

**Portugal: Migrants contribute enough to fund 17% of pensions **NewsWire****

Lisbon: Data provided by the Ministry of Labour, Solidarity and Social Security in Portugal show that foreign workers' contributions to Portugal's social security system are already sufficient to fund 17% of national pensions and retirements. In 2023 the Portuguese social security system disbursed 15.8 billion euros in benefits, with immigrants (Page-8)

**British High Commissioner Jane Marriott visits NUST **Celina Ali****

Islamabad: British High Commissioner to Pakistan Jane Marriott this week paid a visit to the National University of Sciences and Technology (NUST) with an aim to strengthen collaboration between the leading higher education institutions in UK and NUST (Page-11)

# China: Consistent progress seen in environmental protection

**Henan Daily**  
Zhengzhou: Despite facing challenges in environmental protection amid efforts to boost its economic recovery, China has made consistent progress over the past year, the Ministry of Ecology and Environment said. In 2024, the average density of PM2.5 particulate matter in the country's 339 major cities was 29.3 micrograms per

cubic meter, down 2.7 percent year-on-year, the ministry said in a statement issued after its annual work conference that was held on Tuesday and Wednesday. This means the concentration of the air pollutants that can penetrate deeply into the lungs has remained below China's interim national standard of 35 mcg/cubic meters for five straight years, it said. The ministry also revealed that the proportion of days with fairly good air quality —

considered to be below 100 on a 0-500 air quality index scale — in the country reached 87.2 percent last year, up 1.7 percentage points from the previous year. The accomplishment was attributed to a series of initiatives implemented by the ministry to advance efforts to ensure blue skies. Roughly 2 million rural households in northern China, for example, said farewell to coal as a heating source in 2024, the statement said. Approximately 80 percent of the nation's crude steel production capacity has undergone either comprehensive ultra-low emission transformations or targeted upgrades in key segments of their production processes.

The statement also noted unprecedented improvements in the quality of the country's surface water. About 90.4 percent of surface water nationwide was reported to be of fairly good quality last year, a 1 percentage point increase from 2023, the ministry stated.

It was the first time that the proportion of fair good quality water across the country exceeded 90 percent. China has a five-tier quality system for surface water, with Grade I being the best. The country has seen black and odorous water bodies essentially eradicated in urban areas of cities at and above the prefecture level, the ministry said. In the



nation's county seats, 80 percent of heavily polluted water bodies have been treated. The ministry pledged a series of measures to forge ahead with the country's "Beautiful China" initiative. A priority for the ministry in 2025 is to further deepen the reform of the country's mechanisms to work towards the realization of an ecological civilization.

The ministry also aims to spearhead technological innovation in environmental protection and bolster the nation's environmental monitoring system. It said initiatives will be implemented to facilitate the intelligent evolution of the national environmental monitoring network and establish a space-air-ground-sea integrated monitoring network.



## What's the secret to Denmark's happy work-life balance?



Ambassador of Denmark to Pakistan His Excellency Jakob Linnell

**David Silverberg**  
Copenhagen: Gabriel Hoecs repeats a word seven times when he discusses what it's like to work in Denmark - "trust". "No one is trying to micromanage you, or look over your shoulder," says Mr Hoecs, who works for a tech firm in Copenhagen. "Bosses aren't coming in to check if you put in eight or nine hours a day, as they mainly only care if you completed your projects. "There's a lot of trust in Denmark in that way, and I don't feel a hierarchy at my job. It's all very democratic." It is no surprise to Mr Hoecs, a married father of two young daughters, that Denmark is consistently among the top-five countries in the world for work-life balance rankings. Only 1.1% of Danes have to work 50 or more hours a week, according to the most recent global figures from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). That's a significantly lower proportion than the world average of 10.2%. By contrast, the figure for the UK is 10.8% and the US is 10.4%. Meik Wiking, author of the book The Art of Danish Living, has long regarded his home country as a shining example of what other countries should aspire to mimic with their workplace policies. "Danes are actually happy at work," he tells the BBC. "Almost 60% of Danes say they would continue to work if they won the lottery and became financially independent." Mr Wiking, who is also the boss of Danish think tank The Happiness Research Institute, shares several policies that help generate a strong work-life balance in Denmark. These include the right to a minimum five weeks of paid annual leave per year, in addition to public holidays. In the UK most workers are entitled to 5.6 weeks of paid leave, but in the US it can be as low as just 11 days. Denmark also offers a very generous six months of paid maternity and paternity leave. In the UK the father, or non-birthing partner, typically gets one to two weeks of paid leave.

In the US there is only a federal guarantee of unpaid parental leave, although some states, such as California, now offer paid time away from work after the birth of a child. And federal employees can get 12-weeks of paid leave. Mr Wiking is another Dane who cites the concept of bosses trusting their employees to do the right thing. He uses the example of staff at the Tivoli Gardens amusement park in Copenhagen, where they follow the three-metre rule. The idea is that you are CEO of everything within a radius of three metres. "If you see garbage within your three-metre radius you pick it up, and if you see a guest looking for something, you stop and ask them if you can help," says Mr Wiking. He adds that when staff take ownership of their own space it can help them feel empowered and appreciated, which goes a long way to contributing to a healthy sentiment about their workplace. Janine Leschke, a professor in the department of management, society and communication at the Copenhagen Business School, says Denmark is definitely "not a work culture where you have to show up and be available all day, all evening, to show that you're working hard all the time". Instead, she says flexibility during the workday gives employees the time they need to, say, pick up their children from school or day care. "The day doesn't have to officially end at five or six, and that's appealing to a lot of Danes with kids." Mr Hoecs has noticed how some employers in the US may expect their staff to be available over weekends, to answer the odd email or message. "That kind of overtime doesn't fit with his outlook on a positive work-life balance. "If I was expected to take calls on the weekend, that would be a huge red flag to me, and I would likely change jobs," he says. "But so far that hasn't happened to me or anyone I know." Casper Rouchmann, a Copenhagen-based CEO and founder of tech firm SparkForce, says his relaxed leadership policy would be familiar to most Danes. "You don't need to ask me to leave early," he says. "No one takes advantage of my kindness." Mr Rouchmann adds that the element of trust is so ingrained in Danish culture, visitors to Denmark are often aghast at how far it can go. He also highlights Denmark's generous welfare state, and the fact that firms have to give financial compensation to staff who are made redundant. "If you lose your job, the government is there to help," adds Mr Rouchmann. As much as other countries can learn from Denmark's work-life balance, he says it has some downsides. "Some people can rely too much on that safety net, and it might say to them that they don't have to take real risks, which is why we can be less entrepreneurial compared to the US." Samantha Saxby, an American human resources expert, says Denmark has such a good work-life balance because the country "prioritises collective well-being".



## Nation's strength lies in culture, not in guns: Bilawal Bhutto

**Liaquat Ali**

Islamabad: Pakistan People's Party (PPP) chairman Bilawal Bhutto Zardari this week said that the strength of a nation lies not in "guns and bullets", but in its rich culture, strong history, and political heritage. He emphasised that it was from these foundations that the power to confront challenges of a new era could be drawn. He was addressing a ceremony held to commemorate the convening of the "First Constituent Assembly" of Pakistan on August 11, 1947 by Quaid-e-Azam Mohammad Ali Jinnah, on the premises of the Sindh Assembly. To strengthen his argument, the PPP chairman referred to western countries and said they were not superpowers only because of their military might and developed economy. "If they claim to be superpowers, they have embraced their own culture. They have embraced their culture so thoroughly that today our children are listening to their artists' songs, watching their movies, and following their TV shows. This is what true soft power means — winning hearts and minds."

He continued: "That's why I believe in the vision of Quaid-i-Awam [former prime minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto] regarding culture and history. If we had promoted and invested in our cultural heritage, from the Indus valley civilisation to our modern cultural aspects, in the right way, perhaps today, Pakistan's films, music, and art would be thriving globally." He cited the history of struggle behind the Pakistan Movement and contributions of the then political leadership and said: "We established our country, and look at how it was done. Was a single bullet fired? Was Pakistan created because our army was powerful? No, we succeeded because our politicians were successful, and the leadership was effective. And that success came from uniting the nation. To build a nation, they undertook a historic struggle and emerged victorious." He called for unity, emphasising that Pakistan is once again facing challenges that require harmony and consensus among its people and warned that any failure to achieve this could result in serious



disappointment, particularly among the youth. "But if we continue to fight amongst ourselves and fail to understand that true power lies not in guns and bullets, but in culture and politics, then we will not be able to meet the expectations of the youth and fulfil their hopes," he added. He also agreed with the proposal to set up a media university in Karachi that could equip the younger generation with the modern techniques and tools of the fast growing industry. "I request the chief minister to consider the idea of a public-private partnership to establish a media university in Karachi," he said. "This initiative would provide an invaluable opportunity to train our youth in the modern culture of the media industry, equipping them with the latest tools and technology to thrive in today's world." The central president of the PPP women wing, Faryal Talpur, and others also spoke.

# Unite efforts to make new and greater contributions to writing Henan chapter of Chinese modernization



Huo Jinhua, Zhang Zhenyu, Liu Jiongtian, Zhu Huanran, and Secretary-General Wang Zhongshan were seated on the rostrum. Liu Jiongtian presided over the meeting. Liu Ning, Wang Kai, Sun Meijun, Sun Shougang, Jiang Ling, Zhang Wei, Wang Zhanying, Chen Xing, An Wei, Zhang Leiming, Zhang Min, Li Ya, He Jinping, Li Gongle, Liu Nanchang, Su Xiaohong, Liu Yujiang, Sun Yunfeng, Zheng Haiyang, Hu Daocai, Duan Wenlong, Zu Leiming, and Xu Hu attended to offer congratulations and were seated on the rostrum. Other leading officials seated on the rostrum included Guo Gengmao, Ren Keli, Wang Quanshu, Qiao Xinjiang, Gao Tujian, Zhang Guorong, Zhang Tao, Chen Yichu, Wang Xunzhi, Deng Yongjian, Kong Yufang, Shi Jichun, Jin Kewen, Zhang Guangzhi, Qian Guoyu, Zhou Chunyan, and Li Yingjie. The meeting first approved the agenda for the Third Session of the 13th Henan Provincial CPPCC. Kong Changsheng, on behalf of the Standing Committee of the Henan Provincial CPPCC, presented the work report. He emphasized that 2024 marked the 75th anniversary of the establishment of the People's Republic of China and the CPPCC. The Henan Provincial CPPCC and its Standing Committee upheld Xi Jinping's Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era as the guiding principle, earnestly implemented

the spirit of the 20th CPC National Congress and the Second and Third Plenums of the 20th CPC Central Committee. Under the strong leadership of the Henan Provincial Party Committee, the CPPCC focused on central tasks, fulfilled responsibilities, and contributed actively to building a modernized Henan. He highlighted six key accomplishments of the past year:

1. Upholding political principles and the Party's leadership firmly.
2. Strengthening unity and fostering consensus.
3. Promoting development through focused research and collaborative consultations.
4. Addressing people's concerns and improving public welfare.
5. Enhancing routine operations with innovation.
6. Striving for excellence in internal capacity-building.

Looking forward to 2025, Kong stated that it would be the concluding year of the "14th Five-Year Plan" and the start of strategic planning for the "15th Five-Year Plan." It is also the 75th anniversary of the Henan Provincial CPPCC. He outlined the following priorities:

- Strengthening political responsibility by adhering to Xi Jinping's thought.
- Implementing comprehensive reforms.
- Proactively supporting Henan's modernization efforts.
- Expanding democratic engagement and consensus-building.
- Enhancing institutional mechanisms and self-development within the CPPCC.

Liu Ning, representing the CPC Henan Provincial Committee, congratulated the conference and expressed gratitude for the contributions made by the CPPCC and

its members toward Henan's development. He emphasized the central task of advancing Chinese modernization to build a strong nation and achieve national rejuvenation.

He outlined strategic priorities for Henan: Advancing high-quality development through innovation and industrial modernization.

Expanding high-level openness by integrating with key economic regions and international markets. Enhancing people's quality of life and fostering shared prosperity.

Improving governance efficiency by strengthening grassroots organizations and innovative governance models.

Finally, Liu stressed the importance of Henan's role as a national strategic hub and highlighted the CPPCC's duty to foster unity, generate insights, and promote Henan's comprehensive development under the Party's leadership.

Xie Yu'an also presented a report on the proposals submitted since the second session of the 13th Henan Provincial CPPCC.

## Henan Daily

Zhengzhou: On the morning of January 17, accompanied by the majestic national anthem of the People's Republic of China, the Third Session of the 13th Henan Provincial Committee of the CPPCC solemnly opened in the

## Provincial People's Hall.

The meeting should have been attended by 892 members, with 806 present, meeting the required quorum. Kong Changsheng, Chairman of the Henan Provincial CPPCC, and Vice Chairpersons Xie Yu'an, Dai Baihua,

# China's home appliance sales surge in 2024 under trade-in scheme



## China Economic Net

Beijing: China's sales of home appliances surged in 2024 under its policy-backed trade-in program, according to the Ministry of Commerce (MOC).

Retail sales of home appliances and audio and visual equipment under the scheme reached 1.03 trillion yuan (about 143.29 billion U.S. dollars) in 2024, according to data from the National Bureau of Statistics. This marks the first time the figure has surpassed the 1 trillion yuan threshold and represents a 12.3 percent year-on-year growth.

More than 37 million consumers benefited from subsidies for their home goods purchases, the MOC said.

The high participation in the program was evident.

It took 33 days for the number of participants to reach one million, and only 17 more days to hit five million, the ministry added.

Energy-efficient products were in particularly high demand, with items at the highest energy-efficiency level accounting for over 90 percent of total sales revenue.

To stimulate consumer spending and drive economic growth, China announced an action plan in March 2024 to implement large-scale equipment upgrades and consumer goods trade-ins, nearly 15 years after the last such renewal campaign.

As part of recent efforts to bolster the program, China has decided to expand the number of home appliance categories eligible for government subsidies from eight in 2024 to 12 in 2025, with microwaves, water purifiers, dishwashers, and rice cookers added to the trade-in list.

# China's First Provincial-Level Foreign-Related Legal Service Center Unveiled in Henan

## Ta Kung Zhongyuan

Zhengzhou: On January 10, the unveiling ceremony for the Henan Provincial Foreign-Related Legal Service Center was held in Zhengzhou, marking the establishment of China's first provincial-level foreign-related legal service center.

The event was attended by He Zhenhua, Party Secretary and Director of the Henan Provincial Department of Justice; Wang Jun, Member of the Party Leadership Group and Deputy Director of the Provincial Department of Commerce; Liu Zhiliang, Member of the Party Leadership Group and Vice Chairman of the Provincial Federation of Returned Overseas Chinese; and Zhang Yan, President of the Provincial Council for the Promotion of International Trade. He Zhenhua and Wang Jun jointly unveiled the center. During the ceremony, attendees toured the new center, gaining insights into its services and operational model.

Located in the Zhengzhou Area of the Henan Pilot Free Trade Zone, the center serves the entire province by integrating resources such as legal counseling, notarization, judicial appraisal, and commercial mediation. It has established a unified legal service system, bringing together lawyers, notaries, and experts with extensive experience in foreign-related legal matters. The center aims to meet the legal needs of market entities in areas such as compliance manage-

ment, risk prevention, and dispute resolution. Currently, Henan has over 12,000 companies engaged in import and export activities, around 3,000 foreign-invested enterprises, and nearly 500 enterprises involved in international contracting, investment, and labor cooperation. The center consolidates various legal service resources to provide foreign-related legal consultations, international commercial arbitration, notarization, and commercial mediation. It also operates the Henan Foreign-Related Legal Services Network, offering comprehensive and around-the-clock legal services for foreign-related business operations.

"For handling cross-border legal issues in the past, we often had to invest significant effort and costs to find professional resources. Now, with the establishment of the Provincial Foreign-Related Legal Service Center and the launch of the online platform, we have an effective bridge to connect legal service supply and demand. This makes legal support for our investments and operations much more convenient," said a business representative attending the event, expressing optimism about future development. He Zhenhua emphasized the importance of implementing the provincial government's action plan to enhance foreign-related legal service capabilities. He called for optimizing service models and product offerings, building a top-tier platform for foreign-related legal services, and fostering collaboration with departments like commerce to better serve businesses. The center also aims to provide "accompaniment-style" services for companies expanding overseas, strengthen legal education related to for-



eign matters, and promote mutual learning and cooperation with countries and regions along the Belt and Road Initiative. By offering high-quality legal services, Henan seeks to empower high-quality development and establish itself as a hub for foreign-related legal services in central China.

The launch of this center represents a pragmatic step in improving service infrastructure and enhancing institutional innovation in the Henan Pilot Free Trade Zone's Zhengzhou Area. In recent years, the zone has actively pursued pioneering and integrated explorations, resulting in 360 innovation achievements to date, includ-

ing 52 nationwide firsts and 12 models replicated and promoted across China. With its innovative approach, Henan's Free Trade Zone has created a distinctive position in the national free trade zone landscape, branding itself as a "Silk Road Free Trade Zone."

# The cost of living and real estate landscape in Italy



Ambassador of Italy to Pakistan, H.E. Marilina Armellini

index), inflation and overall economic health. In fact, Italy has the third largest economy in the European Union with a steadily growing GDP (gross domestic product). However, the cost of living remains low in Italy, particularly compared to countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom. This is mostly because the average salaries in Italy are close to half what they are in the United States, for example. According to Statista, in 2023 the average salary in Italy was €32,450, and according to the Bureau of Labor and Statistics (BLS), the average in the United States was \$65,470 (the average euro to dollar exchange rate in 2023 was 1.08). Key components of your cost of living include housing accommodation, utilities, transportation and



lower your cost of living in Italy. An additional consideration is the low-cost, high-quality education in Italy. The public primary, middle and high schools are free and the state universities are very reasonably priced. University costs can average a few thousand, or even a few hundred euros per year in Italy versus significantly higher tuitions in the United States. Furthermore, the universities in Italy are world-renowned, including the University of Bologna, one of the oldest in the world, and the University of Padua. Even the tuitions for private universities, such as the Bocconi University in Milan or Luiss Guido Carli University in Rome, usually range between €10,000 to €15,000.



**Newsire**  
Rome: Italy has always been a highly desired location for tourism, residence and property purchase. With its picturesque landscapes, artistic and cultural importance, and rich history, it checks the boxes for many expats. Foreigners are also drawn to the mild Mediterranean cli-

food. Of course, your expenses can vary greatly depending on location and lifestyle, but generally speaking prices in Italy tend to be less than in the United States. Italians spend about €200 on utilities per month, which can be higher in the winter due to heating. Internet and phone bills are also much less in Italy than in the US, where households can spend at least \$100 per month,



A major component of the cost of living is your housing accommodation, such as rent or mortgage payments, and taxes. Renting or buying real estate in Italy is generally less expensive than in the United States. However, the prices can vary depending on the location. Prices in large cities like Rome and Milan are going to be much higher than in smaller towns. Also, in general, the north of Italy tends to be more expensive than the south of Italy. When renting property, these major cities can range between €700 to €1,100 for a one-bedroom apartment, while in a small- to medium-sized town, the same apartment could cost between €500 and €900.

In regards to buying a house in Italy, according to Idealista, Italy's leading property portal, 48% of the house listings for sale on Idealista in the fourth quarter of 2023 were priced below €150,000. Furthermore, they report the average price of a home in 2024 at €1,857 per square meter. Idealista adds that 2024 real estate prices have increased by 2.1%, and a recent analysis based on Eurostat data reports that in the last 10 years, Italy has had one of the lowest price increases of the European Union, second to last ahead of Finland. These prices vary greatly, particularly among the major metropolitan cities, where the largest price increases are seen in Milan and Rome. However, when compared throughout Europe and the UK, even prices in Milan on average remain 15% less than those in London.

mate and lower cost of living, making Italy a popular destination for retirees. To examine this subject further, this article will break down the cost of living in Italy as well as the current and future real estate landscape. The cost of living in a country is generally tied to its average salaries, CPI (consumer price

whereas in Italy, the average spend is €46. Another factor that can lower your cost of living in Italy is healthcare. Public universal healthcare is free in Italy for residents, with specialists and lab testing available for a minimal fee. Not having to pay expensive monthly healthcare premiums, such as in the US, can significantly

Italy continues to be a popular country for foreigners looking to invest in real estate or pursue alternate residency. Expats are attracted to the many options Italy presents, whether a bustling city center or a quiet countryside village, coastal living or a mountain retreat. Italy offers a landscape and housing option for every lifestyle and budget. It's important to look at the driving factors that influence a real estate purchase decision and, ultimately, affect its price. Buyers are often attracted to in-demand locations like city centers or prime neighborhoods that offer other amenities and cultural appeal. Also, the physical condition of the property and its age are important factors that contribute to its investment potential. Throughout 2024, the number of property sales has steadily grown, with transactions increasing by 1.2% compared to last year, according to the Real Estate Market Observatory (OMI) of the Italian Revenue Agency. This trend is expected to continue into 2025, with the ever-present demand from foreign buyers who are interested in investing in a piece of the Italian real estate

market. Americans may wonder if there are any restrictions to buying a property in Italy if they are not an Italian citizen or resident. In fact, Americans can buy property in Italy due to the principle of reciprocity, meaning you can purchase property in Italy if there is an international treaty between Italy and your country, such as the US, that allows this reciprocity. However, non-EU citizens can only spend 90 days in Italy without a visa. Purchasing property in Italy does not allow you to reside past this 90-day limit or automatically grant you legal residency. For periods of residence longer than 90 days, a long-stay visa would be necessary, such as the Elective Residency Visa, which requires the applicant to have a residence (home or rental) in Italy. Purchasing real estate in Italy can have many advantages, whether for a summer getaway, retirement or as an investment opportunity. It's important to take all aspects into account before making a decision, such as the cost of living in different regions of the country and the current landscape of the real estate market.



# Survey offers fascinating window into international perceptions of China

**Evandro Menezes de Carvalho**

Rapid and dynamic changes have shaped the contemporary global landscape, many of which revolve around China's increasingly prominent role. As the world's second-largest economy and a leader in technological innovation, China attracts attention and sparks debates about its image and influence on the international stage. A recently published survey by the Global Times offers a fascinating window into how China is perceived in various countries while revealing the differences in expectations and perceptions between developed and developing nations.

According to the survey, which included over 51,000 respondents from 46 countries, China's image abroad is broadly positive, especially regarding its economic strength and scientific advances. Around 77 percent of respondents recognized the country's economic power as "high" or "strong," followed by advancements in science and technology at 75 percent. This association of China's image with terms such as "economy," "technology," and "innovation," as revealed in the survey, also highlights an intriguing fact: Economic-related terms are more frequently mentioned in developed countries in Europe, the Middle East and ASEAN. In contrast, in developing countries, especially in Africa and among BRICS members, China's image is more closely linked to "technology." Moreover, China has played a crucial role in developing technological and digital infrastructure in emerging markets. Projects to install telecommunications networks, high-speed internet and mobile payment systems have

transformed digital connectivity in previously underserved areas. Additionally, China often implements technological training programs, providing knowledge transfer and capacity building for local professionals. China's rise in fields such as artificial intelligence, electric vehicles, renewable energy and advanced manufacturing is widely reported and often well-received in countries that view China as a model for overcoming developmental challenges. Chinese technological progress resonates more strongly in places that seek alternatives to traditional technological paradigms offered by Western powers.

One of the most interesting issues raised by the survey is how China is viewed on the international stage compared with other major global players. While the survey shows that the US still occupies the leadership position in terms of perceived influence - 47 percent of respondents identified it as the most influential country - China ranked second, with 20 percent of respondents considering it to be the top power, and 27 percent placing it in second place. This fact demonstrates that China has gained a significant place in global awareness even amid geopolitical rivalries and a polarized international environment.

The survey also provides valuable insights into what foreign respondents consider the most representative characteristics of China. Again, differences emerge between respondents from developed and developing countries. While the former prefers traditional Chinese symbols such as the Great Wall, Chinese cuisine and pandas, respondents from developing countries highlight high-speed trains, smartphones, online shopping, electric vehicles and other Chinese innovations. Global South countries are more open to economic cooperation with China and see Chinese



actors as strategic partners that help promote industrialization and modernization rather than as players engaging in "neocolonial policies" or creating "debt traps," as suggested by some Western narratives. Conversely, developed nations often maintain a more cautious approach, influenced by geopolitical and security concerns.

Despite these nuances, nearly 70 percent of

respondents want China to play a more active role in global affairs, and 88 percent support an expanded Chinese presence in international organizations and platforms. China is seen as a pillar of multilateralism and a country with high legitimacy on the international stage. This explains why most respondents expect China to encourage Global South countries to jointly safeguard world peace, protect the diversity of civilizations and promote economic cooperation.

The survey published by the Global Times offers a fascinating panorama of international perceptions of China while also revealing insights about the world itself.

**The writer is a professor of international law at Fluminense Federal University in Rio de Janeiro and a Wutong Chair Professor at Beijing Language and Culture University**

# Viewing the world beyond an 'either/or' lens to seek harmony, peace



**Warwick Powell**

The concept of "Hehe" in Chinese culture, with the first "He" embodying harmony, peace and balance and the second representing convergence, unity and cooperation, is central to both the individual and collective mind-set in China. Rooted in thousands of years of philosophy, the idea of "Hehe" serves as a guiding principle for living in harmony with others, nature and oneself. In a broader context, the concept of "Hehe" has significant relevance to the world today, as addressing the global challenges we face in various areas requires the principles that "Hehe" emphasizes. Viewed through a contemporary lens, "Hehe" is a timeless and universal concept that can guide China and the world toward a more harmonious, peaceful and balanced future. The Global Times gathers opinions from experts and scholars around the world to explore the global significance of "Hehe" culture from various perspectives. This is the ninth piece of the series.

Chinese President Xi Jinping once said, "We live in an

interdependent world and rise and fall together. With their interests deeply intertwined, all countries need to build maximum consensus for win-win and all-win outcomes." With these remarks, he highlighted the proposition that the world is fundamentally intertwined. In contrast, Western international relations "realists" view it as an "either/or" world underpinned by an ontological dualism in which difference must be resolved through conflict. Either the security of one country is safeguarded or that of the other; either security or prosperity; either you or me. But, what if there's an alternative to these "either/or" terms? Rather than perceiving the world through the lens of "either/or," in which the existence of one is a threat to the other, nations could adopt a dialectical perspective in which differences are ever-present and serve as the drivers of perpetual change. Differences can never be completely eliminated. However, they can be transformed through the dynamics of the "unity of opposites."

China's rich philosophical tradition provides one such alternative. Rather than starting with the notion of "either/or," the philosophical traditions of Daoism insist on the fluid dynamics of "and." Instead of "or," the world can be understood through the prism of "and." The Daoist classic, Dao De Jing, articulates a way of understanding the world as a perpetual process of change. There can be no harmonization without difference; it is a fluid and ever-changing "unity of opposites."

The dynamics of the world, including the realm of human affairs, can be seen as the ongoing pursuit of an ever-elusive harmony.

This pursuit is not achieved through the evisceration of difference, but rather through the search for commonalities in the presence of difference. Harmony is fleeting, yet it guides the work of virtuous actors, as the harmonious balance of sameness and difference can be found in what Confucius described as the "golden mean."

Chinese statecraft exhibits these philosophical characteristics. The fortunes of nations, civilizations and peoples are not dictated by atomized conflict; rather, the fortunes of one are intimately intertwined with the fortunes of others.

President Xi's three major initiatives - the Global Development Initiative, the Global Security Initiative and the Global Civilization Initiative - draw on and extend this tradition in the contemporary context. The framework advocates for the recognition and celebration of difference while simultaneously promoting the notion that there are widespread commonalities in aspirations and interests.

These three initiatives also draw on another thread in the Chinese philosophical tradition, the Hehe culture. In his work, Zhejiang, China: A New Vision for Development, President Xi observed that Chinese ancestors "created an incomparable culture, a quintessential part of which is the Hehe culture. The first 'He' of Hehe indicates harmony, peace, and balance. The second 'He' indicates convergence, unity, and cooperation. Such inclusiveness is reflected in the traditional thinking of 'valuing harmony and esteeming balance,' 'being understanding and open-minded,' 'embracing the world through virtue,' and 'living in harmony without uniformity.'"

Chinese statecraft is emerging from the shadows of recent history and the dominance of the dualist methods

informed by Western metaphysics and ontology.

Chinese diplomacy played a pivotal role in facilitating a detente between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the Islamic Republic of Iran announced on March 10, 2023. This rapprochement took time to develop and bring to reality, requiring a steady mind, strong will and patience.

Seven years of frozen and hostile relations were ultimately thawed through persistent diplomatic efforts during 2021 and 2022, resulting in the 2023 joint statement on the normalization of diplomatic relations. Given the extended duration of conflict between the two parties, achieving a detente can be considered a significant regional diplomatic breakthrough. The detente was established on the basis of identifying common interests in the face of historic differences. It did not seek to force the parties, through imposed dictates, to accept an externally devised regime; rather it was made possible by the alignment of shared interests. In this case, the conflicting parties were active participants in designing the rapprochement framework and pathways forward.

On July 23, 2024, 14 Palestinian factions signed the Beijing Declaration. Reconciliation talks were facilitated by Beijing to address their differences by focusing on and agreeing upon a common purpose: the post-conflict reconstruction of Gaza and the realization of an independent State of Palestine. In what is otherwise a fractious environment characterized by persistent intermestic conflicts, Chinese statecraft emphasized the need to build reconciliation through incremental steps aimed at boosting confidence among the participants while maintaining a focus on the destination. Consensus building does not happen via a "top-down" imperative, but

through committed engagement in dialogue. Time and conversation yielded progress.

A similar approach has been advanced in relation to the Ukraine conflict. China did not put forward a "peace plan" to be enforced on disputants on a "take it or leave it" basis; instead, it outlined the necessary issues and conditions that require attention in order to create a space for peace to emerge. China has continued to work with other nations to forge a growing constellation of support and encouragement for the disputants, enabling them to approach peace talks with confidence and in good faith.

Such an approach stands in stark contrast to that of Western "realism." It's not just a framework of advocacy. As an ontology it paints a dramatically different picture of not only the nature of the world, but also the possibilities and the role of humanity and state agency in enabling the ongoing pursuit of harmony.

**The writer is an adjunct professor at Queensland University of Technology, a senior fellow at Taihe Institute and a former advisor to Kevin Rudd, former Australian prime minister**

**Editor-in-Chief: S. Ali**

**Associate Editor: Afzal Butt**

**Email: editor@covert.com.pk**

**Phone/Fax : +92-51-2723419**

**690, Street 17 Block E Bahria Town phase 8, Islamabad, Pakistan**

# Pakistan heaven for tourists: High Commissioner Zahid Hafeez Chaudhri



**Covert Report**

Canberra: Pakistani High Commissioner to Australia Zahid Hafeez Chaudhri said this week that Pakistan is a heaven for the tourists. Highlighting Pakistan's beauty on X, he shared pictures of the beautiful sites. Speaking to Covert, the envoy said Pakistan offered enormous opportunities to the tourists with safe and secure environment. High Commissioner Chaudhri said Pakistan had opened doors for visitors from all across the world by easing visa procedures. Earlier, Federal Minister for Information and Broadcasting, Attaullah Tarar, announced the launch of a new visa policy aimed at simplifying travel to Pakistan. The policy, introduces significant changes to the visa application process, abolishing visa fees for citizens of 126 countries. This will allow visa-free entry to countries including China, Japan, and Gulf countries. Tarar emphasized the government's commitment to facilitating international travel to Pakistan. He highlighted the country's rich natural beauty and cultural heritage, noting that the new policy is designed to attract tourists from around the world. "Our country is blessed with every natural blessing," Minister Tarar stated, underscoring Pakistan's potential as a global tourist destination. Visas will be issued immediately upon the completion of the application form, significantly reducing previous bureaucratic delays. High Commissioner Zahid Hafeez Chaudhri said Pakistan was rapidly transforming into a tourism hotspot. The United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) recently ranked Pakistan as the top-performing tourism destination for the first three quarters of 2023, with international visitor numbers surging by 115% compared to the previous year. This influx of tourists contributed approximately \$1.3 billion in foreign exchange revenue, pushing Pakistan's tourism activity to 92% of its pre-pandemic levels. He said the new visa policy is expected to significantly enhance Pakistan's appeal as a travel destination, particularly for tourists seeking unique cultural experiences and breathtaking landscapes.



# Ambassador Asim Iftikhar Ahmad meets senior UN officials

**Celina Ali**

Islamabad: Pakistan's Alternate Permanent Representative to the UN, Ambassador Asim

Iftikhar Ahmad, met UN Assistant Secretary-General Khaled Khiari this week. They exchanged views on a

number of issues on the Security Council's agenda including the Middle East, Afghanistan and UN's role therein, according to a press release of the Pakistani Mission. Last week, he had a meeting with the UN Under-Secretary-General for Peace Operations, Jean-Pierre Lacroix.



# Pakistani authorities arrest suspected human smuggler linked to last year's Greece boat tragedy

**Abdullah Jan**

Islamabad: Pakistani authorities this week announced the arrest of a suspected human smuggler from Azad Kashmir, accusing him of involvement in last year's Greece boat tragedy that killed five nationals and charging him with sending one victim abroad after taking Rs 4.5 million (\$16,200). The incident occurred in December when a wooden vessel carrying migrants, which departed from Libya, sank off the southern Greek island of Gavdos. The government has intensified its crackdown on human smugglers in recent months, leading to several arrests. The latest detention comes just days after another boat capsized off Morocco's coast, where over 40 Pakistanis are feared to have drowned. "The smuggler involved in the Greece boat tragedy has been arrested," the Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) said in a statement. "The accused, Abdul Salam, was apprehended during a raid in

Bhimber, Azad Kashmir." "He was part of a gang involved in human trafficking and extorted Rs4.5 million from victim Ahsan Ali for facilitating his travel to Europe," it added. The FIA said the suspect and his associates had kept the victim in safe houses in Libya before coercing him to board the ill-fated boat to Greece. Ali, who hailed from Jalalpur Jattan, died in the shipwreck. The FIA informed that evidence related to human smuggling was recovered from the suspect's mobile phone, and investigations were ongoing to track down his accomplices. "We are using all resources to ensure the arrest of those involved in these tragic incidents," said Abdul Qadir Qamar, Director of FIA's Gujranwala Zone. "Raids are being conducted to apprehend the remaining suspects." The FIA reiterated its commitment to bringing human smugglers to justice. "No one will be allowed to play with the lives of innocent people," the statement said. "Those responsible will face severe punishments based on solid evidence."



# PPP-led Sindh govt setting new standards in health sector: Umar Rehman Malik

Abdullah Jan

Islamabad: Pakistan People's Party (PPP) leader Umar Rehman Malik said this week that the PPP-led Sindh government was setting new standards in the health sector. "The report released by PALISI (Pediatric Acute Lung Injury and Sepsis Investigators) highlighting the reduction in child mortality at Sindh's public hospitals is a testament to the continuous development program PPP Chairman Bilawal Bhutto Zardari," he said in a

statement. He said the Sindh government was a trailblazer in the whole of Asia creating Public Private Partnerships in the health sector which many doubted would work at first. "I saw this personally when I was Special Assistant to Sindh Chief Minister Murad Ali Shah on Public Private Partnership. Today it has become the benchmark of development and demonstrates the efficiencies that the private sector can inject in to the public sector," he added. Earlier, PPP chairman Bilawal Bhutto Zardari took great pride in the Sindh government's public-private partnership initiatives especially in

healthcare sector and lauded its significant achievements in reducing the child mortality rate in the province. The PPP chief was speaking to mark the release of a report by PALISI network, a US-based health institute, highlighting a significant reduction in child mortality rate at Sindh's public hospitals. Quoting a report by PALISI network, PPP chief says province's death rate now at 2.9pc, against national average of 5.4pc; credits public-private partnerships for the success. "Infant mortality rates in Sindh now stand at 2.9 percent while rest of Pakistan is at 5.4 percent," he posted on X. He continued: "US based PALISI Global health reports that both Sheikh Zayed Children Hospital Lar-

kana & Civil Hospital Karachi have a 1.2 percent mortality rate. Compared to 1.4 percent for Aga Khan which is a Private hospital and 6.3 percent rate in 19 similar countries. "Our child-life facility is now the only public sector pediatric facility in Pakistan to be rated 5/5 SafeCare Quality level. Proud of everyone who has been a part of the successful transformation of Sindh's healthcare over the last 15 years," the X post concluded. He congratulated the Sindh government, the provincial health department, and the ChildLife Foundation for their efforts. "It is a moment of pride that your hard work and success are now being recognised globally. Congratulations to all of you," he added.



# Germans living abroad face a race to vote

**Covert Report**

Berlin: Christian Wagner, spokesperson for German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock, has some advice for Germans living abroad: If you want to make sure that your vote counts in the Bundestag election on February 23, get your election documents now, because getting the ballot paper with the party candidates in time, filling it out and sending it back to Germany in time is not easy. This year's election date was only decided after Germany's Social Democrat chancellor, Olaf Scholz, lost his vote of confidence in the Bundestag in mid-December, paving the way for German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier to set the election date for February 23, 2025. Wagner warned: "Tight deadlines mean that even normal German parliamentary elections are challenging in some countries. Depending on where they live, some Germans living abroad may not receive their ballot papers in time." In regular elections, German embassies and consulates abroad start preparing months before an election — now they have just a few weeks. Germans living abroad who want to vote have to register on the electoral roll of one of the 299 constituencies in Germany. This is normally the person's last place of residence in Germany. But some countries handle this differently: For example, when Turkey held a run-off for the presidential elections in May 2023, around 1.5 million Turkish citizens in Germany were entitled to vote. They were able to do so at 17 different locations, including consulates, in Germany. This is not possible in the Bundestag elections: "In Germany, there is no provision for simply voting in an embassy. We simply don't have that in our electoral system," Wagner conceded. But

it is now possible to simply send an email to the electoral district in Germany asking for the documents to be sent. There are only rough estimates of how many people this actually affects. "There is no obligation to register abroad, so we can only estimate how many Germans are abroad, and how many of them are eligible to vote," said Wagner. "We assume a total of three to four million." Many more Germans live abroad, but not all are entitled to vote. As a rule, all Germans who have lived in Germany for at least three months without interruption after their 14th birthday are eligible to vote. But there are exceptions: For example, the stay must not date back more than 25 years. In other words, Germans who have only been in Germany briefly from time to time, are not eligible to vote. That obviously also applies to those with a German passport who have never set foot in the Federal Republic. The only exception to these rules are for people who are, "for other reasons, personally and directly acquainted with the political circumstances in Germany and affected by them." If they can prove it, of course. This might, for example, affect people who work in Germany or hold shares in German companies, which employ many people. It all sounds complicated, and it is — which is probably one of the reasons why only about 130,000 Germans living abroad out of three to four million eligible voters voted in the last Bundestag election in 2021. The majority of these lived in EU countries and other European states such as the UK or Turkey. Only 7,700 Germans in the USA, 5,300 in Asia and only 1,500 in the whole of Africa, Canada and Australia combined voted.



Time is running out for Germans abroad who want to apply. Wagner promises that the 154 or so German embassies around the world and the 50 or so general consulates will help: "We are of course looking at what we can do to provide support. When it comes to delivering election documents, we have actually made it possible to use the official courier service."

In other words: If you wish, you can bring your completed voting documents to an embassy in a sealed envelope. From there, the German Foreign Office will organize transportation to Berlin or to the Bonn office. From there, it will be sent by post to the electoral constituencies, where it must be received by 6 p.m. on February 23 at the latest.

That also sounds complicated, which is why Wagner says: "Sometimes a commercial express mail delivery service is simply quicker." In practice, then, the best way for Germans living abroad to exercise their right to vote is probably to get the documents sent from a constituency in Germany, fill them out and send them back immediately by express mail.

# Bulgaria aims to reach visa-free travel to US by 2026



Ambassador of Bulgaria to Pakistan Ivana Dancheva

**NewsWire**

Sofia: The Caretaker Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ivan Kondov, said this week that Bulgaria has made significant progress in meeting the needed requirements for inclusion in the US Visa Waiver Program.

Among the technical requirements for inclusion in this program is maintaining a tourist visa refusal rate for Bulgarians under three per cent. While Bulgaria and Romania shared a joint journey toward Schengen membership, their paths towards the US Visa Waiver Program were separated. Bulgaria has made significant progress in meeting the needed requirements for inclusion in the US Visa Waiver Program, the Caretaker Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ivan Kondov, has said. Kondov stressed that Sofia could successfully conclude negotiations after achieving the condition of reducing B visa rejection rates below three per cent for fiscal year 2025, Schengen.News reports. The comments of the Caretaker Minister of Foreign Affairs came in a written response provided on the National Assembly's website to Martin Dimitrov, a member of the Continue the Change-Democratic Bulgaria (CC-DB) parliamentary group. Among the technical requirements for Bulgaria's inclusion in the United States Visa Waiver Program is maintaining a tourist visa refusal rate for Bulgarian citizens under three per cent. Based on the data provided by the US Department of State on November 27, 2024, Bulgaria's refusal rate for 2024 was 6.02 per cent, accounting for a significant

improvement compared to 11.61 per cent in fiscal year 2023. The figures from the same source show that since 2006, the B visa refusal rate for Bulgarian citizens has decreased below ten per cent twice, with 2024's rate of 6.02 per cent being the lowest recorded. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs launched an awareness campaign on December 15, 2024, aiming to inform the Bulgarian public about the different types of US travel visas and also reduce B-visa refusals. The face of the campaign launched under the slogan "You don't need an Oscar to get a US visa" is the 2021 Oscar nominee Maria Bakalova. In December last year, Bulgaria and the US reached an Enhanced Border Security Partnership, which would also help Bulgaria in its efforts to meet the needed requirements for becoming part of the US Visa Waiver Programme. Becoming part of the US Visa Waiver Program means that citizens of Bulgaria would be able to travel to the US without visas for tourism or business purposes for a period of up to 90 days. While Bulgaria and Romania together became full members of the Schengen Zone, on January 1, 2025, their journey towards the US Visa Waiver Program was separated. Romania has already become part of the US Visa Waiver Program. From March 31, 2025, Romanians will be able to travel to



the US without visas for short-term stays. The federal government of the United States has just officially announced that Romania is now part of the exclusive club called Visa Waiver. Starting March 31 this year, Romanians can travel to the

USA without visas. The ambassador called the decision an important and happy moment for Romanians, stressing that it shows how strong the bond between Romania and the US has become over time.

# Portugal: Migrants contribute enough to fund 17% of pensions



**Newsire**

Lisbon: Data provided by the Ministry of Labour, Solidarity and Social Security in Portugal show that foreign workers' contributions to Portugal's social security system are already sufficient to fund 17% of national pensions and retirements. In 2023 the Portuguese social security system disbursed 15.8 billion euros in benefits, with immigrants to the country injecting 2.7 billion euros into that system. The participation of foreign workers in the financing process of

Portugal's social security system has been growing year after year. According to Pedro Góis, professor of Economics at the University of Coimbra and technical director of the Observatory of Migration, this participation is fundamental to maintaining the sustainability of the system. In other words, this contribution of migrants guarantees that, for a longer period than expected, the government will not need to go into debt to pay insurance policyholders.

Between 2017 and 2022, the total number of foreigners in formal employment and therefore contributing to the social security system more than tripled, increasing from 166 000 to 534 000. This growth was mainly due to the flow of citizens from Brazil to Portugal: the Brazilian community is the largest migrant group in Portugal, and 85% of its members who are of working age are employed.





# Japanese Ambassador Akamatsu Shuichi inaugurates solar-powered irrigation project in Narowal

**Celina Ali**  
Islamabad: Ambassador of Japan to Pakistan, Akamatsu Shuichi this week inaugurated a solar-powered irrigation system in Tehsil Shakar Garh, District Narowal.

Speaking at the ceremony, Ambassador Akamatsu commended the NGO for successfully completing the initiative. He expressed hope that the project would enhance agricultural productivity, im-

prove farmers' livelihoods, and contribute positively to the local economy. Reaffirming Japan's commitment to supporting Pakistan's development, the ambassador emphasized that such efforts



would strengthen the bonds between the two nations. The project, funded under Japan's Grant Assistance for Grassroots Human Security Projects (GGP) Program, received financial support amounting to \$65,617. The funds were utilized to install seven solar-powered irrigation pumps, ensuring efficient and sustainable irrigation in the region. The project, managed by Rural Aid Pakistan, a non-governmental organization,

aims to combat poverty and empower vulnerable rural communities through sustainable development. It has been actively working for over three decades, implementing various projects in collaboration with government departments and international donors. This initiative is expected to improve the agricultural environment, increase crop yields, and boost the incomes of local farmers. The ceremony was attended by representatives of Rural Aid Pakistan, local government officials, community leaders, and farmers.

# Inside WA firefighters' battle for homes in an L.A. canyon



**Covert Report**  
Washington: Climate Lab is a Seattle Times initiative that explores the effects of climate change in the Pacific Northwest and beyond. The project is funded in part by The Bullitt Foundation, Jim and Birte Falconer, Mike and Becky Hughes, Henry M. Jackson Foundation, University of Washington and Walker Family Foundation, and its fiscal sponsor is the Seattle Foundation. More than 1,000 miles from home, Lt. Brian Kees and his fire-fighting team from Snohomish County found themselves staring down a blaze racing into a lush canyon. Firefighters and equipment were flooding in from all over in a fight to save whole neighborhoods. The wind had shifted, fanning the destructive Palisades fire toward Encino and Brentwood. Kees' fire department was among the dozens from Washington to answer a call for help to protect lives and homes in Southern California. After two days on the road, they were sent to the leading edge of the blaze, driven by a sense of duty, professional pride and a desire to aid those in need. The smoke column from the Palisades fire is visible above homes around 4:45 a.m. Jan. 11. Everyone always says thanks for being here, but little do they know that we would have it any other way, said Tyler Griffith, firefighter with Bothell Fire. (Battalion Chief Jason Ward / Eastside Fire & #038; Rescue) Their dispatch to this faraway place, in the middle of winter, illustrates the new reality of longer and more intense fire seasons across the West. Fueled by hurricane-force winds on land that hadn't seen rain for nine months, these fires were especially dangerous. The devastating Los Angeles County blazes have so far killed at least 27 people and razed thousands of structures. That includes about 220 firefighters from more than 50 Washington

fire departments who navigated the journey down Interstate 5 in 55 engines. About 80 additional firefighters in 20 engines from the state Department of Natural Resources responded to a request for assistance from the U.S. Forest Service. Two strike teams from King County, and Kees' team from Snohomish County, were some of the first Washington teams to arrive. Through interviews, text messages, photographs, video and official reports, they told The Seattle Times about their first week working the fire. What was developing on the ground, as winds changed, was one of the more intense battles so far on the front lines. At the training grounds, Kees began to jot down a plan for their journey in a notepad placed on the edge of his pickup. Around his wrist, he wore a bracelet made by his 6-year-old son, its beads spelling "Daddy." The official call for help is part of a voluntary process. Anyone who is qualified to fight wildland fires can raise their hand. "We get the call, and it's yes or no," Tulalip Bay Fire Department Capt. Derek Kuhn said, "and here we are." To some, the chance to help with a big fire is like waking up on Christmas morning. They're eager to help neighbors in need and motivated to make a difference. "We look at this as an opportunity to go down there and help our neighbors," Kees said. "California would do the same thing for us." He and his team of 20 firefighters made it to Salem, Ore., after a long night of driving. Before sunrise Jan. 9, Bremerton firefighters began their journey. Then came a steady flow of crews departing local districts from Mason County to Walla Walla. They continued on for vehicle inspections west of Sacramento, as

would the crews that came after them, and then they were sent on their way. The King County crews were positioned to defend Westridge Road, which dead ends against a mountain park. "You could see active fire just over the ridge from us. The sky was lit to the north," said Seth Merritt, a battalion chief with Eastside Fire and a strike team leader for the deployment to California. The Snohomish County teams were on nearby Bayliss Road. They hooked up to hydrants and used hand tools to remove dry vegetation and scratch a fire break around the neighborhood. Some Washington firefighting teams were dispatched to the leading edge of the fire as it reached Mandeville Canyon on January 11. A map showing the fire boundary of the Palisades fire in California including Mandeville Canyon. Some Washington firefighting teams were dispatched to the leading edge of the fire as it reached Mandeville Canyon on January 11. Firefighters removed patio furniture and raked out debris that had collected in gutters and on people's properties from the extreme winds earlier in the week. They worked through the night to give themselves the best shot at a good defense. Kris Clark with South King Fire, left, and Ryan Chadwick of Valley Regional Fire Authority monitor the advance of the Palisades fire in Mandeville Canyon on Jan. 11. (Eric Thayer / The Associated Press) The humidity was less than 16% and the fire was creating squirrely wind directions. The embers of varying sizes acted as fire starters. They blow in front of the fire and drop on dry fuels. "It looks very otherworldly because all of a sudden, you'll see it

looks like a small campfire starting just on an open slope of a hillside with no other fire around it," Merritt said. "And then it quickly spreads. Then that will be absorbed at some point, generally, by the main body of the fire." They watched the fire continue to jump out in front of itself, create more fires and continue working its way toward the homes. That's when they started deploying hose lines. King County firefighters had anticipated the fire would come from the east, Merritt said. Instead, it came over the ridge and a trickle of spot fires brought it toward them from the west side. As the fire approached, they wetted the roofs of the homes and started up their chain saws. They had maybe 45 minutes before it would reach them. With a roar, they saw down brush from around homes that might spark first. They were forced to throw the debris downhill because of the steep slope. More Washington crews were pulling up to incident command. Among them were about 40 firefighters and 10 fire engines from Kitsap, Mason and Thurston counties. They were directed to join



those working near Mandeville Canyon Road as the fire moved through the dry and explosive brush. "When some of those bushes go up it's a pretty good whoosh," Central Mason Fire Capt. Mark Frazier said. "You get a couple of them together — it has that jet engine sound." From the front line, the flames were severe. The smoke burned firefighters' eyes and noses. "It was wild," said Tyler Griffith, a firefighter with Bothell Fire. "It was a complete wall of flames that just came up over that canyon. And it happened really quick." As the fire climbed up to the back of some properties, firefighters doused the flames with their hoses. Helicopters made continuous water drops. Without the air support, the crews could have lost the upper hand, Merritt said. No homes in the canyon have been officially reported as damaged or destroyed by the fire. Chris Harvey, a public information officer with Cal Fire, witnessed the Washington crews as they fought back the flames. "I cannot overstate how lucky we are and how fortunate we are to have so many out-of-state resources," he said. "It contributed significantly to this success of saving that neighborhood. "... Unequivocally, having those crews there, saved those houses along the top edges of those streets." Fire officials reported late that Saturday that crews had managed to stop the fire from pushing downhill into Mandeville Canyon. Some Washington crews have since been helping to snuff out hot spots. Others were rinsing the red fire retardant dropped from planes off homes or were preparing other neighborhoods for the potential arrival of fire. They're bracing for the next wave of winds. "We're safe. We're working hard. We're happy to be here," Frazier said. "The communities have been fantastic. So far, so good. We're just trying to make our area proud, and we're here to help."

# Pakistani diplomat meets European Parliament's chair of Foreign Affairs Committee

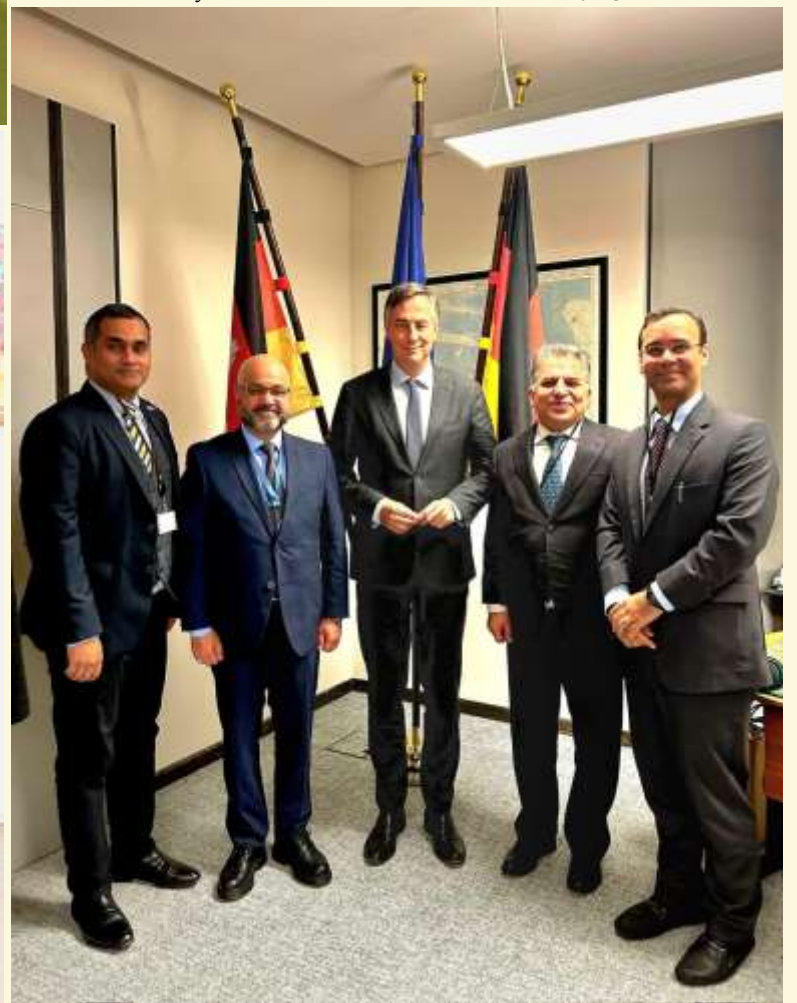


**Newsire**  
Brussels: Pakistan's Chargé d'affaires in Belgium Faraz Zaidi met Chair of Foreign Affairs Committee, European Parliament, David McAllister here this week and discussed relations between Pakistan and European Union and avenues for deepening cooperation. They also shared views on matters of regional and global importance. In a post on X, Faraz Zaidi said, "A very pleasant and warm meeting with Chair of Foreign Affairs Committee David McAllister. Thorough and candid discussions on the global and regional political landscape. Looking forward to our continued positive engagement." He also met with Head of AsiaPac 2 Division, European External Action Service Deren Derya. The EU dele-



Ambassador of the European Union to Pakistan, Riina Kionka

gation included senior officials Andreas Berufflich Striegnitz and Michael Pesta. During the meeting, both sides discussed ongoing and upcoming engagements between Pakistan and European Union and explored opportunities for intensifying relations.



# British High Commissioner Jane Marriott visits NUST



**Celina Ali** Islamabad: British High Commissioner to Pakistan Jane Marriott this week paid a visit to the National University of Sciences and Technology (NUST) with an aim

NUST. Rector NUST, Dr. Muhammad Zahid Latif greeted the British High Commissioner upon her arrival at the NUST main office. During the meeting, the two sides

UK. They particularly examined potential partnerships to enhance knowledge-sharing and drive impactful advance-



to strengthen collaboration between the leading higher education institutions in UK and

expressed their commitment to strengthening collaboration between NUST and the leading higher education and research institutions across

ments in various fields. Earlier, the High Commissioner, along with other members of the delegation, visited the National Sci-

ence and Technology Park (NSTP) at NUST, and interacted with several startups, including LearnObots, Orbit-Ed and Vyro. She expressed her admiration for the innovation-driven startups making meaningful contributions to sectors such as edu tech, smart tech, energy tech, etc. Later, the delegates visited NUST School of Interdisciplinary Engineering and Sciences (SINES), which

houses 10 international laboratories. They also visited the Centre for Emerging Technologies (CEMTECH) at NUST, wherein the briefing highlighted the center's leading work in AI, Chip Design etc. Overall, the visit provided delegates with an opportunity to learn about the university's cutting-edge research capabilities and its emphasis on interdisciplinary collaboration across various scientific fields.



**“It is only when we take chances that our lives improve. The initial and the most difficult risk we need to take is to become honest.” - Walter Anderson**

**“Nature has given us all the pieces required to achieve exceptional wellness and health, but has left it to us to put these pieces together.” - Diane McLaren**

# How Italy stopped migrant boats?

## Covert Report

Rome: It was one of the most daunting items in her in-tray when she was appointed Italy's prime minister just over two years ago.

Giorgia Meloni had been elected on a promise to stop the boats that brought tens of thousands of migrants and refugees from North Africa to Italy with metronomic regularity every year.

When she assumed office in October 2022, the numbers were sky-high.

By the end of that year, 105,000 migrants had reached Italian beaches, and in 2023, the influx was even higher – 157,000 asylum seekers and economic migrants made it across the Mediterranean from North Africa.

Her pledge to address what she described as “an epochal challenge” appeared to ring hollow. But slowly, a raft of measures adopted by her government started to take effect.

By the end of 2024, 66,000 migrants had arrived – a dramatic reduction on the previous two years.

Confirmation of Italy's success in reducing boat arrivals came this week from Frontex, the EU's border agency, which reported that the number of asylum seekers who managed to cross the Mediterranean from Tunisia and Libya last year dropped by 59 per cent compared with 2023.

So how did she do it? How has Italy managed to stop so many migrant boats? It comes down to cold, hard cash.

Rome drew inspiration from the deal struck between the EU and Turkey at the height of the migration crisis in 2015-2016. In return for blocking refugees and migrants crossing by land and sea from Turkey to Greece, Ankara was given €6 billion (£5 billion).

Italy took the Turkey model and applied it to North Africa, pledging hundreds of millions of euros to Tunisia and Libya, the main departure points.

“It came down to money,” said an EU migration policy adviser who asked not to be named.

“There was also a lot of diplomatic pressure, as well as promises of other types of co-operation. But money was key.”

“Stopping the boats on the beaches is the most effective way,” said the EU official. “Once they

set out, there is not much you can do. You have a lot fewer options. The deals with Tunisia and Libya have proved to be very effective.”

The accords were the culmination of a flurry of overseas trips made by Ms Meloni.

They took her from Tunis and Tripoli to Benghazi in eastern Libya, which has been run by Khalifa Haftar, a military strongman, since the country split in two following the downfall of Muammar Gaddafi, the Libyan president, in 2011.

Ms Meloni's coalition gave funding, training and equipment to the Tunisian and Libyan coastguards to improve their ability to stop migrant boats.

It is a policy that has been highly controversial – the Libyan coastguard is accused of being an unscrupulous, brutal outfit, which fires shots at migrant boats – but the prime minister was building on efforts by previous Italian governments, including one led by the centre-Left, which dated from 2017.

In the summer of 2023, Ms Meloni travelled with Ursula von der Leyen, the president of the European Commission, and Mark Rutte, prime minister of the Netherlands at the time, to sign a deal with Tunisia.

In return for more than €1 billion of aid and investment, the Tunisians pledged to step up the fight against irregular immigration. The EU package consisted of €105 million to enhance Tunisia's border control capabilities, €150 million in direct budgetary support and the promise of €900 million in macro-economic loans.

It was just one of several trips that Ms Meloni made to Tunis. Since being elected, she has made official visits to Africa around a dozen times.

The Italians insist they are adopting a holistic approach – the Meloni government has come up with something called the Mattei plan, which aims to spur economic development in Africa as a means of reducing migration.

On a visit to Tunisia in April last year, she said it was essential to combat what she called “the slave traders of the third millennium, the mafia organisations that exploit the legitimate aspira-

tions of those who would like a better life”. In a meeting with Kais Saied, the authoritarian president of Tunisia, she hailed what she called a “new approach” to stopping the boats. She said Italy and Tunisia had “shared priorities” – both wanted to see African migrants repatriated to their home countries.

Ms Meloni has adopted a “transactional approach” that has led to mutually beneficial deals for Libya and Tunisia, according to Jonathan Fenton-Harvey, a researcher and journalist focused on conflict and geopolitics in the Middle East and North Africa.

“Libyan authorities in Tripoli have, to an extent, leveraged the EU's concerns over irregular migration in order to gain more economic and political benefits, while Kais Saied also seeks external support to boost the country's struggling economy,” said Mr Fenton-Harvey. “Arguably, Meloni has done more to engage diplomatically with the authorities in both Tripoli and Tunisia, and proven more willing to provide them with support, with the main precondition being stemming migration without other ‘strings attached’,” he added.

The Italian prime minister has managed to lobby the EU to provide financial support for Tunisia and Libya.

“Beyond just throwing cash at Tunisia and Tripoli's authorities, it's more of a layered strategy – combining both diplomacy and targeted financial support. And while Meloni has signed various co-operation agreements over various sectors with Libyan and Tunisian authorities, a prominent aim of this is to boost Rome's favour with the two countries,” Mr Fenton-Harvey added.

Hans Leijtens, the executive director of Frontex, said: “The drop in irregular migration along the central Mediterranean route reflects better co-operation with North African countries, especially Tunisia.”

“Our focus is on breaking the business model of criminal groups involved in people smuggling and strong partnerships are key to that effort. While irregular crossings to Europe have decreased, the risks haven't gone away. New routes, new challenges, or even the use of migrants in political games could emerge at any time.”

The Meloni government has also clamped down on the humanitarian NGO vessels that, in the past, rescued thousands of migrants from sinking boats.

In a decree introduced in December 2022, shortly after her election, rescue vessels were told that as soon as they pick up a single boatload of migrants, they must head for a port in Italy. They are banned from remaining in the area looking for other migrants in distress, even if they have room on board for them.

And they are assigned ports, often in northern Italy, which are many days sailing from the central Mediterranean – a measure they say is another attempt to hobble their operations. The captains of boats that violate the rules can be fined €50,000 and have their vessels impounded. Sir Keir Starmer, the Prime Minister, has ex-



pressed interest in Italy's approach. But trying to replicate the Mediterranean strategy in the Channel is fraught with difficulties.

France is not a developing country in desperate need of economic aid and investment. Nor would it adopt the morally and legally dubious practices of the Tunisian and Libyan coast guards.

For the Meloni government, the sharp drop in arrivals is a political success story. She has the support of 30 per cent of voters, which may not seem stratospheric but puts her far in front of the next most popular political force, the Democratic Party, on 22 per cent.

“Usually, after two years of a government, Italians are very dissatisfied with the prime minister. But Meloni remains popular,” said Luca Barana, a senior researcher from the International Affairs Institute in Rome.

“There's the perception that she is doing something concrete to tackle the migration problem, even though she is continuing a lot of policies that were implemented by other governments in the past.”

Human rights organisations say, however, that the accords with Libya and Tunisia are pacts with the devil and a calamity for refugees and migrants.

They say asylum seekers in Libya are held in squalid detention centres where smugglers beat them to force their families to send more money for their passage across the Mediterranean. The Tunisian authorities are accused of rounding up migrants in cities such as Tunis and Sfax, driving them into the desert and dumping them. The women are often raped, it is alleged.

“The shift towards anti-migrant policies in Tunisia is unprecedented and very dramatic,” said Susanna Zanfrini, Italy director for the International Rescue Committee, a humanitarian NGO.

“Some migrants are repatriated but others are just taken to the border with Algeria or Libya

and left in the desert.” Past experience shows that clamping down on one migration route tends to transfer the problem to another route, a phenomenon likened to the game whack-a-mole.

This week's Frontex report showed that while numbers were down by 59 per cent on the central Mediterranean route, they were up 14 per cent in the eastern Mediterranean and by 18 per cent on the Atlantic crossing from West Africa to the Canary Islands.

“Migration routes are constantly shifting,” said Ms Zanfrini. “Crackdowns won't stop migrants; they just force people on to more dangerous routes. Smugglers and traffickers open up new routes.”

“So these agreements struck with Libya and Tunisia won't solve the situation. They don't tackle the root causes of migration. They are not a sustainable solution.”

For now, Ms Meloni is jubilant, having grasped a problem that has bedevilled so many previous Italian governments.

The drop in migrant arrivals was “the result of the hard work that our government has undertaken in recent years”, she said this week, hailing the Frontex figures as good news. “We're witnessing a shift.”

But with irregular migration such a dynamic, evolving phenomenon, there is no guarantee her success will continue.

“The accords, the financing and the support for the Libyan and Tunisian coast guards have had a strong effect, at least in the short term,” said Mr Barana.

“But let's see if it will continue to be effective in the long term. Similar measures were introduced in 2017. In the short term, the number of boat departures decreased, but by 2020 the numbers started climbing again.”

“So there's a big doubt about how long the current trend can last.”



# France launches probe into Al Brad Pitt scam



## Newsire

Saint-Denis De La Reunion: The authorities in France's La Reunion this week launched a probe to identify fraudsters who scammed a woman out of €830,000 (\$1.17 million) by making her believe she had an online relationship with actor Brad Pitt.

The police are trying to locate the accounts that received the transfers from the French woman, who has lodged a complaint in the Indian Ocean island, a police source said on Jan 17. The woman, identified only as Anne, told the TF1 TV channel she believed she was in a romantic relationship with the Hollywood heartthrob, leading her to divorce her husband and transfer €830,000.

The scammers used fake social media and WhatsApp accounts, as well as AI image-creating technology, to send Anne what appeared to be selfies and messages from Pitt. Anne, a 53-year-old interior decorator, spent a year and half believing she was communicating with Pitt. She realised she had been scammed only when news

emerged of Pitt's real-life relationship with girlfriend Ines de Ramon. Since last autumn, Anne has been in touch with Mr Marwan Ouarab, the founder of the FindmyScammer.com website, in a bid to find the fraudsters. According to French daily Le Parisien, which quoted Mr Ouarab, the scammers – three men in their 20s – are located in Nigeria. “We would love for Interpol to take up the case,” the newspaper quoted him as saying. The woman has faced a wave of online harassment and mockery after the interview was broadcast, leading the programme to be withdrawn. A representative for Pitt, 61, has warned fans to be wary of impersonation scams. “It's awful that scammers take advantage of fans' strong connection with celebrities,” a spokesperson for the Fight Club actor told US outlet Entertainment Weekly this week.

