

## Resolving minority issues

**Dr Ramesh Kumar Vankwani**



**T**wo major problems non-Muslim minority communities in Pakistan face are directly linked to religious conversion and encroachment of holy sites of worship.

Most of the conversion cases in Pakistan are related to Hindu girls living in Sindh. Such sensitive incidents not only echo in the local media but also receive attention from the international community. However, it seems that my 20-year long tireless struggle to resolve such issues is now seeing some success.

A major breakthrough in recent days has been the visit of Mufti Naeem, Maulvi Abdul Haq alias Mian Mitho and Pir Ayub Jan Sirhindi to my office in Karachi to condemn the attack on the Terri Temple in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Since these three scholars have been criticized for a long time for their alleged role behind the forced conversion of Hindu girls in Sindh province, I decided to avail the opportunity to discuss this sensitive issue with them.

During our meeting, they emphasized that they are not involved in forced conversions. While it is true that some girls are converting voluntarily, the situation becomes so complex that every stakeholder, including girls, parents, Muslim husbands and courts, comes under pressure. The clerics showed the commitment to accept the legislation with the consulta-

tion of the Council of Islamic Ideology on this issue. Meanwhile, I convinced them to inform me when somebody from a minority community approaches them for conversion. I suggested a meeting with such individuals' parents, in the presence of a local minority leader. After sufficient time post meeting their parents, if they are still committed to convert then there will be no issue from any side.

Our consensus on this sensitive issue also reflected in press releases separately issued by them and the Pakistan Hindu Council. In my view, lack of formal procedure for conversion in Pakistan is resulting in creating panic among society. Therefore, a bill on religious conversions, on the basis of my recommendations, is going to be finalized with the consultation of the Council for Islamic Ideology on February 15 during the meeting of the joint parliamentary committee.

In my view, all kinds of religious and sacred places require respect and dignity in every good society. It is quite unfortunate that holy places of worships belonging to non-Muslim communities in Pakistan are being left on mercy of extremist elements. I have therefore been highlighting on every platform available that the Evacuee Trust Property Board, a national institution which is supposed to protect Hindu and Sikh related religious properties, is quite incapable to perform its duties. There must be appointment of any capable Pakistani Hindu national as its head. The Supreme Court of Pakistan, while hearing the case regarding the horrible attack on Terri temple, has recently or-

dered the ETPB to share data of all sacred places under its control. In my view, the ETPB issue is also going to be resolved very soon.

Recently, the British parliament asked me about the situation of minorities in Pakistan. In this regard, when I tried to conduct research on the internet, I came across a number of dubious news websites which are involved in conducting propaganda against Pakistan. Mostly, these websites, while mentioning a few mishaps with Pakistani minorities, are trying to influence international organizations in a very smart way. We should be thankful to the EU Disinfo Lab for exposing India's huge network of more than 550 fake news websites and suspicious NGOs created with the sole purpose to malign the image of Pakistan in the eyes of the international community.

Unfortunately, our silence on fake news results ends up providing authenticity to such propaganda items and various international organizations are used to make these fabricated news part of their annual reports, especially related to the condition of Pakistani minorities and faith freedom. Although resolving long-awaiting minorities' issues would somehow minimize the emergence of unwanted news from our beloved country, there is a dire need to focus on fact checking in order to keep a close eye on foreign media reporting about events in Pakistan.

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# THE NEWS

## Humanity first

**Dr Ramesh Kumar Vankwani**



**O**n Friday (December 10), World Human Rights Day was observed throughout the globe with a commitment to protect the rights of every human. Seventy-three years ago, on December 10, 1948, the UN General Assembly adopted a remarkable resolution. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, passed in Paris, France, recognises the rights and freedom of all humans.

The 30-article document also has the honour of being translated into over 500 languages. Article 1 emphasises the promotion of equality while eliminating inequality around the world. Promoting equality is also one of the top priorities of the UN Global Agenda 2030.

Unfortunately, Pakistan is celebrating International Human Rights Day at a time when the tragic death of an innocent Sri Lankan national in Sialkot has deeply affected the nation.

Many Pakistani social media users are expressing sympathy with the family of the Sri Lankan man. People continue to lay flowers at the memorial, an initiative by the Sialkot Chamber of Commerce and Industry, whereas various sections of people, including religious scholars, have visited the Sri Lankan High Commission to condemn the barbaric incident. Our law-en-

forcement agencies have successfully detained the main suspects.

Expressing solidarity with the bereaved family, I stressed the need to curb extremism and ensure the prevention of false and baseless allegations of blasphemy. In my view, people like Malik Adnan, who tried his best to save the Sri Lankan national, reflect our traditional society which is based on tolerance and co-existence. His efforts also reminded me of a historical event attributed to Prophet Ibrahim (as). A small sparrow came with water in its mouth when the Prophet of Allah was being set on fire by his powerful enemies. The bird knew that this little water would not be able to extinguish the flames, but she tried her best for the good cause without worrying about the consequences.

Pakistan is one of the 48 countries in the world that signed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Although every government of Pakistan expresses its commitment to protect human rights, the actual, unsatisfactory situation is a big question mark for human rights activists. Some extremist elements involved in human rights violations are gaining strength day by day.

It is my observation that people were provoked on the basis of religious discrimination to attack Hindu temples in Bhong Sharif, Ghotki and Karak. Similarly, a Hindu teacher named Nautan Lal is still in custody in Ghotki on blasphemy allegations

which were made by a ten-year-old student. Extremist elements in Pakistan are few – perhaps not more than five percent in number, but, unfortunately, they are in a position to provoke the sentiments of people by making baseless allegations against any person.

On the occasion of International Human Rights Day, we should commit to transforming our homeland into a model country where every human being – men, women or children, a minority or a majority – must have the freedom to live happily within constitutional limits.

It is a matter of pride for me that after entering the sacred profession of a doctor, I have ensured the treatment of every patient without any bias. In loving memory of my great brother Dr Prem Kumar Vankwani, I have launched a welfare project called 'Prem Nagar' in Tharparkar where every person will be eligible to get relief regardless of his/her religious affiliation.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, in my opinion, must be broadcasted on our national media with Urdu translation. We must include this declaration in our educational curriculum to teach our young generation the significance of serving humanity and protecting human rights.

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## Criminal attack

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**D**ecember 30, 2020 was a sad day for the patriotic Pakistani Hindu community because a violent mob succeeded in attacking the Teri Temple and Samaadhi (Tomb) located at district Karak, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. This unjustified act is a violation of the constitution of Pakistan, Supreme Court orders, Quaid-e-Azam's vision and, most importantly, religious teachings.

Shri Param Hans Ji Maharaj was a God-fearing and kind natured saint. His purpose was to provide spiritual relief to vulnerable and poor people. Due to this fact, his 'Aashram' was always full of people seeking eternal peace and spiritual satisfaction. Even after his demise, a large number of his followers, regardless of religious affiliation, used to visit the Samadhi to pay tribute to his selfless and humanitarian services. However, after Partition, the local Hindu population had to migrate from there.

Unfortunately, the tragic incident of Babri Masjid in India resulted in empowering local extremist elements in Pakistan. In so-called revenge, a large number of historical places of worship belonging to the non-Muslim community were damaged during the 1990s. One of those was the Teri Temple which is the fourth most important holy site in the eyes of the Pakistani Hindu community.

The detailed decision of June 19, 2014 by the Supreme Court for the protection of minorities reflects one of my most significant struggles in the legal field. The judgment attempts to address and ensure the rights of non-Muslim citizens. Former CJ Honorable Tassaduq Hussain Jilani had also ordered the restoration of the Samadhi of Shri Param Hans Ji Maharaj. The decision was widely welcomed by the non-Muslim community.

During my visits to the area, I received a very warm welcome by the local community. Many senior citizens were recalling the times when the said Samadhi was a symbol of interfaith harmony and religious freedom. The locals were hopeful that pilgrimage to the holy site would result in uplifting the socio-economic conditions of the area. They were eagerly looking to welcome Hindu pilgrimages. I also noticed that there were a very few elements who were not happy but they had no option but to accept the Supreme Court orders.

However, a few days back on December 27, reliable sources informed me that some extremist elements were making plans to demolish the Samadhi on December 30. My immediate reaction was to bring this to the knowledge of the deputy commissioner of Karak. The DC informed that he had already received an intelligence report on this, and assured that nobody would be allowed to damage the Samadhi, which is under construction on the orders of the Supreme Court.

Due to criminal negligence, a violent mob, on the direction of the same person who had occupied the holy site in 1997, succeeded in attacking the Samadhi on December 30. Reportedly, the local police were standing as silent spectators there. The unfortunate incident has also brought a bad name to Pakistan and the Pakistani nation as a whole. Currently, the Hindu community in Pakistan and followers of Shri Maharaj around the globe are also in a state of shock and grief. It is a just demand to arrest the culprits and book them under the law.

During our discussion, Honorable Chief Justice of Pakistan Gulzar Ahmed showed grave concern over the tragic incident and informed that he has already taken cognizance of the issue with the directions to the One Man Commission on Minorities Rights, chief secretary KP and IGP KP to visit the site and submit the report. Similarly, Prime Minister Imran Khan has also condemned the tragic incident and assured full cooperation in this regard.

I am also thankful to all of those peace-loving citizens who, on the call of the Pakistan Hindu Council, gathered outside the Supreme Court Branch Registry in Karachi to show solidarity with the vulnerable Hindu community. Respect to all holy places of worship must be ensured at any cost.

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## New ray of hope

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The year 2021 dawned with a ray of hope for the minority Hindu community of Pakistan. During my meeting with Honorable Chief Justice of Pakistan Gulzar Ahmed at the Supreme Court Karachi Registry immediately after the tragic attack on the holy Samadhi (tomb) of Shri Param Hans Ji Maharaj, he expressed heartfelt grief over the tragedy. On the occasion, the chief justice directed the One-Man Commission, headed by Dr Shoaib Suddle, to visit the site and submit a fact-finding report. The hearing of the Teri attack was also fixed on January 5 for which the chief secretary of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, IGP KP and other higher-ups were summoned.

During our meeting, a large number of the Hindu community, on the call of the Pakistan Hindu Council, was present outside the Branch Registry to record a peaceful protest. The Pakistani Hindu community also reacted strongly on social media. The tragedy was condemned by all peace-loving circles of various schools of thought and civil society.

Shri Param Hans Ji Maharaj was a God fearing and virtuous man. He was also a Hafiz-e-Qur'an, and equally popular among his followers included Hindus, Muslims and other religions.

Although the local Hindu population migrated from there after Partition, Muslims used to remember him due to his good deeds. The decision to restore the Samadhi under the orders of the Supreme Court was warmly welcomed by the local population.

The Samadhi, located in the town of Teri in the Karak district of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, is considered one of the four most important holy sites for the Pakistani Hindu community. The sacred site was demolished due to the criminal negligence of the local administration. The unfortunate incident also resulted in injuring the religious sentiments of Shri Maharaj's followers across the globe. This also reminds me of the time in 1997 when Samadhi was targeted by the same extremists. At that time, neither was any action taken against the culprits nor an FIR registered.

The recent Supreme Court hearing once again highlighted the long-standing issue of the Evacuee Trust Properties Board. The first prime ministers of Pakistan and India, Liaquat Ali Khan and Jawaharlal Nehru, at the time of signing the Liaquat-Nehru Accord, had agreed on principle to appoint minority representatives to look after evacuee properties. That is why, a Muslim minister has always been responsible for the affairs of the Waqf Board in India since independence.

Unfortunately, the Evacuee Trust Property Board in Pakistan, which has 1288 temples and 522 gurdwaras, has long been a hotbed of corruption.

Due to incompetence, only 31 temples and gurdwaras are functional. The Supreme Court, in the recent hearing, directed the ETPB to remove encroachments from the religious sites of minorities and take action against officials involved in these encroachments. The Supreme Court also ordered the ETPB to furnish a report about all functional or non-functional Hindu temples and Sikh gurdwaras across the country.

No doubt, the bold judgment has won the hearts of the minority communities in Pakistan. The laudable role of the Supreme Court of Pakistan has shown a positive picture of Pakistani society. There is now a dire need to appoint a qualified Pakistani Hindu national as head of the Evacuee Trust Property Board.

The government, in light of the Supreme Court's orders and in collaboration with the One-Man Commission, should also devise a comprehensive strategy to ensure that the four major Hindu sites in Pakistan, Hinglaj Mata Temple Balochistan, Katas Raj Temple Chakwal, PrahLad Temple Multan and Shri Param Hans Ji Maharaj's Samadhi / Teri Temple can lead to the promotion of religious tourism at the national and global levels.

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## The first 100 days

**Dr Ramesh Kumar Vankwani**



**T**he first 100 days are considered to be very significant for every newly elected government. In these initial days, govern-

ments used to devise policies in order to fulfil the promises made to the people under its election manifesto.

Historically, the concept of the first 100 days to determine the initial performance of governments was first introduced by Franklin D Roosevelt in March 1933, when he was sworn in as the 32nd president of the United States. In his first presidential address, he pointed out that the newly elected government needed to work very hard to get the American people out of the crisis, after which special sessions of Congress were called for the next three months. After the competition of his first 100 days of the US presidency in June 1933, it was set as a benchmark for every new democratic government around the world.

The first 100 days of the Biden Administration are significant in the term that former US president Donald Trump made a number of controversial decisions during his tenure resulting in his electoral defeat.

Biden, on the other hand, succeeded to emerge as a new ray of hope for the people of the US. According to polls, the majority of Americans consider

Biden's performance in the first 100 days to be better than that of the former US president.

The US tops the list of countries severely affected by the pandemic. However, Biden's goal of 100 million coronavirus vaccinations was successfully achieved before the 100-day deadline. According to latest reports, Americans are rapidly returning to normal life and Covid-19 cases have been largely contained.

The Covid-19 crisis had hit the US economy hard under Trump's tenure, but the current US president's economic policies have not only helped the sinking US economy, but have also significantly reduced the unemployment rate.

The Biden Administration has lifted the ban on several Muslim and African nationals who were forbidden by the Trump administration from entering the US. President Biden has also termed the construction of a controversial wall on the Mexican border a waste of resources and money, urging his team to introduce immigration laws and policies on humanitarian grounds.

Trump had separated the US from the Paris climate agreement, which raised concerns in the international community, including the European Union. However, the Biden Administration not only rejoined the Paris climate agreement on a priority basis, but has played a leading role during the recently held virtual summit on climate change.

Today, the United States' diplomatic relations with other Western countries,

including the European Union, are moving in a new direction. President Biden also initiated contact with his Chinese counterpart to extend a hand of cooperation. There is some bitterness in the case of former superpower Russia, but it is hoped that the two countries will soon be able to resolve their concerns at the dialogue table. Similarly, bilateral ties with Iran were strained under the Trump administration, but Biden has hinted at rejoining the Iran Nuclear Deal.

In my view, President Joe Biden, with great prudence, wisdom and foresight, is striving in the right direction to let the United States take back its lost world status. He has set the priorities to serve the well-being of the American people, and the beginning of cordial relations with the international community. Biden has also been criticized for some of his actions, but he has proven that the best response to criticism in a democratic system of government can be delivered with a good performance.

Biden's first 100 days are an example for every elected government in the world. The lesson is to be realistic when setting goals for the first 100 days and then work hard to achieve them. In this regard, the right person at the right place also matters for efficient and effective team-making in the best interests of the country.

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# THE NEWS

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## Dignity of Jerusalem

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**B**arbaric attacks on the Gaza Strip have once again highlighted the Palestinian issue across the globe. Dozens of innocent Palestinians have lost their lives as a result of the recent tension, with innocent children among the victims. The live coverage of the horrific destruction of the building housing Al-Jazeera, AP and other media outlets also shocked part of the world.

The land of Palestine, one of the oldest regions in the world, is considered sacred in the eyes of the world's three divine religions – Islam, Judaism and Christianity. The ancient city is also called Jerusalem, Al-Quds or Bait-ul-Muqaddas. Jerusalem is also a highly respectable place in the eyes of Muslims due to the presence of Masjid-e-Aqsa and the Dome of the Rock there.

According to Jewish people, this holy area has been their ancestral homeland and the prophets of the Jews had ruled there for many years in ancient times. Christians also consider Jerusalem a sacred place due to its affiliation with Jesus Christ.

This holiest territory has witnessed the most horrific destruction in human history. There have been many wars in the past to occupy the holy land and today even in the 21st century, the land of Palestine is in turmoil.

In modern history, Palestine was part of the Turkish Ottoman Caliphate until the start of World War I. After the defeat of the Turks, the British took control of the region in 1917. Under the Balfour Declaration, British imperialism promised Jews the area so they could establish their national homeland there. The newly-formed United Nations passed a resolution urging to divide the land of Palestine into two independent and sovereign states, Palestine and Israel.

Israel came into being on May 14, 1948. Ironically, an independent Palestinian state was not established, in violation of the UN resolution. On the other hand, Israel, with the support of Western powers, started to occupy Palestinian territories. All military wars with neighboring Arab countries resulted in increasing Israeli territory. One by one, East Jerusalem, the Gaza Strip, the West Bank, the Sinai Desert, the Golan Heights and other territories were

taken over by Israel. Today, the Palestinian territories only consist of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, which are not even connected by land routes.

Israel is the only country in the world that does not have recognized formal borders. Many resolutions have been passed by the UN against violation of human rights and abuse of international laws by Israel. Even today, peace activists around the world are on the streets to record protests against Israeli atrocities, but Israel is not ready to listen to any sensible voice.

It is a pity for the international community, especially the United Nations, that the Palestinian issue is still unresolved. In my view, the UN resolutions should be implemented to stop the bloodshed in the holy land of Palestine. If the UN and the international community do not play their due role to maintain the dignity of Jerusalem then the ongoing violence may result in initiating yet another horrific world war.

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## Two-state solution

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**T**he violence in the Palestine region has led to a ceasefire. However, it is a temporary solution, and tensions in the Middle East could flare up again at any time.

Being Pakistania, our sympathies are always with the oppressed Palestinians. Before Independence, at the historic Jalsa in Lahore on March 23, 1940, a resolution was also passed to show solidarity with the Palestinians. All Pakistani governments have supported the Palestinians cause in every way, beyond political affiliations. Unfortunately, the Palestinian issue, which has been on the UN agenda for the last century, is still unresolved.

The ancient city of Jerusalem is generally considered a sacred place for the three major religions of the world (Islam, Judaism and Christianity). There is also an ancient building in Jerusalem dedicated to the great Sufi poet of the Subcontinent, Baba Fariduddin Ganj Shakar. It is believed that he stayed there 800 years ago during the Hajj pilgrimage. Baba Farid's poetry is part of our religious book Guru Granth Sahib. That is why

Jerusalem is also a sacred place in the eyes of the Sikh and Nanak Panthi Hindu communities of Sindh.

After World War II, the newly-established United Nations, in its Resolution 181 (ii) passed in the General Assembly in November 1947, proposed a plan to divide the land of Palestine into two independent and sovereign states. According to the resolution, the Palestinian Arabs would have their own independent state of Palestine and there would be a Jewish national state of Israel.

This plan was supposed to come into force after the withdrawal of British troops from Palestine and before October 1, 1948. However, after widespread bloodshed, the establishment of a Palestinian independent state under the auspices of the United Nations was postponed. The territories of the proposed Palestinian state, West Bank and East Jerusalem came under direct control of Jordan whereas Egypt took control of the Gaza Strip. As a result of 1967 and other wars, Israel succeeded in occupying the complete area of Jerusalem along with the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, the Sinai Desert, the Golan Heights, and other territories gradually.

In my view, much of the responsibility for the Palestinian issue lies with

Britain, which promised Jews a national homeland under the Balfour Declaration but did not ensure the protection of the rights of non-Jews before the military withdrawal. The attitude of the Arab neighbouring countries and internal differences of the Palestinian leadership also resulted in harming the Palestinian cause, providing opportunity to Israel to play the victim card. Similarly, the US was also criticized for vetoing UN resolutions in support of Israel.

Today, people belonging to all religions of the world must step forward and play their due role in order to ensure sustainable peace in the holy land of Palestine. The sanctity of Jerusalem must be maintained on the pattern of the Vatican City. The United Nations must implement its resolution for establishing the sovereign country of Palestine, under the two-state solution.

Jerusalem must be declared an international city under the joint control of representatives from all religions, and its doors must be opened for religious tourists coming from all corners of the world.

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## The Mountbatten plan

**Dr Ramesh Kumar Vankwani**



**J**une 3, 1947 holds importance for the success of the Pakistan Movement, led by Quaid-e-Azam Mohammad Ali Jinnah to achieve a separate and sovereign state of Pakistan.

Exactly 74 years ago, the last viceroy lord of British India, Mountbatten, delivered his address on the All India Radio on June 3, 1947 to formally announce the partition plan to divide British India into two independent states, Pakistan and India.

Also known as the June 3 Plan or Mountbatten Plan, it formally accepted the demand of the All India Muslim League for the establishment of Pakistan. On the occasion, the speech of Muhammad Ali Jinnah was also broadcast on the radio, which was concluded by the slogan 'Long live Pakistan.' His slogan was a clear indication that the destination of freedom was now not far away.

History reveals that the traditional society of the Subcontinent was based on tolerance, solidarity and interfaith tolerance before the arrival of the East India Company. During the British rule, Mahatma Gandhi fully supported the Caliphate Movement, which was run by Indian Muslims to show solidarity with the Turkish Ottomans. Similarly, Quaid-e-Azam was known as the ambassador of Hindu-Muslim unity. The two great leaders always maintained a relationship of friendship and respect. Both Hindu and Muslim communities

also have a common history of great struggle against British imperialism.

The British prime minister, Lord Attlee, announced in February 1947 withdrawal from the Indian subcontinent, and set a deadline of June 1948 for the transfer of power to the local representatives. In this regard, Lord Mountbatten was sent as the 29th and last viceroy of British India; upon his arrival, he immediately started meetings with local political figures.

The Congress was demanding the British leave India by handing over power to the majority whereas the Muslim League, under the leadership of Quaid-e-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah, was determined to establish a separate homeland of Pakistan. The viceroy himself was interested in keeping India united. He also desired to become the common governor general of both new countries, something that was rejected by Quaid-e-Azam. He assured the viceroy that the only solution to save India from further chaos was Partition.

After understanding the views of the two major political parties, Lord Mountbatten started working on the partition of India, which required the creation of two independent states. He left for London in May 1947 seeking final approval of his plan. The British Cabinet reviewed every aspect of the plan for ten days. By the end of May, the British government had approved Lord Mountbatten's plan. The viceroy arrived in India immediately and then on June 3, 1947, the Partition of India was formally announced. Lord Mountbatten's plan was approved by both the

Muslim League and the Congress.

Although the British government had set a deadline of June 30, 1948 for the partition of India, Lord Mountbatten relinquished his responsibilities a year before, resulting in the worst kind of chaos and anarchy throughout the Subcontinent. In his August 11 speech, Quaid-e-Azam appealed to the non-Muslim Hindu minority living in Pakistan not to migrate from Pakistani territories. In response, thousands of Hindu families declared Pakistan, which came into being on the 14th of August 1947, their motherland (Dharti Mata).

It is quite unfortunate that the June 3 plan was hastily implemented. The viceroy completely neglected the division of the population on religious grounds in his plan. A tragic series of riots started in which approximately two million people were massacred in Punjab alone, while more than 20 million people were displaced from their homelands.

In my view, it was a wise decision of Quaid-e-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah to accept the Mountbatten plan. Otherwise, if Britain had gone back without dividing the Subcontinent, the situation here would have been similar to that of Palestine where Israel was established at the behest of world powers but the promise of establishing sovereign Palestinian state is not fulfilled yet.

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## Regional scenario

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**T**he rapid withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan is currently in process. The Biden Administration has set the deadline of September 11 this year, which will also be marked as the 20th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks.

The US, in my view, cannot afford to disassociate itself from Afghanistan completely. In the regional scenario, China and Russia are increasingly asserting their importance day by day. Many countries are coming close to China for their economic and defence needs. That's why the international media is of the view that the US desperately needs military bases in neighbouring countries to keep an eye on Afghanistan and the region.

Twenty years ago, some Central Asian countries, in response to the 9/11 tragedy, provided military bases to the United States, but today the situation has changed. Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and Tajikistan have become an active part of a Russian-led regional defence alliance. Tajikistan already has Russia's largest overseas military base with more than 5,000 Russian troops. The national constitution of Uzbekistan prevents providing bases to foreign players. Similarly, Kyrgyzstan has also been hosting Russian bases for some time.

Over the past two decades, China's influence in the Central Asian States has grown rapidly. Joint military exercises with China and Russia have become routine there. In my view, China, Russia and the countries

of Central Asia have succeeded in establishing close relations with all parties in Afghanistan and are keen to play a proactive role in Afghanistan after the withdrawal of the United States.

No doubt, Pakistan has played a pivotal role in the 'war against terror'. A large number of our brave soldiers and innocent people sacrificed their lives to achieve the noble cause. However, it is quite unfortunate that we are still in a dilemma on the foreign front. Apparently, we are once again standing confused where we were in the 1990s and September 11, 2001.

**Pakistan should not wait for the US troop withdrawal but should start working on a comprehensive Afghan policy immediately**

There are numerous reports emerging in the international media about the possible role of Pakistan after the withdrawal of US forces this year. The New York Times, in its latest report, disclosed that the negotiations with Pakistan over the issue of providing military bases to the US had reached an impasse. It is further reported that the CIA and other US security agencies are interested in maintaining their presence in Afghanistan for intelligence-gathering, war-fighting and counterterrorism operations in the country. Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi, in response to the

said report, has announced that Pakistan will not be giving military bases to the US. According to him, there's no question of Pakistan providing bases to America.

Although the US is determined to leave Afghanistan, no clear policy has been shared with the international community to address the threats posed by the post-withdrawal situation. Due to such uncertainty, the China-Russia regional alliance is ready to give a tough time to the US whereas India is trying to make its place in the new scenario. Iran, known as the US's worst rival in the region, also came close with China after signing an historic agreement.

In my view, Pakistan will be the hardest hit by the hasty withdrawal of the US from Afghanistan. The presence of anti-Pakistan elements in the current Afghan government and Pakistan's past actions against the Taliban could cause troubles for us. If a new civil war breaks out there, once again Pakistan has to face a large number of Afghan refugees. Similarly, if anti-Pakistan elements come to power in Afghanistan, there could be full-fledged hostility on the western borders.

Pakistan should not wait for the completion of the US withdrawal but should start working on a comprehensive Afghan policy immediately. We must understand that the situation in our region is changing rapidly. Unnecessary rhetoric and emotional narrative may end up harming our national interests.

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## Humanity at top

**Dr Ramesh Kumar Vankwani**



**I**ndia is currently facing a critical period where the spread of the pandemic has resulted in a huge loss of precious lives. On a daily basis, hundreds of people are testing positive. Sadly, one death every four minutes is being reported only in Delhi.

The WHO has described the terrible situation in India as "beyond heart-breaking". The Indian media is broadcasting horrific news reports in which ambulances are shifting large numbers of dead bodies of Covid-19 victims to perform their last rites. Unfortunately, many helpless people are still in search of oxygen.

Pakistan and India share a glorious history of struggle against British imperialism. Even today, many freedom fighters including Bhagat Singh, Hasrat Mohani, Mangal Pandey and Kadu Makrani live in the hearts of the people of both countries.

Today, the tragic crisis in India has brought tears in the eyes of all peace-loving Pakistani nationals. Keeping their differences aside, people are expressing solidarity with the Indian people. The offer of help by the government of Pakistan to the Indian people in this hour of

need is highly appreciated across the country. Top trends by Pakistani social media users in favour of the Indian people have received positive responses from both countries.

Prominent Pakistani cleric Maulana Tariq Jamil has offered special prayers for the Indian people. Faisal Edhi, son of the late Abdul Sattar Edhi, has announced plans to provide ambulances and other medical aid across the border. In the holy month of Ramazan, special prayers are also being offered in mosques, temples and other religious places of worship across the country. Many Pakistani volunteers are also willing to support Indian people in this tough time.

While the corona situation is also getting worse with each passing day in our own beloved homeland Pakistan, our expression of solidarity with India reflects that we are a living nation with high moral values. Today, the Indian media, which was earlier spreading propaganda against Pakistan, is also acknowledging the positive role of Pakistan.

In my view, expressing solidarity with a country affected by natural disasters is a common practice at the diplomatic level. However, for the first time during the seven decades of post-independence history of Pakistan and India, peace loving elements of both sides are in a good position to play their due role

in strengthening cordial relations on a long-term basis.

The Indian media, civil society and parliamentarians are urging the Modi government to accept Pakistan's offer of assistance. In this regard, Gurjeet Singh Aujla, a prominent Sikh member of the Lok Sabha belonging to Amritsar, in an open letter to Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has asked the government to accept all the medical help offered by all countries including Pakistan. He has also proposed to develop an 'Oxygen Corridor' at the Attari-Wahga border.

Similarly, the international community is also appreciating our recent initiative and calling Pakistan a peaceful and responsible neighbour. The time has come for the Indian leadership to adopt a realistic approach for resolving all conflicts, including the Kashmir dispute. The present situation also demands that the top leadership of both countries follow a peaceful vision to promote coexistence, cooperation and cordial ties for the sake of humanity. In order to tackle the common challenge in the form of Covid-19, there is a dire need to bring the people of both countries closer.

**The writer is a member of the National Assembly and patron-in-chief of the Pakistan Hindu Council.**

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## Unity with all

**Dr Ramesh Kumar Vankwani**



**T**oday, two weeks have passed since my beloved older brother Dr Prem Kumar Vankwani left us. In this critical time, the tense situation in the country has saddened me more.

Human history has witnessed that as long as people remain united, they are safe and secure. During my TV interviews, I always speak in favor of promoting tolerance and respecting each other's stance on various issues.

Unfortunately, our beloved country was forced to face the worst kind of chaos in the last few days. The violence, during the holy month of Ramazan, has resulted in the loss of precious lives, including those of the police. However, it is a good sign that negotiations have improved the law and order situation.

Ramazan is a month of blessings, but the occurrence of such tragic events in this holy month is a clear indication that we have forgotten the real religious teachings about patience, forbearance and tolerance.

In my view, all religions of the world that teach brotherhood, mutual respect, love, peace and tolerance are to be respected. Nobody should be allowed to be blasphemous against any religion under the guise of freedom of expression. Similarly, all kinds of violence, aggressiveness and extremism

must also be discouraged at any cost.

In every religion, brotherhood is considered one of the most important relationships in the world. The last Prophet (pbuh) has advised that: "None of you will believe until you love for your brother what you love for yourself."

According to the Holy Ramayana, Shri Rama had three brothers – Lakshman, Bharat and Shatrughan. The teachings of Ramayana emphasized that the elder brother deserves to be respected like a real father. Similarly, younger siblings must be treated with love, compassion and kindness.

In the Holy Bhagavad Gita, it is clearly stated that there should be love, affection and unity among all brothers and sisters. The most popular festival of Raksha Bandhan also demonstrates the traditional affection and care of Hindu girls for their brothers. Similarly, the Holy Bible also states that: "God has made of one blood all peoples of the earth," emphasizing that every human being is equal in the eyes of God.

All great leaders, including Quaid-e-Azam, Mahatma Gandhi, Abraham Lincoln and Nelson Mandela, were firm supporters of solidarity at national and universal levels. They struggled tirelessly to ensure equal freedom and civic rights of every citizen in their societies.

Today, even in the 21st century, there is a dire need to promote a culture of patience, tolerance and brotherhood in order to tackle unwanted el-

ements spreading hatred and violence. No doubt, this is the toughest task but it can be possible through constant efforts, hard work and mutual cooperation. All sensible and peace loving people, regardless of their religious, political and geographical affiliations, must come forward to join hands for the success of this noble cause. Similarly, the focus of our foreign policy must be on strengthening friendly relations with other countries.

We must understand that there are extremist elements in every society and they propagate hatred in order to pursue their vested interests. However, such a situation demands to be tackled in an intelligent and smart way. In this regard, our government must utilize all diplomatic channels available. The role of our new generation is also very significant to promote love and unity on social media.

During Ramazan, everyone of us must struggle to promote unity and respect to all faiths. The way people are acknowledging my older brother Dr Prem Kumar Vankwani in good words after his death has encouraged me to keep serving humanity. If we succeed in practising the culture of brotherhood, then obviously the world will be transformed into a wonderful place for everyone.

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# THE NEWS

Friday, April 9, 2021

## Festival of flowers

**Dr Ramesh Kumar Vankwani**



**E**very year on April 8, the birthday of Siddhartha Gautama Buddha has been celebrated throughout Japan. Also known as Kanbutsu-e or Hana Matsuri (the festival of flowers), it is celebrated with socio-religious zeal and passion. Buddhist temples across the country used to be decorated with beautiful colors and candles.

Although Prince Siddhartha Gautama opened eyes in a royal family belonging to a Himalayan state around 2500 years ago, he was much interested to find the bitter realities of life and resolve problems amicably.

One day, at the young age of thirty, he left the royal palace to discover the truth. Gautama Buddha tried various ways of enduring hardships to seek spiritual peace, but finally realized that in order to find eternal peace, it is necessary to live a good and pure life, to have mercy on everyone and not to hurt anyone.

The first principle of Buddha's philosophy is that success in life depends on our way of thinking. If we adopt a negative attitude in life, we will suffer from various psychological problems. On the other hand, a realistic approach guarantees a prosperous life.

The second principle of Buddhist philosophy emphasizes that it is very

important to control one's thoughts in order to live a healthy life. People who do not control their thoughts are not able to perform any duty with dedication and concentration. The third principle explains that the greatest cause of heartbreaks is due to our attachment to worldly things. People become impatient when their great expectations are not met and thus, their fantasies eventually turn into bitter realities.

Buddha, in his fourth principle of philosophy, explained that those who only speak about good deeds but do not practise them can never be happy. According to him, a person's own life experience is the greatest teacher. Every human being should perform according to the voice of his/her conscience and no matter what the situation, the negative attitude must not be adopted.

Today, over seven percent of the world's population (approximately 520 million people) are followers of Buddhism. Most Asian countries – including Japan, Korea, China, Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam, Sri Lanka, Singapore, Bhutan, Laos, India and Mongolia – have large Buddhist populations. Eighteen percent of the population of China, consisting of around 244 million people, is Buddhist. There are also Buddhists residing in Russia, the United States and other Western countries.

The 2,000-year ancient Gandhara civilization, belonging to the northern part of present-day Pakistan, reflects

Buddhism's glorious past in our region. That is why every Buddhist in the world wants to visit the sacred sites located in Taxila, Takht-e-Bahi, Swat and other Pakistani areas. In my view, the promotion of religious tourism is essential for the stability of our national economy.

There is also a huge demand for Buddha statues made in Pakistan all over the world. In the historic city of Taxila, there are many talented sculptors who learnt the art of making statues from their ancestors. According to international media reports, their hard work is paid Rs2,000, while Pakistani sculptures are being sold in the international black market for above 10,000 dollars. Unfortunately, instead of overcoming the issue of antiquity trafficking, our outdated laws are resulting in the exploitation of Pakistani artists.

Today, on the occasion of Gautama Buddha's birthday, I would like to suggest that the laws about preparing copies and replicas of Gandhara statues must be revised. Statues of Gautama Buddha with the label 'Made in Pakistan' would not only generate huge foreign exchange from the global market, but also add to our positive image in the world. There is an urgent need to promote cultural diplomacy with Buddhist-majority countries.

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## Deal of cooperation

**Dr Ramesh Kumar Vankwani**



**T**wo and a half thousand years ago, the great philosopher of ancient Taxila belonging to present-day Pakistan, Kautilya Chanakya had stated that the enemy of my enemy is my friend.

It seems that this ancient proverb, full of wisdom, is still applicable in today's modern world for devising foreign policy by various global players. Looking at the current international situation, on the one hand, Middle Eastern Arab countries are coming closer with Israel to counter the Iran factor jointly, and on the other hand, China and Iran, with entirely different ideological identities, are joining hands with each other due to American pressure.

Reportedly, India is being asked by the Gulf countries to adopt the route of Pakistan, instead of Iran, for access to the Middle East. Similarly, the newly elected US President Joe Biden, while following the foreign policies of the previous regime, is apparently in favor of increasing pressure on China. In this regard, the US has recently formed a quadrilateral security alliance, consisting of Japan, Australia and India, to address common concerns related to China.

Pakistan has been a key strategic ally of the United States since day one. One of the main reasons for the cordial diplo-

matic relations between Pakistan and the US was protection from the Soviet Union. Today, Pakistan and China enjoy remarkably enduring bilateral relations. Historically, the military confrontation of China with India in 1962, followed by the Indo-Pak War in 1965, had resulted in strengthening bilateral ties and opening new doors of cooperation between Pakistan and China.

The focus of Pakistan's foreign policy is the promotion of cordial relations with the international community, but it is a matter of grave concern that our two neighbors, China and Iran, have been under US pressure for a long time. Both countries are also facing many hurdles in order to carry on international trade and foreign business activities.

In this regard, I have expressed my concerns in various forums that the internal situation in the Middle East is getting complicated day by day. The US, being the only superpower, is supposed to ensure world peace and stability throughout the globe. Unfortunately, unnecessary involvement is creating a mess for the entire region.

It was a matter of satisfaction for peace activists that the Iranian leadership, in response to the target killing of Iranian General Qassem Soleimani last year in a drone attack by the US, had demonstrated patience, endurance and wisdom. However, there are still chances that the tussle on the diplomatic front could transform into full-fledged military confrontation.

Similarly, Trump had also adopted the policy of isolating China on each front. Interestingly, a common threat factor from the US has resulted in bringing Iran and China closer. Both countries are subject to US sanctions and have recently signed a historical deal of bilateral cooperation. Under the agreement, China has agreed to invest heavily, worth 400 million dollars, in Iran over 25 years in exchange for getting crude oil at a cheaper price. On the occasion, the two sides also agreed to cooperate in the fields of security and defence to tackle common threats.

The recent bilateral agreement is being hailed as a major step towards regional stability and maintaining the balance of power in the region. The role of Pakistan due to its geo-strategic position is very essential in connecting China and Iran. In my view, the Biden Administration neglecting Pakistan, one of the top ten climate affected countries in the world, in the Climate Change Summit is a warning sign at the diplomatic level.

However, I am quite confident that the recent peace developments with India on the eastern border, followed by a cooperation deal among our two other neighbors China and Iran, will have a positive impact on the development and prosperity of our beloved country.

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## The right direction

**Dr Ramesh Kumar Vankwani**



**O**n the occasion of Pakistan Day Parade, our political and military leaderships could be seen together with a commitment to protect and defend our beloved country. The active participation of friendly countries has proven that Pakistan is not isolated on the diplomatic front. A strong message has also been given to anti-state elements through holding the parade successfully.

A big breaking news is the goodwill letter from Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi to PM Imran Khan. In his letter, the Indian prime minister, while congratulating the people of Pakistan, said that: "As a neighbouring country, India desires cordial relations with the people of Pakistan." The Indian PM also conveyed his best wishes to PM Imran Khan and the people of Pakistan in tackling the challenges amid the Covid-19 pandemic.

A few days ago, PM Modi also tweeted his best wishes for Prime Minister Imran Khan who is recovering from the coronavirus. Taking advantage of the confrontation between two important countries of South Asia, some ex-

tremist elements from both sides have been trying to serve their vested interests. However, recently there have been some positive developments that have once again raised hopes for peace and stability in the region.

Last month, the military leaderships of Pakistan and India, in a joint statement, had announced a ceasefire at the Line of Control. Recently, COAS General Qamar Javed Bajwa delivered a wonderful address which has been hailed as historic in all aspects. According to the COAS, unsettled disputes among India and Pakistan are dragging the entire region back to poverty and instability.

The army chief also presented the geo-economic vision based on four core pillars. First, moving towards a lasting and enduring peace within and outside. Second, non-interference of any kind in the internal affairs of our neighbouring and regional countries. Third, boosting intra-regional trade and connectivity, and finally, bringing sustainable development and prosperity by establishing investment and economic hubs within the region.

Pakistan's commitment to regional peace has also mobilized the international community. Bloomberg, in its latest report, claimed that the UAE has played a conciliatory role in bringing

Pakistan and India closer. According to the magazine, Emirati Foreign Minister Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed convinced his Indian counterpart during his visit to New Delhi to understand the geo-strategic significance of Pakistan in the region. Similarly, Saudi Arabia is also trying to reduce tensions between Pakistan and India.

Reportedly, Pakistan and India will likely deploy their diplomatic staff in New Delhi and Islamabad in the first phase to restore trust. In the next phase, bilateral dialogue will be initiated on trade and people-to-people contacts, and finally, work will start on resolving the Kashmir dispute amicably. As per my knowledge, a cricket series between India and Pakistan is also in the pipeline to be organized very soon.

During my last visit to India, I expressed my views on every forum that peace is in the best interest of both countries. Even today I am committed to play my due role in bringing the people of both countries closer. Peace-loving citizens in both the countries should come forward.

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Friday, March 12, 2021

# Celebrating Mauritius

**Dr Ramesh Kumar Vankwani**



**M**arch 12 is a very significant day in the national history of Africa's most beautiful island Mauritius, due to two major events. On March 12, 1968, Mauritius, under the leadership of what it calls the father of the nation and first prime minister, Sir Seewoosagur Ramgoolam, achieved independence from British imperialism. Later on March 12, 1992, exactly 24 years later, Mauritius transformed into a republic country with the British Commonwealth.

Every year on March 12, a national holiday is observed in Mauritius to mark the national day. The people of Mauritius used to demonstrate their pride in their nation by displaying colourful flags across the country. An official flag-raising ceremony also takes place in the capital city with military parades and live music. The national flag, consisting of four-color strips, also represents the pluralist society based on the co-existence and diversity of the population.

Mauritius is a unique country on the world map which is geographically considered a African country but it has a special affiliation with the people of South Asia socio-culturally. Urdu is spoken and understood throughout the island of Mauritius. The majority of the population, consisting of 55 percent, follows Hinduism whereas other prominent religions include Muslims, Christians, Buddhists and others.

At the time of its discovery by Arab traders in the 9th century, there was nothing but dense forests and wildlife. Due to its unique geo-strategic position, it also became a target of Western imperialist powers from Portugal, France and the Dutch East India Company, during the colonial period. Under British rule, many people from present-day Pakistan and South Asia immigrated to Mauritius. In the early 20th century, Mahatma Gandhi also paid a historic visit to Mauritius. During his two-week visit, he urged the people of Mauritius to transcend all kinds of prejudices and focus on educating their children.

Mauritius, most favourite destination of world tourists, is also known as an island of temples, mosques and churches. Ganga Talao, a crater lake situated in a secluded mountain area, is considered the most sacred holy place in the eyes of the Hindu community. There are different temples located on the bank of the lake and are dedicated to lords Shiva, Hanuman, Ganesh and goddess Ganga. On the occasion of the religious festival Shivaratri, many local pilgrims travel bare feet from their homes to the lake. The first mosque, now officially known as the Al-Aqsa Mosque, was built in the early years of the 1800s. The Jummah Mosque in the capital city Port Louis was built in the 1850s and is described as one of the most beautiful religious buildings in Mauritius. The tomb of Jamal Shah, a Sufi saint from the Indian subcontinent, is also located next to the mosque. There are also many churches and other worship places across the island.

No doubt, every sovereign country

has to offer countless sacrifices in order to achieve independence. However, after independence only those countries succeeded to establish internal peaceful societies and earn good name at international level, which follow the vision of their founding fathers in letter and spirit. In my view, today's Mauritius, which in the past was influenced by different global powers, is one of best examples about social harmony, religious tolerance and prosperity. The Republic of Mauritius constitutionally grants equal civic rights and religious freedom to all citizens. On the occasions of Eid, Diwali, Christmas and other holy festivals, public holidays are observed throughout the country. However, during my last visit, I noticed that the Indian lobby is taking advantage of the inactiveness of Pakistani embassy and increasing influence there rapidly.

Today, while congratulating the people of Mauritius, I would also like to appeal to my Pakistani compatriots to analyse that the countries that achieved independence after us have gone ahead of us in the race for development and prosperity. We must understand that the secret of Mauritius development lies in maintaining a culture of tolerance. We must avail the vast opportunities for bilateral cooperation with friendly countries like Mauritius. There is also a dire need to revise our foreign policies according to today's modern era.

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## Yet another surprise

**Dr Ramesh Kumar Vankwani**



**L**ast year, on the first anniversary celebrated by Pakistani nation to acknowledge the professional response by the PAF on February 27, 2019, I had mentioned that: "Today, US President Donald Trump is visiting India at that time when one year of this (Pulwama) incidence has passed but the tension between the two countries could not be ended."

However, after the passage of two years, it is a pleasant surprise for all peace-loving people that the military leaderships of Pakistan and India have agreed to implement the ceasefire arrangement of 2003 at the Line of Control (LoC) in order to ensure peace and stability in the region.

According to ISPR, the surprise announcement was made in a joint statement by the militaries of the two countries on a 'hotline contact' between their directors general military operations (DGMOs). India has also endorsed the statement, terming the conversation with the Pakistani DGMO as 'free' and 'frank' and held in a 'cordial atmosphere'.

The international community, including the US, has welcomed the move for ensuring greater peace and stability in the South Asia region. The UN chief has also hoped that this 'positive step' will provide an opportunity for 'further dialogue'.

No doubt, the recent development is a remarkable move by both sides. However, the joint announcement also resulted in refreshing my memories of

the visit to India two years ago. At that time, Pakistan-bashing was on the rise as part of the Indian election campaigns. The situation at the LOC had also intensified to seek voters' support. Due to the Pulwama attack, Indian media was busy airing non-stop coverage blaming Pakistan for the unfortunate incident.

In such critical circumstances, I got an opportunity to visit India to attend the Kumbh Mela. During my meetings with Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Foreign Minister Sushma Swaraj (late), Minister of Foreign Affairs and ex-Army Chief V K Singha and others, I made clear to everyone that peace is in the best interest of the people of Pakistan and India.

Taking advantage of my presence there, I emphasized that Pakistan is a peace-loving country, and being the frontline state against the 'war on terror', huge sacrifices have been offered in order to achieve peace and prosperity. Instead of indulging in blame game, the leadership of both countries must strengthen people-to-people contacts.

During my interaction with the Indian media, I urged that no Pakistani institution was behind the Pulwama attack. I further highlighted that there are a few unwanted elements at both sides, which have been active since day one. Such hatred-spreading elements want to spoil the peace process for their vested interests. I emphasized that India should cooperate with Pakistan for countering terrorism and other social evils. Due to my sincere efforts, the local civil society supported my stance that the peace-loving people of both countries should join

hands to strengthen people-to-people contacts. Mentioning the peaceful teachings of Mahatma Gandhi, I tried my best to convince that the solution to each and every conflict is dialogue.

Sadly, the Indian leadership, instead of listening to my advice and acting wisely, preferred to violate Pakistani airspace. However, our successful and quick reaction resulted in surprising India and the international community. Later on, the peace gesture demonstrated by Pakistani government was widely appreciated, both at national and international levels. Even today, when India is creating hurdles for minorities and Pakistani immigrants, Pakistan is opening religious places of worships belonging to non-Muslim communities to promote interfaith harmony and religious tourism.

Today, two years later, the ceasefire announcement reinforces my long-held stance that every problem in the world can be resolved through dialogue. India should learn from history that national progress and prosperity is directly linked with regional peace. In today's modern world, the enemies of the past are coming closer in order to strengthen ties. In my view, Pakistan and India should also boost bilateral cooperation to uplift socio-economic conditions of their people. To counter the hate politics by extremist elements in India, all peace-loving followers of Mahatma Gandhi must come forward to play their due role.

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# THE NEWS

Friday, February 26, 2021

## Preserving our heritage

**Dr Ramesh Kumar Vankwani**



**R**ecently, an informative article appeared on the Urdu version of the UK's most renowned journal, 'The Independent', highlighting some historical facts about the Ramkot Fort. According to the writer Sajjad Azhar, the fort, located in Azad Jammu Kashmir near Mangla Dam, is attributed to Hindu religious hero Ram Chandra. The ancient site is comparatively in a better condition than other forts in the Potohar region.

Ram, according to ancient epic Ramayana, is a prominent deity in Hinduism. He is equally respectable for followers of Buddhism, Jainism and other local religions. Due to this, the fort can be transformed into a best tourist spot based on interfaith harmony. This majestic fort, situated on a high hilltop, is also famous for its unique architecture and beautiful location. Due to the confluence of the rivers Jhelum and Poonch, the fort is surrounded by waters on three sides, and is accessible by boat.

The author, in his report, also described many evidences of Hindu civilization there. At the left side of the central entrance, there is a temple which is currently not in good condition. The walls of the temple have collapsed. It is believed that the fort was built over the site of an old Hindu Shiva temple. A large number of the

local Hindu population once used to perform religious rituals there.

Historically, the Potohar region was a hub of wars and conflicts among different forces after the 13th century. This region was also ruled by the warrior tribe Gakhar for many hundred years. Due to their extraordinary abilities to construct and renovate forts, they also made several changes to Ramkot Fort from a defence perspective. According to some historians, the fort was built by the Gakhar leader named Toglu whereas it was renovated during the tenure of Gakhar queen Mangu.

During the Dogra rule over Kashmir, Ramkot Fort was also used for military purposes. Just 20 kilometers away, there is another historical fort located, which is attributed to Princess Mangla, the daughter of famous Hindu king Porus. Historians are of the view that around 2000 years ago, the battle between the Greek warrior Alexander the Great and Raja Porus was held here near this historic site, currently present on Pakistani territory.

Ayodhya is commonly known as the birthplace of Sri Ram but still it is very difficult for historians to reach a final decision. In this regard many places in India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Nepal and Middle East are believed to be the birthplace of Sri Ram. Among many possible places, one site is Ramkot Fort. In this regard, the Independent Urdu also highlighted that British historian David J F Newall mentioned in his book 'The Highlands of India' on

page 181 that Sri Ram Chandra was born in the Ramkot Fort territory.

In my view, it is the duty of government to look after the sacred and historical sites of all religions. Luckily, our current political and military leadership, judiciary and local administration, all are on one page for the protection of the sacred sites of non-Muslim minorities. The opening of the Kartarpur Corridor is undeniable proof of the promotion of religious harmony. Similarly, the Supreme Court of Pakistan has won the hearts of the non-Muslim communities by issuing orders for the restoration of Shri Param Hans Ji Maharaj's Samadhi and celebration of Holi at the ancient Pradlad Temple in Multan.

Being patron-in-chief of the Pakistan Hindu Council, I would like to request the government that the Hindu community all over the globe has a religious and emotional attachment to Ramkot Fort attributed to Ram Chandra. It is our dire wish that the Shiva Temple be restored there. I believe that the opening of such glorious sites will result in a huge revenue to strengthen our national economy as well as work towards promoting Pakistan's soft image internationally. In this regard, the Pakistan Hindu Council is committed to play its proactive role in transforming these heritage sites into the country's leading tourist destinations.

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# THE NEWS

Friday, February 19, 2021

## Back to serve

**Dr Ramesh Kumar Vankwani**



**T**he US has finally decided to rejoin the UN Human Rights Council, one of the most important and significant international forums under the United Nations. According to US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, the recent move is part of the new US administration's recommitment "to a foreign policy centered on democracy, human rights, and equality."

Three years ago, Donald Trump, during his tenure as president of the US, was pulled out of the Human Rights Council. Therefore, the recent decision is seen as having reversed yet another key policy of the previous administration. "We know that the Council has the potential to be an important forum for those fighting tyranny and injustice around the world," a US State Department official expressed.

The current status of the US is as an observer with no voting rights. However, the Biden Administration is interested to play a pivotal role in the decision-making process by securing a full member seat in the upcoming elections this year. The withdrawal of the world's only superpower from the global institution had resulted in damaging America's reputation in the eyes of the international community. It was also very disappointing for many countries which believe that the US is supposed to protect human rights, especially in third-world countries. On the other

hand, some countries, in order to achieve their goals, also tried to take advantage of the absence of the US from the Human Rights Council.

Today, human rights organizations around the world are welcoming the return of the United States. In my view, the US, being a champion of human rights and democracy, is once again in a better position to support oppressed communities. Its active presence will also ensure an abatement of human rights violations, and some sense of justice.

It is on record that every Democratic elected president used to play a pivotal role in protecting human rights globally. During Obama's tenure, Joe Biden has been seen to have been actively contributing in protecting human rights. Now, after taking charge as president of the United States, he has considered it important to contact leaders of various countries, including India, involved in human rights abuses.

Former US president Trump used to ignore India's controversial state policies towards minorities and the people of Occupied Kashmir. However, Biden has expressed disappointment on India's move to impose a lockdown in the occupied valley as well as over its controversial citizenship act.

Similarly, Indian-origin US Vice President Kamala Harris is also a renowned human rights activist who raised a voice for the oppressed people of Indian-held Kashmir. In this regard, the British media has already hinted in a report that the new US administration can pressurize Modi's government over certain issues including human rights.

According to BBC, a number of other Democratic party leaders also have reservations over the undemocratic conduct of the Modi regime.

The current Indian government is also directly responsible for the mysterious deaths of 11 Pakistani Hindu migrants, who went there in hope of a bright future. In this regard, the patriotic Hindu community, on the call of the Pakistan Hindu Council, is continuously recording peaceful protests to seek the attention of the international community.

Unfortunately, the Indian government is not accepting our just demand to hand over the ashes of their dead bodies for performing last rituals. Previous days, during the meeting of the National Assembly Committee on Foreign Affairs, I vowed that the blood of innocent Pakistani Hindu nationals should not go in vain. Pakistan should raise this issue at every international forum available, including the Human Rights Council.

Biden's commitment to empower the UN Human Rights Council is indeed a very positive sign which reflects that the protection of human rights is a top priority of the current US leadership. However, there is also a dire need for the government of Pakistan to present our case before the US and the international community in an effective and efficient manner.

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## Containing China

**Dr Ramesh Kumar Vankwani**



**T**he Canadian embassy in China has issued a formal apology after some diplomats were found ordering controversial T-shirts displaying the stylized alphabet 'W' appeared to look like a bat and the word Wuhan, the Chinese city from where the Covid-19 pandemic started to spread all over the world.

The unwanted incident also has sparked public outrage and anger in China in the context of the recent arrest of the daughter of the head of China's largest telecom company Huawei in Canada. China believes that during the four-year rule of former US president Donald Trump, the US was clearly adopting the policy of containing China. At the behest of the US, Taiwan took various aggressive measures in order to provoke the Beijing government.

China has repeatedly warned the US about dire consequences in response to the supply of advanced weapons, including the F-16, to Taiwan. However, the Trump Administration placed a ban on various Chinese companies, including Huawei and the mobile app TikTok, in order to promote anti-China sentiment globally. Trump also openly termed Covid-19 the 'Chinese virus' and indulged the international community into a blame-game.

Even after Trump's defeat, China has still reservations about the new US administration's continued support for Taiwan. Just after a few days of President Biden announcing the US's foreign policy, a spokesperson of the Chinese military has warned that "We warn those 'Taiwan independence' elements: those who play with fire will burn themselves, and 'Taiwan independence' means war." On the other hand, the US president termed the Chinese stance 'unfortunate'.

Australian Liberal Party Senator and former army general Jim Molan has already predicted war between China and the United States over the Taiwan issue. According to him, the US economic war with China will soon escalate into a full-fledged military confrontation in the South China Sea, and Australia should start preparations to defend itself against China. Although the US and Australia do not formally recognise Taiwan as a sovereign state, there is unofficial cooperation going on with Taipei in various areas.

According to the US, construction of Chinese military bases on artificial islands in the South China Sea is a violation of international law. Japan, a close ally of the US, is also expressing grave concerns over China's maritime activities in the region, saying the Beijing government is trying to control the disputed waters that are potentially energy-rich as well.

Hong Kong, a former British colony, was peacefully annexed by China in 1997. However, the recent

unrest in Hong Kong has further added to China's diplomatic woes. Many Western countries, including the United States, Britain, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, are openly criticizing China over a new security law. The UK government has recently offered Hong Kong residents the opportunity to become British citizens. China, though, has refused to recognize British issued special passports for Hong Kong residents as valid travel documents.

China, under the Belt & Road Initiative, is very keenly interested in constructing the Kra Canal in Thailand. The proposed canal, on the pattern of the Suez Canal in Egypt, will be able to connect the South China Sea to the Indian Ocean, bypassing the Strait of Malacca. Reportedly, the US, India and Australia are also currently in talks with Thailand to construct the said canal. If this happens, it would be a big blow for China.

No doubt, this century is China's century and in the near future, China's leading role will become more dominant in every field. However, the various attempts to contain China are a real threat to world peace and regional stability. Pakistan, in such a critical situation, must be very careful on the diplomatic front and safeguard its national interests.

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## Inspiring struggle

**Dr Ramesh Kumar Vankwani**



**K**amala Devi Harris has added a new chapter to the 230-year history of the US presidential system by winning the recent US elections and taking oath as the first-ever female vice-president of the United States.

Kamala's mother migrated from the Indian state of Tamil Nadu to the US where she married a native of Jamaica. However, Kamala was raised by her Hindu mother, Shyamala Gopalan Harris. California-born Kamala once informed that she used to visit Hindu temples along with her mother. According to The New York Times, when Kamala was contesting the elections for California Attorney General, she contacted her aunt Sarala Gopalan in Chennai and asked her to break coconuts for good luck at a local Hindu temple there.

Kamala also had to face discrimination and prejudice in the United States due to her South Asian and African background. In an interview with American media, she shared childhood memories that children in the neighborhood were not allowed to play with her. However, the high-spirited Kamala Devi never allowed such inequalities in society to become hurdles in achieving her noble goals.

Kamala always raised her voice for the protection of the rights of women, children and other marginalized com-

munities of society. As a US senator, she also played a significant role to support the plights of Rohingya Muslims by co-sponsoring the Burma Human Rights and Freedom Act. When India imposed a lockdown in Occupied Kashmir and tried to seize the rights of India's local Muslim minority community through controversial Indian citizenship act, Kamala Devi openly showed solidarity with the vulnerable Kashmiri people and criticized the Modi regime.

In her personal life, the man Kamala Devi married already had two children from his first marriage, but Kamala Harris decided to take care of the children like their actual mother. In my view, Kamala Harris is a role model for every person in the world, especially women. That's why this week when I was invited by the National Institute of Management for delivering a guest lecture to bureaucrats in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa on the topic of marginalized communities, I decided to highlight the inspiring struggle of Kamala Harris as well.

On the occasion, I emphasized that every society consists of a few unwanted extremist elements who target vulnerable marginalized communities for achieving their vested interests. It is commonly believed that marginalized communities are mostly religious minorities. However, in my lecture, I urged that in addition to religious minorities, there are other segments of our society who are suffering from severe problems and are deprived of their rights.

In my view, women, facing gender

discrimination, are on top of the list of vulnerable marginalized communities. Similarly, people with physical or mental disabilities, children and senior citizens also deserve our special attention. If a member of the above mentioned segments belong to any religious minority community, then the impact of his/her socio-economic problems intensifies immensely. We must understand that every religion in the world teaches that we help the oppressed and vulnerable communities.

The inspiring life story of newly-elected US Vice President Kamala Harris indeed demonstrates that one should never lose hope at any cost. The neighbors of Kamala Devi who once used to forbid their children from playing with the child Kamala are now seeing her become the most powerful woman of the superpower America. I believe that she will take many concrete measures to maintain trust among different segments of the US population, and to establish cordial relations with the international community, especially third-world countries.

There is also a lesson for us that in order to transform our beloved motherland Pakistan into a peaceful, prosperous and developed country, we need to ensure that every citizen of Pakistan must be treated equally under the Article 25 of our constitution.

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# THE NEWS

Friday, January 22, 2021

## A new day

**Dr Ramesh Kumar Vankwani**



**T**he United States has successfully entered into a new democratic era with the historical swearing-in ceremony of newly elected President Joe Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris.

On this occasion, I would like to extend heartfelt congratulations and best wishes from the people of Pakistan to Joe Biden for being elected as the 46th President of the United States of America. It is also a matter of excitement that Ms Kamala Harris, being of South Asian origin, has succeeded to become the first female vice president, the highest-ranking female elected official in American history.

This year, the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic forced to ensure limited audience during the ceremony, and introduced modern features such as virtual performances and waving flags to represent the public.

For the first time in the history of the US, there was a dispute right after the announcement of the election results. Then-president Donald Trump not only refused to accept election results but his supporters also attacked Capitol Hill, the center of American politics. Unlike other former presidents, Trump was not present to attend the inauguration ceremony on Wednesday. No doubt, such unwanted acts damaged the repute of America, known as the champion of democracy.

Today, Trump is no longer in power and the international community is looking towards President Joe Biden. In my view, change of government in the US does not result in changing state policies. In fact, the national interests of the US decides to determine friends and enemies. However, I believe that the new president will immediately review some of the controversial policies of the Trump administration. For example, Joe Biden may consider resolving various international issues related to the Paris Agreement, the WHO, and the Iran nuclear deal, etc.

The slogan 'America is back' tweeted by Joe Biden indicates that he believes in America's soft power. He is of the view that America's contributions to democracy and the protection of human rights, inventions in the field of science and technology, achievements in space, and innovations in the field of medicine, creations in Hollywood and admissions of foreign students to American educational institutions have made the US an unconquerable global superpower. A major challenge for Biden is also to keep the US united internally.

To my knowledge, newly elected Democratic President Joe Biden has a soft corner for Pakistan. He is well aware of Pakistan's geo-strategic importance to ensure global peace and regional stability. Biden had already visited Pakistan before becoming president. As chairman of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, he played a pivotal role in allocating billions of US dollars aid to Pakistan under

Kerry-Lugar Bill in 2008. In recognition of his outstanding contributions, he was honored with Pakistan's second-highest civilian award, the Hilal-e-Pakistan. He has recently included Pakistani-origin citizens and Kashmiri women to his team after being elected president of the United States.

I believe that Joe Biden is a good man at heart and feels the pain of humanity. Few people are aware of the fact that his beloved son Beau Biden, lost his life due to cancer, after which Joe Biden, as vice president during the Obama tenure, made significant efforts to fight against cancer. This shared value of serving humanity brings him closer to the current prime minister of Pakistan, Imran Khan, who successfully established the Shaukat Khanum Memorial Hospital after losing his mother to cancer.

Due to his politics and personality, today Americans are quite hopeful that Biden will be able to uplift their socioeconomic conditions and once again America will be able to achieve its lost position internationally. Joe Biden, who has suffered the loss of his close relatives, will feel the pain of the innocent people affected by the wars and will play a leading role in the peaceful resolution of global conflicts. I hope that under the Biden administration, Pakistan and the US – two traditional allies – will start a new era of friendship and close cooperation.

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## Holi in Multan

**Dr Ramesh Kumar Vankwani**



**T**he Pakistan Hindu Council, while ensuring preparations to organize the annual combined marriages ceremony for deserving Hindu couples, faced various hurdles and uncertainty due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

However, it is a matter of great honor and prestige that we have maintained our traditions to organize the annual event. This year, 48 Hindu couples tied the knot in the presence of a limited audience following the coronavirus SOPs. Arrangements for other couples are being ensured in their respective areas at the district level.

In this regard, I would like to extend special thanks to the chairman of the One-Man Commission, Dr Shoaib Saddle, for gracing the occasion and expressing solidarity with the vulnerable Hindu Community. I am also grateful to Mr Faisal Edhi, who followed in the footsteps of his great father the late Abdul Sattar Edhi, always ensuring his presence every year. Similarly, the media also extended valuable support to cover this colorful ceremony in a friendly way. During my media talk, I categorically stated that the patriotic Pakistani Hindu community loves our motherland Pakistan, and that a few extremists are present in every society that spread hatred in order to achieve their vested interests.

Arrangements for broadcasting the ceremony live on social media were also made so that the international community could witness that minorities in Pakistan have full freedom to organize socio-religious ceremonies. In my view, the successful event of Hindu combined marriages also re-

sulted in promoting a positive image of Pakistan before the international community.

On the occasion, the announcement to celebrate the upcoming Holi festival in March at the ancient Prahlad Temple in Multan was widely welcomed by the audience. They were excited to know that the Pakistan Hindu Council, for the first time in the history of Pakistan, is going to celebrate Holi at Prahlad Temple.

Although today Holi has become an international festival, it actually originated from Multan, one of the oldest cities in the world. It also has a special significance in the eyes of the

**I would like to invite everyone to celebrate Holi with us at the Prahlad Temple of Multan in order to promote interfaith harmony and national unity**

Hindu community due to the presence of the Prahlad Temple. For many thousand years, Hindu followers from all across the globe travelled to Multan. Even today every Hindu has a sincere desire to visit the Prahlad Temple for pilgrimage purposes at least once in their life.

The temple, adjacent to the shrine of Hazrat Bahauddin Zakaria, is also considered one of the hallmarks of the traditional diverse society of Multan. Unfortunately, in response to the Babri Masjid tragedy in India, it was demolished by a violent mob in 1992.

Recently, the One Man Commission, headed by Dr Shoaib Saddle, vis-

ited the Prahlad Temple, on the orders of the Supreme Court. As the only minority member, I also had the honor to visit the sacred place where once Prahlad had celebrated Holi thousands of years ago. The miserable condition of the temple saddened us all. The unfortunate situation is yet another undeniable fact about the failure of the Evacuee Trust Property Board (ETPB), which is actually responsible for safeguarding such sacred religious places of the Hindu community.

During a recent meeting of the executive body of the Pakistan Hindu Council, I suggested celebrating the upcoming Holi at the Prahlad Temple. My suggestion was unanimously approved by the members. It was also decided to invite Honorable Chief Justice Gulzar Ahmed as the chief guest of the ceremony. In my view, the historical event would also be helpful in uplifting socio-economic conditions of the local population.

After the last 74 years, the minorities in Pakistan are now quite hopeful that the positive steps taken by the Supreme Court of Pakistan will help transform Pakistan into a peaceful and tolerant society according to the vision of Quaid-e-Azam. In my view, regardless of the tag of minority or majority, every Pakistani citizen must be allowed to play his/her due role for the prosperity of Pakistan.

Finally, I would like to invite everyone, including civil society representatives, parliamentarians, media friends and students, to celebrate Holi with us at the historical Prahlad Temple of Multan in order to promote interfaith harmony and national unity.

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# THE NEWS

Friday, November 26, 2021

## Orange the world

**Dr Ramesh Kumar Vankwani**



**T**he International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women is marked every year on November 25. In order to raise awareness for the prevention of abuse, gender inequality and domestic violence, a special and unique theme is issued by the UN every year.

This year, under the theme of 'Orange the World: End Violence against Women Now!', various public and prominent places in the world are being decorated with orange colour to convey the message that even in the 21st century, women are victims of various forms of violence. The theme also suggests that transforming our society free from violence is everyone's responsibility. The secretariat of the Pakistan Hindu Council is also painted in orange to express our commitment to a violence-free society.

Historically, November 25 commemorates the assassination of three political female activists known as the Mirabal Sisters from the Latin American country of the Dominican Republic. They were killed on November 25, 1960, at the behest of then-dictator Rafael Trujillo. After their murder, several activists in Latin America and the Caribbean attributed November 25 as a day to combat and raise awareness of violence against women. Finally, the date also received its official status through a UN resolution in 1999.

According to various reports, one in three women has to face physical

or mental abuse at some point in their lives. Situations like epidemics, natural disasters and armed conflicts intensify the plight of women. UN Women has recently collected data on women from 13 countries for its latest report, which found that two out of three women have suffered from violence and malnutrition since the Covid-19 outbreak. Reportedly, only one woman out of ten spoke to the police for help.

Although violence against women is a serious matter in Pakistan, it is also considered a sensitive issue. Un-

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**All government agencies, NGOs, educational institutions and, most importantly, the media must play their due role in ending violence against women**

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fortunately, a majority of women victims of violence do not prefer to inform anyone or seek help. Reporting violence to the police is seen as an attempt to discredit the honour of the family, and those who make such attempts are handled aggressively.

In cases of honour killings, the murderers are usually related to close relatives, so they are freed after being pardoned/reconciled by the family despite being caught by the law. Different reports suggest that only a minority of victims report to the police for help; an even smaller number of victims prefer to

approach civil society organisations and only a few opt for legal action against their abusers.

In Pakistan, many women's rights organisations are working on ending domestic violence, sexual harassment at the workplace, and gender discrimination. However, whatever data is collected on violence against women in these reports is based on press coverage, but it is also a fact that most of the incidents of violence against women remain unreported.

Another source of statistics on incidents of violence against women in Pakistan is the police record whose 'easy access' is another separate matter. One of the worst forms of violence against non-Muslim women in Pakistan is forced conversion and marriages. Minor girls under the age of 18 are abducted by powerful elements.

Under the auspices of the UN and the Inter-Parliamentary Union, all government agencies, local and global NGOs, educational institutions and, most importantly, the media must play their due role in ending violence against women. Today, we need to conduct awareness programmes that truly highlight the importance of women in our society.

The 16-day global campaign of activism under the UN has also started, which will end on December 10, International Human Rights Day. All responsible citizens must join hands for participating proactively in the activities and events being held in these sixteen days.

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## Religious tolerance

**Dr Ramesh Kumar Vankwani**



**T**he Sultanate of Oman celebrated its 51st National Day on November 18. This date marks the country's independence from Portuguese imperialism in 1650. This holiday is the beginning of a two-day break – November 19 is also a public holiday to celebrate the birthday of the legendary and visionary sultan of Oman, Late Qaboos bin Said.

Oman is the only Middle Eastern country with an indigenous Hindu community residing there for centuries. An estimated 5.5 percent of the current Omani population is followers of Hinduism, and approximately 1,000 Hindus have Omani citizenship. The total number of immigrants from the Hindu community is believed to be over 250,000.

The Shiva temple and the Shri Krishna temple, located in the capital city of Muscat, are considered to be the oldest temples in the Middle East, with their unique architecture. One of the salient features of the Shiva temple is the presence of water in its well all around the year. Similarly, the Shri Krishna compound, surrounded by beautiful valleys and desert areas, consists of three temples including the Shri Krishna temple, Shri Ganeshji temple and Mataji temple. Various re-

ligious festivals, including Holi, Diwali, Hanuman Jayanti and Navaratri, are regularly celebrated there.

Just five decades ago, Oman was one of the most backward countries in the region. That era was called the darkest period in national history. People were living below the poverty line. Tribal rivalries were on the rise, and the government had been unable to crush insurgencies. The law and order situation was also badly disturbed. In the wider interest of his country, Sultan Qaboos took charge.

The Middle Eastern region has long been plagued by several conflicts, but Sultan Qaboos, as soon as he took control, made it clear that there was no room for extremism and violence in Oman under his rule. "Extremism, under whatever guise, fanaticism of whatever kind, factionalism of whatever persuasion would be hateful poisonous plants in the soil of our country which will not be allowed to flourish."

Following his determination for peace and coexistence, he resolved all external border disputes with neighbouring countries amicably. He also maintained law and order internally in the sultanate. Rather than taking revenge, Sultan Qaboos took practical steps for the inclusion of rebels in the national mainstream and focused on upgrading the lifestyle of the people.

He also made it clear to the international community that Oman would

not become a party in anyone else's conflict. This is the reason that during the Iraq-Iran war, Oman maintained its neutral status and cordial diplomatic relations with both countries.

Cordial relations with Iran and the US enabled the sultan to play a pivotal role in making the nuclear agreement possible between both rivals. Oman did not support any specific country based on religious affiliations, and during the Saudi Arabia-Qatar tussle, Oman also succeeded in staying neutral.

Today, Oman is one of the modern countries where people of different faiths are living peacefully. Various reports from international organisations have acknowledged the positive situation in Oman in terms of religious freedom.

The current sultan of Oman, Haitham bin Tariq Al Said, while adhering to the golden principles introduced by Sultan Qaboos, is also committed to serve his country and nation.

While congratulating the Omani people on their National Day, I would like to say that if we want to understand the importance of religious tolerance for national development and prosperity, there is no better example than the Sultanate of Oman.

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## Filling a vacuum

**Dr Ramesh Kumar Vankwani**



**E**xactly 20 years ago, on October 7, the world's only superpower, the US, along with its global allies, launched massive air strikes on the war-torn country of Afghanistan. During the last two decades, the US and its allies have been pushing hard to oust the Taliban from Afghanistan.

According to a rough estimate, the US has spent around \$3 trillion for the Afghan war, and Germany spent around 17 billion euros, during the last 20 years. Similarly, India had invested more than \$3 billion dollars in the country.

However, the return of the Taliban to Kabul has completely changed the regional landscape. Several countries that have been influential in Afghanistan for the last two decades have been forced to exit. New regional players have started to fill the vacuum whereas some countries are also making efforts to save the heavy investment they earlier made in the country by making space in the new setup.

Although no country has so far recognised the Taliban regime, diplomatic efforts are currently under way. There are speculations that China would soon become the first country to recognise the Taliban-led government. If it happens, the Taliban would also be supported for their diplomatic representation in the UN and other international forums. Afghanistan's participation in the Belt and Road project could help China to transform into a global superpower.

The soft corner for the Taliban by the former superpower Russia is no se-

cret. Russia kept its embassy open even after the Taliban took control of Kabul, and the Russian ambassador spoke positively after meeting with a Taliban representative. Russian President Vladimir Putin has openly termed the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan a reality, indicating that Moscow wants to start a new era with the Taliban.

Similarly, the British foreign office has officially confirmed that Simon Gass, the British prime minister's special envoy for Afghanistan, has recently met with Tal-

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**Although almost all regional players have made efforts to fill the vacuum in Afghanistan, only Pakistan is considered to be the Taliban's closest ally**

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iban leaders in Kabul. On the occasion, both sides discussed the possibility of restoring diplomatic relations, according to a statement issued by the Taliban.

Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), which have recognised the Taliban in the past, are quietly monitoring the regional situation this time. The UAE has established diplomatic ties with Israel, and Saudi Arabia is also interested in ending its ideological rivalry with Iran. Contrary to what happened in the past, Iran is now acknowledging the role of the Taliban, for defeating the US.

The influence of Qatar began in 2013 when it hosted the Taliban's polit-

ical office in Doha. However, fearing Qatar's growing role in the Afghan peace process, the neighbouring Gulf states expelled it from the GCC forum. Due to Qatar's continuous efforts, a historic peace agreement was reached between the US and Afghanistan, in 2020. Qatari Foreign Minister Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al-Thani is the first high-ranking foreign official to visit Afghanistan since the Taliban regime came into power. Qatar has also established a diplomatic mission at the Serena Hotel in Kabul.

Turkey also wants to ensure a strong presence in Afghanistan to increase its influence in the Islamic world. The successful reactivation of Kabul Airport with the support of Turkish and Qatari experts has resulted in winning the confidence of the new Afghan government.

Although almost all regional players have made efforts to fill the vacuum in Afghanistan after the US withdrawal, only Pakistan is considered to be the Taliban's closest ally. In my view, it is a positive sign that we are having cordial relations with all regional countries including Iran, China, Turkey, Russia and Qatar, and are interested in working with the Taliban regime.

However, we must keep in mind that several other countries, including India, are reportedly in contact with Qatar to pave the way for talks with the new Afghan government. We must therefore learn from past mistakes and act wisely to play a pivotal role in the current regional scenario.

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## Faith conversions

**Dr Ramesh Kumar Vankwani**



**T**he issue of religious conversions in Pakistan is becoming more complex day by day. As soon as I became part of parliament in 2002, I started my efforts to legislate on this sensitive issue. I came to know that many countries have personal laws for minorities. Even the British had introduced separate personal laws for Muslim and Hindu population during their rule. Various Muslim-majority countries are facilitating their non-Muslim citizens in the form of such laws.

At my request, Prime Minister Imran Khan termed this long-standing issue of faith conversions a human rights cause and decided to form a Joint Parliamentary Committee comprising all elected political parties from the Senate and National Assembly, including Federal Minister for Religious Affairs Noorul Haq Qadri.

It was noted that non-Muslim girls under the age of 18 years are being targeted for forced conversion, most of them belonging to the Hindu religion. In most cases, the victim girls have not even been issued identity cards. Minor non-Muslim girls are abducted and tortured for forced marriage. The oppressed girls have no other option but to compromise. I have also raised this question on various platforms.

However, several non-Muslim girls are also converting for the sake of love marriages. Since, there is no formal mechanism for conversion, they have to approach those controversial people

who are already involved in facilitating forced conversions. On the other hand, the parents of the girl blame that she is converted against her will. Due to lack of proper knowledge of the situation, the media highlights the issue, followed by a notice by the court. Similarly, the local administration also takes action.

Although my proposed bill is a personal law related to the minorities, even then its every clause was discussed thoroughly by the Council of Islamic Ideology (CII). Finally in March this

**Marriage is a sacred social duty, but the absence of effective legislation in Pakistan poses serious threats to social harmony, religious freedom, and human rights**

year the committee passed the bill before its term expired. The bill was sent to the Ministry of Human Rights for further necessary action. This was a great achievement because parliamentarians of both the majority and the minority had agreed to end the issue of forced conversion once and for all.

However, at the time of sending it to the Cabinet and the National Assembly for approval, the situation suddenly changed. The same parliamentary committee, which had completed its constitutional role, was reactivated and the Ministry of Religious Affairs demanded

to send the bill back for getting recommendations of the Council of Islamic Ideology. Ironically, no representative from the minority community was invited to the recent meeting to present our point of view.

I had faced a similar situation at the time of presenting the Hindu Marriage Act in parliament. Despite clear orders of the Supreme Court, the bill was passed in 2017 instead of 2014. In these three years, various hurdles were created unnecessarily. Two main points of my proposed bill that the age of marriage for a Hindu girl should not be less than 18 years, and no second marriage should be registered without completing the legal process of divorce, were deleted from the bill.

The state does not even issue national identity cards and driving licences to children under the age of 18. How can a minor be allowed to take the most important decision of his/her life?

Whenever a conversion case emerges, the victim has to appear before the court. If one is converting willingly, he/she should not object to fulfilling legal requirements to appear before the judge. This legal step can also help counter the propaganda against Pakistan.

Marriage is a sacred social duty, but the absence of effective legislation in Pakistan poses serious threats to social harmony, religious freedom, internal peace and human rights. The said bill should be passed with the consensus of all parties.

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## Learning from the kingdom

**Dr Ramesh Kumar Vankwani**



**E**very year the national day of Saudi Arabia is celebrated on September 23 with great enthusiasm throughout the country. On the occasion, different buildings are decorated with green flags and colourful lights. Various celebrations have been organized to acknowledge the great contributions of the Saud family.

The Saud family, living in the historic area of Najd, is prominent in terms of bravery and high spirits. During the Ottoman era, the Saudis began to take control of regional areas one by one, but their rule was toppled in 1818 and they were forced to migrate from their native homeland. Despite facing critical circumstances for about 80 years, the Saudis were committed to make a comeback.

Finally, Abdul Aziz bin Abdul Rahman Ibn Saud, the legendary leader of the Saudi dynasty, succeeded in taking control of Riyadh, the capital of Najd, in 1902, at the age of thirty. Shortly afterwards, he successfully conquered the entire Najd and other surrounding areas. The conquest of the entire Hijaz within four months was his remarkable achievement. Although the Saudi kingdom was proclaimed in January 1926, he preferred to rule over the two parts of his kingdom separately.

Almost a century after its fall, the Saudi dynasty was once again able to return to power with full glory. However, the international community was

reluctant to recognise the Saudi government. In this regard, the Saudis engaged the two superpowers of the time, Russia and Britain, on the diplomatic front in a very brilliant way. As a result, Russia became the first country to recognise the Saudi government whereas Britain signed the Treaty of Jeddah, which led towards unification of Najd and Hijaz as a sovereign kingdom of Saudi Arabia in 1932.

**Saudi Arabia is the largest supplier of petroleum to Pakistan. It is also interested in setting up an oil refinery in Gwadar**

Ibn Saud focused on ensuring internal stability, national development and prosperity for the people. At that time, the local Arab population used to live a nomadic life in the deserts. He took various steps to bring all tribes into the national mainstream. A few years later, the discovery of oil led to positive impacts on economic prosperity at a larger scale. Several educational and national institutions were established. Saudi Arabia, under the visionary leadership of Ibn-Saud, also played a pivotal role in strengthening cooperation with other countries in the region.

Today, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is the largest country in the Middle East and Arabian Peninsula. About 80

percent of Saudi Arabia's ethnic population consists of local Arabs. However, a large number of immigrants from Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, the Philippines, and Egypt are also settled there for employment purposes.

The people of Pakistan have a special relationship with Saudi Arabia. The two countries share a common position on various issues at the international level. In Pakistan's foreign policy, Saudi Arabia has always been given the status of the 'Most Important Bilateral Partner'. Faisal Masjid, located in Islamabad, reflects the everlasting love of Saudi ruler Shah Faisal for Pakistan. Similarly, the city of Faisalabad is named after the Saudi king.

Saudi Arabia has continued to support Pakistan in every difficult time including Pak-India wars. Saudi Arabia is the largest supplier of petroleum to Pakistan. It is also interested in setting up an oil refinery in Gwadar. The kingdom also provides financial assistance to Pakistan in various sectors.

Similarly, Pakistani forces have played a significant role in safeguarding Saudi Arabia from military threats. For the past 50 years, Pakistani troops have been stationed in Saudi Arabia.

On the national day of Saudi Arabia, we must remember that we should not be afraid of difficulties and hurdles in life but should fight to overcome challenges bravely.

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## Listening to the press

**Dr Ramesh Kumar Vankwani**



**O**n the occasion of the joint sitting of parliament, a large number of journalists were gathered outside Parliament House recording a protest against the decision of establishing the Pakistan Media Regulatory Authority (PMDA) by the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting.

No doubt, the presence of free and vibrant media is a prominent feature of a democratic society. Fearless journalists are supposed to keep a close eye on the performance of the institutions. Whether it is misuse of government funds or abuse of power, the media is to play a vital role in highlighting such matters. The United Nations has declared freedom of expression a fundamental human right under Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Every year, World Press Freedom Day is observed on May 3 under the auspices of the United Nations. Quaid-e-Azam was also a firm supporter of independent and responsible journalism.

Although freedom of expression is guaranteed under Article 19 of the constitution of Pakistan, the practice of restricting journalism in different periods is also a shameful part of our national history. In the past, various laws were enacted to curb press freedom; sometimes fearless and independent journalists were flogged as a punishment; several journalists were pushed behind bars; and many times they were targeted by non-state actors. Even today, a few TV anchorpersons complain that they have been forcibly taken off the air from the TV screen.

The majority of professional journal-

ists in our country are associated with government registered media organisations. While following high journalistic values, they have spent a valuable part of their precious lives in the field of journalism. However, many Youtube channels and news websites, being run by immature and non-professionals, are spreading baseless news for the sake of getting likes, comments and views on social media. Such so-called digital journalists do not consider themselves bound by any rule of law or journalistic ethics.

**Only after a series of fruitful discussions with journalists' organisations and civil society representatives must the proposed bill be presented to parliament for approval**

Recently, Federal Minister for Information and Broadcasting Fawad Chaudhry introduced a proposal to establish a new media regulatory body, the Pakistan Media Development Authority. The proposed institution will regulate all kinds of media including print, electronic and social media. The minister believed that the government's initiative would help in countering fake news and yellow journalism. Similarly, the protection of the rights of working journalists will reportedly be ensured under the said authority. The proposed authority is said to also ensure fair distribution of government advertisements.

However, almost all Pakistani media organisations are interpreting the es-

tablishment of the Pakistan Media Development Authority (PMDA) as an attack on freedom of the press and have been protesting this decision. These organisations include the All Pakistan Newspapers Society, Pakistan Broadcasters Association, Council of Pakistan Newspaper Editors, Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists and other media organisations and networks.

In my view, our journalist community is facing a number of crises that must be addressed on a priority basis. Legitimate media houses are suffering from financial problems and on the other hand, those who spread fake news on the internet are not only making good money through online advertisements but also discrediting the sacred profession of journalism. That is why, the Supreme Court of the United States, Washington has declared that not everyone who creates a YouTube channel can be considered a journalist and part of the news media.

While the government seems committed to protecting the rights of all genuine media equally under the PMDA, the Pakistani journalists' community has faced very bitter experiences in the past. Today, it is time to call a round-table conference to take all the journalists' organisations into confidence. The government must listen to the legitimate demands of journalists for reaching a consensus on controversial clauses of the PMDA. Only after a series of fruitful discussions with journalists' organisations and civil society representatives must the proposed bill be presented to parliament for approval.

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# THE NEWS

Friday, September 10, 2021

## Prosperous region

**Dr Ramesh Kumar Vankwani**



**T**wenty years ago, the tragic attacks of 9/11 resulted in changing the world's dynamics. However, on the occasion of its 20th anniversary, the Taliban, are once again rulers of Afghanistan in all their glory and strength. The Taliban's control over Afghanistan has not only become stronger than in the past, but areas that were considered invincible and unconquerable, including the Panjshir Valley, have also been captured.

The Taliban have finally announced an interim government and cabinet. Officially, Afghanistan has once again been rebranded as the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. Mullah Mohammad Hassan Akhund, known as one of the founders of the Taliban movement, was blacklisted by the United Nations at the behest of the United States after 9/11. Today, he has become the head of the new government of Afghanistan. Similarly, new Afghan Interior Minister Sirajuddin Haqqani is one of the top most wanted terrorists in the FBI list. In my view, the appointment of a non-

Pashtun Tajik commander, Qari Fasihuddin Badakhshani, as the chief of army staff reflects commitment of the Taliban for taking decisions on merit and the inclusion of ethnic minorities.

Two months back, international observers were terming the US withdrawal a severe threat to regional peace and stability. Many concerns were raised regarding the possibility of a new civil war and the expected arrival of Afghan refugees to neighbouring countries.

US President Joe Biden, in a telephonic conversation with his then Afghan counterpart Ashraf Ghani on July 23, showed confidence in the US-trained Afghan army to combat Taliban warriors. Earlier, the US president, speaking to reporters in Washington, emphasized that Taliban fighters were not capable of gaining full control of Afghanistan.

Surprisingly, other analysts and experts from the US and international organizations claiming to have a keen eye on the ground realities were also completely unaware of the Taliban's military capabilities. In a short span of a month, all the analysis of international experts, based on ground realities, failed to become reality whereas astrology predictions proved to be accurate and correct.

Afghan people have for the last four decades been facing wars, invasions, civil wars and foreign occupation. However, the tough era is going to end soon, according to Hindu astrology. Sustainable peace and prosperity in Afghanistan will start on September 19, just after one week of the 20th anniversary of the 9/11 tragedy. Afghanistan will not only achieve internal stability but also emerge as a strong economic power.

The Taliban government, unlike in the past, will not be isolated on the diplomatic front. Pakistan, China, Iran and Russia will play a leading role to ensure a prosperous region. In the coming future, the priority of the international community will be to establish cordial ties with Afghanistan.

In my view, the timely visit of ISI Chief General Faiz Hameed to Kabul will bring positive outcomes for Pakistan and the region. Although the foreign media is busy airing traditional propaganda, time will prove his words that: "Don't worry, everything will be OK."

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# THE NEWS

Friday, September 3, 2021

## Philanthropy

### Dr Ramesh Kumar Vankwani



**I** am currently in Washington DC, where I have meetings with various local personalities, including the overseas Pakistani community.

The Pakistani community living in the United States is considered one of the most prosperous classes and is playing its dynamic role in the development and prosperity of the country.

Pakistani-Americans love Pakistan immensely and are always ready to help Pakistan in every difficult hour. Before Independence, a large number of people from the Subcontinent started migrating towards the US. Even today, the US is the most favourite destination for immigration.

According to the US Census 1970, Pakistani-Americans were considered "white" ethnically due to their Indo-European heritage. However, Pakistani-Americans were classified as Asians under the US Census in 2020. The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) used to classify people from Pakistan as being "White (Middle Eastern)". According to a survey, the majority of Pakistani Americans prefer to associate their ethnic identity with Asians.

During my visit to the United States, I am observing that American society as a whole is a humanitarian and philanthropist society. Here, people park their vehicles aside to allow ambulances and fire brigade vehicles to

move smoothly. American citizens are known for their large charity donations. Students are encouraged to participate in volunteer and community work from an early age.

Historically, welfare activities in the United States were started during colonial rule when Europeans began arriving on American soil. Various voluntary charitable organizations were established by ethnic and religious groups for the welfare of their respective communities.

Even today, the tireless services of Benjamin Franklin, one of the founding fathers of the modern American nation and the first US ambassador to France, are highly valued for promoting philanthropic activities. Being an activist and theorist of American philanthropy, he established a social club of like-minded people, called Junto, whose membership qualification included "love for mankind".

Many of today's richest successful businessmen in the US used to dedicate a large part of their wealth and time to philanthropy work. Bill Gates, the founder of Microsoft, established the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, with the active support of his ex-wife, to alleviate poverty, diseases and inequality around the world. Reportedly, Bill Gates provided aid worth 500,000 US dollars to the AJK earthquake victims in 2005. Mark Zuckerberg, the founder of Facebook, is known for revolutionizing social media. He, along with his wife, Priscilla Chan, has donated 99 percent of Facebook shares to support

charity work. Following in the footsteps of its founder, Facebook is also committed to provide financial support for the promotion of various noble activities globally.

A prominent feature of American society is old age homes where a large number of senior citizens spend the last days of their lives. During my stay, I visited various old age homes and saw the elderly people here spending their time happily in various positive activities. Senior citizens, some of them ranging in age from 85 to 100, said that they do not suffer from social isolation here. They make friendships with like-minded people. The timely presence of doctors and medical facilities is also a source of satisfaction for them.

In my view, it is the prime responsibility of a good human-being to play his/her due role for the betterment of society. After closely observing the welfare activities going on in American society, I have decided to launch a world-class charity initiative in Pakistan. In loving memory of my beloved brother Dr Prem Kumar Vankwani (late), I would like to establish 'Prem Nagar' in Tharparkar on several acres of land. Its doors will be opened for all homeless senior citizens, the disabled, and orphaned children. Similarly, education of local children will also be ensured there.

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## Regulation needed

**Dr Ramesh Kumar Vankwani**



I have returned to Islamabad after a successful visit to the Bhong Sharif area of Rahim Yar Khan where I was invited as a special guest to attend a ceremony for the restoration of the Ganesh Temple. Traditionally, the diverse society of Bhong Sharif has been seen as a practical example of religious harmony and tolerance.

Regarding the unfortunate incident that happened last week in which a violent mob attacked the Ganesh Temple, what I have found is that social media has played a major role in creating panic. A large number of hateful posts have appeared on various social media platforms, including Facebook, Twitter and Whatsapp groups. Unfortunately, there was literally no check on hate material on digital spaces.

That is why, during my address at the restoration ceremony, I emphasized on the responsible use of social media. No doubt, social media is the most powerful instrument in societal change but its usage must be for bringing people closer for the betterment of society.

When I was coming back from Bhong Sharif, Federal Minister for Information & Broadcasting Fawad Hussain Chaudhry and National Security Adviser Moeed Yusuf held a press conference, during which they

disclosed that many foreign elements are very active on social media with a focus on Pakistani current affairs.

According to Information Minister Fawad Chaudhry, government teams had analysed Twitter trends from June 2019 to August 2021 and "it transpired that India led the top trends against Pakistan" in order to defame Pakistan in the eyes of the international community.

The said press conference reminded me of my article, 'Regulating social media' (June 2, 2017). I had

### Strengthening the role of the digital editor for news websites is important

mentioned that the situation in our beloved country is quite sensitive where numerous anonymous websites and fake social media accounts are involved in spreading propaganda and conspiracy theories. Still, I am of the view that fake Twitter accounts are being used to make trending topics more popular than they actually are.

Seven years ago, during my hearings in the Supreme Court for the protection of minorities' rights in Pakistan, I had informed then-CJ Tassaduq Hussain Jilani that there is an immediate need to delete all hate material throughout the country. To implement the National Ac-

tion Plan in letter and spirit, the government must take solid measures against abuse of internet and social media promoting hatred, extremism, sectarianism and intolerance.

However, the dilemma is whenever there is some serious effort to ensure positive usage of social media, a lot of hue and cry has been raised under the guise of press freedom.

A nationwide awareness campaign on a massive scale is also needed to highlight the importance of social media for good. An internet user must understand that s/he is accountable to God for all deeds while using the internet and further sharing of fake information is in fact an act of sin, whether people like to admit that or not.

I would like to suggest to the information ministry, under the visionary leadership of Fawad Chaudhry, to call a digital media summit in which representatives of leading news portals, bloggers and youtubers could be invited for sharing ideas and fighting against propaganda.

The internet regulation strategies of different countries could also be analysed on the occasion. Strengthening the role of the digital editor for news websites is also in the best interest of news portals for winning trust of their audience by providing authentic news content.

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## Narrative of forgiveness

**Dr Ramesh Kumar Vankwani**



**F**orgiveness has been given special significance in the teachings of every religion. According to the Holy Quran, Allah is the One who accepts the repentance of people and forgives their sins.

Forgiveness is the most important spiritual virtue in Hindu Dharma too. According to Hindu Dharma, a person who does not know how to forgive carries a heavy baggage of bitter memories of the past in his/her mind and destroys his/her own life and the lives of others due to negative feelings of anger, revenge and depression. Similarly, the Bible emphasizes forgiving the sins of other people.

Today's South Africa is one of the most developed countries in the world, but three decades ago racial discrimination was rampant there. In such critical circumstances, the great Nelson Mandela succeeded his tireless peaceful struggle against racism. Mandela used to say that great people are never afraid to forgive for a noble purpose. The 16th president of the US, Abraham Lincoln, also advised to end enmity by making an enemy a friend.

I used to express my stance at every forum that the teachings of all religions and the lives of legendary leaders should be followed in letter and spirit for achieving peace in our society. When the Samadhi of Shri

Param Hans Ji Maharaj, located in the Karak district of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, was demolished by some extremist elements, I raised my voice against this oppression. My stance in this noble struggle was widely endorsed by the Supreme Court, media, civil society and government circles. Eventually, I received an invitation from the chief minister of KP, Mahmood Khan, to attend the jirga to resolve the conflict amicably.

On the occasion, all religious scholars condemned the tragic incident while assuring the restoration of the holy place. The participants also reiterated their commitment to cooperate in preventing such incidents in the future. The elements responsible for the illegal occupation of the Samadhi in 1997 and later carrying out the attack on the shrine last year, apologized for their deeds in front of everyone. The honourable scholars also assured that rights to the non-Muslim community under Islamic teachings and the constitution of Pakistan would be ensured.

The provincial government team, headed by the chief minister of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, deserves congratulations for realizing our religious sentiments, ensuring the best arrangements for the jirga and opening the door of dialogue for mutual understanding. Being the head of the Pakistan Hindu Council, I decided to demonstrate the holy virtue of forgiveness. In my view, arrogance is a negative attribute whereas good people always show

high morals at every stage of life. We must understand that God forgives the greatest mistake of His followers. Therefore, those who admit wrongdoing should also be forgiven.

I believe that the actual purpose of pardoning someone is to provide them another opportunity to be a good person, but those who spread mischief again must be dealt strictly. I am quite hopeful that such gestures of forgiveness and goodwill will promote religious harmony and tolerance in our beloved country. Similarly, Hindu teacher Notanlal from Ghotki who has been arrested on false charges of blasphemy must also be freed.

Unfortunately, our political situation promotes intolerance and negativity. The opposition parties are active on all fronts, including the Senate, to give the government a tough time. On the other hand, the government is of the view that the opposition alliance PDM is in turmoil due to internal differences. I consider this my national duty to appeal to all political parties to spread a culture of forgiveness and tolerance in the wider national interest of Pakistan. A joint parliamentary committee consisting of senior representatives of all political parties should be formed to formulate national policies for the betterment of Pakistan.

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## Kashmir solidarity

**Dr Ramesh Kumar Vankwani**



**E**xactly two years ago, the Modi government abolished Articles 370 and 35A of the Indian constitution to remove the special status of Indian Occupied Kashmir.

The government of Pakistan not only immediately rejected this illegal move but also mobilized the international community to draw attention against this. Calling himself the ambassador of Kashmir, Prime Minister Imran Khan exposed the true face of the Indian government during UN meetings and on other world forums. He appealed to the international community to urge India to protect human rights in the occupied valley.

In my view, the present Indian leadership has also violated the agreement between Maharaja of Kashmir Hari Singh and Jawaharlal Nehru. India is an occupying power controlling a territory against the will of the people living there.

The Kashmir issue is a long-standing dispute in the United Nations. Unfortunately, the UN has not been able to stop the Indian government from oppressing the Kashmiris for the last seven decades. The Modi government has been pursuing extremist policies day by day in Occupied Kashmir. The

hidden motive to move people there from all over India is to change the proportion of the local population.

No doubt, the Kashmir issue has once again succeeded in gaining international attention and questions are being raised on various forums regarding the ongoing human rights violations in Occupied Kashmir. However, we need to convince the international community that the Kashmir situation must be considered a matter of humanity which needs immediate attention.

Interestingly, the presidency of the UN Security Council has been transferred to India at a time when the people of Indian Occupied Kashmir are marking two years of exploitation under the Modi regime. The presidency changes every month, and Ireland will have the next turn to take the presidency.

The Indian foreign ministry, in this regard, has outlined three key priorities for India during its UNSC presidency: (i) Voice of moderation; (ii) Advocate of dialogue; and (iii) Proponent of international law. If the Indian leadership is committed to achieve the above-mentioned targets then there should be serious efforts to resolve the Kashmir conflict peacefully. The doors of dialogue with Pakistan should be opened and arrangements for a referendum according to the UN resolutions should be ensured. The leadership of both countries must learn from the mistakes of the past.

Today, we need to convince the international community that according to the Indian Independence Act 1947 passed by the UK parliament, every princely state was allowed to either join India / Pakistan or stay independent. If the people of East Timor and South Sudan can get independence through referendum then depriving Kashmiris of the right to self-determination is in fact a grave violation of UN resolutions and international laws.

Today, we also need to analyze why the international community is not supporting our just stance. This is also a question for international human rights activists; the UN is still unable to implement its resolution despite more than seven decades having gone by. In order to counter the Indian narrative on the diplomatic front, we also need to redesign our foreign policy on a priority basis.

Our embassies must play a proactive role to promote the Kashmir cause, rather than enjoying foreign trips along with families. The prime minister and president of Pakistan should immediately call an international conference on the Kashmir issue to seek the support of friendly countries.

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# THE NEWS

Friday, July 30, 2021

## Peaceful coexistence

**Dr Ramesh Kumar Vankwani**



A highly condemnable incident took place in Tharparkar, causing a wave of anger and outrage among peace-loving citizens across the country. In a viral video on social media, it can be seen that a man is harassing a poor Hindu boy, demanding he say blasphemous words against his (Hindu) religion. According to my information, this incident is one month old and the oppressed Hindu child belongs to a very poor family.

Tharparkar is known all over the world for its unique values of interfaith harmony and plural society. According to the recent census results, the population of Tharparkar is about 1.6 million, half of whom belong to the Hindu religion. At the time of Independence, religious riots were on rise across the Subcontinent, but the deserts of Thar remained calm and peaceful. Quaid-e-Azam, in his August 11 speech appealed to the Hindu community not to migrate from Pakistan. In response to this, many Hindu families, including my elders, decided to declare Pakistan our beloved Dharti Mata (motherland).

The Pakistan Hindu Council reacted strongly over the viral video. On social media, the demand for the arrest of the

accused became the top trend. In a few hours, thousands of tweets were posted. Our TV channels also played a positive role in condemning the tragic incident. The prompt action taken by the Sindh Police, especially SSP Tharparkar, is highly appreciable. At the demand of the Pakistan Hindu Council, not only was the FIR lodged but the culprit was also arrested and presented before the media.

In this regard, my stance is very clear: all religions ask their followers to respect each other. The recent irresponsible act has once again proved that some ignorant people consider it a good deed to insult other religions. Such few people are capable of committing any undesirable act at any time which harms the efforts for peaceful coexistence.

However, it is a matter of satisfaction that after the recent incident, the people of Pakistan have shown sympathy regardless of their socio-religious affiliations and stood up for the poor victim. In my view, the behavior of the people living in an Islamic welfare state should be a role model for the entire world community. If any wrongdoing is committed against the minorities in our neighborhood, we shouldn't make it an excuse to target patriotic minorities living in our country.

Various international media representatives have approached me to know my reaction after the recent inci-

dent. I tried my best to emphasize that the majority of people living in Pakistan believe in religious harmony, co-existence and brotherhood. Even under the constitution of Pakistan, all citizens of the country are equal. Constitutionally, non-Muslims have full freedom to practice their religion.

Unfortunately, it was very difficult for me to answer the questions of what action has been taken against those who have damaged Hindu temples in the past. How do culprits who target the holy places of the non-Muslim community manage to get bail? Despite the clear orders of the Supreme Court, why could Holi not be celebrated at the Prahlad Temple in Multan? Similarly, a Hindu teacher Nautan Lal from Ghotki is sent to jail for a baseless complaint by a student. Why is the misuse of blasphemy laws not stopped yet?

Today, the Hindu community across the country is very disturbed. It is our just demand that the hate-mongering person must be punished strictly under Sections 295A and 298 of the Pakistan Penal Code. This is also a test case for the provincial and federal governments to use all means for ensuring brotherhood and peaceful coexistence in society.

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# THE NEWS

Saturday, July 24, 2021

## Upgrading our diplomacy

**Dr Ramesh Kumar Vankwani**



I have returned to Islamabad after attending the International Conference on 'Central and South Asia: Regional Connectivity. Challenges and Opportunities', held at Tashkent, the capital city of Uzbekistan. The government of Uzbekistan, especially President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, deserves appreciation for this excellent initiative.

Today, Uzbekistan, the second largest economy in Central Asia, is on the world map as an independent and sovereign state. The presence of magnificent buildings, amazing public places and excellent infrastructure reflects Uzbekistan's progress and prosperity. However, only three decades ago, Uzbekistan was an integral part of the Soviet Union, the great superpower of the last century.

Geographically, the Soviet Union consisted of multiple socialist republics located in the eastern part of Europe and the northern part of Asia, covering a sixth of Earth's land surface. At least one hundred ethnic groups were living there. Several Middle Eastern and Latin American countries were also influenced by the Soviets.

During the cold war, the international community was divided between the Soviet Union led Eastern Bloc and the US-led Western Bloc. The Soviets were giving a tough time

to the US in every field of life, including economics, business, education, the arts, space and technology. Western countries were afraid of the Soviet Union, which once played a pivotal role in defeating Hitler-led Nazi Germany during World War II.

However, the Soviet leadership made the grave mistake of invading Afghanistan which resulted in the collapse of the USSR. Due to the historic defeat in Afghanistan, many former states, including Uzbekistan, achieved

### During my visit to Tashkent, I was highly impressed by the national spirit of the Uzbek people

independence. The important role of Pakistan in this regard is also acknowledged by citizens of former Soviet states.

During my visit to Tashkent, I was highly impressed by the national spirit of the Uzbek people to ensure cleanliness around their surroundings. According to a report, Uzbekistan is estimated to generate over 12,000 tons of Municipal Solid Waste on a daily basis. The capital Tashkent alone generates 500,000 tons of waste in a year. However, I did not find any garbage there during my entire visit.

On the occasion of the recently-held CASA conference, Pakistan and

Uzbekistan have signed many significant agreements on bilateral cooperation, including trade and investment. Different bilateral trade agreements have been signed during the Business Forum. It is hoped that the two countries will come closer to each other to ensure the development and prosperity of their people.

Unfortunately, on the occasion of the recent conference, not a single press release was posted on the official website of the Pakistani embassy. Similarly, social media accounts of the embassy failed to contribute something genuine.

Uzbek media, no doubt, is dominant over regional media in Central Asia. A good number of local media here is in Russian language. Therefore, there is a dire need for hiring proficient Russian language experts, who can help disseminate Pakistan's national narrative in Central Asian media.

We must understand that the situation in our region is changing very rapidly. The Tashkent Conference was held at a time when America is withdrawing its troops after ending its 20-year occupation of Afghanistan. The changing situation in Afghanistan once again has the potential to affect regional stability. We need to upgrade our approach so as to ensure sustainable peace and integrity in the region.

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INTERNATIONAL  
**THE NEWS**

**Friday**

July 16, 2021

# Model of progress

**Dr Ramesh Kumar Vankwani**



I am currently in Tashkent, the capital of Uzbekistan, to participate in the International Conference on 'Central and South Asia: Regional Connectivity. Challenges and Opportunities', being held at the special initiative of the President of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev.

Prime Minister Imran Khan has also arrived here to jointly inaugurate the opening session of the CASA conference. On the occasion, a number of trade agreements have been signed in different business areas, including the Uzbekistan-Pakistan Transit Trade Agreement. The two countries also agreed in principle to resume direct flight operations very soon.

The business delegation under the Ministry of Commerce is composed of prominent Pakistani businessmen who have established themselves in the relevant field after a long struggle. Due to the current global situation, the Pakistani business community is quite hopeful that our exports can increase by 20-30 percent this year. Serious steps have been taken by the current government to promote trade activities. Similarly, the business community is cooperating with the government to strengthen the national economy.

No doubt, Uzbekistan is one of the most beautiful countries in the world that was part of the Soviet Union just three decades ago. The defeat of Soviet forces in Afghanistan paved the way for the independence for Uzbek-

istan and other Central Asian States. Uzbekistan is also a doubly landlocked country surrounded by other landlocked countries.

The total population of Uzbekistan is about 33.5 million. Constitutionally, all citizens enjoy equal civic rights. Uzbekistan is administratively divided into twelve provinces, one autonomous republic and one independent city. The provinces are further divided into different districts. A large number of Russians are also residing here.

The city of Tashkent, with its glorious past, is considered the cultural capital of the Islamic world. There are thousands of historical and religious sites throughout the country. The shrines of many great personalities, including Imam Bukhari, Imam Naqashbandi, and conqueror Timur are also located there. There is also an eighteen meter long tomb attributed to the Prophet Daniel. People of different nationalities and religions are seen worshipping here together.

The Uzbek citizens show a special love and affection for people of Pakistan. It is a fact that the Central Asian states are bound with Pakistan by historical and cultural ties. According to a study, the vocabulary of Urdu language includes a large number of Uzbek words. Many great Uzbek personalities, including Imam Bukhari, Imam Tirmidhi, Al-Khwarizmi and Al-Beruni, are highly regarded in Pakistan. The founder of the Mughal Empire, Zaheer-ud-Din Babar, also came from here. Interestingly, there is no time difference between Pakistan and Uzbekistan.

The salient features of the Uzbek society are religious harmony and control on crimes. Uzbeks are committed to ensuring the protection of human rights. They consider it their social duty to pick up garbage to clean their homes and neighborhoods. Women have equal opportunities to play an active role in the country's development.

The current Uzbek government understands the importance of promoting tourism. In this regard, border restrictions with neighbouring countries are being eased to facilitate public and business relations. Recently, Uzbekistan has also played a pivotal role for the success of the Afghan peace process.

Although Uzbekistan achieved independence much later than us; but in the journey of development and prosperity, it has gone far ahead of us. Magnificent buildings, excellent transport facilities and high quality infrastructure have transformed Uzbekistan into a developed and modern country. In my view, we need to learn a lot from the Uzbek model of economic progress; the business community is especially in a better position to explore various trade opportunities. Hopefully, Prime Minister Imran Khan's participation in the CASA conference will result in connecting Pakistan with the Central Asian region effectively and efficiently.

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# THE NEWS

Friday, July 9, 2021

## Knowledge of light

**Dr Ramesh Kumar Vankwani**



According to Hindu teachings, the rotation of planets and position of stars in the astronomical universe have a strong impact on our lives and destinies. Whenever a person is in difficulty, he/she can seek guidance in the light of astrology. Thousands of years old ancient Hindu Vedic astrology, originally known as Jyotish or the knowledge of light, is still very popular.

Traditionally, various kings, maharajas and rulers of the Subcontinent ensured to include Vedic astrologers in their cabinets and valued their advice to perform state matters. It is said that the astrologer associated with Tipu Sultan had warned him in advance at the beginning of the day of his martyrdom and advised him to be careful.

The withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan could destabilize the entire region. I have expressed this concern previously, but my recent meeting with two Hindu Vedic astrologers has astonished me a lot. According to them, the current developments in Afghanistan are actually in favor of Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Northern Afghanistan is generally considered a stronghold of anti-Taliban forces in the form of Northern Alliance, but the Taliban's astonishing success in Badakhshan is undeniable proof of the astrologers' predictions. "The withdrawal of the US from Afghanistan will not lead to a civil war but to unite the whole of Afghanistan," the astrologers emphasized.

The ground realities are indicating that after the departure of the United States, a new civil war may break out in Afghanistan; a flood of Afghan refugees is expected to arrive in Pakistan; Kalashnikov culture may once again flourish in Pakistan, and criminal elements in the guise of refugees may exploit the situation. However, the Vedic astrologers, in response to my concerns, predicted that cordial ties between Pakistan and Afghanistan would be revived in near future.

At the diplomatic level, the power that controls the capital Kabul in Afghanistan is usually considered the ruler of Afghanistan. The Taliban have made it clear that the United States has to complete withdrawal before September 11 at any cost. One third of Afghan territory is currently in direct control of the Taliban. Apparently, Kabul will also go to the Taliban very soon. The US is interested in obtaining Pakistani bases for keeping an eye

on Afghanistan and the region, but astrology says that American withdrawal must be considered its ultimate defeat. The decline value of the US dollar on the economic front is yet more evidence.

Although the US leadership, on the occasion of the G7 summit, has presented the B3W project as an alternative to China's Belt and Road Initiative, the astrologists said that no US project or plan can be succeeded in the next three years. America's role in our region is going to end just like British imperialism vanished completely in the last century. Astrology reveals that the regional situation would be favorable for Russia, Turkey, Afghanistan, Pakistan and China.

Today, the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan could be a matter of concern to other neighboring countries, but there is nothing to worry for Pakistan. The astrologists further predicted that Prime Minister Imran Khan will continue to lead Pakistan in the year 2024. Interestingly, it means that either Imran Khan will win the next election or else the national elections will be postponed for a year.

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## Avoiding blame games

**Dr Ramesh Kumar Vankwani**



**T**he recent drone attacks in Occupied Kashmir could be termed reminiscent of the Pulwama attacks, when a failed attempt was made, a few years ago, to launch an offensive against Pakistan under the guise of these strikes.

It is too early to claim from where exactly the mysterious drones were flown, but Jammu and Kashmir's police chief Dil Bagh Singh has linked the recent attacks to Pakistan. Claiming that a Pakistan-based militant group is likely to be the mastermind of the drone strikes, he said that drones are suspected to have flown across the border. On the basis of his baseless statement, the Indian media has once again started propaganda against Pakistan.

The timings of drone attacks could also be termed significant in the context of recent developments in the region. Just a few days prior to the attacks, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, in a meeting with Kashmiri political leaders, had discussed holding elections in the occupied valley.

Similarly, a few days before the drone strikes, a horrific car bomb blast was also carried out near the house of the chief of a banned organization in

Lahore. India is accusing the organization for the recent drone strikes. As a result, three innocent people, including a police officer, lost their precious lives and at least 24 others were injured.

Pakistani security forces have successfully arrested the culprits involved in the attack from different parts of the country. According to Punjab Chief Minister Usman Buzdar, all international and local characters involved in the bombing have also been identified.

If we take a look at the regional scenario, the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan will be completed by September 11 this year. In this regard, there is still uncertainty in the region. The US apparently wants to once again repeat the history of the 90s, when the people of Afghanistan were left at the mercy of warlords and local militias.

In my view, the withdrawal of the US may not only result in emerging a new civil war in Afghanistan but also have negative impacts on neighboring countries, including Pakistan. Although India's border is not directly adjacent to Afghanistan, it is an historic fact that the ongoing freedom movement in Occupied Kashmir gained momentum after the withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan.

I remember that a few years ago, India, after the Pulwama attacks, was showing similar aggressive intentions against Pakistan. In such a critical situ-

ation, I had an opportunity to visit India to attend the Kumbh Mela. During my separate meetings with Indian PM Narendra Modi, the late foreign minister Sushma Swaraj, Minister of State for External Affairs and former Army Chief General VK Singh and other government, media and civil society representatives, I made it clear that no Pakistani institution was involved in the Pulwama attacks. Pakistan is in favour of cordial relations with all neighbours, including India.

Even today, I would like to highlight that some extremist elements have been active in both countries from day one with the aim of achieving their vested interests. However, sustainable peace between Pakistan and India is in the best interest of both countries.

We should avoid playing blame games and all terrorist acts should be strongly condemned. All culprits involved in terrorism should be dealt with forcefully. Today, if superpower America is ready to give up its occupation after a 20-year war in Afghanistan, then obviously one day India will also have to restore the special status of Occupied Kashmir, followed by implementation of the UN resolutions.

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## The Iran way

**Dr Ramesh Kumar Vankwani**



**I**ran is one of the few countries where the international community keeps a close eye on the presidential elections, and even before the election results, speculations about the priorities and policies of the new prospective Iranian leadership start in the media.

Ebrahim Raisi, in the recent presidential elections held in Iran, has won a landslide victory. The 60-year-old is known for holding deeply conservative views on many socio-political issues.

The position of the president is the most powerful in Iran's political system after the Supreme Leader. The president, under the constitution of Iran, is responsible for controlling internal matters and foreign policy. However, the Supreme Leader makes the final decisions on various significant issues. Being the highest political and religious authority, he is the head of state and commander-in-chief of all armed forces. All important national institutions such as defence, judiciary and state media, are under the control of the Supreme Leader.

According to the international media, the conservative Raisi was being considered as the most favourite candidate for the Iranian presidency. It was already predicted that he would win this year's elections.

Supreme Leader Sayyid Ali Hosseini Khamenei had appointed him as the head of the judiciary two years ago. Even before the election, the media portrayed him as a possible successor to the Supreme Leader. It is worth mentioning that Iranian politics has traditionally been divided between conservatives and reformists.

Raisi also contested in the last election of 2017, but at that time he was unable to defeat the incumbent President Hassan Rouhani, supported by reformists. Rouhani, no doubt, was a ray of hope for Iranians. The nuclear deal between Iran and the United States was an historical achievement during his tenure, which left Iran's people with high expectations for raising their living standards and integrating with the international community.

However, US President Trump's withdrawal from the deal resulted in a negative impact on Iran. Rouhani was criticized for failing to revive Iran's economy, and Iranians were also disappointed that he had failed to deliver on his promises of socio-economic reforms. The currency crisis in Iran has also been a major factor in the unpopularity of the reformist government. The reformist candidates backed by President Rouhani also failed to perform well in last year's parliamentary elections.

In my view, the new Iranian president Ebrahim Raisi has to face many challenges at internal and global levels. He will have to take tough decisions to bring relief to the common citizen in

order to improve the country's economy. During the election campaign, he presented himself as the best option to curb corruption, eradicate poverty and solve economic problems. Now he has to come up with a concrete strategy to fulfill his promises. The construction of four million houses in the next four years was also part of his election manifesto. On the diplomatic front, the international community, especially the US, is not comfortable with the presence of conservatives in Iran. The US has already imposed a number of sanctions on Raisi, accusing him of human rights abuses in the past.

Similarly, the Western media fears that hardline elements will gain more influence under the Raisi rule. Different concerns are also being raised about women's rights and freedom of expression, but there are also reports that Raisi is in favor of reviving the nuclear deal with the United States.

While congratulating the newly-elected Iranian president, I would like to highlight that the situation in our region is changing rapidly. Iran and Pakistan would be most affected by the US withdrawal from Afghanistan. The new Iranian leadership must try its best to restart the nuclear talks. Cordial cooperation between Pakistan and Iran is essential for ensuring regional peace and stability.

**The writer is a member of the National Assembly and patron-in-chief of the Pakistan Hindu Council.  
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# THE NEWS Friday, April 16, 2021

## Immense loss

**Dr Ramesh Kumar Vankwani**



**L**ast Friday on April 9, I was busy in my routine socio-political engagements when I received a phone call from my brother residing in Hyderabad. He told me that our elder brother Dr. Prem Kumar Vankwani had just suffered a heart attack. Unfortunately, the cardiac arrest has proved to be fatal, and our beloved brother lost his precious life at the age of 57.

At the time of writing this piece, I am unable to control the tears in my eyes. Such a critical situation was also faced, 32 years ago, on May 29, 1989, when my respected father, Sital Das, left us at the age of 48. However, we were lucky that our loving older brother Prem Kumar took up the responsibility to care for us. Every family member, old or young, used to call him 'Baba' to acknowledge his kindness, humbleness and fatherly support.

The Vankwani family is still in a state of great shock as our minds are not accepting this bitter reality that our beloved older brother is no more with us. Today, all the memories of

childhood are also playing out again in our minds.

My gentle brother spent his whole life upholding high family values. He was respectful to adults and kind to children. His purpose in life was to promote humbleness and modesty. To please God, he loved to serve humanity. That is why, even after his death, everyone remembers him with good words. He was truly a symbol of the unity of the Vankwani family. Dr. Prem Vankwani used to love unconditionally, without any bias, and spread his guidance and love equally with the same compassion to all.

I am proud that our new generation is also committed to follow in his footsteps by promoting messages of love, kindness and compassion. Prem Kumar believed that the teachings of every religion emphasize that we become good human beings. He was of the view that faith in one God encourages us to endure worldly difficulties and tackle all kinds of challenges. One day, every person has to leave this mortal world, and at the time of departure, our social status, wealth, relatives, friends, and all worldly achievements are not in a position to help us. People close to us mourn for a few days and then they too become busy in the routine of life.

Therefore, our focus in life must be on doing good deeds as much as we can.

The sudden death of my dear brother also emphasizes that a call from God can come at any time, and therefore, we should spend every moment of our life pleasing God; we should not hurt anyone's heart, and we should not delay good deeds. A noble person who spends his/her life in a good way not only earns the respect of others but is also remembered in a good manner after having left the world.

I am also grateful to all the well-wishers who sent messages of condolence. We are currently organizing a 12-day condolence program at our residence in Hyderabad to bring peace to the soul of our beloved late brother. On the occasion, Shrimad Bhagawad Gita is being recited daily in the morning whereas Aarti, Sat Sang and Ramayan Katha are prayed in the evening. I will remain in Citizen Colony, Hyderabad till April 22. Our doors are always open for all those who want to visit for condolence. Hari Om Shanti!

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## The China factor

**Dr Ramesh Kumar Vankwani**



**T**he G7 summit of the world's most powerful economies and democracies was recently held in Cornwall, Britain. The purpose of the summit, in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, was to play a leading role in resolving the problems facing the world today – but the rapid rise of China dominated the meeting agenda.

Although most of the G7 summits are held behind closed doors, according to media reports, various issues related to China's growing influence in the region were also discussed. No doubt, China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is the largest economic project of the century. However, the US, on the occasion of the recently-held G7 meeting, has launched a global infrastructure plan to counter China's growing influence. Known as the Build Back Better World (B3W) initiative, the US-sponsored project aims to offer an infrastructure partnership with developing countries by providing support worth \$40 trillion by 2035.

According to the US, there also was a consensus during the G7 meeting on the need for a shared approach regarding human rights violations in China.

Which is why the G7 leadership also criticized China for mistreating minority communities and protests in Hong Kong. In response, the Chinese Embassy in London has recorded a strong reaction on behalf of the Chinese government, stating that: "The days when global decisions were dictated by a small group of countries are long gone." The envoy emphasized that China always believes that countries, big or small, strong or weak, poor or rich, are equals, and that world affairs should be handled through consultation by all countries. In simple words, all countries in the world are honourable in their individual national status, and enjoy sovereignty in their internal matters.

The US is undoubtedly the world's number one economy and only superpower. According to analysts, the rapid growth of China will lead to transforming it into becoming the world's number one economic power by the end of the current decade. Its successful tackling of the Covid-19 challenge is in fact an example to be followed by the countries of the world.

Although US President Joe Biden ended many of the controversial policies of the Trump regime, the anti-China factor in foreign policy has apparently become more prominent. It seems that the US now intends to give China a tough time openly as was once

practised against the Soviet Union. In my view, China has been recognized as a superpower rival and the US is now forming global alliances of like-minded countries against China.

Recently, Nato has warned of the emerging threats posed by China in the form of military and technological advancements. The US Senate has also recently passed a bill which also includes China-specific provisions.

On the other hand, it is a positive sign that not all G7 countries are in favour of going aggressively against China. Most Western countries enjoy cordial relations with China. That is why some heads of state had to clarify that the G7 is not hostile towards China.

Both the US and China are very significant for Pakistan on the diplomatic front. However, the first priority for us is to safeguard our own national interests. In the past, we have contributed a lot to world peace. Even today our foreign policy is based on establishing cordial relations with neighbouring countries and the international community on the basis of mutual respect and dignity. The current situation demands us to adopt a careful, practical and wise approach to handle such global issues.

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## Diwali dream

**Dr Ramesh Kumar Vankwani**



**N**ovember 8 of this current year could be considered a much-needed achievement for the patriotic non-Muslim minority community due to the fact that Pakistani Hindu community, after a long peaceful struggle, succeeded in defeating the forces of darkness and mischief.

This year's Diwali festival in Pakistan actually brought an end to the darkness when the Samadhi (shrine) of Shri Param Hansji Maharaj, a philanthropist and God-fearing Hindu saint located in Teri in the Karak district of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa was decorated with colourful lights after a long time.

Celebrating the festival of lights there was not an easy task but the result of a long and tireless struggle in which I was supported by our judiciary, media and civil society and, above all, the local population of the area. They endorsed my stance that Pakistani non-Muslim communities should be guaranteed complete freedom to live happily and celebrate their religious festivals according to the vision of Quaid-e-Azam and the constitution of Pakistan.

No doubt, Honourable Chief Justice of Pakistan Gulzar Ahmed has won the hearts of the oppressed people across the country by accepting the invitation of the Pakistan Hindu Council to join the Diwali festival as chief guest. He practically proved

that every possible step is being taken to protect the rights of minorities, and the nation cannot be left at the mercy of some unwanted elements whose aim is to foster hatred. His participation reflected that all citizens have equal constitutional rights in the eyes of the state, and the highest institutions are committed to eradicating extremism.

While attending Shri Param Hansji Maharaj's Samadhi, I had the feeling that I had gone back one hundred years when there was always a rush of people at his Ashram. Shri Maharaj

**The CJP's participation in Diwali reflected that all citizens have equal constitutional rights in the eyes of the state**

was a God-fearing pious man who believed only in serving humanity without any bias. His followers belong to different religions. He had established Krishna Dwara temples / ashrams in various parts of British India. He was buried in the Teri area of the Karak district, where his Samadhi and temple were established in 1919. His followers are spread all over the world including Pakistan and are proactively participating in welfare and charity activities.

When the British left, an atmosphere of fear and panic prevailed in the Subcontinent and the local Hindu population preferred to migrate from there. Like other holy places of wor-

ship, this Samadhi too was thrown into darkness, and then in 1997 it was encroached by a local religious group. After a long legal battle from the platform of the Pakistan Hindu Council, my efforts to restore the Samadhi as per the orders of the Supreme Court began to bear fruit. Unfortunately, a violent mob made it a target on December 31, 2020 by violating the sanctity of the place. Demolishing the Samadhi has once again created an atmosphere of fear in the area. Many locals personally approached me to condemn this heinous incident.

Today, under the orders of the Supreme Court, Shri Param Hans Ji Maharaj Samadhi / Teri Temple is not only fully restored but the local population is also very happy with the arrival of Hindu pilgrims. When we reached there to celebrate Diwali, we were warmly welcomed by the locals. They believed that Hindu pilgrims would play their due role in the development and prosperity of the region. In my speech in the presence of the CJP, I also considered it my moral duty to highlight the issues facing the local population. In my view, it is very unfair to deprive the local people of basic amenities.

The restoration is a lesson for every peace loving person that one should not be frightened by difficulties and hurdles. At every turn in life, we must remember that the ultimate victory is always of truth, light and justice.

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# THE NEWS

Friday, November 5, 2021

## Celebrating Diwali

**Dr Ramesh Kumar Vankwani**



**T**he world, including Pakistan, celebrated Diwali yesterday (Nov 4). On this auspicious occasion, I would like to extend my heartfelt congratulations to everyone. According to Hinduism, Diwali is associated with the heroic return of Shri Ram along with his beloved wife Sita and brother Lakshman to Audhiya after defeating the powerful king, Ravana. The whole area was lit with colourful lights to welcome them.

This ancient festival gives a positive message that no matter how deep the dark night of oppression and despair is, a ray of light will definitely end the darkness one day. It demonstrates the victory of light over darkness, good over evil, and truth over falsehood.

Unfortunately, festivals of non-Muslims – including Diwali – are not given due importance in Pakistan. Our elders told us that during the British era, there were many public holidays in connection with local religions. A now-viral post on social media claims that in 1953, citizens of then East and West Pakistan were given holidays on the eve of Holi, Easter, Basant, Besakhi, Dussehra and Diwali. Even today, the governments of India, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Singapore, Nepal, Fiji, Mauritius and other countries announce gazetted holidays on Diwali and other Hindu festivals.

The patriotic Hindu community in Pakistan is the country's largest

non-Muslim minority community. Even though the provincial governments are trying to facilitate the Hindu community to celebrate Diwali, there is a dire need to take necessary action at the federal level. A few years ago, I had tried to legislate in parliament for public holidays on religious festivals of non-Muslim communities. I remember the comments of the then-speaker of the National Assembly that Pakistan already has more public holidays than in other countries. Similarly, some people also expressed concerns over holidays for such fest-

### **We must struggle to restore public holidays on Diwali and other non-Muslim festivals in today's Pakistan**

tivals in a Muslim-majority country.

Every country declares public holidays in view of national history, cultural values, religious traditions and social significance. The main purpose is to promote social harmony. I think that had the government declared a public holiday across Pakistan yesterday, it would have sent a positive message that the state respects the importance of a major religious festival of the Hindu community and helped people understand the real message of celebrating the festival.

This way, we could have shown to the international community that the people of Pakistan are united re-

gardless of the majority-minority debate. Such initiatives also lead to ensure respect to all religions and mutual understanding of other faiths.

The role of the Supreme Court of Pakistan (SPB) in bringing vulnerable minorities to the mainstream has always been laudable. Recently, the participation of Chief Justice of Pakistan Justice Gulzar Ahmed as a special guest in a Navratri festival held in Hyderabad was highly appreciated both nationally and internationally. He delivered a strong message that minority communities are not at the mercy of extremist elements and that the highest institutions of the state stand with oppressed citizens and is committed to ensure that minority communities also enjoy the status of equal citizens of Pakistan as per the constitution.

Last year, the *samadhi* (tomb) of a great philanthropist and saint, Shri Param Hans Ji Maharaj, located in Teri, Karak, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, was targeted by a mob of miscreants. The good news is that the Teri temple and *samadhi*, the holiest places for the Hindu community, have been restored on the orders of the Supreme Court.

Also, the chief justice, at the invitation of the Pakistan Hindu Council, is going to visit the place to take part in the Diwali celebrations that will be held on Monday (Nov 8). We must struggle to restore public holidays on Diwali and other non-Muslim festivals in today's Pakistan.

**The writer is a member of the National Assembly and patron-in-chief of the Pakistan Hindu Council. Twitter: @RVankwani**

## Cryptocurrency status

**Dr Ramesh Kumar Vankwani**



**T**he Sindh High Court (SHC) has issued a written order in response to a petition filed against the ban on cryptocurrency largely used for online transactions. According to media reports, the court ordered the government to regulate cryptocurrency in consultation with all stakeholders, including representatives of the Security and Exchange Commission of Pakistan (SECP), State Bank of Pakistan (SBP), and the Ministries of Law and IT, within three months.

In April 2018, the SBP declared that all kinds of virtual and cryptocurrencies, including Bitcoin, Litecoin, Pakistan, OneCoin, DasCoin and Pay Diamond, are not legal and not recognised, issued or guaranteed by the Pakistani government. "The SBP has not authorised or licensed any individual or entity for the issuance, sale, purchase, exchange or investment in any such virtual currencies/coins/tokens in Pakistan," it stated. However, in a recent court hearing, SBP's counsel took the position that the ban on cryptocurrency was imposed to prevent misuse, on which the court stressed the need for legislation in this regard.

Bitcoin, one of the most renowned and prominent cryptocurrencies, has become an interesting topic in Pakistan for the last many years. Many people are tilted towards becoming rich overnight by investing in cryptocurrency, whereas many people have lost their hard-earned savings due to online fraud and cheating.

Bitcoin was introduced around 12 years ago. In 2011, one Bitcoin was

equivalent to just one US dollar. Interestingly, today, one Bitcoin is worth about \$59,000. The dramatic change in its price has made Bitcoin the most favourite in the eyes of global investors, on the internet.

According to some reports, Pakistan is one of the world's top countries where many people have invested heavily in cryptocurrencies. The US is at the eighth position on the same list. However, for most Pakistanis, Bitcoin is still a mystery. Due to a lack of knowledge, many people assume that digital currency and cryptocurrency are the same, but they are not. The money used as a result of

**The SBP must organise a national dialogue on the status of cryptocurrency so that legislation on this issue could be ensured in parliament**

bank transactions, internet banking or online payments from any electronic means is called digital currency, and it is legally operated under the central bank system. On the other hand, cryptocurrency is based on blockchain at the non-state level. The implementation of the Bitcoin mining process also requires a large number of computer machines, electricity, energy and other resources.

Although Pakistan has not yet regulated any form of cryptocurrency, various countries are currently working on it. There are reports that China is in the final stages of introducing its own cryp-

tocurrency. Recently, El Salvador became the world's first country where Bitcoin has been legalised. According to President Bukele, "It [Bitcoin] will bring financial inclusion, investment, tourism, innovation and economic development for our country." Similarly, Brazil could also adopt Bitcoin in the near future.

Several internet activists, including entertainment personality Waqar Zaka, have been struggling for a long time to urge the Pakistani government for adoption of cryptocurrency. They are of the view that legalising cryptocurrency can pay off all debts of Pakistan. Similarly, people in Pakistan do not declare cryptocurrency in their assets due to a lack of clarity, which is causing severe losses to the national exchequer. They are also not paying taxes despite having financial assets in the form of cryptocurrency.

The Covid-19 pandemic resulted in the devaluation of several world currencies, including the Pakistani rupee. However, Bitcoin has boosted the confidence of investors on keeping virtual assets. Many global businesses on the internet do accept Bitcoins. The currency is also being encouraged for buying video games and other online activities including video streaming.

However, the legitimacy of cryptocurrency in our country is still uncertain. The SBP, with the collaboration of the business community, must organise a national dialogue on the status of cryptocurrency so that legislation on this issue could be ensured in parliament.

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## Identity crisis

**Dr Ramesh Kumar Vankwani**



**P**akistan is a country with rich historical and cultural heritage. Numerous beautiful sites across the country not only remind us of our glorious past but also promote the golden principles of tolerance, harmony and co-existence. These places can also be operated as tourist spots to generate a huge amount of revenue.

However, many historical places are facing the challenge of maintaining their identity. After Independence, various parks, roads and cities have been renamed on the basis of the ruling elite's religious and political affiliations. During my recent visit to rural Sindh, I found that many historical places have been renamed. Umerkot, a famous city of Tharparkar, was once known as Amarkot. The city, founded by Hindu Maharaja Amar Singh in the Amarkot fort, is also the birthplace of Mughal emperor Akbar-e-Azam.

After the fall of the Mughals, various regional powers including the Persians, Afghans, Kalhoras and Talpurs tried to gain control of the strategic area. The city was also annexed with the Jodhpur state of Rajasthan under the rule of Rathore Rajputs.

Similarly, the Nawabshah district of Sindh (official name: Shaheed Benazirabad) is also of historical significance. Although Syed Nawab Shah laid the city's foundations, official documents attribute it to the name of former prime minister of Pakistan Be-

nazir Bhutto Shaheed. However, it seems that this political decision has not been popular among the locals as they are still calling it by its original name.

Before Independence, Lahore was inhabited by a large number of Hindus and Sikhs. Sir Ganga Ram deserves to be called the architect of modern Lahore. At that time, Rehman Gali was known as Ram Gali. Today's Jinnah Garden is the Lawrence Garden of the past. During the British rule, Sahiwal was called Montgomery, and Faisal-

### It is the duty of the government to look after historical sites and restore their original identity

abad was known as Lyallpur. Similarly, Campbellpur was later renamed as Attock. Similarly, several towns in Rawalpindi, such as Mohanpura and Bagh Sardaran, reflect that once Hindu and Sikh communities lived there.

Unfortunately, the list of rebranding historical places attributed to the British and non-Muslims is endless. The country's historical sites continue to be deprived of their true identity. It is my personal experience that many times we need to tell the old name to the locals when asking for road directions and other details. Similarly, whenever a tourist visits these historical places, the locals mention the place's original name to them. The reason is that while making decisions to

change the names, we forget that such unnecessary orders can in no way change the identity of these places.

In response to the appeal of Quaid-e-Azam's speech on August 11, many Hindus and non-Muslims, including my elders, declared Pakistan their beloved motherland. The constitution also guarantees equal rights to non-Muslims. However, when I see the unfamiliar names of historical places, it seems to me that these places are crying out for the restoration of their real identities.

In this regard, I would also like to pay tribute to the people of Abbotabad for taking a firm stand. After Independence, the intention to rename the city, which was founded by British commissioner Sir James Abbott, had to be postponed by the authorities due to strong protests by the locals.

In my view, it is the duty of the government to look after historical sites regardless of socio-political affiliations. However, the role of the media and civil society is also crucial to raise awareness about the significance of historical sites and the need for restoring their original identity.

I also consider it necessary to make clear that if the original names of ancient sites pose an ideological threat to the state, proper legislation should be enacted in parliament to establish an authority which has the power to decide the case after careful and in-depth consideration of historical circumstances and the present.

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## Mohatta Palace

**Dr Ramesh Kumar Vankwani**



**I**t is a fact that during the British rule and even after Independence, no beautiful and magnificent building like the Mohatta Palace has been built in the country so far. The palace, built in the Clifton area just 14 years before the creation of Pakistan, is still the centre of attraction.

When I first visited this impressive palace, I felt as if I had reached the ancient era of hundreds of years ago, when the Subcontinent was ruled by kings and emperors. The pink stones used in the construction of the palace were specially ordered from Jodhpur, Rajasthan, India. The pictorial glimpses of flowers and birds were carved in an eye-catching way. A Shiva temple was also built for worship purposes in the premises, but its remains are nowhere to be found.

This two-storey magnificent palace, consisting of 16 rooms, also has interesting cultural history. Before the creation of Pakistan, Rai Bahadur Shivratan Chandraratan Mohatta was one of the richest Hindu businessmen in Karachi. His family migrated from Calcutta and settled in the city. He had a good reputation in the fields of sailing and shipbuilding.

Mohatta deeply loved his wife who was suffering from a deadly disease. Knowing that the sea climate could improve her health, he decided to build a magnificent palace for his wife in Karachi, on the shores of the Arabian Sea. And so a glorious palace in the history of the Subcontinent was constructed on

the shores of Clifton in Karachi under the name of Mohatta Palace. Rai Bahadur Mohatta also held a grand celebration at the palace to celebrate his wife's complete recovery. Among the distinguished guests were various dignitaries including Jamshed Nusserwanjee Mehta, the first elected mayor of Karachi.

After Independence, Mohatta and his family decided to migrate from Karachi. Later on, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was set up at the palace in Karachi, the capital of the newly-founded state of Pakistan. The ministry remained there until

**Rai Bahadur Mohatta handed over his wonderful palace to the government of Pakistan with good wishes. Now it is our responsibility to preserve its true identity**

the relocation of the capital to Islamabad. Many historical statues, including that of Queen Victoria and Jamshed Mehta's, which were erected on roads and public places during the British era, were removed from their original places and relocated to the palace after the independence.

However, there was another turning point in the history of the Mohatta Palace when the government handed over this magnificent palace to Fatima Jinnah, the sister of Quaid-e-Azam. Following her mysterious

death, a legal battle for the ownership of the palace started in courts. In response to the petitions filed by her family, the Sindh High Court handed over the Mohatta Palace to Fatima Jinnah's sister Shirin Jinnah. Even after her death, disputes between her family members continued which led to the seizure of the palace by the authorities.

The palace, which was once an amazing place to visit, turned into darkness for almost one decade. During the 1990s, then prime minister Benazir Bhutto, at the request of the Sindh government, provided funds to the provincial culture department to purchase and restore the Mohatta Palace. Finally, it was turned into a museum, and an independent board of trustees was set up to look after the affairs.

However, due to the ongoing litigation in the court, the Mohatta Palace has once again come in the limelight. In this regard, my position is clear: while renaming any historical building or area, moral values should also be kept in mind. The countless services of the non-Muslim community, including the Mohatta family, for the development and prosperity of Karachi are unforgettable.

Even after Partition, Rai Bahadur Mohatta handed over his wonderful palace to the government of Pakistan with good wishes. Now it is our moral responsibility to preserve the true identity of the great cultural heritage like the Mohatta Palace.

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# THE NEWS

Friday, December 31, 2021

## Goodbye 2021

**Dr Ramesh Kumar  
Vankwani**



If 2020 was termed the year of unimaginable losses as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, then 2021 must be considered a year of hope, during which the process of defeating this insidious virus began to gain momentum.

Life has gradually been restored with precautionary measures. Not only have vaccines against the coronavirus been manufactured but also a large population of the world has been successfully vaccinated. However, the new Covid variant Omicron is still a major threat to precious lives around the world, including Pakistan.

Every year on the eve of the new year, I try to figure out what we lost and what we gained during last year. No doubt, the year 2021 caused irreparable loss and great sorrow for the Vankwani family when in April our dear elder brother Dr Prem Kumar Vankwani left us at the age of 57.

The Vankwani family has initiated a grand welfare project called Prem Nagar at our native town Islamkot, Tharparkar in the loving memory of Dr Prem Kumar. We have purchased 110 acres of land at our own expense to establish a world class old-aged home, centre for disabled persons and schools for children. We will ensure that every human being will be eligible to get relief regardless of his/her religious affiliation. The initial groundbreaking was already performed by our beloved mother. Hopefully, we will be able to work

according to the master plan by February next year.

Facilitating someone deserving to raise a family is the best deed in the world, which results in pleasing God Almighty. On January 9, 2022, the Pakistan Hindu Council will organise its 15th annual combined marriages ceremony. During this long period, hundreds of couples have tied knots in a memorable way.

The end of the year 2020 caused great sorrow and grief for the patriotic Pakistani Hindu community when on December 30 (2020), the Samadhi (shrine) of Shri Param Hansji Maharaj, a God-loving Hindu saint,

**I believe that the year  
2022 will prove to be a  
year of further  
achievements in  
promoting religious  
tourism in Pakistan**

was attacked by a mob of miscreants in the Karak district of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. On the very next day, I had an emergency meeting with Chief Justice Gulzar Ahmed, who was very kind to take notice of the unfortunate incident. Due to his clear orders, the Samadhi along with Teri temple was restored in a record time period. He also won the hearts of the minority community by attending the Diwali celebrations as chief guest. Then, a delegation of international pilgrims, belonging to the US, Europe, Australia, India, Singapore and other countries, landed at Peshawar

Airport in November this year to visit the Samadhi and returned from Pakistan with good memories.

An important agreement has also been signed between the Pakistan Hindu Council and Pakistan Airlines for the promotion of faith tourism on a regular basis. The national flag carrier, in order to facilitate followers of Shri Param Hansji Maharaj, will start special flights towards Peshawar by January 1, 2022. Similarly, special flights from other international cities including New Delhi, Calcutta and Mumbai to facilitate pilgrims from other parts of the world would also be started in the next phase.

Keeping the religious significance of Katas Raj Temple Chakwal, Jain Temple Lahore, Gandhara civilization Taxila and other religiously significant historical sites, I believe that the year 2022 will prove to be a year of further achievements in promoting religious tourism in Pakistan.

On the international front, the biggest news of the year was the withdrawal of the superpower America from Afghanistan and the return of the Taliban to Kabul. Apparently, our Afghan policy is still not clear. We need to adopt a wise and careful approach in this regard, putting our national interest first.

On the occasion of the eve of the New Year, let's pray that the year 2022 will be a year of progress and prosperity for Pakistan. We must play our due role in building a society based on compassion, brotherhood and tolerance while ensuring respect for all religions.

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## Battling smog

**Dr Ramesh Kumar Vankwani**



**L**ahore has been at the top of the list of the world's most polluted cities over the past few weeks. The number of patients suffering from heart issues, chest infections etc is increasing day by day.

Daily life has been practically suspended due to smog; safety measures have been taken in view of serious traffic accidents; motorways are being closed from time to time; flight operations of various airlines have also been disrupted. Despite the temporary closure of educational institutions, offices and markets, the challenge of air pollution has not been overcome. According to research data issued by the University of Chicago, the average age of every Pakistani citizen has decreased by 2.7 years due to air pollution.

The areas adjacent to the Pakistani border in India are also facing a similar situation. According to media reports, Delhi has been declared one of the most polluted cities in the world, due to smoke emitted from factories and vehicles. According to a report by an international organisation, 22 cities out of the world's 30 most polluted cities are in India. Reportedly, New Delhi is termed as the most polluted capital in the world. In 2019, air pollution was believed to be the reason for casualties of around 1.7 million people in India.

Farmers in eastern Punjab used to burn crop stubble on a large scale, considering it an affordable and fast way to prepare the land for the next crop. The widespread crop fires could also be seen through NASA satellite images. However, the Supreme Court of India is now continuously monitoring government measures to tackle air pollution. All construction and demolition activities in the capital were banned last month. On court orders, other strict measures have also been taken.

**In order to protect people from smog, concrete measures are needed by taking all regional governments on board**

Similarly, several world powers including China, Russia and the US are also struggling to combat the challenge of air pollution. According to experts, the huge use of coal is the main reason for causing smog in China. The Chinese government, in this regard, introduced various environmental initiatives such as the Great Green Wall to plant more than 35 billion trees across 12 provinces.

Air pollution, in my view, is a year-round problem that needs to be addressed globally. However, we have to deal with smog in a specific season each year. Sadly, countries in our region

are indulging in playing blame-game on this issue rather than increasing cooperation. Various international forums and accords, particularly related to the Paris Climate Agreement, SDGs, ASEAN, Saarc, and the Male Declaration also emphasise collaboration at the state level to control air pollution.

In my view, the lack of governmental cooperation on public issues is the biggest challenge that our region is facing currently. Although we understand the significance of dialogue on bilateral peace, border disputes and other sensitive subjects, issues like smog affecting all the people in the region are badly ignored by the policy makers. In 2017, then- CM of Pakistani Punjab, Mian Shahbaz Sharif, in a letter to his Indian counterpart Amarinder Singh, wrote that it was in the best interest of both parts of Punjab to ensure a collective effort towards identifying technologies and business methods that may help in controlling smog formation. Unfortunately, the offer was not well-received on both sides of the border.

I am ready to play my due role so that the two neighbouring countries stand together to solve public issues regardless of border tensions. In order to protect people from smog, it is recommended to take concrete measures by taking all regional governments on board.

The writer is a member of the National Assembly and patron-in-chief of the Pakistan Hindu Council.  
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# THE NEWS

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## Deciding on a system

**Dr Ramesh Kumar Vankwani**



A few days ago, someone forwarded a video clip to me on WhatsApp in which an analyst was terming the current system of government the root of the country's problems. According to him, there was a need to introduce such a presidential system of government in Pakistan in which the head of state is directly elected by the people.

Historically, Pakistan inherited a parliamentary system of government from the British after independence. The Constituent Assembly adopted the first constitution of Pakistan in 1956, paving the way for a parliamentary system. However, the said constitution was revoked and a presidential system was introduced in the country in which president Ayub had to seek votes directly from the people. During the presidential election campaign, complaints of all kinds of rigging and unfair means became common. Attempts to discredit Ms Fatima Jinnah are a shameful chapter in our national history. Introducing a presidential system of government failed miserably and martial law was enforced in the country.

Although the constitution of Pakistan, unanimously passed in 1973, adopted a parliamentary system of government, the rule of generals Zia and Musharraf was on the pattern of the presidential form of government due to the fact that power was vested in one person.

Internationally, most influential world leaders, including US President Joe Biden, Chinese President Xi Jinping, Russian President Vladimir Putin and Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi, represent a powerful presidency in their respective countries. However, the United States is considered the originator and primary example of the presidential system.

A study of the current presidential system in the world reveals some interesting facts. For example, in a presidential system of government, the office of the president has wide powers and he/she is elected for a fixed term while in a parliamentary system of government the prime minister is the head of government who is elected by the members of parliament and is accountable to parliament. The president as head of state is usually considered a non-political position in a parliamentary system and can be removed by parliamentarians.

Several countries, including the United States, Iran, Mexico, Costa Rica, Chile, Brazil, Panama, South Sudan, Ghana, and Nigeria, the president has full authority and normally there is generally no prime minister. However, the prime minister's office works with the support of the president in South Korea, Belarus and Central Asian states, including Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.

Many countries, including Algeria, Portugal, Ukraine, Congo, East Timor, Egypt and France, have a premier-presidential system where the president chooses a prime minister and cabinet from parliament. Similarly,

Russia, Azerbaijan, Palestine, Sri Lanka and Taiwan have a president-parliamentary system in which the president is constitutionally the head of state while the prime minister works as the head of government under the discretion of the president.

In order to review the current parliamentary system of Pakistan, several petitions have been filed in the Supreme Court, highlighting that people are being deprived of socio-economic justice in the parliamentary system. Apparently, Prime Minister Imran Khan is also not satisfied with the current system. In an interview to foreign media, he expressed his desire to bring a system of government like China. In the past, he was also a supporter of General Musharraf's presidential referendum campaign.

In my view, the presidential system is preferred in different countries because it is considered more stable and it is much easier to maintain the continuity of government policies. In our country's parliamentary politics, the focus is always on saving the government rather than ensuring public welfare. The first priority of every government is to complete its term. Similarly, if the ruling political party does not have a majority in parliament, the sword of a no-confidence motion hangs over the head of the prime minister and smaller political parties are in a position to blackmail in this numbers game.

**The writer is a member of the National Assembly and patron-in-chief of the Pakistan Hindu Council. He tweets @RVankwani**

## Historic yatra

**Dr Ramesh Kumar  
Vankwani**



**O**n November 24, a delegation of international pilgrims led by Shri Guru Maharaj from Anandpur Sahid, India landed at Peshawar Airport to visit the samadhi (shrine) of Shri Param Hans Ji Maharaj, with religious enthusiasm and zeal.

These Hindu pilgrims had arrived from different countries including the US, Spain, Australia, India, the UK, Singapore and Europe; a large number of Pakistan's Hindus also joined them. In order to facilitate them, a special chartered flight of PIA and an Emirates flight were arranged by the Pakistan Hindu Council (PHC).

All security agencies of Pakistan including the Rangers, ISI, FIA and ASF ensured the best measures to provide foolproof security to the international delegation. While describing their pleasant experiences of the one-week-long trip in Pakistan, the guests expressed special gratitude for the hospitality, especially the friendly attitude, of PIA staff and security officials which won their hearts. They also appreciated the excellent arrangements made by the provincial governments of Sindh and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP).

Shri Param Hansji Maharaj was a God-fearing saint and philanthropist. His shrine is located in Teri, District Karak in present-day KP where he breathed his last. His followers, in his loving memory, continued to establish hundreds of other ashrams (monasteries) across the globe.

It was an honour for me that for the first time since Independence, Hindu pilgrims from all over the world landed on Pakistani soil to visit the shrine/Terri Temple at my invitation. Their historic arrival also reminded me of the incident that happened two decades ago when an attempt was made to encroach upon the shrine in 1997. In the struggle of approaching the Supreme Court, I also had the active support of civil society and the media.

### **The significant arrival of such a large number of Hindu pilgrims has paved the way for the promotion of faith tourism in the country**

Finally, I succeeded in my struggle to restore the shrine this year. In my view, the credit for this landmark achievement goes to Chief Justice of Pakistan Gulzar Ahmed who took immediate notice of the attack on the shrine by some miscreants last year, and after the restoration of the Terri temple, he attended the Diwali celebrations as a special guest for expressing solidarity with patriotic Hindu minorities.

The recent experience with PIA was so good that the Pakistan Hindu Council has proposed to sign a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with our national flag carrier under which the two organisations will strengthen bilateral cooperation for the promotion of religious tourism in the country.

In the first phase, a special flight of 169 passengers will be operated from Karachi to Peshawar monthly. Similarly, an international flight carrying 330 passengers from Dubai to Peshawar will also be functional. Both flights will return on the same day.

PIA, in the next phase, will start flights from other international cities, including Mumbai, Kolkata and New Delhi to bring pilgrims to the Terri temple.

Another proposal for introducing chartered flights for the Hinglaj Mata Mandir, Balochistan is also under consideration. The Pakistan Hindu Council also intends to start a helicopter service from Islamabad for facilitating the followers of Shri Param Hansji Maharaj.

In my view, the significant arrival of such a large number of foreign pilgrims has not only improved the image of Pakistan but also paved the way for the promotion of faith tourism in the best interest of our beloved country.

Shri Guru Maharaj was also happy with his historic visit to Pakistan. He ordered me to make arrangements for the pilgrims on a monthly basis. He also asked to establish a free dispensary and other healthcare/welfare facilities for the locals.

Shri Guru Maharaj also ordered me to play my due role in arranging a goodwill meeting between the prime ministers of Pakistan and India so that peace and prosperity could prevail in our region.

**The writer is a member of the National Assembly and patron-in-chief of the Pakistan Hindu Council.**

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