

**Bulgaria and Kazakhstan to set up joint Business Council** **NewsWire**

Sofia: Kazakhstan and Bulgaria intend to establish a joint Business Council, Kazinform News Agency quoted President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev as saying during the extended talks with the President of Bulgaria, Rumen Radev. “We would like to reaffirm Kazakhstan’s commitment to the promotion of mutually beneficial partnership with Bulgaria. We .. **(Page-5)**

**London mayor Sadiq Khan is knighted by King Charles**

London: The Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, was formally knighted by King Charles in a ceremony at Buckingham Palace this week. The 54-year-old Labour politician received the honour in recognition of his political and public service. Sir Sadiq **(Page-11)**

# China extends visa-free access to 4 Gulf countries

**Henan Daily**

Zhengzhou: China this week launched a trial policy that grants unilateral visa-free entry to citizens of Saudi Arabia, Oman, Kuwait, and Bahrain, expanding its unilateral visa-free access list to 47 countries.

Under the policy, which will remain in effect through June 8, 2026, holders of ordinary passports from these four countries can enter China without a visa for up to 30 days for purposes such as business, tourism, family visits, cultural exchange, and transit.

Both the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Qatar have established reciprocal visa-free arrangements with China since 2018, which means all six member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) now enjoy visa-free

access to China.

The expansion has been warmly welcomed across the Gulf region and is expected to boost bilateral exchanges, strengthen cultural and people-to-people ties, and inject new momentum into broader China-GCC cooperation.

In a statement posted on platform X following China's announcement in late May, the Saudi Ministry of Foreign Affairs said the move would "contribute to encouraging mutual visits and deepening the bonds of friendship between the two friendly peoples."

Emirati travel influencer Abdulla Alblooshi praised the policy in a video on social media, calling it a major benefit for Gulf travelers. "Now, all you need is your passport to travel to China," he said.

Naif Awlia, director of tourism and engagement at Saudi

tourism developer Diriyah Company, also hailed the policy as a positive step forward. "Friendly ties are the foundation of long-term cooperation, and we look forward to deepening our partnership with China," he said.

Kanoo Travel, one of the largest travel companies in the Gulf region and an early mover in promoting outbound tourism to China, has launched new travel packages since the announcement, targeting residents of the UAE, Bahrain, and Saudi Arabia.

Harvey Lines, Acting CEO of Kanoo Travel, called the new policy "a gateway to expanded China-Arab cooperation," adding that the company is committed to facilitating closer people-to-people exchanges between China and the Gulf region -- and the broader Arab world.

China and Gulf countries already enjoy strong air travel connectivity, and the new visa-free policy is anticipated to further boost travel volume.

Currently, about 20 direct flights operate weekly between major Chinese cities -- including Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Shenzhen -- and Saudi destinations such as Riyadh and Jeddah. The UAE is connected to 13 cities across the Chinese mainland with direct flights. Looking ahead, Chinese carrier Hainan Airlines plans to launch a direct Haikou-Jeddah route on June 28, while UAE carrier Emirates will begin daily nonstop service between Dubai and Shenzhen on July 1.

Observers say the new policy reflects the growing political, economic, and cultural ties between China and the Gulf region. In 2024, trade between China and GCC countries reached 288.09 billion U.S. dollars, making the GCC China's sixth-largest trading partner.

Wen Shaobiao, a Middle East researcher at Shanghai International Studies University, noted that the visa-free policy will significantly reduce travel time costs and facilitate large-scale, two-way mobility.

"It will encourage people-to-people exchanges and academic collaboration while helping to advance trade, investment, and joint projects, aligning with business sector expectations," Wen said.

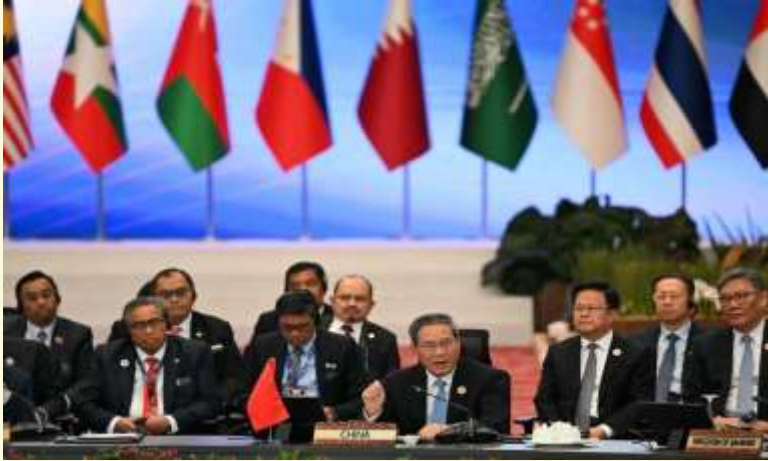
The latest step underscores China's continued push to open its doors wider to global visitors, in line with its commitment to high-level opening-up.

Since late 2023, China has introduced a series of traveler

-friendly policies. Starting June 1, holders of ordinary passports from Brazil, Argentina, Chile, Peru, and Uruguay are eligible for unilateral visa-free entry -- the first time such access has been extended to Latin American and Caribbean nations.

Additionally, the visa-free transit period has been extended to 240 hours for travelers from 54 countries. These initiatives have already had a noticeable impact. In 2024, China recorded 3.39 million entries under its unilateral visa-free policy, a year-on-year surge of 1,200 percent. During the recent three-day Dragon Boat Festival holiday, 231,000 foreigners entered China without a visa, up 59.4 percent from a year earlier.

Dai Bin, president of the China Tourism Academy, said foreign travelers come not only to visit China's landscapes and cities but also to experience everyday life. "These visits offer opportunities to discover the real China," he said.



## Denmark picks French, German and Norwegian air defence suppliers



**His Excellency Jakob Linulf, the Ambassador of Denmark to Pakistan**

**NewsWire**

Copenhagen: Denmark will acquire short-range air defence systems from MBDA France, Germany's Diehl Defence and Kongsberg Gruppen of Norway, the Nordic country's defence ministry said in a statement this week.

Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen in February ordered the military to go on a buying spree to beef up the country's defences in preparation for potential future Russian aggression in Europe.

Denmark will spend over six billion Danish crowns (\$919 million) on the artillery acquisition, with the first deliveries expected in 2026, the defence ministry said.

Denmark received 10 offers, including from suppliers in Turkey, Israel and Italy, and decided in the end to buy systems from French and Ger-



## “Don’t let them silence you,” urges Aseefa after Sana Yousaf’s murder



**Liaquat Ali**

Islamabad: First Lady Aseefa Bhutto Zardari this week strongly condemned the murder of teenage influencer Sana Yousaf, calling it a tragic reminder of violence against women in Pakistan. Sana, who was shot dead at her Islamabad home just before her 17th birthday, had rejected repeated advances from the alleged killer, Omar Hayat. The suspect was arrested from Faisalabad within 20 hours, and a local court has approved his 14-day judicial remand.

Aseefa extended heartfelt condolences to Sana's family and the grieving community, saying that the crime wasn't just an act of violence but a punishment for a girl saying "no." She emphasized that girls like Sana have every right to live safely and freely and should never face danger for asserting their choices.

Speaking about the wider issue, Aseefa said violence driven by male entitlement is neither new nor acceptable. She rejected any cultural or traditional justification for such crimes. She also invoked her late mother Benazir Bhutto's legacy of women's empowerment and urged society to continue breaking the barriers young women face.

Aseefa also addressed the cruel online comments blaming Sana's social media presence for her death. She condemned the mindset that tries to link a girl's self-expression to violence. "No photo, video, or app ever justifies murder," she stated firmly, warning that such thinking puts countless other girls at risk.

In her closing message, Aseefa encouraged young girls not to lose hope or be silenced. "You have the right to dream, to speak, to exist without fear," she said. "Don't back down—because if you do, they win. But if we rise together, we will change this country."



# 14 Preferential tax measures enhance competitiveness of Hainan FTP

## Newsire

Beijing: China's Hainan Free Trade Port (FTP)'s expanding tax incentives are translating into tangible benefits for both businesses and individuals. This year marks the fifth anniversary of the Master Plan for the Construction of the Hainan Free Trade Port. Over the past five years, Hainan has rolled out 14 major tax initiatives under five guiding principles: zero tariffs, low tax rates, streamlined tax codes, stronger rule of law, and phased implementation. These include three "zero-tariff" lists — covering raw materials, self-use equipment, and transportation (including yachts) — and a preferential 15% income tax rate for both corporations and individuals. These tax arrangements are gradually forming a comprehensive, pro-growth fiscal ecosystem characterized by reduced costs and enhanced legal clarity. Together, these reforms are turning Hainan into a magnet for capital, talent, goods, and services. As the Hainan FTP moves steadily from framework design to operational readiness, its favorable tax regime continues to inject dynamism into the province's development trajectory. Thanks to the Hainan FTP's tax incentives, Haikou Engine Service Co., Ltd is exempt from import duties and value-added tax (VAT) when importing self-use equipment. Aircraft materials imported into the customs supervision zone where the company operates also benefit from bonded treatment (meaning that duties are not levied on imported materials so long as they remain within the zone), substantially reducing operational costs and strengthening the company's competitive edge in the global engine maintenance market.

According to Hu Tao, Deputy General Manager of HNA's Procurement Department, between 2021 and May 2025, the company imported over 10 shipments of engines, air circulation systems, and other items worth about RMB 350 million (\$48.7 million) under the zero-tariff list for raw and auxiliary materials, saving more than RMB 44 million (\$6.1 million) in tariffs and VAT. It also imported two aircraft engine brackets worth nearly RMB one million under the list for self-use equipment, saving a further RMB 300,000 (approx. \$42,000). More than 500 consignments of aircraft components were re-imported under the FTP's duty-free maintenance re-entry policy, saving over RMB 30 million (\$4.2 million) in duties. "These zero-tariff policies operate on an exemption upon declaration' basis. Once approved, duties are waived immediately. The financial relief is both tangible and substantial," said Hu. As of May 26, 2025, total imports under Hainan's three zero-tariff lists had reached RMB 22.69 billion (\$3.2 billion), with RMB 4.32 billion (\$0.6 billion) in duties waived, according to Haikou Customs, CEN reported on Tuesday. In recent years, as the Hainan FTP continues to mature, the zero-tariff policy framework has been consistently refined and expanded. In September 2024, a new zero-tariff policy for pharmaceuticals and medical devices was introduced, further widened the scope of eligible goods and extended the benefits to individual consumers. A key milestone came on December 31, 2024, when Boao Super Hospital successfully declared the first batch of medical products imported under the new policy. This

shipment, comprising cochlear implants and processors valued at 572,000 yuan (approx. \$80,000), was quickly cleared by Boao Airport Customs, resulting in tax savings of 74,000 yuan (approx. \$10,000) and sounding the starting gun on the official implementation of Hainan's zero-tariff policy for medical products. The impact has been widely felt by the public. As of May 26, 2025, the Lecheng International Medical Tourism Pilot Zone had imported 37 batches of duty-free medical products under the policy, totaling 72.53 million yuan (\$10.1 million) in value, with 9.78 million yuan (\$1.4 million) in tax relief granted. A representative from the Tax Policy Division of the Department of Finance of Hainan Province noted that since the implementation of the three "zero-tariff" lists, Hainan has continually optimized and expanded the policy to meet market needs, with nearly 2,000 goods now covered. Eligible importers enjoy full exemptions from import duties, VAT, and consumption tax, helping enterprises reduce production costs, boost profits, and elevate the attractiveness of the Hainan FTP as an investment destination. "The reduced 15% corporate income tax rate has significantly eased our tax burden as a company in the strategic emerging industries," said Wang Qi, Chairman of Hainan Jintai Pharmaceutical Co., Ltd. "The FTP's personal income tax incentives have enabled us to attract more high-caliber professionals to our company, strengthening our team's overall capabilities." In recent years, thanks to the favorable policies of the Hainan FTP, Jintai Pharmaceutical has seized opportunities and transformed itself from a commercial pharmaceutical enterprise into a full-fledged pharmaceutical



manufacturer. The company has taken full advantage of the Hainan FTP's various preferential policies, boosting its transformation and expansion. According to Wang, these tax benefits have saved the company over 10 million yuan, with the funds reinvested into R&D and brand building. "Going forward, we plan to make full use of Hainan's tax incentives to further lower production costs and enhance the overall competitiveness of our products," he added. Since the launch of the Master Plan five years ago, a series of policies centered on the "dual 15%" income tax cap for enterprises and individuals have laid a solid foundation for attracting both businesses and talent to the province. According to official statistics, by the end of December 2024, nearly 4,300 enterprises in Hainan had benefited

from the 15% corporate income tax policy. Working in tandem with other preferential policies, the incentive has helped direct the flow of talents, goods, and capital into Hainan, playing a pivotal role in driving regional socioeconomic growth. On the individual level, high-caliber, in-demand professionals working in the Hainan FTP are exempt from paying individual income tax on the portion of their earnings that exceeds an effective tax rate of 15%. More than 39,000 people had benefited from this policy as of the end of 2024. Combined with other talent-focused measures, the policy has helped attract over 850,000 professionals to Hainan, injecting strong momentum into the construction of a high-standard free trade port with Chinese characteristics.

# China issues guidelines on further improving people's well-being

## Covert Report

Beijing: China this week issued a set of guidelines on further safeguarding and improving public well-being, and resolutely addressing the most pressing concerns of the people. The guidelines, jointly issued by the General Office of the Communist Party of China Central Committee and the General Office of the State Council, aim to promote a more equitable, balanced, inclusive, and accessible development of public services. The guidelines stressed the need to provide social insurance subsidies to eligible university graduates and individuals facing employment difficulties. The country will gradually

adjust basic public services to ensure they are provided based on individuals' permanent residence, according to the guidelines. More than 1,000 high-quality general high schools will be newly built or expanded, with a focus on improving the basic educational conditions in county-level general high schools, according to the guidelines. The guidelines also support the nighttime opening of cultural venues, such as museums, libraries and art galleries. The guidelines further vowed to strengthen cross-departmental coordination and collaboration on major policies concerning people's well-being.



# Henan's trade volume benefiting from RCEP hits 1.17 billion yuan over past 5 months

## Henan Daily

Zhengzhou: Recently, Saint-Gobain Ceramic Materials (Zhengzhou) Co., Ltd. has secured an RCEP certificate of origin for a shipment of single-crystal alumina bound for Japan, enabling the company to take immediate advantage of tariff reductions. "The RCEP certificate has also led to a rise in orders from Japanese clients," said Hao Jia, the company's head of foreign trade. Three years after the RCEP came into effect, its trade benefits continue to grow. According to data from Zhengzhou Customs, the total value of preferential imports and exports under the RCEP agreement in Henan reached 1.17 billion yuan in the first five months of this year, marking a 5.4% year-on-year increase. As tariff rates continue to decrease and the zero-tariff product list grows, foreign trade companies in Henan are increasingly adept at leveraging the benefits of the RCEP. Jiaozuo Zhuoli Membrane Materi-

als Co., Ltd. is a prime example. Benefiting from the RCEP tariff reduction policy, the company now pays a lower import duty on petroleum resin from Japan, with the rate dropping from 6.5% to 4.9%. After processing, the finished film products are exported back to Japan, where they receive an additional 3.2-percentage-point tariff reduction. Ren Jiaxiang, the company's foreign trade director, said, "The RCEP brings substantial benefits to companies like ours, which rely on international markets for both raw material sourcing and product sales. It has significantly reduced intra-regional trade costs, giving us the confidence to strengthen and optimize our industrial and supply chains." He added that the company is now enjoying RCEP incentives on both import and export transactions. By leveraging RCEP and other tariff reduction policies, "Made in Henan" products are gaining a stronger presence in the international markets. At Luoyang Hengguan Bearing Technology Co., Ltd., Xiao Xu, a foreign trade representative,

was applying for a ASEAN-China Free Trade Area Preferential Tariff Certificate of Origin Form. With in one minute, he received the printed certificate. "With this certificate, we can secure a tariff reduction of about 30,000 RMB yuan on the needle bearings we're exporting to Thailand," he explained. "To better help businesses benefit from overseas preferential tariff treatment, we have not only actively promoted the effective implementation of preferential policies for Certificates of Origin, but also introduced measures like smart certificate verification and self-service printing to streamline processes



for enterprises," according to Luoyang Customs. Over the past five months, Luoyang Customs issued Certificates of Origin for bearing companies in the re-

gion, with a total value of 36.49 million yuan, saving businesses approximately 2.92 million yuan in import tariffs.



# Consulate celebrates Italy's National Day 2025



The first lady of Pakistan, Aseefa Bhutto Zardari, attended the event with Pakistan Peoples Party Women Wing President Faryal Talpur, Sindh Chief Minister Syed Murad



various aspects of strong and friendly



the Emirates Airlines and the Italian consulate for enhancing economic and commercial activities.



**Covert Report**  
Karachi: The consul general of Italy in Karachi, Fabrizio Bielli, this week hosted an event in connection Italian National Day 2025 celebrations at a local hotel.

Ali Shah, ministers, parliamentarians, diplomats and bureaucrats.



cooperation between Italy and Pakistan, particularly in the economic and commercial fields. The Italian consulate in Karachi had invited chef Vincenzo De Liso from Italy to host an extraordinary evening of Italian gastronomic excellence and culinary heritage with a specially



curated menu for the guests. The chef, who hails from the vibrant culinary traditions of Naples, displayed his culinary innovation and creativity at the event. To create an extraordinary Italian evening, the event not only served authentic Italian food by De Liso but also treated the guests with exclusive coffee by Illy, Italian gelato and Italian cheese. The consul general also shared with the august gath-



Ambassador of Italy to Pakistan Marilina Armellin & her husband



# Why the interview with Ren Zhengfei went viral

Global Times

On June 10, the People's Daily published an exclusive interview with Huawei CEO Ren Zhengfei on its front page. When talking about facing external blockades and suppression, Ren said, "Don't dwell on difficulties, just take action and move forward step by step." He also called on the whole society to support theoretical research, whose contributions "may only be recognized after decades or even centuries," and to maintain strategic patience with theoretical scientists. As a Chinese entrepreneur, Ren's confidence in "unswervingly managing own affairs well," his open-mindedness that "the more open the country becomes, the more it will drive our progress," and his determination to anchor the forefront of scientific and technological development and adhere to long-termism



have sparked widespread resonance across all sectors of society. As we all know, Huawei has long been sanctioned and suppressed by the US and some other Western countries from chips to 5G technology. Not long ago, Huawei's Ascend chip encountered groundless "warnings" from the US about its "risks." But Huawei "moved forward step by step" and overcame one difficulty after another. This reflects a value consensus that is increasingly gathering in Chinese society: Moving from the semiconductor field that was once under "stranglehold" to the forefront of the most competitive technological fields such as artificial intelligence and basic scientific research, China's leapfrog progress has never been based on momentary passion, but on tireless efforts to reach long-term goals. It is precisely by insisting

on doing "difficult but right things" that gave Huawei the confidence to not only "survive" in the face of suppression and blockade, but to actually break foreign stranglehold in fields such as chips and operating systems. This is also a vivid display of "managing our own affairs well." "The more open the country, the more it will drive our progress." It should also be recognized that, in the current environment, the growth and success of private enterprises like Huawei would not be possible without the strong support of China's vast and complete industrial system, infrastructure, talent pool, and institutional safeguards. It also relies on the building of a business environment governed by market principles, the rule of law, and internationalization.

In the span of seven years, the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee has held two symposiums with private enterprises to help ease their difficulties, boost confidence, and map out development blueprints. Just last month, the Private Sector Promotion Law officially came into effect. Comprising nine chapters and 78 articles, the law aims to continuously improve the development environment for the private sector across multiple dimensions such as fairness, regulation, services, and protection, setting many precedents in the process. The principle of the "two unswervingly" has now been written into law and has been repeatedly stressed in the Party's documents, providing private enterprises and entrepreneurs with long-term institutional confidence. The alignment between national top-level planning and the needs of enterprise development serves as the most solid foundation for overcoming blockades and withstanding risks. The Chinese society's increasing emphasis on R&D investment over the years also reflect the strong social consensus of "managing our own affairs well." According to a report Huawei published on its official website in April this year, Huawei's R&D investment in 2024 reached 179.7 billion yuan, up 9.1 percent year-on-year, accounting for 20.8 percent of its sales revenue. According to data from the National Bureau of Statistics, China's total national expenditure on research and experimental development (R&D) in 2024 exceeded 3.6 trillion yuan, reaching 3.613 trillion yuan, an 8.3 percent increase from the previous year, maintaining its position as the world's second-largest R&D investor.



China's R&D investment intensity reached 2.68 percent, ranking 12th among major countries worldwide, surpassing the EU's average of 2.11 percent, and further closing in on the OECD average of 2.73 percent. The World Intellectual Property Organization's recently released Global Innovation Index 2024 showed that China's global innovation ranking rose by one place to 11th compared to the previous year, making it one of the fastest-growing economies in innovation over the past decade. Many Western media outlets, including Reuters and Bloomberg, have viewed Reng's exclusive interview through the lens of China-US competition and the ongoing China-US economic and trade negotiations. While such a perspective is not so strange, it somewhat narrows the understanding of China's development logic. Looking solely at the recent achievements of Chinese companies - from DeepSeek to Xiaomi's Xuanjie chip and Huawei's fully "homegrown" HarmonyOS computers - whether breakthroughs in key technologies or cluster-style innovation across multiple fields, these are fundamentally natural outcomes from the combination of national strategy and market rules, which help the society to run more efficiently, make the industry more dynamic, and make people's lives more convenient. This reflects China's national conditions and system.

Ren's statement that "one of the core purposes of socialism is to advance societal development" captures this simple but profound logic. This is also the source of China's determination and confidence in dealing with various risks and challenges. "On the new journey of the new era, the private economy has broad development prospects and immense potential, and it is the perfect time for private companies and entrepreneurs to fully demonstrate their prowess." The important speech delivered by Xi Jinping, general secretary of the CPC Central Committee, at a symposium on private enterprises on February 17 contained high expectations for private enterprises. As a representative of private entrepreneurs, behind Ren's statement of "don't dwell on difficulties, just take action" going viral is the collective admiration of countless Chinese people for the spirit of "hard work leads to victory" and the firm confidence in winning the future through struggle. Today, China needs not only to "take action," but to do it with determination, endurance and direction. When the world is full of uncertainty, this long-termism and spirit of struggle based on hard work is the basis for China to overcome the storms and move toward rejuvenation.

Global Times

# China's expanding visa-free policy enhances inclusive globalization



Global Times

Starting Monday, China began implementing a trial visa-free policy for ordinary passport holders from Saudi Arabia, Oman, Kuwait and Bahrain. With this expansion, China now offers unilateral visa-free entry to 47 countries. Not long ago, China extended its unilateral visa-free policy to Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) by granting visa-free entry to citizens of Brazil, Argentina, Chile, Peru and Uruguay, and launched the "ASEAN visa." It has now achieved full visa-free coverage for Gulf Cooperation Council member states. These moves demonstrate that China has been steadily expanding its visa-free circle. The Global Times invited scholars both at home and abroad to discuss the conveniences brought by China's continuously improving entry policies and their broader significance. Muhammad Abdurrohman, a research coordinator of ASEAN-China Research Center of Universitas Indonesia

Based on my personal experience as someone who has traveled and studied in China, I believe that visa-free or simplified visa processes offer significant practical benefits for foreigners. A visa-free policy would enable quicker visits for market exploration, negotiations and trade, while also boosting tourism. Easier entry encourages more Indonesian tourists to visit and gain a better understanding of China. Additionally, simplified visa processes enhance academic and cultural exchanges, preventing students, researchers and artists from encountering bureaucratic barriers that hinder participation in conferences, collaborations and cultural events. Improved mobility could foster deeper mutual understanding, allowing Indonesia to gain a fuller appreciation of China and its values. Easier travel fosters economic cooperation and people-to-people exchanges between China and ASEAN. Indonesian businesses can explore more trade opportunities, while tourism and cultural visits increase on both sides. These visa policies also enhance China's image as an open nation, encouraging mutual understanding and reshaping perceptions through education, arts and soft power. China's visa facilitation is a win-win for ASEAN, including Indonesia. These policies can facilitate economic growth and also improve China's global standing as an open and connected nation. China's recent visa facilitation policies, such as the "ASEAN Visa" and the 30-day visa-free trial, demonstrate the country's determination to proactively expand its opening-up to the outside world. These measures not only simplify the entry procedures but also send a clear signal to the international community that China welcomes cooperation and shared development. As an Iranian, I particularly notice China's emphasis on emerging markets in the Middle East, Southeast Asia and other areas. Such policies help eliminate "visa barriers," promote regional connectivity and align with the trend of accelerated personnel flow in the context of globalization. For example, my personal experience in China illustrates how the simplification of visa procedures has significantly enhanced efficiency. First, for business activities,

short-term meetings or visits no longer require lengthy applications, facilitating immediate cooperation among enterprises. Second, for academic exchanges, international scholars can attend conferences and conduct research visits more conveniently, which undoubtedly promotes knowledge sharing. Third, in the tourism industry, visa-free policies have directly stimulated inbound tourism. Moreover, measures such as e-visas and port visas have reduced both time and economic costs, making foreigners more confident in their "China experience." From the perspective of economic and trade cooperation, such measures will simplify visa procedures, attract more foreign investors to visit and invest in China, and enhance trade facilitation. For instance, Middle Eastern enterprises are increasingly willing to see China as a priority partner. Moreover, from the perspective of cultural exchanges, China's positive attitude toward openness has increased the flow of students, artists and researchers, promoting cross-cultural understanding. China's history and modern achievements are better recognized by the world through more on-site visits. These policies have also broken the Western stereotype of China as "closed." China has become an advocate of inclusive globalization, especially for developing countries. I believe that in the future, China can further expand the list of visa-free countries to include more "Belt and Road" partners and optimize services within the country, such as providing multilingual guidance and facilitating payment options, to consolidate the achievements of its opening-up. Starting June 1, China began implementing a unilateral visa-free policy for holders of ordinary passports from five LAC countries: Brazil, Argentina, Chile, Peru and Uruguay. This major diplomatic initiative reflects China's firm commitment to high-level opening-up and its strategic vision for advancing relations between China and LAC countries. From a geographical perspective, this marks the first time China has extended its unilateral visa-free policy to LAC countries, making it a pioneering move. Previously, China's visa-free arrangements primarily covered countries in Europe, Asia and Oceania. By including five key LAC nations in its visa-free "circle of friends," China has not only expanded the geographical reach of

its policy but also demonstrated a global outlook in its diplomatic strategy and a strong emphasis on emerging markets. From a broader diplomatic strategy perspective, this move is a concrete practice of China's Global Civilization Initiative, which aims to promote dialogue and mutual learning among civilizations and build a more open and inclusive international order. The development of China-LAC relations provides a historical context for understanding this policy. Since the concept of a China-LAC community with a shared future was proposed in 2014, the two sides have enjoyed over a decade of growing ties, achieving fruitful outcomes in political trust, economic cooperation and people-to-people exchanges. Against this backdrop, the visa-free policy can be seen as both a consolidation and an upgrade of existing cooperation, laying a stronger people-to-people foundation for more comprehensive engagement in the next stage. The visa-free policy for the five LAC countries is expected to generate broad and far-reaching positive effects in the economic sphere, with tourism revival being the most immediate benefit. Following the policy announcement, according to international travel platforms, these countries have shown significantly greater interest in visiting China. This trend is expected to inject new vitality into China's hospitality, dining, transport and retail sectors. The policy will also significantly reduce transaction and time costs for LAC business people visiting China, effectively boosting bilateral trade and investment. For LAC entrepreneurs already operating in China, the policy offers direct benefits. China's expanding visa-free



"circle of friends" is more than a convenience measure; it is a key pillar of China's diplomatic strategy, representing both high-level opening-up and practical cooperation with the Global South. China's commitment to opening-up marks a departure from the Western-dominated practice of "visa politics" and demonstrates its strategic resolve to remain open as it develops, especially as the US implements a "travel ban" and tightens visa restrictions. Against the backdrop of Western-led "de-risking" narratives, China's visa-free policies contribute to defining globalization by emphasizing connectivity and shared development.

Global Times

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# High Commissioner Zahid Hafeez Chaudhri welcomes inclusion of several Pakistani players in BBL initial overseas draft list

**Covert Report** Canberra: Pakistani High Commissioner to Australia Zahid Hafeez Chaudhri this week welcomed the news that several Pakistani players had been named in the initial overseas draft list for the 15th edition of the Big Bash League (BBL). Several top Pakistani cricketers, including Shaheen Shah Afridi, Shadab Khan, Haris Rauf, and Mohammad Rizwan, have been named in the initial overseas draft list for the 15th edition of the BBL. Cricket Australia released the list ahead of the draft scheduled for June 19, with Brisbane Heat holding the first pick. The draft also features international stars such as England's Sam Curran

and Alex Hales, New Zealand's Lockie Ferguson and Tim Southee, Sri Lanka's Kusal Perera, and West Indies' fast-bowling talent Shamar Joseph. The Women's Big Bash League (WBBL) draft list includes well-known names like India's Jemimah Rodrigues and Shikha Pandey, West Indies' Deandra Dottin, and Pakistan's Fatima Sana. England is strongly represented with Lauren Bell, Sophie Ecclestone, Heather Knight, and Danni Wyatt-Hodge, while South Africa's Shabnim Ismail and Chloe Tryon are also part of the nominations. For the first time, the BBL and WBBL drafts have been moved to June to give franchises more time for planning. Over 600 overseas players have shown interest in the two leagues, according to Cricket

Australia. In the lead-up to the draft, several teams have confirmed pre-signings. These include Jamie Overton and Laura Wolvaardt for Adelaide Strikers, Colin Munro and Nadine de Klerk for Brisbane Heat, Chris Jordan for Hobart Hurricanes, Tim Seifert and Hayley Matthews for Melbourne Renegades, Tom Curran and Marizanne Kapp for Melbourne Stars, Finn Allen and Sophie Devine for Perth Scorchers, Amelia Kerr for Sydney Sixers, and Sam Billings and Chamari Athapaththu for Sydney Thunder. High Commissioner Zahid Hafeez Chaudhri told Covert that Pakistani cricketers had been promoting the country's image across the world. He said it was heartening to see Pakistan players perform at top international platforms.



# Ambassador Asim Iftikhar Ahmad extols Iraq's moves to solidify democratic institutions ahead of November polls



**Celina Ali** Islamabad: With parliamentary elections in Iraq scheduled for November 11, and the drawdown of the UN Mission there set for December, Pakistan this week commended the country's efforts to consolidate democratic institutions and stabilize the security environment, despite complex challenges. "Sustained reforms and public service delivery

initiatives, implementation of the federal budget, successful provincial council elections, and the focus on regional development reflect positive momentum", Ambassador Asim Iftikhar Ahmad, permanent representative of Pakistan to the United Nations, told the UN Security Council. Speaking at a briefing on the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI), he underscored the need for a "seamless and well-

political stakeholders in Iraq to maintain dialogue and inclusivity, especially in the context of preparations for national elections in November this year, and work to address the institutional gaps," Ambassador Asim said. Describing the peaceful conduct of elections in the Kurdistan Region last year as a "welcome step", he said that formation of the regional government was still pending, hoping that it would be addressed through dialogue, grounded

in Iraq's Constitution. On the humanitarian side, Ambassador Asim said, sustained attention was required including with regards to the needs of the internally displaced persons, acknowledging Iraq's achievements in facilitating voluntary return, reintegration, and improved access to documentation. Pakistan, he said, remains concerned about the volatile regional security environment, which poses a risk to Iraq's stability. "We reiterate our firm support for Iraq's sovereignty, unity, and territorial integrity — it is imperative that Iraq not be drawn into regional confrontations". Ambassador Asim also reaffirmed Pakistan's strong support for the efforts to resolve outstanding issues between the two brotherly countries of Iraq and Kuwait, including the return of property, archives, and repatriation of all Kuwaiti and third country nationals or their remains. "Pakistan will continue to remain engaged on this matter in the Council and with the two brotherly countries to find an amicable and mutually acceptable way forward, for settlement of all outstanding issues especially the missing person." Briefing the 15-member Council, the top UN official in Iraq reiterated his confidence in the resilience of the country's people, and the determination of their leaders. "Iraq is a nation of profound history, strength, potential, and pride. By working together, Iraqis can continue to make meaningful strides towards stability, prosperity and human rights for all," said Special Representative Mohamed Al Hassan, who also heads the UN Assistance Mission

for Iraq (UNAMI). He provided updates on political, human rights and other developments over the past six months, and the Mission's ongoing support to the authorities as it prepares to leave at the end of the year. Hassan commended the Iraqi Government for providing humanitarian aid to people in Gaza, Lebanon, Yemen and Syria, and for supporting the new peace initiative between Türkiye and the Kurdistan Workers' Party, a militant group known as KPP. He said Iraq is well on the way to fresh parliamentary elections set for 11 November, and the Independent High Electoral Commission (IHEC) is making notable progress towards polling day, with UNAMI's technical support. Although voter registration should conclude in the coming days, and nearly three-quarters of all voters have completed biometric registration, challenges and logistical concerns remain. "But IHEC is committed to doing its best towards a free, fair and transparent election with the participation of all Iraqis without fear and intimidation," he said. "UNAMI will spare no effort in providing the most professional technical support towards this end, including efforts to promote the widest participation of women, youth and minorities." Hassan also reported on the aftermath of the successful parliamentary elections held in the Kurdistan region in northern Iraq last October. With formation of a regional government still outstanding, he called for a spirit of compromise to break the impasse.

# Ambassador Mumtaz Baloch leads Pakistan delegation to 3rd UNOC3 in France

**Covert Report** Paris: Ambassador Mumtaz Zahra Baloch is leading the Pakistan delegation to the Third United Nations Ocean Conference (UNOC3) being held in Nice, France from June 9–13. According to the statement issued here, Pakistan remains strongly committed to

the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS); and conserving and sustainably using the ocean, sea and marine resources for sustainable development, in line with the Sustainable Development Goal 14 (Life Below Water).





# Europe's migrant crisis continues as Spanish islands 'demand help'



The North isn't asking for charity. It's asking to be seen, heard, and included. A recent IRR International poll, for example, found only 25% of people in Yorkshire and the Humber, and 30% in the North East, believe Westminster understands the impact the cost of living has on local communities — compared to 47% in London.

As Andrew Snowden MP told me: "Many of these towns were built around the mills and factories that powered Britain, providing employment, prosperity, institutions, pride, and a shared identity. "What changed? The wealth creators disappeared with deindustrialisation—and the jobs went with them...To reverse the fortunes of these towns, access to skilled jobs and training is essential."

Replacing paving stones in the town square won't bring these communities back to life. Not if people don't have income to spend, or purpose to hold onto. Access to skilled work and training is the foundation for renewal. And right now, that foundation is missing.

Levelling up must become more than rhetoric. It must become a blueprint for dignity: better NHS services, reskilling for the unemployed, and real opportunities for young people to stay and thrive.

The decision to slash winter fuel payments only made things worse. We stepped in where we could. But philan-



expecting things to change. The people of Blackpool and Burnley are not asking for favours. They are expecting leadership. And the time for it is now. Ali Rehman Malik is a philanthropist and the chairman of the Institute of Research and Reforms (IRR) International. The article originally appeared in The Express.



**Ali Rehman Malik** Walk through some of the post-industrial towns of Lancashire and you'd be forgiven for thinking you've stepped into another century. In places like Blackpool and Burnley, home to some of the most deprived neighbourhoods in England, the streets still echo with the ghosts of Victorian Britain, not from nostalgia, but from neglect. Serious investment hasn't reached these communities in generations. This isn't history. It's abandonment. You meet families who've lived in the same town for fifty years without



ever moving up the social ladder. Shuttered shops. Crumbling terraces. Rows of houses going for under £100,000, not because it's a bargain, but because people have given up on the area.

These communities are cut off, not just economically but physically. Rail connections are poor. Services are inconsistent. In Blackpool, the post-code lottery has produced the lowest life expectancy in England.

And yet these are the very people who built Britain's backbone. I saw the consequences firsthand this winter. Through the Rehman Malik Foundation's support to Age UK Lancashire, we supported pensioners in Blackpool and Burnley forced to choose between heating their homes and eating supper. That should never happen in a country like ours.

thropy cannot be a substitute for policy. In some places, it's not anger you hear, it's silence. Because people have stopped





# GERMANY AND BULGARIA

## Pakistan, Germany strengthen railway cooperation in high-level meeting

COVERT 7  
June 15 - 21, 2025



**Celina Ali**  
Islamabad: Federal Minister for Railways Muhammad Hanif Abbasi met with German Ambassador to Pakistan Alfred Grannas on Monday to discuss ways to deepen diplomatic, economic, and industrial ties between the two nations. A major focus of the meeting was the modernization and upgradation of Pakistan Railways in line with international benchmarks and technological advancements. Minister Abbasi underscored Pakistan's commitment to leveraging Germany's vast experience and technical know-how, aiming to transform the country's rail network with enhanced infrastructure and advanced facilities. He noted that such improvements would support the delivery of fast, safe, and high-quality travel services to the public. The discussions also covered areas such as infrastructure development, technological exchange,

and broader industrial collaboration within the railway sector. Both parties explored prospects for future joint ventures and emphasized the need to elevate bilateral relations to benefit the economies and citizens of both countries. As part of the engagement, Minister Abbasi extended an invitation to Ambassador Grannas to visit the historic Golra Railway Station Museum, a project dedicated to preserving Pakistan's railway heritage. The German ambassador graciously accepted the invitation and reaffirmed Germany's ongoing support and interest in continued cooperation, expressing hope for further collaborative projects in the near future. This meeting signals a positive move toward enhanced economic, technological, cultural, and industrial engagement between Pakistan and Germany, with a particular focus on revitalizing Pakistan's railways and strengthening bilateral relations.

## Bulgaria and Kazakhstan to set up joint Business Council



**NewsWire**  
Sofia: Kazakhstan and Bulgaria intend to establish a joint Business Council, Kazinform News Agency quoted President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev as saying during the extended talks with the President of Bulgaria, Rumen Radev. "We would like to reaffirm Kazakhstan's

commitment to the promotion of mutually beneficial partnership with Bulgaria. We view your country as a major, very important partner of Kazakhstan in Europe and exert every effort to strengthen and deepen our relations in a number of areas," the Kazakh President said. Both countries are committed to enhancing

bilateral ties in trade and in other sectors, including agriculture, tourism, healthcare, digitalization etc. "Kazakhstan strives for further strengthening of economic relations and implementing projects in energy, green transition, agriculture, healthcare and tourism. I am confident that the Intergovernmental Commission for Trade and Economic Relations will be at the frontline of this work. We also plan to set up Business Council of Bulgaria and Kazakhstan in the nearest future, and this will be the next step in strengthening our business relations," Kassym-Jomart Tokayev noted. In his words interparliamentary cooperation is another important sphere for the bilateral dialogue. The Head of State suggested boosting interparliamentary ties through more

frequent visits. "Kazakhstan and Bulgaria successfully interacted within the UN and other international organizations, with whom we share common goals at the international arena. Deepening the cultural-humanitarian relations is also another aspect of our agenda. There is an opportunity for cooperation in education, tourism,

and this will help us exchange knowledge, expertise, experience and pave the way towards innovative projects and development initiatives," he concluded. As it was reported, the President of Bulgaria, Rumen Radev, arrived in Astana for an official visit.





# Facts you may not know about Portugal



Newswire

Lisbon: Portugal is a beautiful country in Europe with attractions for everyone. The country is home to Europe’s westernmost point, Cabo da Roca, located near Lisbon. It’s not just a picturesque spot but also holds historical significance as it marks the edge of the European continent. The University of Coimbra, established in 1290, is one of the oldest universities in continuous operation in the world. Its Joanina Library, built in the 18th century, is renowned for its exquisite Baroque style and houses thousands of ancient books. Portuguese is the official language of not only Portugal but also of Brazil, Mozambique, Angola, Cape Verde, Guinea-Bissau, and São Tomé and Príncipe, making it one of the most widely spoken languages globally. Porto, Portugal’s second-largest city, is famous for its production of port wine. The wine is produced exclusively in the Douro Valley and aged in cellars along the Douro River before being shipped from Porto. Portugal is the world’s largest cork producer and exporter, with much of its cork harvested from the cork oak trees that blanket the country’s landscape. The Vasco da Gama Bridge in Lisbon is one of the longest bridges in Europe, spanning the Tagus River at a length of over 17 kilometers (about 11 miles). It’s named after the famous Portuguese explorer Vasco da Gama. Portugal’s Algarve region boasts some of Europe’s most stunning beaches, attracting millions of tourists each year. However, beyond its beaches, the region also offers picturesque fishing villages, dramatic cliffs, and a rich cultural heritage. The Portuguese archipelago of the Azores, located in the North Atlantic Ocean, is composed of nine volcanic islands. It’s a paradise for nature lovers, offering unique landscapes, hot springs, and opportunities for whale watching. Portugal is home to one of the world’s oldest bookshops, Livraria Bertrand, which opened its doors in 1732 in Lisbon. It holds the Guinness World Record for



the oldest operating bookstore. The Portuguese love their seafood, and one of their traditional dishes is “Bacalhau à Brás,” a flavorful combination of salted cod, onions, potatoes, and eggs. The country has a rich tradition of fado music, characterized by its soulful melodies and melancholic lyrics. It’s often performed in intimate settings known as “fado houses,” particularly in Lisbon’s historic neighborhoods. The Alentejo region in southern Portugal is known for its vast cork oak forests, rolling plains, and medieval hilltop towns. It’s a tranquil escape from the hustle and bustle of city life, offering visitors a glimpse into traditional Portuguese culture. Portugal has a long history of seafaring exploration, with renowned explorers like Vasco da Gama, Ferdinand Magellan, and Bartolomeu Dias. Their voyages played a significant role in shaping world history

during the Age of Discovery. The Portuguese town of Óbidos is famous for its well-preserved medieval walls and picturesque streets. It’s also known for its annual chocolate festival, where visitors can indulge in a variety of chocolate treats. Portugal has a rich tradition of ceramic tiles, known as azulejos, which adorn buildings, churches, and palaces across the country. These intricately designed tiles often depict historical scenes, religious motifs, and geometric patterns. The Tower of Belém, a UNESCO World Heritage Site located in Lisbon, was built in the early 16th century as a fortress to defend the city’s harbor. It’s a stunning example of Manueline architecture, adorned with intricate carvings and maritime symbols. Portugal is one of the sunniest countries in Europe, with over 3,000 hours of sunshine per year on average. Its mild climate, combined with its diverse landscapes, makes it an ideal destination for outdoor activities year-round





# Acting US Ambassador Natalie Baker, US Consul General Kristin K. Hawkins meet CM



**Covert Report**  
Lahore: Punjab Chief Minister Maryam Nawaz this week highlighted the proactive and positive role of the United States and deemed it highly important for attaining sustainable peace in the South Asian region, reaffirming her government’s keenness to further strengthen cordial relations between Punjab and Cali-

fornia. Punjab Chief Minister Maryam Nawaz was speaking to Acting US Ambassador Natalie A. Baker and US Consul General Kristin K. Hawkins in Lahore at the Chief Minister’s House here on Tuesday. The Punjab CM warmly welcomed the acting US ambassador and Consul General Kristin K. Hawkins, describing the Pakistan-US relations partnership as valuable based on shared values and

strategic interests. Matters pertaining to further strengthening the long-standing Pak-US relations and enhancing cooperation in areas of mutual interest were discussed in the meeting. CM Maryam appreciated the constructive and positive role of the United States in the recent Pakistan-India strained relations. The Chief Minister thanked Natalie A. Baker for supporting Lahore Qalandars in the PSL tournament and expressed solidarity

with the people of California on being a sister state of Punjab. She described her meeting with the US Congressional Pakistan Caucus as positive and constructive. She highlighted, “Pakistan is emerging as a strategic partner for the US in various sectors, including textiles. Punjab, being the largest and most economically vibrant province of Pakistan, welcomes US investment and cooperation in multiple sectors.” “The Pakistani-American community plays the role of a strong

bridge in further strengthening cordial relations between the two countries,” she emphasized. She outlined, “We deem the US as an important global ally in confronting formidable challenges such as climate change, food security, and sustainable development. The Punjab government is keen to further expand its strategic partnership with the United States.” She apprised that Punjab province holds the honor of establishing the first Women’s Virtual Police Station.

# Japan imports Russian oil for first time since 2023

**Liaquat Ali**  
Tokyo: Under Japanese government instructions, refiner Taiyo Oil has bought a cargo of Russia’s Sakhalin crude to ensure stable production of the LNG plant that supplies gas to Japan, a company spokesperson said this week. “At the request of the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry, we have decided to take delivery of 600,000 barrels of Sakhalin Blend crude oil,” the spokesperson for Taiyo Oil said. Japan stopped importing crude oil from Russia in early 2023, but it has a special waiver from the United States – currently expiring on June

28, 2025 – to import crude from the Sakhalin-2 project. The US Treasury’s Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) has authorized the maritime transport of crude oil originating from the Sakhalin-2 project (Sakhalin-2 byproduct) through 12:01 a.m. eastern daylight time, June 28, 2025, provided that the Sakhalin-2 byproduct is solely for importation into Japan. Japan buys LNG from the Sakhalin project, where oil is a byproduct of gas output. Earlier this year, the Japanese authorities asked refiners to consider importing Sakhalin Blend crude to ensure that the LNG plant operates smoothly and delivers LNG to Japan. Now Taiyo Oil has bought a Sakhalin cargo and “This decision was made to help ensure a stable energy or LNG supply to Japan,” the company



spokesperson told Reuters. The crude was delivered on a tanker that has been blacklisted by both the U.S. and the EU, but since Sakhalin-2 byproduct crude imports are exempted from sanctions by June 28, the

shipment was allowed and there will not be any repercussions for the Japanese refiner. The EU doesn’t have secondary sanctions that would affect entities in third countries dealing with blacklisted tankers.

The Aframax tanker Voyager shipped the Sakhalin Blend crude to the Japanese port of Kikuma. The vessel arrived on Monday and left after discharging its cargo, according to LSEG shipping data cited by Reuters.



# EU approves Bulgaria to adopt euro in 2026



**Newswire**

Brussels: The European Commission this week concluded that Bulgaria is ready to adopt the euro as of 1 January 2026, positioning it to become the 21st Member State in the euro area. This decision, outlined in the 2025



EU Ambassador to Pakistan  
H. E. Riina Kionka

Convergence Report, follows a formal request by Bulgarian authorities and represents a key step in the country’s path toward full eurozone membership. The report finds that Bulgaria meets all four nominal convergence criteria—relating to price stability, sound public finances, exchange rate stability, and long-term interest rates—indicating that its economy is sufficiently prepared for euro adoption. Additionally, the country’s legislation is deemed compatible with the

EU Treaties and the statutes governing the European Central Bank (ECB) and the European System of Central Banks. The assessment also considered broader economic factors such as balance of payments, market integration, and the overall health of labour, product, and financial markets. The European Central Bank published its own Convergence Report in parallel, also supporting Bulgaria’s readiness. European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen praised the milestone, stating: “The euro is a tangible symbol of European strength and unity. Bulgaria is one step closer to joining. The euro will strengthen Bulgaria’s economy, increase trade,



Bulgarian Ambassador to Pakistan  
H. E. Irena Gancheva

attract investment, and give Bulgaria a voice in eurozone decision-making.” Following the assessment, the Commission adopted proposals for a Council Decision and a Council Regulation for Bulgaria’s euro introduction on 1 January 2026. The final decision lies with the Council of the EU, following consultations with the Eurogroup,

European Council, European Parliament, and the ECB. The Commission publishes Convergence Reports every two years or upon request from a Member State. Bulgaria submitted its request in February 2025. The Convergence Report serves as the legal and technical foundation for determining a Member State’s eligibility to adopt the euro.



# London mayor Sadiq Khan is knighted by King Charles



British High Commissioner to Pakistan, Jane Marriott

**Covert Report** London: The Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, was formally knighted by King Charles in a ceremony at Buckingham Palace this week. The 54-year-old Labour politician received the honour in recognition of his political and public service. Sir Sadiq Khan has said that he and the King discussed which of them is "a bigger workaholic" as he received a knighthood for political and public service. Sir Sadiq, who has served as Mayor of London since 2016, was awarded the knighthood after being named in the New Year Honours list. Speaking to a media outlet, he said, "I have had the pleasure of working

closely with the King.

"We were just comparing who's a bigger workaholic. He was very chuffed that he managed to personally give me this honour, and he apologised for it taking so long, which is not a problem at all."

Sir Sadiq, a second-generation immigrant, said he was delighted to receive a knighthood with his family in attendance.

He remarked: "My mum's here, and she's been emotional since it was



announced on January 1, and today's just a great day for the family.

**"Obviously, from my background, being the son of immigrants, my parents coming here from Pakistan, it's a big deal for us."**





"Being happy never goes out of style."  
Lilly Pulitzer

"Time you enjoy wasting is not wasted time."  
Unknown

# Italy: Referendum on easing citizenship rules thwarted by low turnout



The general secretary of the Italian General Confederation of Labour union, Maurizio Landini, slammed the low turnout as a sign of a “clear democratic crisis” in Italy. “We knew it wouldn’t be a walk in the park,” he said, stressing that millions of Italians had turned up to fight for change. Meloni’s Brothers of Italy party posted on social media that the “only real goal” of the referendum was to bring down the Meloni government, and it added, alongside pictures of opposition leaders: “In the end, it was the Italians who brought you down.” Opinion polls published in mid-May showed that 46 percent of Italians were aware of the issues driving the referendums. Activists and opposition parties accused the governing coalition of deliberately dampening interest in sensitive issues that directly affect immigrants and workers. Campaigners for the change in the citizenship law said it would help the children of non-European Union parents better integrate into a culture they already see as theirs. Changes to the laws would have affected about 2.5 million foreign nationals. Other questions in the referendum dealt with labour-related issues like better protections against dismissal, higher severance payments and the conversion of fixed-term contracts into permanent ones. Opposition forces had hoped that promoting these causes would help them woo working class voters and challenge Meloni, something they have struggled to do since she came to power in 2022. Many of the 78 referendums held in Italy in the past have failed due to low turnout.



Ambassador of Italy to Pakistan H.E. Marilina Armellini and Governor Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Faisal Karim Kundi

## NewsWire

Rome: An Italian referendum on easing citizenship rules and strengthening labour protections this week failed after hard-right Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni encouraged voters to boycott the vote. As polls closed on Monday, it emerged that many citizens had heeded Meloni’s call as only 30 percent of the electorate cast their ballots over two days of voting, far short of the 50 percent plus one needed to make the result legally binding. The outcome was a clear defeat for the centre-left opposition, which had proposed to halve the period of residence required to apply for Italian citizenship from 10 to five years and to reverse labour market liberalisations introduced a decade ago. The prime minister said she was “absolutely against” the citizenship proposals, announcing she would turn up at the polls but not cast a vote. A stated goal of Meloni’s government is to cut irregular immigration, but it has increased the number of immigrant work visas.

# France keen to strengthen educational ties with Pakistan



Ambassador of France to Pakistan H.E. Nicolas Galey



## Abdullah Jan

Lahore: France and Pakistan are poised to deepen cooperation in higher education following a high-level meeting at the French Embassy in Islamabad between renowned career counsellor Syed Abidi and the embassy’s cultural and education team. Under the stewardship of French Ambassador Nicolas Galey, bilateral relations have entered a new phase of vitality, with education singled out as a strategic pillar. During the recent meeting, Mr Abidi outlined his three-decade record of guiding Pakistani students abroad and of partnering with foreign universities to expand their footprint in emerging markets. Embassy officials Ms Sabeen — who heads education outreach — and Mr Mark Pit said Paris is eager to attract more Pakistani students but faces several hurdles, notably limited awareness of France’s English-taught programmes and the absence of local regulations for dual-degree arrangements. French universities are increasing-

ly interested in offering split-site degrees, with the first year in Pakistan and the remainder in France; however, Pakistan’s Higher Education Commission has yet to create a framework for such initiatives. Mr Abidi proposed targeted student seminars, promotional campaigns and campus visits by French universities to bridge the information gap. Drawing on his experience boosting German enrolments and running the Finland-Pakistan Business Summit, he offered to coordinate nationwide student fairs and faculty networking sessions, placing particular emphasis on compliance and transparent visa guidance. Ms Sabeen welcomed the plan, underscoring the need for ‘closer, face-to-face interactions’ between French academics and prospective students. She also asked for support in identifying reputable education agents; Mr Abidi pledged to create an authentication system so universities engage only qualified representatives. Both sides agreed to explore specialised fields where France enjoys global renown, including engineering, fashion design and forensic science — and to organise French university delegations to Pakistan in the coming months. Mr Abidi expressed readiness to travel to France to compile an in-depth market report and build institutional partnerships through his consultancy, Falcon Education. For Pakistani students, France remains an attractive yet under-explored destination. Tuition fees at public

universities are modest by European standards, and the quality of instruction ranks among the continent’s best. Nevertheless, students must verify that their chosen programmes are offered in English, as English-medium options are still limited outside private business schools. The meeting concluded with a shared commitment to promote France as a premier study hub, expand transnational education pathways and enhance agent training. As Ambassador Galey’s tenure continues to elevate Franco-Pakistani relations, the education sector stands to reap significant benefits.

