Advisory Opinion of the International Court of Justice (ICJ).

## Trump administration to cancel student visas of pro-Palestinian protesters: White House official

Washington(News Desk) US President Donald Trump will sign an executive order on Wednesday to combat antisemitism and pledge to deport non-citizen college students and others who took part in pro-Palestinian protests, a White House official said. A fact sheet on the order promises "immediate action" by the Justice Department to prosecute "terroristic threats, arson, vandalism and violence against American Jews" and marshal all federal resources to combat what it called "the explosion of antisemitism on our campuses and streets" since the October 7, 2023 attack on Israel by Hamas. "To all the resident aliens who joined in the pro-jihadist protests, we put you on notice: come 2025, we will find you, and we will deport you," Trump said in the fact sheet. "I will also quickly cancel the student visas of all Hamas sympathisers on college campuses, which have been infested with radicalism like never before." The Hamas attacks and the subsequent devastating Israeli onslaught on Gaza led to several months of pro-Palestinian protests that roiled US college campuses, with civil rights groups documenting rising antisemitic, anti-Arab and Islamophobic incidents.

## 'Champions Trophy to be held without opening ceremony'

LAHORE:(News desk) In an untoward development, it has emerged that there will be no opening ceremony of the ICC Champions Trophy starting in Pakistan next month, mainly due to the late arrival of England and Australian squads for the prestigious event. Moreover, it has been learnt that no warm-up matches will be held in the elite eight-nation tournament. A well-informed source has told Dawn that in accordance with the travelling schedule, which all the participating teams had conveyed to the International Cricket Council (ICC), England are set to arrive in Lahore on Feb 18, just one day before the first match of the event is staged in Karachi, between defending champions Pakistan and New Zealand. The Australia squad, who are scheduled to play their first group stage game against England on Feb 22 in Lahore, will arrive in the provincial capital on Feb 19. "Due to the late arrival of England and Australian teams the initial plan to hold the traditional opening ceremony featuring the participating teams and their captains has been cancelled," the source revealed.

## Defending champion Asjad ousted from National Snooker

KARACHI:(News Desk) The NBP 49th National Snooker Championship witnessed a major upset on Wednesday as defending champion Asjad Iqbal was ousted from the tournament after losing against Mohammad Sajjad 5-3 here at the NBP Sports Complex. With the victory Sajjad booked an all-Punjab quarter-final clash against Mohammad Naseem Akhtar, who registered a narrow 5-4 win over Sindh's cueist Zulfiqar A. Qadir in their last-16 match. In Wednesday's other matches, Mohammad Asif — Pakistan's most successful cueist — survived a scare against Mubashir Raza to progress into quarters, where he will be up against Ian Mark John, who edged past Babar Masih 5-4. Last-year finalist, Awaisullah Munir kept his perfect run intact as he recorded a thumping 5-1 win over Sharjeel Mehmood to book a last-eight date with Abdul Sattar of Sindh. Sattar won a pre-quarter thriller against province-mate Abdul A. Jabbar 5-4. Shahid Aftab and Sohail Shehzad completed the quarter-final line-up following identical 5-2 wins over Waseem Abbas and Mohammad Shahbaz, respectively. Asjad, who was seeking to retain his title, got off to a strong start, winning the first frame 25-61. However, Sajjad bounced back, taking the next two frames 65-39, 62-25. Asjad, though, struck back in emphatic fashion as he clinched the fourth frame with a break of 114. But Sajjad halted the comeback immediately and wrapped up the victory as he bagged the next three frames 69-29, 78-11, 69-29. In another exciting match, Asif — who won the World Amateur Championship last year — was stretched to the full distance by Mubashir. Asif, undefeated in the tournament so far, took an early lead, winning the first frame 86-8, but Mubashir turned the tide in his favour after he won the next two frames 81-13, 80-21 to take the lead. High-flying Asif kept the momentum on his side as he won the next three frames 56-47, 79-15, 70-1 to seemingly take a decisive advantage.