COVERT
TRUTH UNFOLD
November 15 -21, 2026

FS Asim Iftikhar Ahmad: A seasoned diplomat at the helm of Pakistan's foreign policy **Liaquat Ali**

Islamabad: With more than three decades of experience in diplomacy, multilateral negotiations and international relations, Ambassador Asim Iftikhar Ahmad, Pakistan's 34th Foreign Secretary, brings extensive diplomatic expertise and a wealth of institutional knowledge to the country's top (Page-5)

Pakistan, UK agree to deepen cooperation against terrorism, organised crime **Celina Ali**

Islamabad: Pakistan and the United Kingdom this week agreed to strengthen practical security cooperation to combat terrorism, serious organised crime, illegal migration and visa fraud, with a renewed focus on disrupting criminal networks, enhancing intelligence sharing and (Page-11)

China calls for de-escalation of Ukraine conflict





China Economic Net

United Nations: A Chinese envoy this week called on the parties concerned to de-escalate the Ukraine conflict by building on the current momentum of engagement. The Ukraine issue is approaching a critical moment for a negotiated settlement and calls from the international community for peace through negotiations are growing stronger. Recently, a flurry of engagements and interactions among key stakeholders have sent some positive signals. China supports efforts conducive to peace and hopes that the parties concerned will meet each other halfway, maintain the positive momentum, and promote an early political settlement of the crisis, said Sun Lei, China's deputy permanent representative to the United Nations.

Not long ago, Russia and Ukraine conducted a new swap of prisoners of war and agreed on a localized humanitarian ceasefire. These developments deserve recognition, he told the Security Council.

"We call on the parties to put people's lives first, exercise calm and restraint, and effectively protect civilians and civilian infrastructure, especially women, children, and other victims of the conflict. At the same time, humanitarian relief efforts should be intensified to help those affected by the crisis overcome their hardships," he said. "The parties concerned should strictly comply with applicable international law and ensure basic living conditions, medical treatment, and dignity for prisoners of war and detained persons."



Recently, the parties have expressed their views on how to achieve a political settlement of the crisis. The international community has made extensive diplomatic efforts to promote peace and talks. Russia, Ukraine, and the United States will hold a new round of trilateral talks. The parties concerned should demonstrate political will, maintain contact and communication, build consensus step by step, and work together toward a comprehensive, durable, and binding peace agreement, said Sun.

China's position on the Ukraine issue has been consistent. It has always stayed committed to promoting peace and talks and a political settlement. China has maintained close communication with Russia, Ukraine, and other parties concerned, actively conducted shuttle diplomacy, and worked tirelessly to create conditions for peace talks and build consensus for peace. China stands ready to work with the international community and continue making unremitting efforts toward an early ceasefire, cessation of hostilities and lasting peace and stability in the region, he said.

Canada renews nearly four-decade partnership with Pakistan to eradicate polio



Celina Ali

Islamabad: Canada has reaffirmed its longstanding commitment to supporting Pakistan's efforts to eradicate polio, continuing a partnership spanning nearly four decades as the country launches its latest nationwide vaccination campaign targeting more than 24 million children.

Canadian High Commissioner to Pakistan Tarik Ali Khan this week joined representatives of the World Health Organization (WHO), UNICEF Pakistan and the Pakistan Polio Eradication Initiative in engaging with frontline vaccination workers and local community members, acknowledging their vital contribution to the country's fight against the crippling disease.

The engagement highlighted the importance of community participation and the dedication of frontline health workers in ensuring that every eligible child receives the polio vaccine, particularly in areas where vaccination teams face difficult geographical, social and operational challenges.

The November immunisation campaign is being conducted in 97 selected districts across Pakistan, with more than 200,000 frontline workers mobilised to administer polio drops to children under five years of age. The nationwide drive represents another major effort to protect millions of Pakistani children against a disease that can cause irreversible paralysis and lifelong disability. Canada's continued engagement underscores the strength and durability of its cooperation with Pakistan in the public health sector. Over nearly 40 years, the partnership has reflected a shared commitment to protecting children, strengthening immunisation efforts and supporting the international campaign to eliminate polio.

The Canadian contribution also highlights the importance of sustained international cooperation in addressing public health challenges that require coordinated action, adequate resources and the trust of local communities.

Frontline vaccination workers remain at the centre of Pakistan's eradication efforts, often working under challenging conditions to reach children in remote communities and ensure that no child is left unprotected. The involvement of community members, parents and local stakeholders is equally essential in building confidence in vaccination programmes and overcoming barriers to immunisation. As Pakistan continues its campaign against polio, Canada's renewed support sends a strong message of international solidarity with the country's efforts to secure a polio-free future.

The shared objective remains to protect every child from preventable disability and ensure that future generations grow up free from the threat of polio.

Bilawal Bhutto urges federal government, PTI to resume dialogue, prioritise national interests



Liaquat Ali

Islamabad: Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) Chairman Bilawal Bhutto Zardari this week called on the federal government and opposition parties, particularly the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), to keep the door open for dialogue, warning that persistent political confrontation could undermine efforts to address the country's pressing challenges. Addressing a ceremony in Larkana after laying the foundation stone of a modern 600-bed hospital, Bilawal urged the federal government to abandon its tendency to engage in confrontations with political opponents and instead pursue meaningful consultations with all stakeholders.

He thanked Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif for accepting the PPP's proposal to establish an electoral reforms committee, describing the initiative as a potentially significant first step towards bringing political parties onto a common platform and addressing fundamental weaknesses in the electoral process. Bilawal said he had already reached out, through delegations, to opposition leaders in the Senate and the National Assembly, urging them to nominate their full representation to the proposed committee.

He stressed that the federal government should prioritise engagement with political, social and provincial stakeholders rather than remain embroiled in disputes with various political parties. Pointing to the country's multiple challenges, including terrorism and strained relations with India and Afghanistan, the PPP chairman said the national leadership could not afford to expend all its energy on political rivalries when the country needed collective efforts to overcome serious security and economic difficulties and alleviate public suffering. Bilawal reiterated his appeal to both the PTI and the federal government not to shut the door on negotiations. He said that if the government and the PTI could reach an understanding on a joint strategy to combat terrorism, he would be the first to demand the withdrawal of governor's rule in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. He made it clear that the PPP's position was rooted in two principles: respect for the democratic mandate and an unwavering commitment to fighting terrorism. Political differences, he maintained, should not overshadow the responsibility of protecting citizens' lives and property and eliminating the menace of terrorism. Referring to the PTI's previous insistence that a meeting with its incarcerated founder or his release should precede political engagement, Bilawal said the party founder had now given opposition leaders in both Houses of Parliament full authority to make decisions.

He urged the relevant parliamentary leaders to exercise that authority and ensure the PTI's participation in the electoral reforms committee.

Bilawal cautioned that if the PTI declined to join the committee despite repeated invitations and efforts to secure its participation, it would eventually have to consider how it could credibly take its complaints and allegations of electoral rigging to the public while remaining absent from a parliamentary forum established to address such concerns. Responding to Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam-Fazl chief Maulana Fazlur Rehman's assertion that major national decisions were being taken outside Parliament, Bilawal said the PPP had consistently advocated a strong, effective and empowered legislature.

He argued that opposition parties also had a responsibility to strengthen Parliament by participating in its committees and institutional forums, including the financial committee, the judicial commission and the proposed electoral reforms committee.If opposition parties chose to stay away from these platforms and subsequently complained about Parliament's weakening role, they should also examine their own contribution to the situation, he said.

Bilawal maintained that responsibility for Parliament's shortcomings could not be placed solely on the government, as the conduct and decisions of opposition parties also played a part.

He invited all political forces to take the electoral reforms committee as an opportunity to begin rebuilding parliamentary strength, even if they could initially agree on this single issue.

All political parties, he said, recognised the importance of electoral reforms and should therefore come together within Parliament, participate in the committee and work towards consensus-based decisions to improve the electoral system.

COVERT is published every Sunday

IRON BROTHER - 铁兄弟

How the CPC plans to sustain its anti-corruption drive





China Economic Net

Beijing: China has pledged to sustain its anti-graft drive in key sectors and target new and concealed forms of corruption, including those through virtual currency and cross-border financial activities.

At a key Party plenum held in late October, the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee adopted a resolution on persevering with full and rigorous Party self-governance, underscoring the Party's resolve to maintain a tough stance against corruption and strengthen oversight over the exercise of power.

Since the 20th CPC National Congress held in 2022, the Party has stepped up its fight against corruption in key sectors including finance, state-owned enterprises (SOEs), energy, tobacco, pharmaceuticals, and project bidding and tendering.



Special campaigns have also been reinforced to address corruption in grain procurement and sales, as well as in the football sector.

The resolution pledged to investigate and deal with cases involving both political and economic issues, collusion between government officials and businesspeople, and capital penetrating into the political domain.

It also vowed to crack down hard on graft of the "key few," especially officials in top posts, and young officials, and take stern action against corruption committed by leading officials' families and staff.

Over the years, some senior officials -- including former members of the Political Bureau and its Standing Committee, senior military officials, former government ministers, and retirees who left their leading positions years ago -- have been brought to justice for violations of law.

In February 2026, revised regulations were issued to strengthen oversight of leaders of SOEs, prohibiting them from abusing power, engaging in unauthorized commercial activities or investments, and practicing nepotism or favoritism.

At a press conference on the guiding principles from the October plenum, a senior anti-graft official said the CPC had outlined priorities for steadfastly following a distinctive Chinese path to combating corruption.

They include maintaining a tough anti-graft stance, strengthening oversight of power, fostering a culture of integrity, and enhancing coordinated efforts to prevent corruption by rooting out audacity, opportunity, and desire, said Zhang Fuhai, deputy secretary of the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection of the CPC and deputy head of the National Commission of Supervision.

The resolution pledged to target new and disguised forms of corruption such as receiving returns later for abusing one's power for the beneficiaries, reaping benefits from assets under the name of bribe givers or a third party, the "white glove" or agents concealing corruption activities in ostensibly legal forms, and the "revolving door" phenomenon of bureaucrat-merchant collusion after officials' retirement.

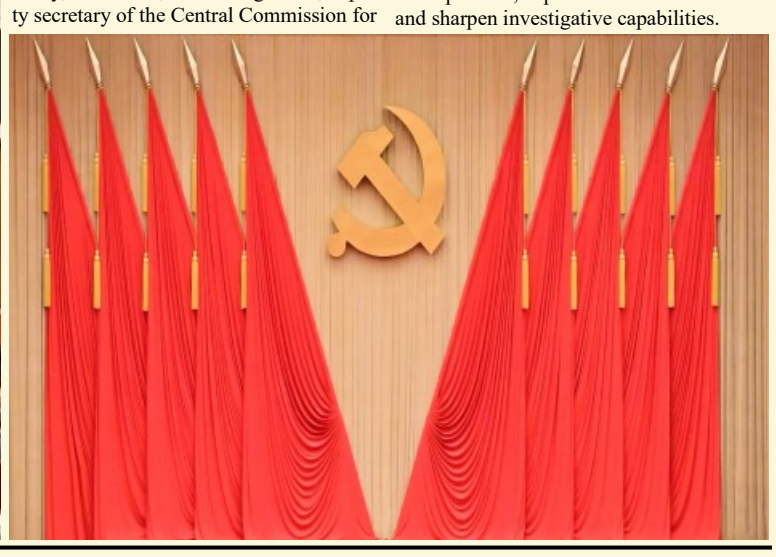
Such offenses feature increasingly concealed actors, diversified channels for illicit benefit transfers, and more obscured connections between power and money.

Investigating these practices requires accurately identifying the concealed parties, turning illicit benefits into quantifiable and comparable data, and developing specialized forensic technologies and tools to facilitate cross-border tracking and asset freezing.

A stronger legal framework is essential, with more clearly defined criteria for establishing criminal liability, determining convictions and imposing sentences for offenses such as offering bribes on behalf of an entity and brokering bribery.

The resolution also calls for greater use of technology and digital tools, including algorithms, data mining and cross-referencing techniques to uncover suspicious patterns, expose hidden connections and sharpen investigative capabilities.





Italy's luxury tourism boom gathers pace as five-star hotel stays double in 17 years

Newswire

Rome: Italy's luxury tourism industry is experiencing a remarkable boom, with overnight stays in the country's five-star hotels more than doubling over the past 17 years, highlighting the growing appeal of premium hospitality, high-end travel experiences and exclusive destinations among international visitors.



Italian Ambassador to Pakistan H.E. Ugo Ciarlatani

A study conducted by research institute Demoskopika has found that stays in Italy's five-star hotels increased by 111.1 per cent between 2008 and 2025, compared with a modest 14.5 per cent increase in overall hotel stays during the same period.

The findings underline how luxury tourism has emerged as one of the most dynamic segments of Italy's visitor economy, generating substantial revenues and attracting an increasingly international clientele.

The expansion has also translated into significant financial gains for the hospitality industry. Five-star and luxury hotels generated an estimated €10.4 billion in revenue in 2025, accounting for more than 17 per cent of the country's total hotel turnover.

According to the study, every overnight stay in a luxury hotel generates an average of €702, more than three times the revenue produced by an average hotel overnight stay.

The figures demonstrate the economic importance of attracting visitors willing to spend more on premium accommodation, exclusive services, fine dining and high-quality tourism experiences.

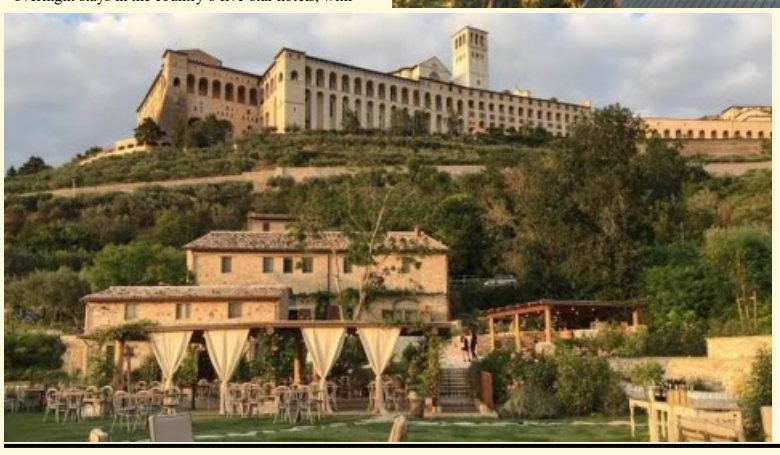
Foreign tourists are playing a particularly important role in the expansion of Italy's high-end hospitality sector. International visitors accounted for 77.7 per cent of overnight stays in the country's five-star hotels, with their share increasing by 7.5 per cent year-on-year.

The growing presence of overseas travellers reflects Italy's enduring international appeal as a destination combining cultural heritage, historic architecture, world-renowned cuisine, fashion, shopping and luxury accommodation.

While domestic tourism remains an important component of the country's visitor economy, the luxury segment is increasingly dependent on international markets, whose travellers contribute significantly to hotel revenues.

The concentration of foreign guests also highlights the importance of strengthening international connectivity, improving tourism services and developing targeted promotional strategies to attract high-spending visitors from major source markets.





Despite the nationwide expansion of luxury hospitality, the economic benefits are distributed unevenly across Italy. According to Demoskopika, the country's premium accommodation market remains heavily concentrated in a relatively small number of major tourist destinations.

Rome alone accounts for almost 20 per cent of overnight stays in high-end hotels, while Bolzano, Venice, Florence and Milan are among the other leading destinations. Together, these five major destinations account for 53.4 per cent of luxury overnight stays, demonstrating the dominance of Italy's established tourism centres.

The concentration becomes even more pronounced when other leading destinations are included. A total of 17 major tourism hubs account for 79.2 per cent of overnight stays in luxury accommodation across the country.

At the regional level, Lazio, Trentino-Alto Adige, Campania, Valle d'Aosta and Sardinia are among the leading areas for premium tourism.

However, the sector's geographical concentration also reveals considerable room for development. The study identifies 25 Italian provinces that do not have a single five-star hotel, indicating that several parts of the country have yet to benefit fully from the expansion of high-end tourism.

The growing popularity of premium travel is also encouraging investment in new accommodation facilities. Italy added 38 luxury hotels in 2025 compared with the previous year, bringing the total number of five-star establishments to 809. The expansion reflects increasing confidence in the country's high-end hospitality market, with investors seeking to capitalise on international demand for exclusive travel experiences.

Despite concerns over overtourism in popular destinations such as Venice, Demoskopika believes Italy still has considerable potential to expand its tourism revenues, particularly by attracting more visitors to premium accommodation and distributing tourist flows more evenly across the country.

The study places Italy among Europe's leading tourism destinations. According to Eurostat figures cited in the research, Italy recorded approximately 535 million overnight stays, followed by Spain with 513 million, France with 472 million and Germany with 440 million. Together, these four countries account for around 60 per cent of all overnight stays across the European Union.

However, Italy's tourism intensity remains below that of some of its major European competitors. The country records 9.1 visitor nights per inhabitant, compared with 10.4 in Spain.

This suggests that Italy still has opportunities to increase tourism activity, provided it can attract additional visitors while managing pressure on popular destinations and improving the distribution of tourism across different regions.

Demoskopika identifies Germany, the United States and the United Kingdom among the leading source markets in terms of tourism spending, highlighting their importance for Italy's future luxury tourism strategy.

Attracting more visitors from these markets, particularly those interested in premium accommodation and high-value experiences, could generate additional revenues for the Italian hospitality industry.

However, the challenge is not simply to increase visitor numbers. Italy also needs to encourage longer stays, higher spending and travel beyond the traditional peak season.

The study therefore points to the importance of developing tourism products that appeal to affluent international visitors throughout the year, rather than concentrating activity in the busiest summer months.



One of the major opportunities identified in the study is extending Italy's tourism season, particularly in the southern regions. Although southern Italy offers considerable cultural, historical and natural attractions, luxury hotel occupancy in some areas can remain below the national average of 37.1 per cent.

Demoskopika suggests that encouraging visitors to travel outside the traditional high season could help address capacity imbalances, improve hotel occupancy and generate more consistent revenues for tourism businesses. Achieving this, however, requires more than promotional campaigns.

Tourists need reliable transport connections, quality accommodation, accessible services and a year-round calendar of cultural and recreational activities.

Discussions at the Global Tourism Forum have similarly highlighted the importance of creating the infrastructure and visitor experiences necessary to attract international travellers beyond the conventional holiday season.

For southern Italy, this could mean greater investment in transport links, cultural events, heritage tourism, gastronomy, wellness facilities and other attractions capable of drawing visitors throughout the year.

The findings suggest that Italy's luxury tourism success story is entering a new phase. While its historic cities and internationally recognised destinations continue to attract millions of visitors, the next opportunity lies in expanding premium hospitality beyond established tourism centres and making the country's diverse regions more accessible. With five-star hotel stays having more than doubled since 2008 and luxury accommodation generating billions of euros annually, Italy's high-end tourism industry has demonstrated its considerable economic potential.

The challenge ahead will be to sustain that growth while addressing geographical imbalances, extending the tourism season and ensuring that the benefits of international travel reach a wider range of destinations.

For Italy, the future of luxury tourism may depend not only on attracting more affluent visitors but also on persuading them to discover the country's lesser-known regions, remain longer and experience its cultural and natural attractions throughout the year.



Counter violent extremism: Why rehabilitation and trust are key to defeating radicalisation

Professor Dr Toaha Qureshi MBE

In the two decades since the horrors of 7/7 left an indelible mark on British society, counterterrorism policies have largely focused on arrests, surveillance, prosecution and containment. While these measures remain essential in confronting terrorism, an equally important question continues to challenge governments and policymakers: how do we prevent individuals from embracing violent extremism in the first place, and, more importantly, how do we bring those who have already crossed that threshold back into society?

My book, COUNTER VIOLENT EXTREMISM, addresses this fundamental challenge by exploring the human dimensions of radicalisation and demonstrating why rehabilitation, trust and meaningful community engagement must become central to sustainable counterterrorism strategies.

Drawing on more than 25 years of experience in counter-extremism, deradicalisation and the rehabilitation of individuals charged with terrorism-related offences in the United Kingdom, I have come to believe that the answer lies not exclusively in enforcement but in understanding, dialogue, sustained engagement and the willingness to offer people a genuine opportunity to change.

Countering violent extremism is not simply about identifying threats and removing dangerous individuals from circulation. It is also about understanding the circumstances that draw people towards radical ideologies, addressing their grievances, rebuilding their confidence in society and providing them with a credible alternative to hatred and violence.

COUNTER VIOLENT EXTREMISM is therefore not another account of why young people become radicalised. It is an attempt to answer a more important question: what can societies do to reverse radicalisation and help individuals reclaim their lives?

My journey in this field has taken me through some of the most challenging environments in British society. I have worked with individuals convicted of terrorism-related offences, including those who once posed serious security concerns. I have also witnessed the devastating consequences of extremism for families and communities, particularly mothers who have lost their children to violence and ideological manipulation.

These experiences have reinforced one fundamental belief: no individual should be regarded as beyond redemption, provided there is a genuine willingness to change and the right support system is available.

One of the central arguments of the book is that effective deradicalisation cannot be imposed through fear, suspicion or coercion alone. It requires credibility and relationships built over time. Individuals who have embraced extremist ideologies are unlikely to abandon them simply because they are instructed to do so. They need opportunities to question their beliefs, confront their misconceptions and rediscover a sense of belonging.

This is where community-based rehabilitation becomes particularly important.



Our approach was therefore based on sustained personal engagement, mentoring, religious and ideological dialogue, family involvement and practical support. Rather than treating individuals merely as security cases, we sought to understand them as human beings capable of transformation.

The results demonstrated the potential of this approach. The programme achieved zero reoffending among convicted terrorism offenders during a ten-year follow-up period, a remarkable outcome that challenged conventional assumptions about rehabilitation and the possibility of change.

The significance of this achievement extends beyond statistics. It demonstrates that carefully designed, community-led interventions can complement traditional security measures and deliver lasting results.

My book also examines the broader social circumstances that can contribute to radicalisation. Alienation, discrimination, social exclusion, identity crises and a lack of meaningful opportunities can create vulnerabilities that extremist organisations are quick to exploit. Addressing these issues requires a comprehensive response involving families, educational institutions, religious leaders, civil society and government agencies.

For Britain, this means recognising the importance of genuine partnerships with communities rather than viewing them merely as instruments of security policy. The experience of the Prevent strategy, despite its controversies and shortcomings, has underlined the importance of listening to communities and recognising their capacity to contribute to solutions.





Over the years, I have worked with people whose backgrounds, experiences and ideological journeys were vastly different. Some had been exposed to extremist networks overseas, while others had become vulnerable to radicalisation within their own communities or through wider ideological influences. What many shared was a profound crisis of identity, belonging and trust.

The lessons, however, are not confined to Britain.

For Pakistan, the subject carries an even greater urgency. Having witnessed the devastating impact of terrorism on the country, including the loss of innocent lives and the suffering of families, I believe Pakistan must increasingly invest in rehabilitation, prevention and community-based approaches alongside its security operations. Military action and law-enforcement measures can weaken terrorist networks, disrupt their operations and restore security. However, lasting peace requires more than defeating armed groups. It demands confronting the ideologies that sustain extremism, preventing vulnerable individuals from being recruited and creating pathways for those willing to abandon violence.

Pakistan's policymakers, religious scholars, educational institutions, security establishment, parents and civil society must recognise that counter-extremism is a collective responsibility. Religious understanding, credible mentoring, educational opportunities, psychological support, vocational training and family engagement can all contribute to preventing radicalisation and facilitating rehabilitation.

The British experience offers valuable lessons, but these must be adapted to Pakistan's own social, cultural and religious realities. There can be no universal formula for deradicalisation. Every society must develop approaches that reflect its circumstances while remaining committed to human dignity, justice and the rule of law.

COUNTER VIOLENT EXTREMISM also reflects my personal journey between two countries and societies that have shaped my understanding of identity, faith and belonging. Having experienced the challenges of British society while remaining deeply connected to my Pakistani roots, I have come to appreciate the importance of dialogue between cultures and communities.

My work has not always been easy. It has brought threats from extremist elements, difficult encounters with individuals imprisoned for terrorism-related offences and emotionally demanding engagements with families affected by violence. Yet it has also provided opportunities to witness extraordinary transformations and the possibility of rebuilding lives that many had considered lost.

Ultimately, the purpose of COUNTER VIOLENT EXTREMISM is not merely to examine why people become radicalised. It is to demonstrate what can be done to reverse that process.

The challenge confronting policymakers and societies today is to move beyond an exclusively reactive approach and develop strategies that prevent extremism before it takes root. We must understand that the distance between a young person drawn towards violence and the same individual building a peaceful family life can be bridged through trust, patience, meaningful intervention and the willingness to offer a second chance. For me, that is the essence of effective counter-extremism: replacing alienation with belonging, hatred with understanding, and violence with hope.

If this book succeeds in encouraging even a small number of policymakers, practitioners, families and community leaders to reconsider how they approach radicalisation and rehabilitation, it will have served its purpose. The fight against extremism cannot be won through force alone. It must also be won through humanity.

Dr. Toaha Bashir Zulqarnain Qureshi MBE is a British intellectual, author, philanthropist, and community leader based in London, United Kingdom.

The school-age population is changing, and the allocation of educational resources must also change

The Paper

At a recent press conference held by the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) on the upcoming 15th Five-Year Plan period, an official stated that the number of children of kindergarten, primary, and junior high school age has peaked, while the number of children of senior high and higher education age continues to grow. The next step will be to optimize the allocation of preschool and compulsory education resources, increase the supply of senior high and higher education places through multiple channels, and better guarantee the right to equal access to education for all groups in urban and rural areas.

The public has long been aware of the changes in the school-age population at various stages. In recent years, some areas have experienced a surplus of kindergarten and primary school places and teachers. Authoritative data shows that during the 14th Five-Year Plan period, the number of students enrolled in kindergartens, primary schools, and junior high schools in my country will decrease by nearly 17 million. This year, at the National People's Congress and the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, "adapting to changes in the structure of the school-age population and promoting the adjustment of the layout and structure of educational resources" was included in the Government Work Report for the first time.

With structural changes occurring in the school-age population, educational resources should naturally adapt and be adjusted accordingly. We must not only "follow the crowd," but also "stay ahead"; we need not only forward-thinking, but also forward-looking planning and action.

Firstly, there is a surplus of preschool and compulsory education resources, which should of course be allocated in a coordinated manner. However, the focus of allocation should not be solely on increasing or decreasing school buildings and places, but rather on revitalizing software resources such as teachers and courses to effectively improve teaching quality.

Simply "transferring" or "diverting" resources is not enough. It is particularly important to note that while some areas are experiencing saturation in preschool and compulsory education resources, there are still shortcomings and gaps in certain areas. This necessitates breaking down barriers between urban and rural areas, between schools, and between educational stages, allowing high-quality educational resources to truly flow freely.

Of course, the decline in student enrollment in some regions and at some grade levels also makes deeper educational reforms possible. With fewer classes and smaller class sizes, classroom formats can become more dynamic, and personalized learning can have more room to take place.

Secondly, the increase in the supply of regular high school and higher education places should also be approached scientifically and prudently, avoiding redundant construction and hasty implementation. Education cannot be calculated solely based on scale; only by leveraging the quantitative changes in the structure of the school-age population to drive qualitative changes in high-quality education development can we truly meet the public's expectation of "access to quality education."

Currently, many places in China have already implemented effective measures to increase the supply of high school students. For example, Nanjing has adopted a combination of "new construction, renovation and expansion + integrated allocation + flexible class sizes" to accommodate the peak of high school enrollment; Guangdong has converted old vocational school campuses into regular high schools, freeing up tens of thousands of places annually; and Xiaoshan District in Hangzhou has implemented "tidal schools" that reserve flexible space according to high school standards, using it during peak junior high school periods and transferring it to high school afterward.



In higher education, it has been revealed that in 2026, "Double First-Class" universities will expand undergraduate enrollment by 24,000, with the majority of the new enrollment slots allocated to majors urgently needed for national strategy and popular with the public. Furthermore, support will be provided to qualified localities to establish several new research-oriented universities and to build a number of high-level vocational undergraduate schools with distinctive characteristics.

Simply put, the so-called multi-channel supply is not just about building more buildings and schools, but also about studying the changing trends of the population curve and reorganizing and revitalizing existing resources.

Ultimately, while the population changes, the bottom line of educational equity must remain unchanged. In the face of demographic shifts, all relevant parties should proactively adapt, continuously expanding the supply of educational resources to areas with net inflows of school-age children into urban areas, promoting the migration of basic public education services, increasing the proportion of migrant children attending public schools, and reducing the educational expenditure burden on migrant children's families. By providing dynamically adapted public services, the foundation of education can be strengthened.

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The views expressed on these pages are that of the writers and do not necessarily reflect Covert's policy.

FS Asim Iftikhar Ahmad

A seasoned diplomat at the helm of Pakistan's foreign policy



Liaqat Ali

Islamabad: With more than three decades of experience in diplomacy, multilateral negotiations and international relations, Ambassador Asim Iftikhar Ahmad, Pakistan's 34th Foreign Secretary, brings extensive diplomatic expertise and a wealth of institutional knowledge to the country's top foreign service position.



Having assumed charge on October 12, 2026, Ambassador Ahmad takes the helm of Pakistan's foreign policy establishment at a time of evolving regional and global dynamics, growing geopolitical complexities and expanding diplomatic opportunities for Islamabad.

His distinguished diplomatic career has been characterised by strategic foresight, extensive international engagement and sustained efforts to advance Pakistan's national interests through bilateral diplomacy, multilateral cooperation and international consensus-building.

Before his appointment as Foreign Secretary, Ambassador Ahmad served as Pakistan's Permanent Representative to the United Nations in New York, where he played an active role in advancing the country's diplomatic priorities and contributing to international initiatives on peace, security and global governance.

One of the significant milestones during his tenure at the United Nations was the unanimous adoption of Security Council Resolution 2788 on the peaceful settlement of disputes during Pakistan's presidency of the Security Council in July 2025.

The achievement reflected the importance of consensus-building and diplomatic engagement in addressing complex international challenges and underscored Pakistan's contribution to multilateral efforts aimed at promoting peaceful conflict resolution.

Ambassador Ahmad has developed extensive expertise in international peace and security, conflict prevention and resolution, peacekeeping, peacebuilding, Security Council reform, global governance and sustainable development.

His association with the United Nations spans nearly three decades, providing him with an in-depth understanding of the organisation's institutional framework, decision-making processes and the challenges confronting the international community.

During Pakistan's 2012-2013 term as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council, he served as Political Coordinator, gaining valuable experience in negotiations on international peace and security issues.

Earlier, from 2009 to 2010, he served as Deputy Chef de Cabinet to the President of the United Nations General Assembly, an assignment that further strengthened his understanding of multilateral diplomacy and international institutional processes.

These responsibilities have equipped him with considerable experience in navigating complex diplomatic negotiations, building international partnerships and developing consensus among countries with differing political and strategic priorities.

Beyond his multilateral assignments, Ambassador Ahmad has held several important ambassadorial positions, representing Pakistan in key diplomatic capitals and international organisations.

From 2022 to 2024, he served as Pakistan's Ambassador to France and Monaco, while also performing the responsibilities of Pakistan's Permanent Delegate to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO).

During this assignment, he represented Pakistan's interests in bilateral engagement with European partners and in international discussions concerning education, science, culture and heritage.

Earlier, from 2017 to 2021, he served as Pakistan's Ambassador to Thailand, where he also represented the country at the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP).

His diplomatic assignments across Asia, Africa and Europe, alongside his extensive experience at the United Nations, have provided him with a broad understanding of international political and economic developments.

Throughout his career, he has dealt with a diverse range of responsibilities, including strengthening bilateral relations, promoting regional cooperation, advancing economic diplomacy and participating in complex multilateral negotiations.

Ambassador Ahmad has also held several senior positions at Pakistan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, contributing to policy formulation, diplomatic coordination and the development of the country's international engagement strategy.

He has served as Foreign Office Spokesperson, a position requiring extensive engagement with domestic and international media on Pakistan's foreign policy priorities, regional developments and major diplomatic initiatives.





He also served as Additional Foreign Secretary for the United Nations and Asia Pacific Divisions, overseeing important areas of Pakistan's bilateral and multilateral diplomatic engagement.

These assignments gave him valuable institutional experience and an understanding of the foreign policy challenges facing Pakistan across different geographical and strategic regions.

His professional background combines practical diplomatic experience with extensive exposure to international organisations, providing him with insights into both the formulation and implementation of foreign policy.

Born into an academic and professional tradition, Ambassador Ahmad's educational background reflects a strong foundation in technical and analytical disciplines.

He is a double gold medallist in Electrical Engineering from the University of Engineering and Technology (UET), Lahore, and also holds a Bachelor of Arts degree from the University of the Punjab.

He joined the Foreign Service of Pakistan in 1993, beginning a diplomatic career that has taken him to some of the world's most important diplomatic capitals and international institutions.

In recognition of his outstanding contributions to diplomacy and public service, the President of Pakistan conferred upon him the civil award Sitara-e-Imtiaz.

Apart from his professional commitments, Ambassador Ahmad is fluent in French and has diverse personal interests, including golf, tennis, snooker and cricket.

Ambassador Ahmad's appointment as Foreign Secretary brings to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs a combination of multilateral experience, bilateral diplomatic exposure and extensive institutional knowledge.

His long association with the United Nations, experience in international negotiations and ambassadorial assignments in major diplomatic capitals have given him a comprehensive understanding of the opportunities and challenges confronting Pakistan in an increasingly interconnected world.

As Foreign Secretary, he is expected to play a central role in translating Pakistan's foreign policy objectives into sustained diplomatic engagement, strengthening international partnerships and safeguarding the country's national interests.

His professional journey reflects a longstanding commitment to the Foreign Service of Pakistan and the pursuit of a resilient, peaceful and prosperous Pakistan.

With more than 33 years of diplomatic experience behind him, Ambassador Asim Iftikhar Ahmad now leads the country's foreign policy machinery, bringing to the office a career shaped by international engagement, consensus-building and an enduring commitment to Pakistan's place in the global community.



Umar Rehman Malik hails completion of one million homes for Sindh flood victims as historic achievement





Abdullah Jan

Islamabad: Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) leader Umar Rehman Malik this week described the completion of one million houses for families affected by the devastating 2022 floods in Sindh as a historic milestone, saying the initiative has transformed the lives of millions of vulnerable people by providing them with permanent shelter, dignity and renewed hope.

In a statement, Malik said the achievement went far beyond the construction of residential units, representing a comprehensive effort to rehabilitate disaster-hit communities, restore livelihoods and enable affected families to rebuild their lives with security and confidence.

He said the sustained efforts of the Sindh government in reconstructing homes and restoring normalcy in flood-affected areas deserved recognition, particularly given the unprecedented scale of destruction caused by the 2022 floods.

Highlighting the programme's distinctive focus on women's empowerment, Malik said the initiative had introduced an important dimension of social and economic inclusion by transferring ownership of houses to women and opening bank accounts in their names.

He observed that providing women with legal ownership of residential properties was a significant step towards strengthening their economic independence, financial security and decision-making authority within households.

According to him, the arrangement would help women move beyond their traditional dependence on male family members for property ownership and financial resources, giving them a stronger stake in their families' long-term security.

Malik said the housing programme had also attracted international appreciation, with representatives of the World Bank, Asian Development Bank and Islamic Development Bank recognising Sindh's inclusive and climate-resilient housing model as an important example of post-disaster rehabilitation.

He said international recognition of the initiative demonstrated its wider relevance, particularly at a time when countries across the world were increasingly confronting the devastating consequences of climate change, natural disasters and extreme weather events.

Emphasising the importance of people-centred development, Malik said the real measure of any public welfare initiative was its ability to deliver tangible benefits to ordinary citizens, especially those belonging to economically disadvantaged and disaster-affected communities.

He noted that the completion of one million homes illustrated how sustained political commitment, effective public policy and institutional efforts could address major humanitarian challenges and provide lasting solutions to vulnerable populations.

Malik particularly appreciated PPP Chairman Bilawal Bhutto Zardari and the Sindh government for their efforts in advancing the housing initiative, saying the programme reflected the party's commitment to rehabilitation, social protection, women's rights and inclusive development.

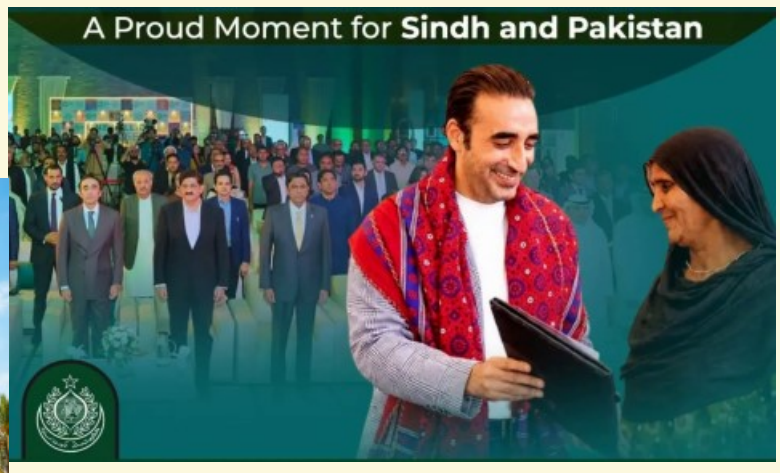
He expressed confidence that the initiative would continue to benefit additional deserving families, enabling them to secure permanent housing and build more stable and prosperous futures.

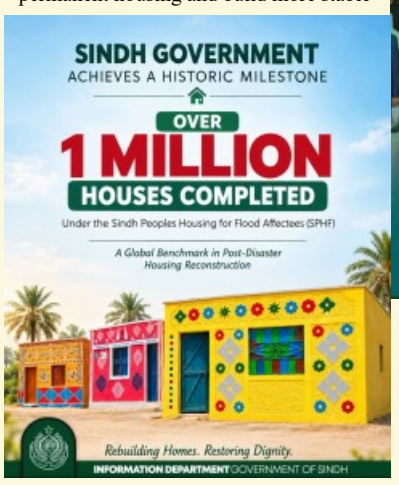


He further said the Pakistan Peoples Party had consistently prioritised public service and remained committed to empowering marginalised sections of society through welfare-oriented policies and development initiatives.

Umar Rehman Malik said the completion of one million houses was not merely an infrastructure achievement but a significant social intervention that had restored hope and security to families who lost their homes and possessions in one of the country's worst natural disasters.

He said such initiatives demonstrated the importance of placing ordinary people, particularly women and vulnerable communities, at the centre of development planning and national reconstruction efforts.









Kazakhstan unveils $1 billion climate investment opportunity at COP31, targets 10GW renewable energy capacity

Newswire

Astana: Kazakhstan has unveiled an ambitious climate investment initiative at the 31st United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP31) in Antalya, Türkiye, seeking to mobilise billions of dollars in financing to accelerate its transition towards clean energy, modernise its power infrastructure and strengthen environmental sustainability.

The launch of the Just Energy Transition Investment Platform (QaJET) marks a significant step in Kazakhstan's efforts to turn its climate commitments into tangible investment opportunities, with the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) offering up to $100 million in concessional financing and grants, alongside the possibility of up to $1 billion in direct financing on a non-committal basis.

The initiative reflects Kazakhstan's growing ambition to position itself as a regional leader in the green energy transition while attracting international financial institutions, development partners and private investors to support its long-term environmental and economic objectives.

Developed in cooperation with the Kazakh government, QaJET is designed to accelerate renewable energy development, modernise electricity transmission and distribution networks, introduce energy storage systems and expand electrification across the country. A key objective is to commission at least 10 gigawatts of renewable energy capacity by 2035.

The platform is intended to bridge the gap between climate policy commitments and the practical financing required to implement large-scale energy projects. By bringing together public-sector institutions, international development banks and private investors, Kazakhstan hopes to create a more coordinated investment environment capable of delivering sustainable infrastructure and long-term economic benefits.

The EBRD's proposed financial support is particularly significant, offering the prospect of concessional resources and grants to help advance priority projects, reduce investment barriers and encourage further private-sector participation. However, the potential $1 billion financing remains non-binding and does not constitute a confirmed funding commitment.

The launch was announced at Kazakhstan's National Pavilion at COP31, where international partners highlighted the importance of transforming climate ambitions into bankable projects and stronger investment partnerships.

QaJET forms part of the broader Kazakhstan Country Climate Investment Platform (QCIP), a comprehensive framework aimed at mobilising domestic and international capital for priority climate and environmental projects.

Operating under the Ministry of Ecology and Natural Resources, the initiative brings together government agencies, international financial institutions, climate funds and private investors. The International Center for Green Technologies and Investment Projects (IGTIC) serves as its secretariat, coordinating institutional cooperation and supporting the development of investment proposals.

The launch was accompanied by the signing of two memorandums of understanding to strengthen institutional cooperation. One agreement was concluded between IGTIC and the Development Bank of Kazakhstan, while another brought together the Ministries of Energy and Ecology and QaJET partners led by the EBRD.









These arrangements are expected to strengthen coordination between national institutions and international financial partners, helping create a pipeline of projects capable of attracting investment and accelerating Kazakhstan's green transformation.

Green ambitions take centre stage

Beyond the investment platform, Kazakhstan's presence at COP31 has provided an opportunity to showcase its broader environmental priorities, technological innovations and commitment to sustainable development.

Operating under the theme Continuity of Times: Past, Present and Future, the country's 250-square-metre National Pavilion presents a wide-ranging exhibition of environmental conservation programmes, green technologies and investment opportunities.

The exhibition combines Kazakhstan's natural heritage with its ambitions for a technologically advanced and environmentally responsible future. Among its distinctive features are artificial intelligence-powered digital guides representing the Turan tigers Umit and Amur, highlighting efforts to protect biodiversity and restore endangered wildlife populations.

Visitors are also introduced to initiatives aimed at restoring the Northern Aral Sea, recovering saiga antelope populations and planting saxaul forests across the dried seabed of the former Aral Sea. These projects reflect the country's determination to address environmental challenges that have affected ecosystems, livelihoods and regional development for decades.

The pavilion further highlights the Central Asian Green Shield programme, which focuses on regional environmental protection and combating land degradation.

Another important initiative is KazMethane, a digital monitoring, reporting and verification platform designed to improve the measurement of methane emissions and detect potential leaks. The technology is intended to strengthen transparency in emissions monitoring and support efforts to reduce the environmental footprint of industrial activities.

Industrial waste recycling, the adoption of best available technologies and the promotion of resource-efficient production methods also feature prominently in the exhibition.

Traditional Kazakh craftsmanship has been incorporated into the pavilion's environmental message through a quraq korpe, a traditional patchwork quilt mattress. The installation symbolises the principles of resource efficiency, reuse and responsible consumption, reinforcing the global Zero Waste concept through an expression of the country's cultural heritage.

38 events to advance climate cooperation

Kazakhstan's COP31 programme also includes 38 thematic events bringing together government representatives, international organisations, financial institutions, businesses and environmental experts.

The discussions cover a broad range of issues, including climate finance, industrial decarbonisation, energy transition, carbon markets, water security, biodiversity conservation and technological innovation.

Particular attention is being given to environmental challenges requiring regional cooperation, including the protection of the Caspian Sea ecosystem, restoration of the Northern Aral Sea, combating desertification and expanding renewable energy production.

These priorities underline Kazakhstan's recognition that climate change and environmental degradation transcend national borders and require coordinated responses involving neighbouring countries and international partners.

For a country seeking to diversify its energy mix while modernising its economy, the transition towards renewable energy also represents an opportunity to attract new investment, encourage technological innovation and strengthen long-term economic resilience.

The launch of QaJET at COP31 therefore carries significance beyond the announcement of potential financing. It represents an effort to establish a structured mechanism through which climate objectives can be translated into investment-ready projects, supported by international expertise and financial partnerships.

With its 2035 renewable energy target, expanded cooperation with the EBRD and a wider programme of environmental initiatives, Kazakhstan is seeking to demonstrate that the green transition can serve both as an environmental imperative and a driver of economic development.

As climate negotiations increasingly focus on implementation, financing and measurable outcomes, Kazakhstan's message at COP31 is clear: the next phase of climate action must move beyond declarations and commitments towards practical projects, stronger partnerships and investments capable of delivering lasting results.



PORTUGAL – The land of poets

Julie's journey to freedom: Portugal's former circus elephant finds a new home in Europe's pioneering sanctuary



Liaquat Ali

After decades of captivity, Portugal's last circus elephant is enjoying a remarkable new chapter of life in a vast natural sanctuary in the Alentejo region, where freedom, space and the ability to make her own choices have transformed her daily existence.

Nearly four months ago, Julie, Portugal's last circus elephant, embarked on a journey that would fundamentally change her life. After spending decades in captivity, the elephant was transferred to a sprawling sanctuary in southern Portugal, where she is now discovering the joys of freedom, independence and a more natural existence.

Julie is the first resident of Pangea Sanctuary, a 400-hectare estate in the Alentejo region that represents one of Europe's most ambitious initiatives dedicated to providing elephants with a more humane and natural environment. The sanctuary is designed to offer a permanent refuge to elephants rescued from circuses, zoos and other captive settings, giving them an opportunity to experience a life far removed from the restrictions of traditional captivity.

For Julie, the transition has been both gradual and remarkable.

When she first arrived, the elephant was understandably hesitant, unfamiliar with her surroundings and uncertain about the people responsible for her care. However, as days passed, her apprehension began to give way to curiosity and confidence, allowing her to gradually explore the vast landscape that is now her home.

"Julie, when she arrived, was shy. It is like anyone who comes to a new place, who does not know anyone and does not know the surroundings," elephant keeper Johnny Nascimento recalls.

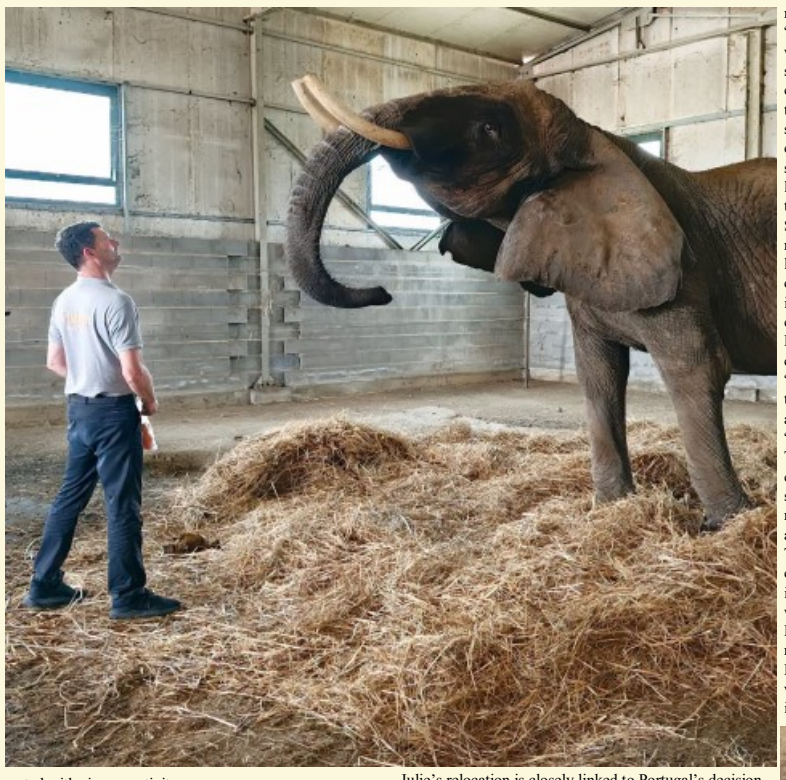
"Slowly, about a week later, she began to trust and to decide what she wanted to do outside. There are many trails, so she has been tidying up the house and, in this case, making it her own home."

The transformation is evident in Julie's behaviour. Rather than remaining confined to a limited space, she now has the freedom to roam across extensive grounds, explore different habitats and spend time wherever she feels comfortable.

One of her favourite activities is wallowing in muddy pools, an instinctive behaviour that elephants enjoy for cooling their bodies, protecting their skin and simply having fun.

Julie's new environment stands in sharp contrast to the conditions in which she spent much of her life.

Captured in Africa approximately 40 years ago, she was brought to Portugal at a young age before joining the Victor Hugo Cardinali circus in 1988. For decades, her life revolved around the routines and restrictions associated with circus captivity.





Julie's relocation is closely linked to Portugal's decision to prohibit the use of wild animals in circuses.

The country adopted legislation banning wild animals from circus performances in 2018. However, the law was given a transition period and only came fully into force in 2024, allowing circus operators time to adapt and arrange suitable destinations for animals that had spent years in captivity.

Julie was transferred to Pangea Sanctuary in June following a voluntary agreement with the Victor Hugo Cardinali circus.

Her arrival has become an important milestone in the effort to provide captive elephants with a more appropriate environment, while also highlighting the challenges associated with finding permanent homes for animals affected by changing animal-welfare legislation.

The sanctuary was established precisely to address this growing need.

Its founders recognise that the end of circus performances involving wild animals does not automatically resolve the question of where those animals should live or how they should be cared for throughout the remainder of their lives.

Providing a safe, spacious and permanent environment is therefore central to Pangea's mission.

Julie may be the sanctuary's first resident, but she is unlikely to be its last.

According to estimates cited by the sanctuary, more than 600 elephants, including both African and Asian species, are currently living in captivity across Europe. Many remain in zoos, circuses and other facilities where their opportunities to move freely and display natural behaviours may be restricted.

For elephants, which are highly intelligent, social and physically active animals, the quality of their living environment is particularly important.

In the wild, elephants can travel considerable distances, explore changing landscapes, search for food and water, and interact with other members of their species. Captive environments, even when providing basic care, cannot always replicate these conditions.

Although Julie received care during those years, her previous living conditions offered limited opportunities for physical activity and independent movement.

At Pangea, the situation is entirely different.

"She has been with us for just over three months and has already gained about 100 kilos in that time, which is perfectly normal," says Ryan Hockley, manager of the sanctuary.

"Where she was before, she did not really have the opportunity to exercise. She was just in a shed most of the time. Whereas now she has free access 24 hours a day. She can be in the shelter, she can be in any habitat. She literally owns everything; she makes her own choices."

The freedom to make decisions about her daily routine is perhaps the most significant change in Julie's life.

She can choose when to venture outdoors, where to walk, when to rest and which areas of the sanctuary to explore. There is no fixed schedule dictating where she must spend her time, allowing her to develop a routine according to her own preferences.

The sanctuary's philosophy centres on providing animals with the space and autonomy they need to express natural behaviours, rather than simply replacing one form of confinement with another.

Julie's growing confidence, increased weight and willingness to explore are seen as encouraging indicators of her adjustment to the new environment.



Pangea Sanctuary hopes to offer an alternative for elephants whose circumstances make relocation to a more natural environment desirable or necessary.

"I think it is extremely important that someone has done what we are doing, that someone has created an elephant sanctuary," Hockley says. "There are more than 600 elephants in Europe, Asian and African, and a proportion of those elephants are not in ideal conditions." The sanctuary's long-term vision is to create a refuge where elephants can spend the remainder of their lives in surroundings that prioritise their physical and psychological well-being. The choice of Alentejo as the location for the sanctuary was far from accidental.

Situated in southern Portugal, the region is known for its relatively warm climate, expansive countryside, open landscapes and distinctive natural environment. These characteristics make it particularly suitable for an initiative seeking to recreate some of the conditions elephants might encounter in their native habitats.

For Hockley, Portugal offers an especially attractive combination of climate and geography.

"I think Portugal is the ideal choice," he says, explaining that the region's weather and landscape can evoke the atmosphere of parts of Africa.

"The climate gives me that feeling of being in Africa."

The vast estate also provides the space necessary for elephants to move around without being restricted to small enclosures. Its extensive trails, open areas and natural features create opportunities for exploration and activity throughout the day.

The Alentejo landscape, with its broad horizons and comparatively mild winters, offers a setting that stands in striking contrast to the confined environments in which many captive elephants have spent their lives.

For now, Julie enjoys the privilege of being the sole resident of a sanctuary built around her needs.

Her days are increasingly shaped by her own choices, whether exploring the estate, resting in sheltered areas or indulging in her favourite mud baths.

The change may appear simple, but for an animal that spent decades under human control, the ability to decide where to go and how to spend her time represents a profound departure from her previous existence.

Pangea Sanctuary, meanwhile, is looking beyond its first resident. Its ambition is to gradually expand its operations and welcome more elephants in need of a permanent home. The estate is expected to have the capacity to accommodate between 20 and 30 elephants once its development reaches the intended scale.

Such an expansion would place the sanctuary among the significant elephant-refuge initiatives in Europe, providing a potential lifeline for animals whose circumstances require a different approach to captivity.

The challenge will be to ensure that growth remains consistent with the sanctuary's commitment to spacious habitats, individual care and an environment that allows elephants to exercise greater autonomy. Julie's experience offers an encouraging glimpse of what that future might look like.

After decades spent living according to the demands of a circus, she is now free to explore a landscape of her own, to rest when she chooses and to enjoy the simple pleasures of an expansive natural environment.

At Pangea, she is no longer merely an animal being accommodated in a facility. She is the first inhabitant of a place designed around the idea that elephants deserve more than survival in captivity.

And as she continues to discover the trails, pools and open spaces of Alentejo, Julie is gradually turning a sanctuary into something far more personal: a home. Her story is also a reminder that the end of an era of animal performances can mark the beginning of another, one in which compassion, freedom and the welfare of animals take centre stage. For Portugal's former circus elephant, the greatest spectacle is no longer performed before an audience.

It is the quiet, everyday experience of living on her own terms.



Trump nominates Natalie Baker as US ambassador to Pakistan amid renewed diplomatic engagement

Celina Ali

Islamabad: US President Donald Trump this week nominated career diplomat Natalie Baker, who is currently heading the US diplomatic mission in Islamabad as chargé d'affaires, as Washington's next ambassador to Pakistan, signalling an important step towards strengthening diplomatic engagement with the strategically significant South Asian country.

The nomination comes at a time of renewed diplomatic engagement between Islamabad and Washington, with both sides exploring opportunities to expand cooperation in trade, investment, regional security and other areas of mutual interest.

Baker's proposed appointment also assumes added significance against the backdrop of Pakistan's increasingly visible diplomatic role in regional affairs, particularly its efforts to facilitate dialogue and help ease tensions surrounding the US-Iran conflict.

The evolving regional situation has enhanced the importance of Washington's engagement with Islamabad, given Pakistan's geographical position, diplomatic relationships and contacts with key regional stakeholders.

In its official announcement, the White House nominated Baker as Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the United States of America to the Islamic Republic of Pakistan.

"Natalie Baker, of Texas, a Career Member of the Senior Foreign Service, Class of Minister-Counselor, to be Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the United States of America to the Islamic Republic of Pakistan," the White House statement said.

The nomination has been forwarded to the US Senate for consideration and confirmation.

Baker will formally assume the ambassadorial position after completing the requisite confirmation process. Her nomination marks an important move towards appointing a Senate-confirmed ambassador to head the US Embassy in Islamabad following an extended period during which the diplomatic mission has operated under chargé d'affaires leadership.

Baker has been serving as US chargé d'affaires in Pakistan since January 2025. She previously assumed the position of deputy chief of mission at the American Embassy in Islamabad in August 2024 and subsequently took charge of the mission following the departure of Ambassador Donald Blome, the last US ambassador to Pakistan confirmed by the Senate.

During her tenure in Islamabad, Baker has remained engaged with Pakistani government officials on a range of bilateral and regional issues, including economic cooperation, trade negotiations, investment opportunities and regional security developments.

Her nomination is expected to provide continuity to the Trump administration's diplomatic engagement with Pakistan while offering an opportunity to advance bilateral discussions under the leadership of a formally appointed ambassador. For Washington, Pakistan continues to occupy an important position in its regional diplomatic calculations because of its strategic location, relationships across the region and influence in developments affecting South Asia and the wider Middle East.

Although relations between the two countries have experienced periods of strain over security concerns and differing regional priorities, both governments have continued to explore avenues for cooperation and maintain high-level diplomatic contacts.

Economic engagement has increasingly emerged as a key pillar of the renewed relationship. Islamabad and Washington have been examining possibilities for expanding bilateral trade, encouraging American investment and developing commercial partnerships in sectors offering opportunities for businesses in both countries. The two sides have also shown interest in broadening economic interaction beyond traditional areas of cooperation, with trade and investment featuring prominently in their diplomatic engagement. Regional security remains another important dimension of the relationship. Developments in the Middle East, particularly tensions involving Iran and the United States, have added a new layer to regional diplomacy and highlighted the importance of maintaining communication with countries capable of engaging multiple regional stakeholders. Pakistan's diplomatic contacts and its efforts to encourage dialogue amid regional tensions have brought additional attention to Islamabad's role in efforts aimed at preventing further escalation and promoting stability.

Against this backdrop, Baker's nomination is being viewed as an important development in Washington's efforts to maintain a sustained diplomatic presence in Pakistan and strengthen engagement on a broader range of bilateral and regional issues.

A career member of the US Senior Foreign Service, Baker brings considerable diplomatic and policy experience to the proposed assignment.

She holds a bachelor's degree from Princeton University, a master's degree in public policy from Harvard University and is also a graduate of the US National War College.

Her professional background and previous experience in Islamabad are expected to provide continuity in the functioning of the US diplomatic mission as Washington pursues its engagement with Pakistan.



The Senate confirmation process will determine the next stage of her appointment. Once confirmed, Baker will formally take over as the US ambassador, placing her at the forefront of American diplomatic engagement with Islamabad at a time when both countries are seeking to expand economic cooperation, strengthen regional coordination and establish a more sustained framework for bilateral relations.

Japan funds $59,764 water supply project to provide clean drinking water to 6,000 people in Mansehra



Abdullah Jan

Islamabad: Japan has financed a major community water supply project in Mansehra, providing safe drinking water to more than 6,000 residents of Village Bakki in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and easing the daily hardships faced by women and children in accessing this essential resource. Japanese Ambassador to Pakistan Akamatsu Shuichi inaugurated the project this week, marking another milestone in Japan's efforts to support grassroots development, improve public health and strengthen people-to-people ties with Pakistan.

The project, titled "Installation of Water Supply System in Village Bakki, Mansehra, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa", was implemented by Friends Welfare Association (FWA) Pakistan with financial assistance of $59,764 from the Government of Japan under its Grant Assistance for Grassroots Human Security Projects (GGP) programme.

Member of the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Assembly Sardar Shahjehan Yousaf, Additional Deputy Commissioner of Mansehra Asad Mehmood Lodhi, officials of the Japanese Embassy, FWA representatives, members of the local Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) Committee and community members attended the inauguration ceremony.

The initiative addresses the longstanding shortage of safe drinking water in Village Bakki, where residents, particularly women and girls, have traditionally faced considerable difficulties in collecting water for their households.

Under the project, FWA successfully constructed a gravity-flow water supply system comprising 6,013 metres of galvanised iron main supply pipelines and a water intake tank, ensuring a more reliable supply of clean water to the local population.

The Japanese-funded initiative was supplemented by contributions from FWA and the local community, which provided additional resources for excavation, transportation of construction materials and water quality testing to ensure the safety and reliability of the system.

Recognising that the sustainability of water infrastructure depends on effective local management, FWA also established a 20-member WASH Committee and arranged specialised training for its members.

The training covered water quality management, hygiene awareness and the operation and maintenance of the newly installed system, enabling the community to take an active role in preserving the facility and ensuring its continued functioning.

The project is expected to bring significant improvements to the daily lives of more than 6,000 residents by reducing the time and physical effort required to collect water, particularly for women and girls, who traditionally shoulder much of this responsibility.

Improved access to safe drinking water is also expected to contribute to better public health, reduce the risk of waterborne diseases, provide children with greater opportunities to concentrate on their education and improve the overall living standards of the community.

Addressing the inauguration ceremony, Ambassador Akamatsu congratulated FWA on the successful completion of the project and underscored the importance of access to safe drinking water as a fundamental requirement for improving people's lives and promoting sustainable societal development.

He observed that the availability of clean water closer to households would significantly ease the daily burden on women and girls, allowing them more time for education and other productive activities. The ambassador also highlighted the wider benefits of the initiative, saying improved water access would contribute to better community health, create greater educational opportunities for children and enhance the overall quality of life.

Emphasising the importance of maintaining the newly established infrastructure, Akamatsu called for continued community participation and proper management to ensure that the water supply system remained functional and benefited residents over the long term.



He reaffirmed Japan's commitment to supporting Pakistan's sustainable development through grassroots initiatives that directly address the basic needs of vulnerable communities.

The ambassador expressed the hope that the newly inaugurated water supply system would not only improve living conditions in Village Bakki but also serve as a lasting symbol of friendship and cooperation between Japan and Pakistan.

Japan's Grant Assistance for Grassroots Human Security Projects has supported community-level initiatives in Pakistan, focusing on essential sectors such as healthcare, education, water supply, sanitation and social development.

The Mansehra project reflects the importance of development cooperation that goes beyond large-scale infrastructure by directly addressing the everyday needs of local populations.

By combining Japanese financial assistance, the expertise of a local development organisation and community participation, the initiative has established a sustainable water supply facility that is expected to benefit thousands of people for years to come.

For the residents of Village Bakki, the project represents more than the installation of pipelines and a water tank. It promises easier access to a basic necessity, better health prospects and a future in which children, particularly girls, can devote more time to education rather than spending hours collecting water.

The initiative also reinforces the longstanding partnership between Japan and Pakistan through practical cooperation aimed at improving human security and the well-being of ordinary citizens.

European Union

EU moves to rein in influencers, addictive online features and deceptive digital marketing

Covert Report

Brussels: The European Union is preparing a major overhaul of its consumer protection framework to crack down on misleading influencer marketing, deceptive online practices and addictive digital features, seeking to give millions of Europeans greater control over their online activities, personal information and spending.

The European Commission is set to unveil its proposed Digital Fairness Act (DFA), a new legislative initiative aimed at closing gaps in existing digital regulations and protecting consumers from increasingly sophisticated commercial practices employed by online platforms, gaming companies and digital advertisers. The proposed legislation would introduce stricter obligations for technology companies and online businesses, including a ban on manipulative website designs, tougher transparency requirements for influencer promotions and restrictions on certain features targeting children.



Ambassador of the European Union to Pakistan H. E. Mr Raimundas Karoblis

It would also require digital platforms to provide users with the option of switching off addictive features, while strengthening their rights to access human customer service representatives and obtain clear information about subscriptions and payments.

Under the proposed framework, companies could face financial penalties of up to six per cent of their annual turnover in cases involving large-scale violations.

The initiative comes amid growing concerns in Brussels that existing European legislation covering data protection, artificial intelligence and online content has not sufficiently addressed the commercial practices increasingly shaping consumers' digital experiences.

Official figures cited in the draft proposal indicate that problematic digital practices cost European consumers an estimated €10.3 billion annually, highlighting the economic consequences of misleading advertising, manipulative purchasing techniques and other unfair online practices.

A central feature of the proposed legislation is a ban on so-called "dark patterns", a term used to describe digital design techniques that manipulate users into making decisions they might otherwise avoid.

Such practices include confusing website layouts, misleading buttons, hidden cancellation options and deliberately complicated procedures that encourage consumers to purchase products, subscribe to services or agree to settings without fully understanding the consequences.

The European Commission is particularly concerned about the widespread use of these techniques by online platforms and commercial websites.

EU consumer protection chief Michael McGrath has previously stressed the need to intensify efforts against unfair commercial practices, citing data indicating that 97 per cent of popular online platforms employ some form of dark pattern.

The proposed legislation aims to ensure that consumers can make informed choices without being manipulated by website designs or digital interfaces deliberately structured to influence their behaviour.

Another important provision would target "drip pricing", a practice in which businesses initially advertise a lower price but reveal additional charges, service fees or other costs only towards the final stages of a purchase.

Under the proposed rules, consumers would have to be informed of the full price of an order before completing the checkout process, preventing businesses from concealing additional expenses until the last moment.

The Digital Fairness Act would also introduce stricter requirements for commercial promotions through social media influencers.

Under the proposed framework, influencers and brands would be required to clearly identify paid promotional content through explicit labels such as "advertisement", ensuring that audiences can distinguish commercial endorsements from independent opinions or personal recommendations.

The move is intended to address concerns that consumers, particularly younger audiences, are increasingly exposed to marketing messages presented as ordinary social media content.

Influencer marketing has become an important component of the digital advertising industry, with brands frequently relying on online personalities to promote products and services to millions of followers.

However, the absence of clear disclosures in some promotional material has raised concerns about transparency, consumer manipulation and the potential promotion of unsuitable products.

The proposed rules seek to make commercial relationships more visible and ensure that consumers understand when an influencer is being paid or otherwise compensated to endorse a product or service.

Protecting minors from potentially exploitative commercial practices is another major priority of the proposed legislation.

The EU wants to prohibit gaming companies from offering children certain "pay-to-win" and "pay-to-progress" features that encourage players to spend additional money to gain advantages or advance more quickly in games.

The proposal would also require companies to display the real-world monetary value of virtual currencies used in online games.

The measure is intended to prevent children from losing track of how much they are actually spending when purchasing virtual coins, tokens or other digital items.

European policymakers are increasingly concerned that gaming platforms can encourage repeated spending through reward mechanisms, in-game purchases and features designed to keep users engaged for extended periods.

The wider legislation also seeks to address addictive online features by requiring platforms to give users greater control over elements that encourage excessive engagement.

The proposed legislation would introduce additional safeguards for consumers signing up for free trials and subscription-based services.

Companies would be required to remind users when a free trial period is approaching its end, providing clear information about the termination date and the amount they will be charged if they decide to continue using the service.

The measure aims to prevent consumers from being unexpectedly transferred to paid subscriptions or charged for services after promotional periods expire.

The Commission also wants consumers to have access to human customer service representatives when they request them, addressing growing frustration over businesses relying exclusively on automated systems and chatbots.

Consumer advocates have argued that automated customer service can make it difficult for users to resolve complicated complaints, obtain refunds or cancel unwanted subscriptions.

The proposed provision seeks to ensure that consumers are not left without meaningful assistance when dealing with online businesses.

The proposed legislation has received support from consumer rights organisations, which have long called for stronger protection against manipulative commercial practices in the digital economy.

Agustin Reyna of the European Consumer Organisation described the initiative as a much-needed instrument for restoring consumers' control over the time and money they spend online.

The proposal is also part of a wider European debate over the growing influence of digital platforms and the effectiveness of existing regulatory mechanisms.

Brussels has already introduced extensive legislation governing online content, digital services and technology companies. However, concerns persist that gaps remain in consumer protection, particularly where commercial practices exploit the psychological and behavioural vulnerabilities of users.

Spanish EU lawmaker Laura Ballarin Cereza said the proposed legislation was intended to create a safer online environment for both children and adults.

She argued that the new framework would fill existing gaps, emphasising that consumer protection law should serve as a safety net for people exposed to unfair commercial practices.

Despite welcoming the proposed initiative, consumer advocacy groups have cautioned that stronger legislation will have limited impact unless it is properly implemented and enforced.

Euroconsumers, an organisation representing consumer interests across several European countries, has stressed that effective enforcement is essential to ensuring that companies comply with the rules.





The organisation has warned that the European Union must move beyond introducing new legal obligations and ensure that regulatory authorities have the capacity and determination to hold companies accountable.

Financial watchdog NGO Finance Watch has also welcomed aspects of the proposed restrictions on dark patterns but argued that the measures do not go far enough to protect consumers in financial services.

The organisation warned that significant gaps remain in the draft framework, particularly concerning the use of influencers to promote financial products. It expressed concern that companies could continue paying social media personalities to advertise risky investments, potentially exposing consumers to misleading financial information and inappropriate investment decisions.

Finance Watch had previously raised concerns about the growing influence of financial influencers and the risks associated with misleading online investment advice.

These concerns underline the challenge facing European regulators as social media increasingly becomes a platform for marketing financial products and investment opportunities to audiences that may lack the expertise to assess associated risks.

The proposed Digital Fairness Act comes as Brussels continues to expand its regulatory approach to the digital economy, particularly regarding the protection of children and vulnerable users.

The European Union has already introduced sweeping requirements under its Digital Services Act, while policymakers are also examining additional measures aimed at restricting children's exposure to potentially harmful online environments.

The broader debate includes proposals concerning children's access to social media, platform accountability and the responsibility of technology companies to ensure safer digital experiences for minors.

The latest initiative reflects the Commission's view that regulating online content alone is insufficient and that consumer protection must also address the commercial mechanisms through which digital platforms generate revenue. With online services increasingly influencing shopping habits, entertainment, financial decisions and everyday communication, European policymakers are seeking to ensure that technological innovation does not come at the expense of consumer rights.

The Digital Fairness Act is intended to establish clearer boundaries for digital businesses while giving consumers greater transparency, choice and protection.

Its effectiveness, however, will ultimately depend on how comprehensively the rules address emerging online practices and how consistently European authorities enforce them across the digital marketplace.





Pakistan, UK agree to deepen cooperation against terrorism, organised crime

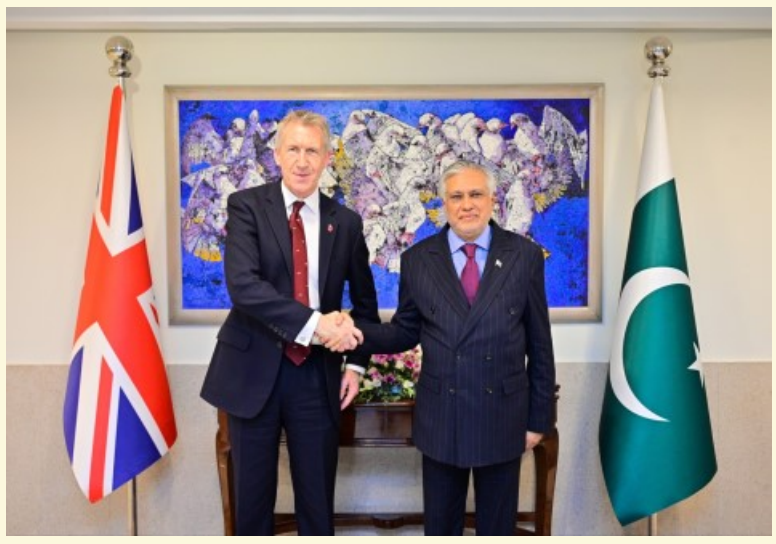
Celina Ali

Islamabad: Pakistan and the United Kingdom this week agreed to strengthen practical security cooperation to combat terrorism, serious organised crime, illegal migration and visa fraud, with a renewed focus on disrupting criminal networks, enhancing intelligence sharing and improving law-enforcement capabilities.

The understanding was reached during the visit of UK Security Minister Dan Jarvis to Pakistan, where he held a series of high-level meetings with senior Pakistani ministers, military officials and law-enforcement authorities to discuss shared security challenges and identify areas for enhanced bilateral cooperation.

During his visit, Jarvis met Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Senator Mohammad Ishaq Dar and Interior Minister Mohsin Naqvi, with discussions focusing on regional security, particularly the evolving situation in Afghanistan, counter-terrorism cooperation and efforts to tackle serious organised crime.

The two sides explored ways to strengthen operational coordination, improve the exchange of vital information and develop institutional capabilities to counter terrorist and criminal networks operating across borders.



The discussions also covered illegal migration and visa fraud, issues that require closer collaboration between the relevant authorities of both countries to prevent exploitation of migration channels and protect vulnerable communities.

The visit reflected the growing importance attached by Islamabad and London to practical security cooperation, particularly as transnational threats increasingly require coordinated responses, effective intelligence sharing and stronger enforcement mechanisms.

UK Security Minister Dan Jarvis said Pakistan and Britain faced common security challenges and could achieve better results by working together.



High Commissioner of United Kingdom to Pakistan Jane Marriott



"The UK and Pakistan face shared threats, and we are stronger when we confront them together. My visit has focused on deepening the partnership that helps keep British people safe," he said. He observed that terrorism, serious organised crime, illegal migration and visa fraud were challenges that transcended national borders and required practical cooperation with trusted international partners.

"Tackling them demands practical cooperation with trusted partners – cooperation that protects communities in both our countries," Jarvis said.

The British minister said his visit was aimed at translating the longstanding relationship between the two countries into tangible outcomes through stronger collaboration against criminal networks, improved information-sharing arrangements and enhanced institutional capabilities. "This visit is about turning a strong relationship into real results: disrupting criminal networks, improving how we share vital information and building the capabilities that protect the UK," he added. The engagement also highlighted the significance of Pakistan's role in regional security discussions, particularly in view of developments in Afghanistan and their implications for counter-terrorism efforts and wider regional stability.

Both countries have a shared interest in preventing terrorist and criminal groups from exploiting cross-border vulnerabilities, while strengthening cooperation among security agencies to address emerging threats.

The latest engagement is expected to contribute to closer coordination between Pakistani and British authorities, reinforcing bilateral efforts to safeguard citizens, combat transnational crime and address security challenges through sustained institutional cooperation.



“What you do makes a difference, and you have to decide what kind of difference you want to make.”
- Jane Goodall

COVERT
TRUTH UNFOLD
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“Success isn't about the end result, it's about what you learn along the way.” - Vera Wang

Italy accuses EU allies of failing to strengthen Red Sea shipping security



Newswire

Rome: Italy’s Defence Minister Guido Crosetto has criticised European Union member states for failing to take concrete measures to strengthen maritime security in the Red Sea, warning that the bloc’s naval mission remains inadequately supported despite growing threats to international shipping.

Crosetto said European governments had yet to respond meaningfully to his calls for additional naval deployments and resources to reinforce Operation Aspides, the EU’s maritime security mission launched in 2024 to protect commercial vessels from attacks by Yemen’s Iran-aligned Houthi movement.

Speaking in Rome on November 10, the Italian defence minister expressed disappointment over the lack of tangible progress, despite raising the issue with European partners and securing an understanding from EU foreign policy chief Kaja Kallas.

“I have yet to see anything concrete,” Crosetto said, while acknowledging that Kallas had fully understood the importance of Italy’s concerns and the need to strengthen the mission.

In September, Crosetto urged the European Union to reinforce Aspides as attacks on commercial shipping and growing instability across the Middle East heightened concerns about the security of vital international maritime corridors.

Following the Italian minister’s appeal, Kallas wrote to the bloc’s 27 member states, urging them to increase their contributions to the naval operation. She indicated that more than 10 warships would be required to make the mission sufficiently effective.

However, discussions among EU governments have so far failed to produce a concrete agreement on additional deployments. Differences over military resources and the reluctance of some member states to commit naval assets have reportedly complicated efforts to expand the operation.

Crosetto also questioned the unequal distribution of responsibilities among European countries, arguing that Italy was shouldering a disproportionately large share of the burden despite having fewer resources than several of its European partners.

“About one third of European operations depend on Italy’s contribution. Other countries, far larger than us, contribute much, much less,” he said.

Emphasising the need for greater collective responsibility, Crosetto argued that European countries should contribute fairly if they considered maritime security operations strategically important.

The minister’s remarks highlight growing divisions within the European Union over military burden-sharing at a time when instability in the Middle East is threatening major commercial shipping routes and international energy supplies.

The security situation has become increasingly complicated amid the US-Israel war on Iran, which has disrupted maritime traffic through strategically important waterways, including the Bab el-Mandeb Strait and the Strait of Hormuz.

The disruption has raised concerns about shipping costs, energy security and additional inflationary pressures on the global economy.

The Red Sea and the adjoining Suez Canal remain particularly important for international commerce, providing a vital connection between European and Asian markets. Any prolonged disruption to shipping through the region can force vessels to take longer alternative routes, increasing transportation costs and delaying deliveries.

The economic implications are especially significant for Italy. According to Assarmatori, one of the country’s principal shipowners’ associations, approximately 40 per cent of Italy’s international trade passes through the Suez Canal at the northern end of the Red Sea.

The Houthi movement has intensified attacks on commercial shipping and strategic infrastructure, further complicating efforts to restore confidence among international shipping operators. Saudi Arabia has also carried out strikes against Houthi targets in Yemen, adding another dimension to the already volatile regional security environment.

Operation Aspides was established to provide defensive maritime protection, including escorting commercial vessels and strengthening surveillance in response to threats against international shipping. Its effectiveness, however, depends heavily on the availability of naval vessels and adequate operational resources from participating countries.

Crosetto’s intervention has therefore renewed the debate over whether the European Union can sustain an effective collective maritime security presence without a more equitable commitment from its member states.

With major trade and energy routes facing mounting security challenges, Italy is pressing its European partners to move beyond diplomatic assurances and translate their commitments into practical military contributions.

The dispute also exposes a broader challenge for European security policy: ensuring that collective responsibilities are matched by collective action at a time when instability in one of the world’s most strategically important maritime regions carries consequences far beyond the Middle East.



France puts gender equality at heart of 2026 G7 presidency, renews high-level advisory council

Covert Report

Paris: France has reaffirmed its commitment to gender equality and women’s empowerment under its 2026 G7 Presidency, renewing the Gender Equality Advisory Council (GEAC) to develop policy recommendations aimed at protecting women’s rights amid growing conservative rhetoric and increasing challenges to gender equality worldwide.

The initiative reflects France’s determination to place women’s rights at the centre of international policy discussions, particularly at a time when gender equality, reproductive rights and women’s autonomy are facing mounting pressure in different parts of the world.

Established as an independent forum of distinguished experts, the GEAC advises G7 heads of state and government on advancing gender equality and strengthening the protection of women’s rights. Its renewed mandate for 2026 places particular emphasis on examining demographic challenges through a feminist perspective, challenging simplistic narratives and ensuring that demographic policies respect human rights and women’s fundamental freedoms.

For this year’s initiative, French President Emmanuel Macron has brought together 20 high-level experts tasked with preparing recommendations on demographic issues and their social, economic, cultural and political dimensions.

The council is chaired by Ghada Hatem, an obstetrician-gynaecologist and founder of La Maison des Femmes, while economist David Duhamel, a specialist in demographic issues, serves as vice-chair.

France’s renewed focus comes against a backdrop of increasingly influential ultraconservative narratives that often present demographic developments through narrow ideological interpretations. The GEAC aims to counter such arguments through independent expertise, reliable evidence and a broader understanding of the factors shaping population trends.

The council believes that demographic questions cannot be addressed simply through discussions about birth rates and population growth. They are closely connected to women’s access to education, employment, healthcare, reproductive choices, economic opportunities and the ability to establish families on their own terms.

By bringing these dimensions together, France intends to promote a more comprehensive approach to demographic resilience, one that recognises gender equality as an essential foundation of sustainable societies rather than an issue to be reconsidered in response to population changes.

The Gender Equality Advisory Council originated from a Canadian initiative during the country’s G7 Presidency in 2018. Since then, it has convened annually, with the exception of 2020 because of the COVID-19 pandemic, providing independent advice and helping shape the G7’s gender equality agenda.

Its previous contributions under France’s 2019 G7 Presidency were particularly significant. The council helped identify effective legislative practices for advancing gender equality and played a key role in promoting a Declaration on Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment, adopted by 14 heads of state and government.

The declaration sought to encourage the full empowerment of girls and women through stronger political commitments and more effective policies.

The council’s work also contributed to the development of an annual review of gender inequalities, which has been published since 2021. The review provides information and indicators covering key areas such as education, employment, domestic violence and healthcare, helping governments assess progress and identify persistent gaps.

Through these initiatives, the GEAC has developed into an important platform for translating international commitments on women’s rights into practical policy recommendations.

As part of France’s 2026 G7 Presidency, council members are meeting in Paris from November 9 to 11 to finalise their recommendations and engage with a broad range of political, institutional and civil society stakeholders.

The experts are expected to present their report to President Emmanuel Macron and G7 authorities alongside the Paris Peace Forum.

Their programme also includes meetings with members of the French Parliament, institutional partners, students and representatives of the G7 engagement groups focused on women’s rights and youth, known respectively as Women 7 (W7) and Youth 7 (Y7).

These consultations are intended to broaden the debate and ensure that the council’s recommendations reflect perspectives from policymakers, younger generations and organisations working directly on gender equality.

The GEAC’s policy proposals for 2026 are organised around three fundamental priorities.

The first focuses on adaptation to declining fertility rates, which have become a global demographic trend. The council argues that governments must recognise changing population patterns and develop policies that respond to new social and economic realities rather than treating lower birth rates as an issue that can be addressed through restrictive measures affecting women’s rights.

The second priority is eliminating structural barriers that prevent people from forming families. This involves addressing the gap between individuals’ reproductive aspirations and their actual ability to fulfil them. Economic insecurity, inadequate healthcare, unequal responsibilities within households, employment pressures and insufficient support systems can all influence decisions about family formation.

The third priority concerns combating demographic disinformation and ensuring responsible regulation of technological developments. The council warns against the political and ideological manipulation of demographic data, particularly when such narratives undermine women’s autonomy and their ability to make decisions about their own bodies.

It calls for the G7 to promote evidence-based discussions, reliable information and respect for internationally recognised human rights.

France’s renewed commitment through the GEAC reflects a broader effort to ensure that gender equality remains an integral part of international diplomacy and global policymaking.

The initiative also highlights the importance of distinguishing genuine demographic challenges from ideological narratives that can threaten the rights and freedoms of women.

By bringing together experts from different disciplines, France hopes to encourage governments to adopt policies that address population changes while strengthening women’s access to opportunities, healthcare, economic participation and social protection.

The central message of the council is that gender equality should never be treated as a variable that governments adjust in response to demographic pressures. Instead, it must remain at the heart of efforts to build resilient societies, support families and prepare for future population changes.

For France, the 2026 G7 Presidency offers an opportunity to strengthen international cooperation on women’s rights and reinforce the principle that sustainable demographic policies must be built on equality, dignity and individual freedom.

