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## Islamabad set to host meeting for ME de-escalation

• Saudi Arabia, Turkiye, Egypt foreign ministers arrive for quadrilateral huddle • PM speaks to Pezeshkian for over an hour to push for peace, condemns strikes on Iran • Iranian president underscores 'deep mistrust' of US, seeks confidence-building measures • US-Iran direct talks mediated by Pakistan likely in Islamabad next week; insider claims ceasefire may precede this meeting

By Baqir Sajjad Syed

ISLAMABAD: Diplomatic efforts to bring the United States and Iran to the negotiating table to end nearly a month of hostilities entered into top gear on Saturday, with officials pointing to potential progress by midweek even as deep Iranian mistrust of Washington continues to cast a long shadow over the process.

Momentum built around a lengthy phone call between Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif and Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian, as Islamabad

prepared to host a four-country meeting seen as central to the emerging peace initiative.

According to officials, the call lasted about 90 minutes and was the PM's

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second conversation with Mr Pezeshkian in five days, both of which focused on de-escalation and pathways to dialogue.

Pakistan has stepped up diplomatic outreach, engaging Washington, Gulf capitals and other Muslim countries in an effort to create space for talks. Islamabad is set to host a meeting of the foreign ministers of Saudi Arabia, Turkiye and Egypt, alongside Pakistan.

In a press release issued on Saturday, the Foreign Office said that at the invitation of Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Ishaq Dar, Saudi Arabia's FM Prince Faisal bin Farhan Al Saud, Turkiye's FM Hakan Fidan, and Egypt's FM Dr Badr Abdelatty will visit Islamabad from March 29 to March 30. All three foreign ministers arrived in Pakistan on Saturday night, confirmed the FO in a statement.

The quadrilateral mechanism, formed on the sidelines of a broader 10-country gathering of Arab and Muslim states in Riyadh earlier this month, has since evolved into a key diplomatic track feeding into wider efforts to end the conflict. Officials say the focus of this process is on facilitating the dialogue, with Pakistan being the central interlocutor between Tehran and Washington.

The quadrilateral meeting was initially planned to be held in Turkiye, but

## 20 more Pakistani ships allowed thru Hormuz

By Our Staff Reporter

ISLAMABAD: Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Ishaq Dar announced on Saturday that Iran had agreed to allow 20 additional ships flying the Pakistani flag to transit the Strait of Hormuz, with two vessels crossing daily.

Mr Dar called the decision "a welcome and constructive gesture by Iran" that "deserves appreciation" and could help bring stability to the region. "Dialogue, diplomacy, and such confidence-building measures are the only way forward," he said in a post on X.

Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi had some time back stated on X that his country had permitted passage through the strait for friendly nations, including China, Russia, India, Iraq, and Pakistan. By selectively regulating passage through the Strait of Hormuz —

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## Action plan unveiled to combat drought

Climate ministry official says drought 'no longer a distant or occasional risk', calls for 'proactive' approach

By Jamal Shahid

ISLAMABAD: Pakistan has developed a national drought action plan in an attempt to transition from a reactive to a proactive risk-based approach for drought management, as climate change is making droughts frequent and severe, leading to water stress.

Federal Secretary for Climate Change and Environmental Coordination Aisha Humera Moriani, while speaking as a keynote speaker at a national consultative workshop on the National Drought Action Plan (NDAP) on Saturday, said drought was "no longer a distant or occasional risk" but an increasingly persistent threat driven by rising temperatures, water stress, and climate variability.

"Pakistan is already among the countries facing high water risk and drought

directly affects agriculture, water resources, food security, ecosystems and livelihoods," she said, adding that past responses had largely focused on post-impact relief rather than preparedness.

Ms Moriani highlighted the need for a coordinated institutional and policy framework to translate data into action. She acknowledged the role of the International Water Management Institute (IWMI), the Pakistan Meteorological Department (PMD) and

**Hotter urban future: Editorial on Page 6**

partners in developing the Pakistan Drought Management System (PakDMS), which provides real-time monitoring and early warning capabilities.

"This is a significant step forward. However, data alone is not enough. We need systems that ensure timely data-informed and evidence-based decisions and on-ground implementation," she said.

The climate change ministry secretary informed participants that the

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ISRAELIS gather for a weekly anti-war protest at Tel Aviv's HaBima Square.—AFP

## Houthis join fray by firing ballistic missiles at Israel

• Saudi Arabia, UAE, Bahrain hit by Iranian missiles, drones; strike wounds US troops at Saudi airbase • Drone strike disrupts shipping hub in Salalah • Explosions rock Tehran as Israeli attacks intensify; Iran halts steel production • IRGC warns of retaliation against regional economic infrastructure • Israel reports 5,689 wartime injuries; hospitals under pressure • Vance says US nearing exit but war to continue a 'little longer'

TEHRAN: Yemen's Houthi rebels announced their entry into the Middle East war on Saturday by launching a barrage of ballistic missiles towards Israel, while Gulf countries came under missile fire and Israeli forces struck Iran, as the war raged into its second month with Washington expressing hopes for progress in talks with Tehran.

The intervention of Iran's Yemeni allies in the US-Israel war on Iran will spark concern about disruptions to Red Sea shipping, with trade from the Gulf through the Strait of Hormuz already choked off.

With Hormuz all but impassable, many shipments to and from the region go through the Omani port of Salalah, on the Arabian Sea, but Danish shipping giant Maersk said operations had been temporarily suspended there after a drone attack injured one worker and damaged a crane.

With no end to the conflict in sight despite US President Donald Trump's optimism that US forces

**Exports to Europe stagnate amid challenges: Page 9**

**Three fighters of Iraq's ex-paramilitary force killed in US strike: Page 11**

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**Israeli strike kills three journalists in Lebanon: Page 12**

have obliterated Iran's military, a spokesman for the Houthis issued a video statement declaring that the group had launched ballistic missiles towards Israeli bases.

Meanwhile, Emirati authorities said debris from a successful

missile interception started fires at an Abu Dhabi industrial zone, injuring five Indian nationals.

Saudi Arabia also said it had intercepted a missile and several drones, and Bahrain said a blaze caused by the "Iranian aggression" had been brought under control.

In Israel, repeated air raid sirens sent people to shelters. Israel's health ministry said that a total of 142 people had been brought to hospitals in the last 24 hours, bringing Israel's total wartime injuries to 5,689, *Al Jazeera* reported.

Of those injured, 132 remain hospitalised, 15 of whom are in serious condition and one of whom is in critical condition, according to the ministry.

An Iranian missile and drone attack on the Prince Sultan Airbase in Saudi Arabia wounded at

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## FIA has compiled data on human smugglers, interior minister told

Naqvi says agency to become frontline force against organised crime

By Iftikhar A. Khan

ISLAMABAD: The Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) has compiled a comprehensive data of individuals involved in human smuggling.

This was stated by FIA Director General Dr Usman Anwar while giving a detailed briefing to Interior Minister Mohsin Naqvi during his visit to the FIA headquarters on Saturday.

The FIA director general said modern technology was being utilised to ensure effective action against immigration-related crimes, human smuggling and money laundering.

He said a transparent and effective accountability system had been developed within the organisation. In this regard, he said, working groups and coordination committees were being established with other agencies.

During the last four months of 2025, the FIA pun-

ished 214 officials amid rising complaints of human trafficking and corruption. The agency also dismissed 76 officials from service, demoted nine to lower ranks, and awarded other punishments to 127 others.

Speaking on the occasion, the interior minister highlighted the need for an effective crackdown against corruption in government institutions and directed that, in line with the prime minister's vision, a zero-tolerance policy against corruption be strictly enforced across all public sector organisations.

Mr Naqvi emphasised that the FIA would be organised as a frontline force against all forms of organised crime, and assured full support to the agency at every level in this regard.

He sounded confident that the reform process in the FIA would be completed by December. He emphasised that all online advertisements offering overseas employment should be "monitored" and that public awareness must be ensured regarding "misleading" advertisements.

During the visit, the minister also inspected the ongoing infrastructure improvement projects. He directed the relevant officials to ensure completion of the ongoing construction activities at the earliest.

## Staff-level deal reached with IMF for \$1.2bn tranche

• Country set to receive \$1bn under EFF, \$210m under RSF • Total IMF disbursements to reach \$4.5bn under two arrangements • Fund endorses govt's fuel pricing policy amid Middle East crisis

By Khaleeq Kiani

ISLAMABAD: The International Monetary Fund (IMF) on Saturday announced that it had reached a staff-level agreement (SLA) with Pakistan for the disbursement of about \$1.2 billion on successful conclusion of the third review under the Extended Fund Facility (EFF) and the second review under the Resilience and Sustainability Facility (RSF).

The Fund also tacitly endorsed Islamabad's fuel pricing policy in the wake of the Middle East crisis.

It said programme implementation by Pakistan under the EFF remained broadly aligned with the authorities' objectives to strengthen public finances, ensure inflation remained durably within the State Bank of Pakistan's (SBP) target range, advance reforms to improve

the viability of the energy sector and deepen structural reforms while strengthening social protection and rebuilding health and education spending.

The authorities' climate reform agenda, backed by the RSF, is progressing, and the authorities remain committed to implementing comprehensive reforms and policies that enhance resilience and reduce vulnerabilities to climate-related risks.

The talks were held in Karachi and Islamabad from Feb 25 to March 2 and continued virtually afterward.

IMF mission chief Iva Petrova said that, subject to IMF board approval, Pakistan would have access to about \$1bn (760 million special drawing rights, or SDR) under the EFF and about \$210m (SDR 154 million) under the RSF, bringing total disbursements under the two arrangements to about \$4.5bn.

"Supported by the EFF, ongoing

policies have continued to strengthen the economy and rebuild market confidence. Following the recovery in FY25, economic activity gained further momentum in the first part of the current fiscal year. Inflation and the current account balance remained contained, and external buffers continued to strengthen," the IMF said in a statement.

**Shadow of crisis: Editorial on Page 6**

"The conflict in the Middle East, however, casts a cloud over the outlook as volatile energy prices and tighter global financial conditions risk putting upward pressure on inflation and weighing on growth and the current account," it added.

The lender said the authorities remained committed to pursuing sound and prudent macroeconomic

policies to preserve the recent gains in macro-financial stabilisation, while deepening structural reforms to accelerate growth and strengthening social protection to mitigate the impact of volatile energy prices on the most vulnerable.

The authorities' policy priorities include maintaining a prudent fiscal stance, advancing fiscal structural reforms, strengthening poverty reduction and social protection, maintaining an appropriate monetary policy, achieving energy sector viability, deepening structural reforms and building resilience to climate change.

The Fund said the authorities remained committed to ensuring a sustainable fiscal position and reducing the still high public debt burden to more moderate levels over the medium term.

"To this end, efforts are ongoing to meeting the FY26 budget primary

surplus of 1.6 per cent of GDP and to target an underlying primary balance of 2pc of GDP in FY27, supported by measures to broaden the tax base and strengthen expenditure discipline, while expanding health, education, and social protection spending, and strengthening federal-provincial burden-sharing," it said.

Moreover, it said that "steadfast implementation" of fiscal reforms remained critical to achieving the fiscal objectives. "Revenue mobilisation efforts have already started to yield results, with the FBR implementing priority actions under its transformation plan and developing key performance indicators to monitor progress," it added.

These priorities include strengthening taxpayer audits, expanding the use of digital invoicing and production monitoring and enhancing

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## Policeman martyred in Bannu ambush

By Muhammad Waseem Khan

BANNU: A head constable was martyred when a police vehicle in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's Bannu district came under attack on Saturday, with the ensuing fire exchange killing two suspects, police said.

Militants attacked a police vehicle in the Sheikhan Mama Khel area, within the jurisdiction of the Haved police station, resulting in the death of Head Constable Dilnawaz Khan and injuries to three other officials.

According to police, militants ambushed the vehicle as the police party was on routine duty, to which the latter retaliated.

The attackers set the police vehicle on fire after the assault.

Regional Police Officer (RPO) Sajjad Khan said that two suspects were killed in the exchange of fire, while around four others were injured. Police also took two motorcycles of the attackers into custody, and a search operation was underway in the area.

In a separate incident, police in Bannu's Wazir tehsil successfully repulsed a militant attack.

According to police, the Ahmadzai police officials were on patrol near the

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ON OTHER PAGES



## Sharp rise in drug prices contested

While stakeholders have alleged that an unprecedented increase in medicine prices has been observed since February 2024, the Pakistan Pharmaceutical Manufacturers Association has claimed that the prices of medicines have remained unchanged. The Pakistan Drug Lawyers Forum has alleged that the prices of many medicines had increased by over 100pc. **Page 3**



## Ex-Nepal PM held over protest deaths

Nepal's former prime minister KP Sharma Oli and ex-home minister Ramesh Lekhak were arrested on Saturday over their alleged involvement in a deadly crackdown on protesters in September. A police spokesman said they were arrested in the morning. An inquiry commission found that 76 people were killed in the anti-corruption youth uprising on Sept 8 and 9. **Page 12**

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