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Rs.10.00 Vol.VII:No:117
Email address:quettavoice@gmail.com
Website: www.quettavoice.com

Saturday 24, January, 2024

First Digital, Print Daily of Balochistan

Editor: Asim Khan.

QUETTA VOICE



47 Illegal Chromite Mines Shut Down in Pishin as Balochistan CM Vows Crackdown

Syed Ali Shah:

QUETTA: Chief Minister of Balochistan Mir Sarfraz Bugti has stated that all mineral resources of Balochistan belong to the people of the province, and illegal mining remains a serious and long-standing issue that is causing massive losses

to the national exchequer. He said that in recent days, a successful operation was carried out against illegal chromite mining in Pishin district with the cooperation of the district administration and law enforcement agencies, resulting in the closure of 47 illegal mines. This action, he added, is part of the provincial

government's policy to protect mineral resources and ensure the rule of law.

According to the Chief Minister, the province earns less than Rs 10 billion annually from the mines and minerals sector, mainly due to illegal mining, smuggling, and a weak regulatory framework. He emphasized that sustainable eco-

nomic development of the province is not possible without curbing these illegal activities.

Mir Sarfraz Bugti announced that the provincial government is introducing a comprehensive and effective policy to reform the minerals sector, aimed at ensuring transparency, promoting legal min-

ing, protecting the rights of local communities, and significantly increasing provincial revenues.

He further stated that while the government will encourage investment within the legal framework, a zero-tolerance policy will be adopted against those involved in illegal mining.

Police arrest injured suspect after alleged shootout in Rawalpindi

NEWS DESK:

Police in Rawalpindi say one shooting suspect has been arrested and a stolen car and weapons recovered after an alleged shootout.

According to police, two men travelling in a car opened fire on a police team when officers signalled them to stop. During the exchange of fire, one suspect was injured and another arrested. The second arrested suspect was arrested after he escaped. The arrested suspect has been identified as Adnan. Police say a car stolen two months ago from the New Town area was recovered from his possession. A police constable, identified as Umar, was also injured in the shooting incident but remained unharmed due to wearing a bulletproof jacket. Senior police officers reached the scene following the incident, and a search operation is underway to locate the remaining areas to arrest the absconding suspect. The injured suspect was shifted to the hospital for medical treatment. Police said the arrested man was a known offender and had previously been involved in several car theft cases.

PDMA Successfully Concludes Rescue Operation in Snowbound Areas of Balochistan

Sardar Khondai, Muhammad Shahwani, Syed Muhammad Qasem:

The Provincial Disaster Management Authority (PDMA) Balochistan has wrapped up an extensive rescue operation in areas affected by heavy snowfall, ensuring the safety of travelers stranded amid harsh winter conditions. Adviser to the Chief Minister for Political and Media Affairs Shahid Rind said, "Our priority was to protect lives." Shahid added, noting that rescue teams remained active despite severe cold and difficult terrain. "Several vehicles stuck in snow were recovered, and passengers were promptly moved to safer locations."



"Mir Sarfraz Bugti commended PDMA Balochistan for its effective response and praised the dedication of officers and field teams. Their commitment and professionalism under challenging conditions reflect the government's resolve to safeguard citizens," the Chief Minister said.

In recognition of their efforts, the Chief Minister announced certificates of appreciation for officers and teams who supervised and carried out the rescue operation, acknowledging their exemplary performance during the emergency.



'Inefficiencies' no reason to delay promotion: SC

NEWS DESK: The Supreme Court on Thursday ruled that government-run departments cannot invoke their own administrative inefficiencies and procedural delays as justification for failing to ensure timely promotions.

"Safeguarding an employee's right to be considered for promotion in a timely manner is a 'right,'" observed Justice Aysha A. Malik, adding that the government departments cannot take shelter behind their inefficiencies and inactions by relying on Section 8(3) of the Punjab Civil Servants Act 1974, as they are responsible for ensuring timely promotions.

The observation came in an appeal of Fakhar Majeed before the Supreme Court, which has a three-judge bench comprising Justice Aysha A. Malik, Justice Muhammad Hashim Khan Kakar, and Justice Iftiaq Ibrahim had taken up against a February 16, 2024, order of the Punjab Service Tribunal, which had dismissed his plea.

The Supreme

Court, however, ordered the Punjab Irrigation Department to grant promotion to the employee from 2012 and held the department responsible for an "unjustified," "negligent," and "inefficient" delay in processing his promotion for over a decade. The petitioner stated that he was entitled at that time to a pro forma promotion to the post of civil servants for the post of draftsman (BPS-14) became available on that date. Court says civil servants should not suffer due to procedural delays, inaction of government departments.

The department, on the other hand, pleaded that in terms of Section 8 of the Act, the employee did not have any right to seek regularization from the date of vacancy, rather promotion was to be granted with immediate effect.

The petitioner claimed that his case was not treated fairly and was denied the lawful right of being considered for promotion in 2012. The issue, therefore, is the petitioner's request for regular promotion to the post of draftsman (BPS-14) with effect from Jan 18, 2010.

FIA cybercrime officers accused of abducting families, extorting millions

NEWS DESK: A major corruption scandal has surfaced in the National Cyber Crime Investigation Agency (NCCIA) Gujranwala, as the Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) Composite Circle has registered a case against three of its own officers, along with their accomplices, on charges of corruption, bribery, extortion and abuse of authority.

Three government officials, among others, have been taken into custody.

The NCCIA, established to strengthen enforcement of cyber laws, has come under scrutiny after it was alleged that its officers, in collusion with private individuals, struck deals worth millions of rupees with suspects involved in online fraud cases and released them after receiving illegal payments.

Following reports from intelligence agencies and a citizen's complaint, the FIA initiated action and registered an FIR. According to the FIR, complainant

transactions at different times, while further payments were demanded to avoid legal action.

Some items were later returned, but cash and one mobile phone were not.

Another victim, Salman Riaz, alleged that his family was abducted, tortured and a demand of Rs50 million was made.

Muzammil Iqbal claimed that after negotiations involving FIA personnel, a "deal" was finalised for Rs30 million, out of which Rs3 million in cash and around Rs1.5 million through bank and ATM transactions were paid before their release.

The complainant said 15 mobile phones, a laptop, a car, cash and ATM cards were taken away.

The family was later shifted to the FIA Cyber Crime office, where they were questioned about online business activities and cryptocurrency.

The FIR further states that the victims were forced to pay large amounts of cash, cryptocurrency and money through bank

to reach the ground floor, where the fire erupted.

'Diplomatic win': In joint session, govt again defends decision to join Trump-led Board of Peace

NEWS DESK:

The government on Friday again defended its decision to join the Board of Peace led by US President Donald Trump with Planning Minister Asif Iqbal saying that Pakistan being at the "centre stage" along with its brother Muslim countries to contribute towards peace in Gaza and Palestine was a "diplomatic win".

Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif was among the leaders and senior officials of 19 countries, including Pakistan, who gathered in Davos on Thursday and put their names to the founding charter of the Board of Peace – a move that had been denounced by the opposition. Trump had originally proposed establishing the board when he announced his plan last December to end the conflict in Gaza.

It was originally meant to oversee peace in Gaza after Israel's two-week onslaught on the Palestinian enclave, but the board's charter envisaged a wider role in resolving international



conflicts. Parliamentary Affairs Minister Dr Tariq Fazal, Chaudhry on Thursday had defended the move in the National Assembly, saying the committee joined the session to oversee Gaza's rebuilding in the interest of the Palestinian people. The matter was again debated in a joint session of Parliament on Friday, summed by President Asif Ali Zardari a day earlier, and

presided over by National Assembly (NA) Speaker Sardar Ayaz Sadiq. Arguing in defense of the government's decision to join the session, Iqbal said that "diplomatic win" should be celebrated. He began his speech by recalling nuclear tests by Pakistan in 1998. "We set an example of Pakistan's liberty and sovereignty and when the then-USA presi-

dent called five times [...] Pakistan was being pressurised from the world, but we took the decision [to conduct the tests] with courage," he said. Amid a noisy protest from the opposition benches, he asserted, "We don't need to be taught about Pakistan's defence and integrity. We are the defenders of Pakistan's freedom and sovereignty."

He went on to emphasize that with the PML-N in power, "there can be no danger to Pakistan's integrity and sovereignty."

Iqbal said the government and armed forces had responded during a four-day conflict with India in May that anyone intending to harm the country would get a befitting reply. "So nobody can taunt that we are cowards and negli-

gent."

PTI seeks withdrawal of asset secrecy bill

NEWS DESK: PTI/MNA Asad Qaiser, while speaking in the National Assembly on Thursday, by an application raised objections to the bill and sought its withdrawal in writing. In a ruling delivered in the chamber, determine that the statement of assets and liabilities of that member shall not be published publicly by the Commission if such publication would pose a serious threat to life or safety of the member or, as the case may be, his family, for a period not exceeding one year at a time and subject to the condition that of their assets and liabilities, the statement of assets and liabilities of their spouses and dependent children.

Section 138 of the Act requires to the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP), on or before Dec 31 each year, a statement of their assets and liabilities, the statement of assets and liabilities of their spouses and dependent children. Section 138 of the Act requires to the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP), on or before Dec 31 each year, a statement of their assets and liabilities, the statement of assets and liabilities of their spouses and dependent children.

The proposed amendment to Section 138 seeks to insert a proviso stating: "Provided that the Speaker of the

concerned Assembly be, as the case may be, the Chairman of the Senate may, on an application made by a member and before the bill is recorded in writing, in a ruling delivered in the chamber, determine that the statement of assets and liabilities of that member shall not be published publicly by the Commission if such publication would pose a serious threat to life or safety of the member or, as the case may be, his family, for a period not exceeding one year at a time and subject to the condition that of their assets and liabilities, the statement of assets and liabilities of their spouses and dependent children."

On Thursday, the House also passed the Income Tax Third Amendment Bill.

The National Assembly was informed that billions of dollars in investment had been attracted through the Special Investment Facilitation Council (SIFC),

Minister of State

Bilal Azhar Kayani

added that the SIFC

functioned as a single

window to promote in-

vestment and transpar-

ency.

Furthermore, seven new bills were laid before the assembly for consideration.

These included the National Anti-Money Laundering and Counter Financing of Terrorism Authority Bill, the National Archives Amendment Bill, 2026, and the Abandoned Properties Management Amendment Bill, 2026.

Death toll from Karachi's Gul Plaza inferno reaches 71; search operation in 'final stages'

NEWS DESK: The death toll of Karachi's Gul Plaza blaze crossed 70 on Friday as rescuers found more remains from the rubble of the gutted shopping centre.

Police Surgeon Dr Sajid Ali Syed informed an update that 71 deceased. Of the 16 identified so far, nine were identified through DNA tests, which have been performed for 49 samples.

The deadly inferno, which erupted on the night of January 17 at the mall and took nearly two days to be fully extinguished, has left the ground-and-plus-three-storey building in ruins, with some sections collapsed.

As more bodies were recovered from different parts of the building, officials cautioned that the final toll can only be determined once the identification of the remains is completed.

Meanwhile, officials expressed the hope to complete their search in "forts" today. South Deputy Commissioner (DC) Javed Nabi Khoso told reporters that the search operation was in the "final stages".

"The search in the wreckage will be completed today," he said.

Stating that a total of 77 missing persons had been recovered, he said the recovery efforts were being made under the supervision of the Sindh Building and Control Authority's (SBCA) team.

The director general (DG) of Sindh Fire and Rescue (SFR) Major General Sibhatullah Maher, said rescue personnel were to continue their recovery efforts in "10 to 15 per cent" of the building's area that they had been unable to

access before. "There are some concerns that we have not been able to reach the ground floor, where the fire erupted.

We hope to find bodies from there," the Rescue 1122 DG told the media.

Defending Rescue 1122's efforts, Maher asserted that the teams had modern equipment.

The inferno had turned into a third-degree fire by the time rescue personnel reached the site.

The fire chief said that 15 to 20 people were rescued and evacuated when the blaze erupted.

"Either the fire safety system was not

present in the building,

or it was not activated," Maher said. He revealed that the latest technology had been used over the past three days to aid the search process, in order to locate any individual who survived the blaze.

The Rescue 1122 DG added that based on the information so far, the fire erupted in a flower shop, from where it spread through the duct.

However, he added, the police were still investigating why the fire spread quickly. CM Murad briefs Sindh Assembly Sindh Chief Minister Murad Ali Shah also briefed

the provincial assembly on the incident during its proceedings today, with Mayor Murtaza Wahab in attendance.

He informed the assembly that the fire erupted at a ground-floor shop at 10:14pm on January 17, with the first call received by the Kalmati Metro-Mall Corporation (KMC) from a shop owner's son.

The first fire brigade was dispatched at 10:27pm from a fire station near the Civil Hospital Karachi, Murad said, adding that Rescue 1122 received the first call at 10:36pm.



Rescue 1122's efforts, Maher asserted that the teams had modern equipment.

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Pakistan joins Board of Peace to contribute to peace in Palestine: Ahsan

ISLAMABAD (INP): Minister for Planning and Development Ahsan Iqbal has said Pakistan has joined Board of Peace to contribute to peace in Palestine.

He was speaking at

the joint sitting of Parliament in response to the remarks made by Raja Nasir Abbas, the Leader of the opposition in the Senate, and JUI-F chief Maulana Fazlur Rehman.

Defending the deci-

sion of joining Board of Protection of rights of Palestinians and peace.

The Minister for Planning emphasized Pakistan's policy on Palestine remains unchanged. He said Pakistan considers Israel an aggressor whose hands

are soaked in the blood of innocent Palestinian people. He said Pakistan supports the creation of an independent Palestine state based on the pre-1967 borders.

Ahsan Iqbal cat-

egorically stated there is

no threat to the country's sovereignty and security. Alluding to the humiliating defeat of an independent Pakistan by armed forces on India by May conflict last year, he said nobody can dare cast an evil against Pa-

kistan. Meanwhile, the joint sitting of the par-

liament passed a resolu-

tion expressing grief and

sorrow over the Cata-

strophic fire at Gul Pina-

ron Karachi. The resolu-

tion moved the Sindh go-

vernment to the families who lost their dear ones and prayed for the recovery of those injured in the tragic incident.

Payng tributes to the

fire fighters, the resolu-

tion demanded the

Sindh government.



ISLAMABAD: Group Photo of Chairman Senate of Pakistan, Syed Yousaf Raza Gillani with the Participants of the Global Muslim Business Forum (GMBF)

Rain continues across country with snowfall in upper regions

LAHORE (INP): Widespread intermittent rain continued in various parts of the country on Thursday with heavy snowfall in upper regions under the influence of a strong weather system, turning the weather cold.

The rain started in Lahore, like many other parts of the country, around the evening and continued till late night with occasional gaps, causing a sharp drop in temperature and wet conditions across the city. According to the Pakistan Meteorological Department (PMD), rain accompanied by wind and thunderstorms, with snowfall over the hills, is expected to continue tomorrow (Friday) in upper Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Kashmir, Gilgit-Baltistan, Islamabad and upper Punjab. Moderate to

heavy rain and snowfall are also likely at isolated places in upper Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, northern Punjab and Kashmir, while cold and dry weather is expected to prevail over most other parts of the country.

Islamabad and surrounding areas are expected to remain cloudy with rain and wind-thunderstorms. In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, rain with snowfall over the hills is forecast for Chitral.

Dir, Swat,

Shangla, Kohistan, Battagram, Manchesr, Abbottabad, Haripur, Buner, Bajaur, Mohmand, Khyber, Orakzai, Paktia, Paktika, Ghazni, Swat and Nowshera. Moderate to heavy snowfall is likely in the upper districts.

In Punjab, rain and intermittent snowfall is forecast for the hills, with snowfall likely during the forecast period.

Attallah Tarar greets newly elected PASC office bearers

ISLAMABAD (INP): Minister for Information and Broadcasting Attallah Tarar has congratulated the newly elected office bearers of the Press Association of the Supreme Court and expressed best wishes for their tenure.

In his statement, the Minister congratulated President Imran Waseem, Vice President Abrar Astori, General Secretary Dr. Aslam Gishkon, Finance Secretary Abd Nisar, Information Secretary Sehrish Khan and members of the executive body Zahid Sharif, Rauf Bazaar and Sabeen Shahzad.

The Minister termed Press Association of the Supreme Court as vital and prestigious journalistic forum.

Maintaining peace in province is KP govt's responsibility: Abadullah

PESHAWAR (INP): Leader of the Opposition in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Assembly Dr. Ibadullah on Friday said that maintaining peace and providing security is the sole responsibility of the provincial government.

Addressing a Press conference in Peshawar, Dr. Ibadullah said chief ministers are installed and removed at will, and the responsibility of leadership of the province are being forced to witness.

"The province has practically been turned into a joke," he remarked.

The opposition leader further alleged that despite the security situation, the chief minister spends time touring Lahore and Punjab, enjoying leisure trips and dining at public ex-

hibition.

He accused Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf workers of facilitating terrorists. Abadullah said that the provincial government is doing negative politics under the head of FATA.

He should have been present in his constituency with the internally displaced persons (IDPs) during operations, where, after the completion of the operation, no effective writ of the government and people cannot even leave their homes," he said.

Adding that the writ of the government does not exist in the province and the people of the province are being forced to witness.

"The province has practically been turned into a joke," he remarked.

Ibad claimed that while the people of Khyber live in fear, the rulers remain busy in luxuries, enjoying official protocol even outside the province.

He pointed out that in 2013 the province's debt stood at Rs150 billion, which has now surged to Rs1,000 billion.

The opposition leader further alleged that despite the security situation, the chief minister spends time touring Lahore and Punjab, enjoying leisure trips and dining at public ex-

hibition.

He questioned whether the Rs800 billion allegedly provided by the federal government to the PTI-led administration had gone and who should be held accountable.

He said that the law-and-order situation in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa is worsening day by day. Abadullah said that the provincial government is acting as the Leader of the Opposition in KP.

He said that in case the KP government fails to bring the situation under its control, then they should resign immediately.

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Adding that the writ of the government does not exist in the province and the people of the province are being forced to witness.

"The province has practically been turned into a joke," he remarked.

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Airport moved to privatisation list

NEWS DESK: The government has shelved a plan to outsource the management and operations of Islamabad International Airport to the United Arab Emirates (UAE) after Abu Dhabi lost interest in the project.

The deadlock between the two countries emerged following a repeat delay by the UAE in nominating an entity for the outsourcing of Islamabad International Airport.

The government has now approved a proposal to include Islamabad International Airport in the active privatisation list following a recent successful privatisation of Pakistan International Airlines (PIA).

Sources told The Express Tribune that despite the proposal shown by the UAE, it failed to communicate the name of the nominated entity for the outsourcing of the management and operations of Islamabad International Airport, indicating disinterest on the part of the UAE.

Official sources said the Pakistani side had received a positive response from the UAE by sending a final call letter. In response, the UAE conveyed that it was



still unable to confirm any nominated entity. It further said the UAE had delayed in continuing the process. Consequently, the government approved a proposal to include Islamabad International Airport in the active privatisation list, following the example of the highly successful privatisation of Pakistan

International Airlines. Earlier, the government had not acceded to the UAE's request for the exclusion of Jinnah International Airport (JIA), Karachi, and Allama Iqbal International Airport (AIAP), Lahore, in the draft government-to-government (G2G) framework agreement.

Moreover, the Government of the UAE's re-

quest for privatisation of the air link between Abu Dhabi and Pakistan was not backed by the government of Pakistan.

The government had also constituted a need-based committee under the chairmanship of the Adviser to the Prime Minister on Privatisation and had di-

rected the ministry to continue engagement with the UAE side on the outsource of management of Islamabad Airport only. The Government of the United Arab Emirates had also conveyed its interest through its emphasis on the role of the management of Islamabad International Airport.

Multiple draft agreements were exchanged between the Pakistan Airports Au-

thority and the UAE side. A delegation led by the Adviser to the Prime Minister on Privatisation, along with senior officers from the concerned ministries, also visited Abu Dhabi to hold meetings with UAE officials to discuss and finalise a draft framework agreement.

Meanwhile, the Privatisation Division

submitted a summary to the Cabinet Committee on Privatisation (CCoP) proposing the inclusion of Islamabad, Karachi and Lahore airports in the active privatisation list for outsourcing.

The cabinet body approved the inclusion of Karachi and Lahore airports in the list, while Islamabad Airport was being excluded for the time being.

The concerned ministry was also directed to seek a final response from the Government of the UAE within one week on its intent regarding the ongoing G2G process for outsourcing Islamabad Airport.

The UAE side conveyed that it was unable to specify the name of the nominated entity at that stage, stating that the commercial and technical requirements associated with the G2G framework agreement needed to be finalised first, after which the nominated entity would be shared. The concerned ministry argued that persistent delays by the UAE in nominating an entity were hampering the government's efforts to outsource the management and operations of Islamabad International Airport.

Sustainable growth key to economic transformation, says minister

NEWS DESK: Pakistan's economic growth is only possible through alignment of policy, capital industry, and institutions, said Minister for Board of Investment Qasim Ahmed Shahzad, pointing out that fragmented progress cannot deliver sustainable growth.

Speaking at the Pakistan Leadership Conference on Thursday, the minister emphasised collective acceleration, export-led growth, and investor-friendly reforms as key drivers for economic

transformation. He stressed that Pakistan can replicate this success by upgrading its production base, improving quality standards, and leapfrogging the global value chain. He underlined that future-fit and skilled human capital is critical for sustainable development, adding that pro-

ductivity enhancement, not just through GDP growth, must remain Pakistan's economic north star. He emphasised technology adoption, managerial capacity, and SME formalisation to strengthen competitive

highlighting digital transformation. Qasim Ahmed Shahzad said digital technologies, artificial intelligence, and fintech can enable Pakistan to leapfrog economically, provided adoption moves from pilot projects to large-scale platforms.



Intel forecasts weak quarter as AI server chip demand outstrips supply

NEWS DESK: Intel (INTC.O) said on Thursday it struggled to satisfy demand for its server chips used in data centres and forecast quarterly revenue and profit below market estimates, sending shares down 13% in after-hours trading.

The forecast underscores the difficulties faced by Intel in predicting global chip markets, where the company's current products are the result of decisions made years ago.

The company, whose shares have risen 40% in the past month, recently launched a long-awaited laptop chip designed for its lead in personal computers just as a memory chip crunch is expected to depress sales across that industry.

Meanwhile, Intel executives said the company was caught off guard by surging demand for server central processors that accompany AI chips.

By running its factories at capacity, Intel cannot keep up with demand for the chips, leaving profitable data centre sales on the

table while the new PC chip squeezes its margins.

"In the short term, we are not able to fully meet the demand in our markets," Chief Executive Officer Lip-Bu Tan told analysts at a conference call. The company forecast quarterly revenue between \$11.7 billion and \$12.7 billion, compared with analysts' average estimate of \$12.51 billion, according to data compiled by ISEAS.

It expects adjusted earnings per share to break even in the first quarter, compared with expectations of adjusted earnings of 5 cents per share.

Investors and analysts have hoped that rapid data centre buildouts commissioned by large tech companies to advance their AI business will drive sales for Intel's traditional server chips that are used alongside Nvidia's (NVDA.O) market-leading graphics processing units (GPUs).

Demand for AI sur-

passed some of the cloud-computing giants, which have had to scale back in order to upgrade their data centres because of an "erosion in networking performance," finance chief David Zinser told Reuters in an interview.

"They were a little bit caught off guard," Zinser said.

Intel has held off on investing heavily in its next-generation manufacturing process known as 14 nm, while proceeding to 22 nm. Demand for AI sur-

passed some of the cloud-computing giants, which have had to scale back in order to upgrade their data centres because of an "erosion in networking performance," finance chief David Zinser told Reuters in an interview.

"They were a little bit caught off guard," Zinser said.

Intel has been a major investor in Asian telecoms, with its 1990s building operations in Bangladesh, Thailand, Malaysia and Pakistan, but has recently said it is open to deals as the industry matures.

May also do deals in Malaysia, Bangladesh and Thailand. With the completion of the sale of Telenor Pakistan to its owner, and in a bid to sell our shares in True we have taken big steps in delivering on that strategy," Telenor CEO Benedicto

Schibsted Fasmer said in a statement.

Telenor's other Asian companies, Malaysia's CelcomDigi, Indonesia's Indosat Ooredoo, and Gramedia where it holds a 55.8% stake, could also become subject to deals, the group said.

True's business, as usual, until such time that any opportunities present themselves," Chief Financial Officer Torbjorn Wist told Reuters in a telephone

interview.

"We know we're going to be focusing on delivering value to our remaining assets in Malaysia and Indonesia," Wist said. True is one of the world's biggest telecom operators with around 60 million customers.

Telenor will book an accounting gain of 14.7 billion Norwegian crowns at

Telenor sells its stake in Thailand's True Corporation for \$3.9 billion

NEWS DESK: Telenor said on Thursday it would sell its 30.3% stake in Thailand's True Corporation for \$3.9 billion, its second divestment from Asia in recent months, lifting the Norwegian group's shares 8%.

Telenor said it had signed an agreement with Arise Digital Technology Company, owned by Khun Suphachai Chearavantorn, to sell its 9.9% stake and then retain a 5.3% stake two years after the closing of the initial deal.

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the current exchange rate at the closing of the initial stake sale and said it aimed to provide further information next month on the use of the proceeds.

The divestment, which is expected to close within a few months, is projected to bring Telenor's return on capital employed and underpins the company's goal of focusing more of its business in the Nordic region, it said.



Trump says United States (US) 'armada' headed toward Gulf

NEWS DESK: President Donald Trump said a US "armada" was heading toward the Gulf and that Washington was watching Iran closely, even after downplaying the prospect of imminent military action and saying Tehran deserved international talks.

Trump has repeatedly left open the option of new military action against Iran after Washington's own recall of Israel's 12-day war in June aimed at degrading Iranian nuclear and ballistic missile programs.

The prospect of immediate American action seemed to recede in recent days, with both sides insisting on giving diplomacy a chance.

On his way back from the World Economic Forum in Davos, the president told reporters on Air Force One the United States was sending a "massive fleet" toward the Persian Gulf.

"We're watching Iran," he said. "I'd rather not see anything happen but we're watching them very closely."



Addressing the the programme is aimed at seeking the bomb. "Can't let that happen," Trump said, adding, "And Iran does want to talk, and we'll talk."

The commander of Iran's Revolutionary

Guards had also warned Washington Thursday that the force had its "finger on the trigger" of war.

A night of protests started in late December shook Iran's leadership under supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, but the movement has stalled in the face of a crackdown, as planned by an unprecedented internet blackout.

Last week, Trump pulled back from a threat to strike Iran over its

deadly crackdown on the protests after the White House said Tehran had halted planned executions of demonstrators.

In a stand-off marked by seesaw rhetoric, Trump had on Tuesday warned Iran's leaders the United States would "wipe them off the face of the Earth" if there was any attack on its life in response to a strike targeting Khamenei.

Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkan in a

speech Thursday, accused the United States and Israel of stoking the protests as a "cynical ploy" in the 12-Day War.

Legitimate targets Guards commander General Mohammad Alkhar warned Israel and the United States "to avoid any miscalculations" and learn from "what they learned in the 12-day armed war, so that they do not face a more painful and regrettable fate".

The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and dear Iran have their first "drill" to better prepare themselves ready to carry out the orders and measures of the supreme commander-in-chief," he was quoted by the television channel IRGC International day.

Ali Abdollahi Aliaabadi, head of Iran's joint command headquarters, meanwhile, stressed that if America attacked, it would be in its interests, bases and centres of influence" would be "legitimate targets" for Iranian forces.

BD launches drives for first post-Hasina polls

NEWS DESK: Bangladesh began official campaigning on Thursday for the hugely anticipated general elections next month, the first since the uprising ended the autocratic rule of Sheikh Hasina.

Tons of flag-waving supporters of key frontrunner Tarique Rahman, leader of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) crowded the streets of the northern city of Sylhet, chanting his name.

"We have liberated the country from autocratic rule," prime ministerial hopeful Rahman, who returned to Bangladesh in December after 17 years in exile, told crowds of BNP loyalists. "Now we must establish the rights of the people."

Rahman vowed to create jobs for "millions of unemployed youth" and support women's economic independence.

Key rival Jamaat-e-Islami, the last Islamist party in the Muslim-majority nation of 170 million, began its campaign in the capital Dhaka, after being crushed during Hasina's 15 years



in power.

Jamaat's leader Shafiqul Rahman said he wanted to clamp down on corruption and build a nation where people from all races, religions and communities will be treated equally".

Among the sea of Jamaat supporters was Kakol Akter, 36, who said it was the first election rally she had ever attended.

Although eligible to vote since 2008, she said that would be the first time she would cast a ballot, as she could finally support the party of her choice.

"We came here to pray for the party," she said.

The South Asian nation votes on Feb-

ary 12 to elect 350 lawmakers, polls that will bring in new leadership after prolonged turmoil following the ouster of the country's government, reshaping domestic politics and regional dynamics of progress of reform."

Rahman, 60, better known in Bangladesh as Tarique Zia, assumed leadership of the BNP following the death of his mother, former prime minister Khaleda Zia, who died in December at the age of 85.

Bangladesh, home to the world's largest Muslim-majority population, has a significant Sufi following, and the BNP's Rahman fol-

Venezuela unveils plans to open oil sector to private investment

NEWS DESK: Venezuela's parliament on Thursday begins debating plans to throw open the country's lucrative oil sector to private investment, less than three weeks after the US ouster of Nicolas Maduro.

Until now, private companies were only allowed to operate in joint ventures with state-owned oil firm PDVSA, which insisted on holding a majority.

The bill under debate allows for "private companies domiciled in the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela" to engage in oil exploration and extraction.

The Trump administration is allowing China to purchase Venezuelan oil but not at "unfair, 'cheaper' prices at which Venezuela sold the crude before the US re-



moved its leader Nicolas Maduro, a former oil minister, and, he insisted, to engage in oil exploration and extraction.

The Trump administration is allowing China to purchase Venezuelan oil but not at "unfair, 'cheaper' prices at which Venezuela sold the crude before the US re-

a fair price for their oil from China and other nations rather than a corrupt, cheap price," the official said.

Oil executives and potential investors, as part of Washington's ambitious \$100 billion reconstruction plan for

TikTok establishes joint venture to end US ban threat

NEWS DESK: TikTok announced on Thursday that it has established a majority American-owned joint venture to operate its US business, allowing the company to keep its Chinese ownership.

The video-sharing app is a global digital entertainment powerhouse, but its mass appeal and links to China have raised concerns over privacy and national security.

The TikTok USDS Joint Venture LLC will serve more than 200 million users and 7.5 billion monthly active users, and will offer strict safeguards for data protection and content moderation, the company said.

The new structure, reported to be under US President Donald Trump's predecessor Joe Biden that forced Chinese-owned ByteDance to sell TikTok's US operations or face a ban in its biggest market.

Trump welcomed and claimed credit for the deal, but also thanked Chinese President Xi Jinping for approving it.

"I am so happy to have helped in saving TikTok," Trump said in a post on Truth Social late Thursday.

"It will now be owned by a group of Great American Patriots and Investors, the Biggest in the World, and will be an important Voice." "I would also like to thank President Xi, of

"While the need for users to download a new app seems unlikely, brand partners will want to know that their TikTok strategies won't be disrupted."

The joint venture will be governed by a seven-member, majority-American board including TikTok CEO Shou Chew and executives from investment firms.

Jasmine Embreg, CEO of Scalable, a media company focused on the creator economy, said TikTok users would be "very happy" by the news that there are "still big questions about how this will all play out."

"Behind the scenes, TikTok is likely working hard to assure advertisers will remain business as normal," she told AFP.

Japan suspends restart of world's biggest nuclear plant



The alarm that went off prompted TEPCO to "investigate the malfunctioning electrical equipment," spokesman Takeshi Kobayashi told AFP.

And "once it became clear that it would take time, we decided to remain in a shutdown in a planned manner," he added, noting that the reactor "is stable and there is no radioactive impact outside".

Control rods are a device used to control the nuclear chain reaction in the reactor core, which can be activated by pulling them out, drawing them in, or slowing down or stopping completely by inserting them deeper.

The restart, initially scheduled for Tuesday, had been pushed back after another technical issue related to the rods' removal was detected last weekend — a problem that was resolved on Sunday, according to TEPCO.

Kashiwazaki-Kariwa is the world's largest nuclear power plant by potential capacity, although just one reactor of seven was restarted. The facility was taken offline when Japan experienced one of the largest power outages in history following a massive earthquake and tsunami that sent three reactors at the Fukushima atomic plant into meltdown in 2011.

