

## Govt, PTI finally come to table to defuse tensions

ISLAMABAD / LAHORE:(news desk) The first meeting between negotiating committees, formed by the government and the PTI, is expected to take place today (Monday), kicking off long-anticipated talks between the rival parties to defuse prevailing political tensions. The meeting is expected to be held today after Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif, on Sunday, formed a committee that included leaders from his coalition partners in the federal government. Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif formed a negotiation committee comprising members of the gov-

ernment," said an official press release issued by the Prime Minister's Office (PMO). PML-N leaders included in the committee are Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Ishaq Dar, PM's political aide Rana Sanaullah and Senator Irfan Siddiqui, according to the PMO statement. Interestingly, Defence Minister Khawaja Asif, who has remained a permanent feature in past government committees for political dialogues, is not part of the group this time. The committee also includes PPP's Raja Parvez Ashraf and Naveed Qa-

mar, MQM-P leader Dr Khalid Maqbool Siddiqui, Istehkam-i-Pakistan leader and Privatisation Minister Aleem Khan, PML-Q leader and Religious Affairs Minister Chaudhry Salik Hussain and Sardar Khalid Magsof of BAP, the press release added. Incarcerated PTI founder, Imran Khan, had already formed a five-member committee for holding negotiations on a two-point agenda: the release of PTI's workers and supporters from prisons and judicial inquiry into the events of the May 9 riots and the November 24 protest. The PTI committee included Opposition Leader

in the National Assembly Omar Ayub Khan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Chief Minister Ali Amin Gandapur, Sunni Ittehad Council Chairman Sahibzada Hamid Raza, PTI Secretary General Salman Akram Raja and PTI MNA Asad Qaiser. First meeting PTI Information Secretary Sheikh Waqqas Akram confirmed the two sides will meet today (Monday). Meanwhile, National Assembly Speaker Ayaz Sadiq, who had offered to play the role of a mediator to bring the two sides to the table, has hailed the government's decision to form a committee for talks.



Supporters and workers of a multiparty alliance participate in a sit-in on Marine Drive in Gwadar.—

## Protest against Kurram road closures continues

KURRAM: Protests over the prolonged closure of transportation routes continued on Sunday in Kurram, with residents braving freezing temperatures in a sit-in outside the Parachinar Press Club. Philanthropist Faisal Edhi said that 50 children have died due to a lack of medical facilities at hospitals and other health centres, while independent sources suggested the toll might be even higher. Speaking to protesters, Tehsil Council Chairman Agha Muzammil Hussain lamented that the people of Parachinar and surrounding areas had been besieged due to road closures, and severe shortages of essential food items and medicines had worsened the situation. He slammed the government for being "bent on disarming besieged citizens", adding that the government's actions "are tantamount to leaving innocent people at the mercy of terrorists. We cannot accept such policies under any circumstances". MPA Ali Hadi Irfani also criticised the government for making "unnecessary decisions" and called for urgent action to ensure public safety and relief efforts. He praised Faisal Edhi's initiatives and urged the government to adopt more effective measures to ease the crisis. Faisal Edhi has launched an air ambulance service to transport patients from Parachinar to Peshawar and bring medicines back to the besieged region.

## War to continue until terror eradicated, pledges army chief



LOWER DIR / SHANGLA: (news desk) As martyrs of the Dec 20 terrorist assault on a South Waziristan checkpoint were laid to rest in their ancestral graveyards with full military honours, Chief of the Army Staff Gen Asim Munir on Sunday declared in unequivocal terms that the attackers would be hunted down till their elimination. President Asif Ali Zardari and Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif strongly condemned the terrorist attack. Interacting with officers and troops during his visit to Wana in South Waziristan, Gen Munir reaffirmed Pakistan Army's commitment to "pursuing Fitna al Khwarij (the military's term for the banned Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan) which shall continue to be hunted down till its elimination along with the facilitator, abettors and financier who will be made to pay the price for their nefarious activities against the state".

## Military trial verdicts not in line with international obligations, says EU spokesperson

ISLAMABAD: (news desk) The European Union has expressed concern over the recent sentencing of 25 civilians by a military court, stating that "these verdicts are seen as inconsistent with the obligations that Pakistan has undertaken under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)". In a statement issued on Sunday, an EU spokesperson said that in line with Article 14 of ICCPR every person is entitled to a fair and public trial in a court that is independent,

impartial and competent, and has the right to adequate and effective legal representation. "It also stipulates that any judgement rendered in a criminal case shall be made public," according to the EU spokesperson. The EU spokesperson reminded that under the EU's Generalised Scheme of Preferences Plus (GSP+), beneficiary countries, including Pakistan, have voluntarily agreed to implement effectively 27 international core conventions, including the ICCPR, in order to contin-

ue benefitting from GSP+ status. The EU is Pakistan's second-largest trading partner, with the Generalised Scheme of Preferences Plus arrangement contributing significantly to the growth of bilateral trade. The GSP+ provides wide-ranging tariff preferences for imports to the EU from vulnerable developing countries to support poverty eradication, sustainable development and their participation in the global economy as well as reinforce good governance. Eligible coun-

tries like Pakistan can export goods to the EU market at zero duties for 66 per cent of tariff lines. This preferential status is conditional on GSP Plus countries demonstrating tangible progress on the implementation of 27 international conventions on human and labour rights, environmental protection, climate change and good governance. The existing GSP framework ended in December 2023, however legislative process was ongoing on its successor for 2024-33, according to EU documents.



KURRAM: Officials of the provincial government unload cartons of medicine from a helicopter at the Parachinar airport, on Sunday.

## PTI to enter talks with civil disobedience call intact

ISLAMABAD: (news desk) The PTI has agreed to meet with the committee formed by the government for talks but said the call for civil disobedience will not be revoked as a prelude to negotiations. The civil disobedience was called for by the jailed PTI founder, Imran Khan, and only he can withdraw it, the party's information secretary, Sheikh Waqqas Akram, said in a video

statement on Sunday. The civil disobedience, expected to start on Sunday, has been decried by the government. Last week, PM's adviser, Barrister Aqeel, warned that dialogues can't take place with the "dangling sword of civil disobedience". However, Mr Akram said the PTI leaders will meet their jailed founder after talks on Monday to inform him of the outcome.

"People nominated by both sides will come to the table and lay down their points," Mr Akram said of today's meeting. After the meeting, he said, the PTI will be able to "gauge whether the government is truly serious about resolving our issues and meeting Imran Khan's demands." After the talks, the party will "demand to meet Imran Khan" to brief him about the meeting's outcome. "[W]hatever Im-

ran Khan directs about the civil disobedience movement, we will implement it," Mr Akram said, adding that unless the party withdraws it, the call for civil disobedience will remain intact. Last week, Mr Khan warned the first phase of the civil disobedience movement — where overseas Pakistanis would be asked to stop sending remittances — would kick off on December 22.

## Gwadar 'paralysed' as protests over border trade continue

GWADAR:(news desk) Normal life in Gwadar remains severely disrupted as workers and supporters of the All Parties Alliance continue their sit-in at Marine Drive for over a week. The protesters are demanding the reopening of the border with Iran for trade in oil and other commodities, which has been closed for months. The protest leaders stressed that border trade is the primary source of livelihood for Gwadar's residents, many of whom have been rendered jobless due to the prolonged closure. They criticised the introduction of a token system at the Kantani Hor border, describing it as a major barrier to trade that has exacerbated unemployment in the region.

## People urged to 'conserve internet' amid slowdown

KARACHI: (news desk) A parliamentary official has suggested that people should "use the internet less" and only for "important matters", as the country grapples with frequent cyber-slowdowns in Pakistan, Dawn.com reported. Syed Sajid Mehdi, Parliamentary Secretary for the Cabinet Division, has recently been in the headlines for answering queries fielded by lawmakers in the National Assembly on the issue of sluggish speeds, difficulty downloading media on WhatsApp, and intermittent connectivity across the country. Mr Mehdi has responded to internet related queries during Question Hour as the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA) falls under the purview of the Cabinet Division, rather than the Ministry of IT. In an interview with DawnNewsTV on Sunday, the parliamentary secretary likened the internet in Pakistan to a road, adding that the more people use it, the more congested it would get and the slower people would move. "There are large loads on our internet, [just] like on a congested road," he said. "Cars move slower if there is congestion. If 10 people use a road meant for five, it will slow everything down." The secretary, whose analogy indicated his limited technical understanding of how the internet actually works, claimed that work was underway to resolve the issue and will be completed "very quickly". He also said that outdated infrastructure, rapid population growth, and increased demand are key factors contributing to slow internet speeds.

## ECP vows to close gender gap in voter rolls by next elections

ISLAMABAD: (news desk) The Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) has pledged to eliminate the gender gap among voters by the next general elections. In a message on the occasion of Working Women's Day, Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) Sikandar Sultan Raja said the chasm between male and female voters was as high as 11.8 percentage points in 2018 elections, which has now dropped to 7.5 pps, which he said was a significant achievement in five years. As many as 25.53m individuals have been added to the electoral rolls since September 2018, including 11.5m men and 14.08m women. That means 2.58m more women than men have been included in the voters' list over the last five years. In September 2018, the total number of registered voters was 106m, including 59.22m (55.89pc) males and 46.73m (44.11pc) females, meaning a gap of 11.78 pps. According to the latest data, the total number of registered voters stands at 131.53m, including 70.72m (53.77pc) men and 60.81m (46.23pc) women, with the difference dropping to 7.54 pps. Stressing that women's participation in the electoral process was inevitable for peace, stability, and democracy in the country, the chief election commissioner urged women to actively take part in elections as voters and candidates and encouraged others. He said the ECP has taken some key initiatives over the last few years to address the challenges women face as voters and candidates.

## Fafen finds difference between votes cast for NA, PA seats

ISLAMABAD: The number of votes polled in the 2024 general elections for National Assembly seats exceeded the number of votes cast for provincial assembly seats in Punjab and Sindh provinces, with Punjab alone accounting for a difference of over half a million. Conversely, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan saw more votes cast for provincial assembly contests than National Assembly seats. According to a recent report by the Free and Fair

Election Network (Fafen), the number of valid votes polled for the National Assembly seats in Punjab was 37.06 million, compared to 36.55m votes polled for provincial assembly seats, reflecting a gap of 0.509m. In Sindh, 11.41m votes were polled for the national and 11.34m for the provincial assembly seats. In contrast, in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan, 29,114 and 28,875 more votes, respectively, were polled for

provincial assembly seats as compared to the National Assembly. It is worth noting that on election day, all voters are handed two ballot papers each — one to pick a National Assembly candidate and the other to select a representative for the provincial assembly. But since both ballots are deposited in separate ballot boxes, it is possible that one vote cast by an individual is rejected due to any reason, while the other is considered valid.

in addition, electoral experts say that certain voters may only cast ballots for one seat and not the other, depending on their level of interest in that particular contest. The Fafen report tries to offer some explanations — such as the fact that voters in Islamabad do not have any provincial assembly candidates to vote for. This accounts for 0.59m votes cast in ICT but doesn't explain the 0.509m difference seen in Punjab, for example.



According to the report, the difference in the votes cast for national and provincial assemblies is reflected in the number of valid votes. Compared to provincial assembly seats, 1,117,624 more valid votes were recorded in the party/candidate tally in National Assembly results.