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Afghanistan

UN warns of more flooding in Afghanistan (VOA)

[VOA](#) [5/23/2024 4:41 PM, Roshan Noorzai and Waheed Faizi, 4186K, Negative]

As the United Nations warns of more "intensive" floods affecting food security in Afghanistan in the coming months, experts say the country needs long-term planning to mitigate the adverse effects of climate change.

The U.N. said that floods in the northeastern and northwestern provinces in the past two weeks have affected more than 80,000 people in the country.

Local Taliban officials in the western province of Ghor said Thursday that last week’s flood in the province killed at least 50 people and damaged more than 4,000 houses and shops.

According to the U.N., floods on May 10 and 11 in the northeastern provinces of Badakhshan, Takhar and Baghlan killed 347 people and injured 1,651. The floods destroyed 7,800 houses, killed nearly 14,000 livestock and destroyed about 24,000 hectares of land in the three provinces.

The worsening climate crisis has brought about "the erratic weather pattern," which has "become the norm" in the country, according to the World Food Program.

"The affected people are living in districts with higher food insecurity," said Ziauddin Safi, a spokesperson for WFP in Afghanistan, adding that "the floods are caused by unusual rainfall after a dry winter that left the ground too hard to absorb the rain caused by climate crisis."

"Unfortunately, WFP expects more floods in the future," Safi added.

Afghanistan remains one of the world's most vulnerable countries to climate change, though it has one of the lowest greenhouse gas emissions.

According to the INFORM Risk Index 2023, the country is ranked fourth on the list of countries most at risk of a crisis.

Afghanistan is also one of the most vulnerable and least prepared countries on the Notre Dame Global Adaptation Index.

Najibullah Sadid, an Afghan water specialist at the University of Stuttgart in Germany, told VOA that Afghanistan needs a long-term plan to mitigate the effects of climate change but that the country lacks resources.

"Unfortunately, without international economic support, implementing projects [to mitigate the effects of climate change] in Afghanistan is impossible," Sadid said.

He added that Afghanistan needs support from the U.N. Green Climate Fund and Loss and Damage Fund for Developing Countries.

Sadid said that Afghanistan has no capacity to prepare communities in the face of challenges caused by climate change.

Sadrudin Fakhruddin, a former Afghan official at the Ministry of Agriculture, told VOA that most of the affected people in the provinces depend on agriculture, and the floods "washed away the agricultural land and destroyed the irrigation system."

WFP has called for an additional \$14.5 million to assist flood-affected people with "emergency food and nutrition assistance and resilience-building projects."

Even before the recent floods, the country was facing a humanitarian crisis.

WFP had requested \$670 million for the first six months of 2024 to reach some 16 million people who needed food assistance in Afghanistan.

According to the U.N., 4 million people, including 3.2 million children under the age of 5, are malnourished in Afghanistan.

"Acute malnutrition is above emergency thresholds in 25 out of 34 provinces, and is expected to worsen, with almost half of children under 5 and a quarter of pregnant and breastfeeding women needing life-saving nutrition support in the next 12 months," according to WFP.

"Women and children were disproportionately affected by the floods as they were inside their homes during the heavy rains, while men sheltered in public buildings such as mosques," said the Gender in Humanitarian Action Working Group and the Women Advisory Group to the Humanitarian Country Team.

Fakhruddin said better management of resources is needed in the long term to mitigate the adverse effects of natural disasters in Afghanistan.

"In the short term, food security would be important; however, in the long term, issues such as reforestation, land and water management would need to be addressed."

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Mines, Unexploded Ordnance A Daily Menace For Afghanistan's Children (Agence France-Presse)

[Agence France-Presse](#) [5/24/2024 2:30 AM, Qubad Wali and Pascale Trouillaud, 1.7M, Negative]

The black mushroom cloud had barely faded in Ghazni province before kids clustered around the edge of the crater created by the mine, one of the devices that kills a child every other day in Afghanistan.

Afghans have been able to return to fields, schools and roads since the Taliban authorities ended their insurgency and ousted the Western-backed government in 2021.

But with new freedom of movement comes the danger of remnants left behind after 40 years of successive conflicts.

Nearly 900 people were killed or wounded by leftover munitions from January 2023 to April this year alone, most of them children, according to UN figures.

The anti-tank mine had been 100 metres from Qach Qala village, south of the provincial capital Ghazni, since the Soviet invasion from 1979 to 1989.

Deminers from the British organisation Halo Trust cautiously unearthed then detonated it, the explosion echoing three kilometres (nearly two miles) around.

But before it was set off, a Taliban member roared up to the deminers on his motorcycle.

"Give me that mine!" he demanded. "I'll keep it safe at home. We can use it later when Afghanistan is occupied again."

The mine couldn't be "so dangerous since it hadn't exploded all these years", he insisted, before being pushed back by the deminers.

The Taliban government "is very supportive of demining in this country and wants to conduct clearance as far as it possibly can", said Nick Pond, head of the Mine Action Section of UNAMA, the United Nations mission in Afghanistan.

Demining began in Afghanistan as early as 1988 but, over decades of wars, the country has been re-infested with mines and ordnance.

"It is almost impossible at the moment to predict what the scale of current contamination is," Pond told AFP.

Eighty-two percent of those killed or wounded by the remnant weapons since January 2023 were

children, with half of cases involving children playing.

The village of Nokordak, nestled in a bucolic valley, lost two children in late April.

Surrounded by her small children, Shawoo told of how her 14-year-old son Javid was killed by unexploded ordnance.

"He threw a stone at it. He hit it once, then a second time. The third time, the device exploded."

The boy died almost instantly.

The same explosion killed Javid's friend Sakhi Dad, also 14.

"People said there were explosive ordnances around, but nothing like this had ever happened in the village before," said Sakhi Dad's 18-year-old brother, Mohammad Zakir, a lost look in his eyes.

"No one had come to the village to warn the children of the danger."

In Patanaye village, 50 kilometres away, 13-year-old Sayed showed his wounded hand and foot, still in bandages after the explosion in late April that killed his brother Taha, 11, as they were tending their sheep.

"Three, four times I pulled it from his hands. I was shouting at him but he kicked me and hit it on a rock," Sayed told AFP.

These kinds of accidents are all too common, said their father Siraj Ahmad.

Tomorrow, "someone else's son could be killed or handicapped for the rest of their life", he said.

Zabto Mayar, Halo's explosive ordnance disposal officer, said "lack of funds" was a major challenge their work.

So deminers work painstakingly plot by plot, depending on donations.

"The mine action workforce was once 15,500 people around 2011. It is currently 3,000," said Pond.

Other global conflicts have pulled funding away, while Afghanistan has also seen donors pull back after the Taliban takeover, their government unrecognised by any other country.

But Mohammad Hassan, headmaster of a small school in the Deh Qazi hamlet, is still counting on the deminers.

"Even the schoolyard is dangerous for the children because it is not cleared of mines," he said.

"We can't even plant trees here. If we dig, if we bring a tractor or machines to work here, it is really dangerous," he said.

Children in a classroom listened to a lesson aimed at preventing such accidents, the wall plastered with charts of mines or ordnance of all shapes and colours.

"Six months ago on a walk with my friends, we saw a rocket and we immediately told the village elders and they informed the deminers," said 12-year-old Jamil Hasan.

Mines and ordnance can look like playthings to children, said Pond.

The Soviet-era butterfly mine (PFM-1), for example, with its winged shape, "is very attractive to pick up", he said.

Children are also drawn to the "beautiful and modern colours" used in munitions, said Halo unit commander Sayed Hassan Mayar.

Some colours are also deceiving, such as golden-topped ammunition that can look like precious metal to people hunting for scrap to sell in the impoverished country.

"The children usually think it might be gold, and they hit it with a stone or a hammer to take the top part," Pond said.

Danger from remnants of war is also omnipresent for deminers. Halo lost two of their number in early May.

"Sometimes when I go defusing mines, I call my family and tell them I love them, just in case anything happens," said Zabto Mayar.

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Afghan mine-clearer killed by Taliban after face is seen in Emmy-winning film (The Telegraph)

[The Telegraph](#) [5/23/2024 12:29 PM, Raoul Simons, 28080K, Negative]

An Afghan contractor who worked for the US military was killed by the Taliban after appearing in an Emmy-winning documentary despite warnings it would endanger him, according to a report.

The man in his 20s – nicknamed “Justin Bieber” because of his good looks – was featured in the 2022 film *Retrograde*, which has now been accused of inadvertently helping the Taliban to create a hit list used to target American allies in Afghanistan.

The documentary focuses on the experiences of US special forces prior to America’s military withdrawal from the country in 2021.

It has now been pulled by the two US broadcasters – National Geographic Channel and Hulu – that had been screening it.

According to *The Washington Post*, “Bieber”, whose real name was withheld in an effort to protect his family, was seized from his house by Taliban forces and tortured for two weeks

before later dying of his injuries.

In Taliban custody, he claimed to have been punched, kicked, beaten with sticks and held under water.

After being released, the man told a source cited by The Post: “They showed me (the) Retrograde movie and said you have worked with foreign forces and also worked in the movie. They found me through the Retrograde movie.”

Earning his nickname when working with the Green Beets, “Bieber” was employed to protect US troops by helping to identify potential mines on the streets.

He was one of thousands of civilian workers, including interpreters as well as bomb-clearers, left in danger in 2021 once US troops left and the Afghan government fell to the Taliban.

But his profile was raised significantly after featuring, without facial blurring, in director Matthew Heineman’s acclaimed film – which won high praise from critics and scooped three Emmy awards.

A clip from the documentary spread through Afghanistan on TikTok in the weeks prior to his capture.

Up to eight other Afghans, whose faces are also shown in Retrograde, remain in hiding, according to the 1208 Foundation, a charitable organisation that tries to help Afghans who assisted US forces flee the country.

“As Retrograde became a hit in Hollywood, it became a hit list in Afghanistan,” Thomas Kasza, a former Green Beret who is the foundation’s executive director, told a Congressional hearing in January.

“A hit list which the Taliban used to identify, abduct, torture and kill.”

Heineman and the documentary’s producer Caitlin McNally decided to show close-ups of mine-clearers despite warnings from at least five people prior to Retrograde’s December 2022 release, according to Post interviews.

Those sources – identified as three active-duty US military personnel and two former Green Berets – told the paper that scenes from Retrograde would put “Bieber” and other Afghan contractors in the film in danger.

The Post says the warnings to the filmmakers were issued at a time when hundreds of Taliban retribution killings of contractors and their families had already been documented.

In a statement, Heineman and McNally said they had “no recollection” of receiving specific warnings about the Afghan mine-clearers after two pre-release reviews by the US military.

They said the same about a Washington DC screening event held before the film’s release that was attended by two former Green Berets who told the paper they warned about the danger of

showing the faces of mine-clearers.

Heineman and McNally called the man's death "a heartbreaking tragedy".

They added: "The US government's precipitous withdrawal from Afghanistan and the vengeful actions of the Taliban upon taking power – armed with detailed information identifying Afghans who worked with the US government – led to the deaths of countless partners left behind.

"That is the tragic story that warrants attention. But any attempt to blame Retrograde because the film showed faces of individuals in war zones – as has long been standard in ethical conflict reporting – would be deeply wrong."

National Geographic, which produces documentaries as part of a joint agreement with Disney, said that it had pulled the film in "an abundance of caution" because of "new attention to this film".

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Pakistan

Pakistan, IMF Initial Talks for New Loan Conclude on May 24 (Bloomberg)

[Bloomberg](#) [5/23/2024 4:08 PM, Faseeh Mangi, 24454K, Positive]

Pakistan and the International Monetary Fund are wrapping up two weeks of talks for a new loan on Friday, after the officials from the two sides focused on the government's proposals for the upcoming budget.

The budget, which has traditionally been used a way to implement IMF loan conditions, will be presented to parliament next month, Rana Ihsaan Afzal Khan, a coordinator for Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif, said in an interview in Islamabad on Thursday.

Finance Minister Muhammad Aurangzeb has said Pakistan intends to reach a staff-level agreement with the IMF for a bigger and longer loan by June-end or early July. The South Asian nation needs fresh support from the Washington-based lender to shore up its foreign reserves and give policymakers some space to boost a sputtering economy that has been grappling with record inflation.

Among other steps, Sharif's government plans to reduce energy costs for industries as a way to make exports cheaper and more competitive, Khan said, adding that the details could be announced as soon as Friday. He also said that the government will aim to reduce spending by cutting the number of ministries.

A new IMF program would likely be the toughest in recent history, forcing the government to consider some unpopular decisions. Key objectives in the negotiations for the fund will include broadening the tax base, improving debt sustainability, restoring viability to the energy sector and improving state-owned companies, the IMF said last month.

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IMF, Pakistan make significant progress on new loan, IMF mission says (Reuters)

[Reuters](#) [5/23/2024 11:54 PM, Sudipto Ganguly, 5.2M, Neutral]

An International Monetary Fund (IMF) mission and Pakistan have made significant progress towards reaching a staff-level agreement for an extended fund facility, the global lender said on Friday.

The IMF has opened discussions with Pakistan on a new loan programme after Islamabad last month completed a short-term \$3 billion programme, which helped stave off a sovereign debt default.

An IMF team, led by mission chief Nathan Porter, concluded discussions with the authorities on Thursday after arriving in Pakistan on May 13, the lender said in a statement.

"The mission and the authorities will continue policy discussions virtually over the coming days aiming to finalise discussions, including the financial support needed to underpin the authorities' reform efforts from the IMF and Pakistan's bilateral and multilateral partners," Porter said.

Pakistan is likely to seek at least \$6 billion under the new programme and request additional financing from the IMF under the Resilience and Sustainability Trust.

Ahead of the discussions, the IMF had warned that downside risks for the Pakistani economy remained exceptionally high.

"The authorities' reform program aims to move Pakistan from economic stabilization to strong, inclusive, and resilient growth," Porter added.

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Pakistan says United Arab Emirates to invest \$10 billion in Pakistan (AP)

[AP](#) [5/23/2024 2:06 PM, Staff, 2291K, Positive]

The Pakistani government said Thursday that the United Arab Emirates committed to investing up to \$10 billion in Pakistan during a meeting in the UAE capital between that country's president and the Pakistani prime minister.

The office of Pakistani Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif said in a statement that UAE President Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan made the commitment during a meeting in Abu Dhabi with Sharif, who is visiting the UAE. It provided few details.

The statement said Sharif told the UAE president about measures the Pakistani government is taking to encourage foreign investment, and that the UAE president committed to investing \$10 billion in various sectors in Pakistan.

Sharif also invited the UAE president to visit Pakistan, an offer which he accepted, the statement said.

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Pakistan PM office says UAE has committed \$10 bln in investments (Reuters)

[Reuters](#) [5/23/2024 12:07 PM, Jana Choukeir, Yomna Ehab and Gibran Peshimam, 45791K, Positive]

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) on Thursday committed \$10 billion to invest in promising economic sectors in Pakistan, Islamabad said.

Pakistan has been pushing for foreign investment in a bid to shore up its \$350 billion economy, which has struggled with high inflation and low growth as it navigates a tough reforms mandated by the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

The investment pledge, also announced by the Emirati state news agency (WAM), came after a meeting between Pakistani Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif, on a two day visit to the UAE, met President Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan.

"President of the UAE His Highness Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan assured (Pakistan of) the UAE's support in all circumstances and made the commitment of investing US \$10 billion in multiple sectors," a statement from Pakistan's Prime Minister's Office said.

It did not specify which areas the investment would be in.

The statement said Sharif emphasised strengthening strategic partnerships, including in the field of information technology, renewable energy and tourism.

Pakistan needs foreign investment to boost its economy and shore up its currency reserves to meet rising external repayment obligations. It is in talks with the IMF to secure a long term bailout deal, expected to go as high as \$8 billion.

An IMF team is in Pakistan to discuss the country's budget and economic recovery policies after the country successfully completed a short term \$3 billion IMF bailout programme last month.

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Pakistan to pay \$2.58 million in compensation to families of 5 Chinese who died in suicide bombing (AP)

[AP](#) [5/24/2024 1:43 AM, Staff, 456K, Neutral]

Pakistan will pay \$2.58 million in compensation to the families of five Chinese engineers who were killed in March when a suicide bomber targeted the vehicle carrying them in the northwest, the finance ministry said.

The Chinese were attacked in the town of Bisham as they were heading to Dasu Dam, Pakistan's biggest, where they worked.

The ministry said in a statement Thursday night that the government will also pay \$8,950 to the family of the Pakistani driver who also died in the March 26 attack.

The government says the attack was planned in Afghanistan and the bomber was an Afghan citizen. Afghanistan's Taliban government and Pakistani militants have denied the allegations.

The compensation was approved at a meeting led by Finance Minister Mohammad Aurangzeb, the statement said.

Thousands of Chinese are working on projects related to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor. Some have been attacked in recent years by militants who accuse them of plundering mineral resources.

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Pakistani poet was abducted because of human rights activism, says wife (The Guardian)
[The Guardian](#) [5/24/2024 12:00 AM, Shah Meer Baloch, 83.6M, Negative]

The wife of a Pakistani poet and journalist who was abducted from outside his house last week has accused the country's spy agency of responsibility, saying it acted because of his activism.

Ahmad Farhad was pushed into a vehicle after returning from a dinner in the early hours of Wednesday 15 May and driven away.

His wife, Syeda Urooj Zainab, said that hours before his abduction Farhad had posted on X about receiving threats from the Inter-Services Intelligence agency, using the euphemism "the company" to describe it.

"My husband has been abducted for writing and raising his voice against human rights violations across the country," Zainab said. "He actively reported on the recent protests in his hometown in Pakistan-administered Kashmir. Farhad has been receiving threats from the company for a long time, he was asked to keep silent which he refused."

Hours after his disappearance, Farhad's family petitioned the Islamabad high court to investigate what had happened. On Monday a defence ministry official told the court that Farhad was not in the custody of the ISI. The court was unconvinced, however, and on Tuesday it ordered security forces to produce Farhad within four days and threatened to summon the prime minister in the event he was not released.

The powerful ISI has long been accused of enforced disappearances of activists, political workers and students.

Zainab said that two days after the alleged abduction, Farhad contacted her through WhatsApp and asked her to withdraw her petition in the court in return for his recovery. She said the duration of each call was not more than 30 seconds.

"I could hear that he was forced to talk and send messages. He asked me to withdraw my petition and he would return home on Saturday as he was away for some private business," she said. Zainab submitted an application to withdraw the petition but Farhad did not return on Saturday.

Mohsin Akhtar Kayani, the judge hearing the case, said the government needed to change people's perception of state institutions that are accused of abducting people.

Zainab said she hoped that Farhad would be reunited with his family on Friday after the court interfered.

Harris Khalique, another poet and civil society activist, said: "Abducting artists or poets is not just a disappointing act on part of the state, it is a sign of intellectual decline in society at large."

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Pakistan scrambles for relief on \$15bn energy debt owed to China (Nikkei Asia)

[Nikkei Asia](#) [5/23/2024 9:17 PM, Adnan Aamir, 2197K, Negative]

Cash-strapped Pakistan is moving to restructure more than \$15 billion in power-plant debt owed to Chinese energy producers, in a move that threatens to dampen Beijing's appetite for future investment.

The South Asian nation is already on the hook for about \$1.9 billion in unpaid operating bills at 20 China-backed power plants across the country. Most were built under the \$50 billion China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a key part of Beijing's globe-spanning Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

But Islamabad announced this weekend that it was seeking to restructure \$15.4 billion in loans linked to the construction of those China-funded plants.

Pakistan wants to extend the maturity of the loans by five years to save roughly \$2 billion in debt-servicing costs over the next several years, according to an official involved in the process who spoke on condition of anonymity because he is not authorized to speak with the media.

Delaying payment could give the government some wiggle room to avoid raising electricity prices in the midst of soaring summertime demand. An energy price hike last year triggered widespread protests.

The surprise announcement came as Pakistan negotiates another bailout package in the range of \$6 to \$8 billion with the International Monetary Fund (IMF), which has called on Islamabad to stop subsidizing the energy sector

"It reduces the [debt] burden [of Pakistan] when it comes to negotiating with the IMF," Aadil Nakhoda, an assistant professor of economics at the Institute of Business Administration (IBA) in Karachi, said of the restructuring plan.

Pakistan is aiming to get the restructuring approved before Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif visits China next month. But observers said convincing Beijing could be difficult. The request comes amid tensions between the two countries after a series of deadly militant attacks on Chinese nationals and economic interests in Pakistan.

Abdul Rehman, a Pakistan-based energy market expert, said Chinese officials will not agree to restructure the multibillion-dollar loans.

"China will give new loans, which can be used to repay the existing loans of power projects," Rehman said. "In this way, the debts will not be restructured and Pakistan's forex accounts will also get a breather."

Chinese companies have repeatedly called on Pakistan to settle its outstanding power bills, stoking fears that producers could suspend their operations to force Islamabad's hand. Pakistan is paying some of the operations' variable costs, such as fuel, and it is unlikely the Chinese companies would take such a drastic step, Rehman said. But "Chinese power producers' payment problems will surely affect future Chinese investment in Pakistan," he added.

This month, Chinese investors called for Pakistan to place funds in a foreign bank account to ensure that debts owed to power producers are paid on time. Pakistan has not accepted this demand, but it is under mounting pressure to placate them before next month's Joint Coordination Committee (JCC) meeting. The body makes decisions for the broader China-Pakistan investment framework, including about future funding and the suspension of existing projects.

"Given its burgeoning economic problems, Pakistan expects major investments from China at the next JCC meeting," another government official told Nikkei on condition of anonymity. "We fear that Pakistan's failure to honor commitments to pay Chinese power producers has made our investment pitch to China a very hard sell."

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Hundreds of people suffer heatstroke in Pakistan, and dangerous heat is forecast to stay a while (AP)

[AP](#) [5/23/2024 8:55 PM, Munir Ahmed, 39876K, Negative]

Doctors treated hundreds of victims of heatstroke at hospitals across Pakistan on Thursday after an intense heat wave sent temperatures above normal levels due to climate change, officials said.

Temperatures soared as high as 49 degrees Celsius (120 degrees Fahrenheit) the previous day in Mohenjo Daro. The city, known for its archaeological sites, is in southern Sindh province, which was badly hit by climate-induced monsoon rains and devastating floods in 2022. The heat wave is forecast to continue for at least a week.

Authorities have urged people to stay indoors, hydrate and avoid unnecessary travel. But laborers say they don't have a choice because they need to work to feed their families.

"Pakistan is the fifth most vulnerable country to the impact of climate change. We have witnessed above normal rains, floods," Rubina Khursheed Alam, the prime minister's coordinator on climate, said at a news conference in the capital, Islamabad.

Barakullah Khan, a civil defense official, asked people not to place cooking gas cylinders in open areas as a safety measure. He warned those living near fields that snakes and scorpions could enter homes and storage places in search of cooler spaces.

This month, temperatures are likely to soar to 55 C (131 F), weather forecasters said.

Doctors say they treated hundreds of patients in the eastern city of Lahore, while scores of people were brought to hospitals in Hyderabad, Larkana and Jacobabad districts in the southern Sindh province.

“The situation has been getting worse since yesterday, when people affected by heat started coming to hospitals in the Punjab province,” said Ghulam Farid, a senior health official. Pakistan has set up emergency response centers at hospitals to treat patients affected by the heat.

The state-run ambulance service is now carrying bottled water and ice to provide emergency treatment to victims of the heat, health officials said.

The United Nations children’s agency appealed for children to be protected from the heat.

“UNICEF is deeply concerned about the health and safety of babies and young children as debilitating heatwave conditions take hold in several countries,” said Sanjay Wijesekera, UNICEF regional director for South Asia. He said the increasing temperatures across the region could put millions of children’s health at risk if they are not protected and hydrated.

Heatstroke is a serious illness that occurs when one’s body temperature rises too quickly, causing some to fall unconscious. Severe heatstroke can cause disability or death.

This year, Pakistan recorded its wettest April since 1961, with more than double the usual monthly rainfall. Last month’s heavy rains killed scores of people while destroying property and farmland.

Daytime temperatures are soaring as much as 8 degrees Celsius (46 degrees Fahrenheit) above May’s average temperatures over the last 20 years, raising fears of flooding in the northwest because of glacial melting.

The 2022 floods caused extensive damage in Sindh and Baluchistan provinces, as 1,739 people were killed across the country.

Pakistan’s southwest and northwestern areas are also experiencing the heatwave.

Authorities have shut schools for a week in Punjab.

On Thursday, nongovernmental organization Save the Children said more than half of Pakistan’s school-age children — about 26 million — will be locked out of classrooms for a week due to the heat wave. In a statement, it said the closure of the schools in Punjab means 52% of the country’s students will be out of school.

In the city of Lahore people were seen swimming in roadside canals. Pakistan says despite contributing less than 1% to carbon emissions, it is bearing the brunt of global climate disasters.

Alam said recent erratic changes in weather patterns were the result of human-made climate change.

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Extreme heatwave disrupts education for half of Pakistan’s schoolchildren (VOA)

[VOA](#) [5/23/2024 11:37 AM, Ayaz Gul, 4186K, Negative]

Pakistan has temporarily shut down schools in most parts of the country to protect children from

heatstroke and dehydration due to an ongoing climate-induced heat wave.

“At least 26 million children in Pakistan’s most populous province, Punjab, - or 52 percent of the country’s total number of pupils in pre-primary, primary and secondary education – will be out of school from 25 to 31 May,” Save the Children said Thursday.

The education department in Punjab cited a temperature surge and a prolonged heat wave as reasons for shutting down all public and private schools across the province. However, it said that schools “will be allowed to conduct examinations as scheduled, with necessary precautions to ensure the safety of students.”

On Thursday, doctors in major urban centers reported treating hundreds of patients for heatstroke.

This is not the first time extreme weather has disrupted educational activities in the South Asian nation, which has a population of about 250 million people.

In 2022, Pakistan’s southern and southwestern regions experienced devastating floods triggered by climate change-induced erratic monsoon rains, which affected 33 million people and halted education activities.

"Pakistan ranks fifth among the countries most affected by global warming," Rubina Khursheed Alam, the prime minister’s climate coordinator, told a news conference in the capital, Islamabad, on Thursday. She cited recent unusually heavy rains, floods, and soaring temperatures.

Alam said 26 districts in Punjab, southern Sindh, and southwestern Baluchistan provinces are experiencing an intense heat wave, which will persist for at least a week.

She advised the public to minimize exposure to direct sunlight during peak heat hours and stay hydrated, warning that the extreme heat and dry conditions could spark bush fires and forest fires in vulnerable districts.

This past April was the wettest in Pakistan since 1961, with more than double the usual monthly rainfall, killing scores of people and destroying property as well as farmland.

Officials say due to climate change, temperatures in some of the affected areas in Pakistan have already reached close to 50 degrees Celsius (over 127 degrees Fahrenheit).

Meteorological Department officials said temperatures in northern and northwestern Pakistani areas would be “4-6 °C higher than normal” for the rest of the week.

Pakistan contributes less than 1% to global carbon emissions but bears the brunt of climate change.

Save the Children said the country “faces rates of warming considerably above the global average with a potential rise of 1.3°C–4.9°C by the 2090s, and the frequency of extreme climate events in Pakistan is projected to increase as well.”

The flooding in 2022 resulted in at least 1,700 deaths, affecting 33 million people and submerging approximately one-third of Pakistan.

“Let’s stop sleepwalking towards the destruction of our planet by climate change,” U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said after visiting flood-hit areas in Pakistan. He said Pakistanis were “facing a monsoon on steroids — the relentless impact of epochal levels of rain and flooding.”

The U.N. Children’s Fund, or UNICEF, said Thursday temperatures spiked to 43-47 degrees Celsius on Sunday across India’s many northern states, including New Delhi.

The agency warned in a statement that “the soaring temperatures across South Asia can put millions of children’s health at risk if they are not protected or hydrated.”

UNICEF noted that 76% of children under 18 in South Asia, about 460 million, were exposed to extremely high temperatures, with 83 or more days in a year exceeding 35 degrees Celsius. It estimated that 28% of children across South Asia were exposed to 4.5 or more heat waves per year, compared to 24% globally.

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Punjab’s New Defamation Law Sparks Pushback, Protests (The Diplomat)

[The Diplomat](#) [5/23/2024 10:06 AM, W. Tariq, 847K, Negative]

The government of Pakistan’s most populous and wealthiest province has pushed through a defamation law to curb fake news, which the opposition, civil society, and journalists say infringes on freedom of press and expression. The controversial bill has led to protests nationwide and calls to challenge the controversial rules in courts.

The Punjab Defamation Bill 2024, a copy of which was seen by The Diplomat, was passed late Monday amid ruckus in the provincial assembly and a walkout in the press gallery. It is meant to provide legal protection from false, misleading, or defamatory claims made via print, electronic, or social media platforms including X (formerly Twitter), WhatsApp, YouTube, and TikTok against both private citizens and public officials.

“These claims and assertions violate peoples’ privacy and damage the reputation and image of public figures or the government by defaming, slandering, and libeling them. The Bill is necessary to contain such unwarranted criticism and dislike for a person or authority,” the draft of the bill said.

Defamation has been loosely defined as “publication, broadcast, or circulation of a false or untrue statement or representation” that “injures or may have the effect of injuring the reputation of a person or tends to lower him in the estimation of others, or ridicules him, or exposes him to unjust criticism, disliking, contempt or hatred.”

Defendants can face exorbitant fines in damages by special tribunals, and a case has to be decided within 180 days. If an instance of defamation is proved, the tribunal can order an apology, and also call for a block on defendant’s social media account or any other medium or platform through which the content was distributed. An appeal against the judgment can be filed

in 30 days, to be heard by a two-judge bench of the provincial high court within 60 days; there will be blanket restrictions on commenting on ongoing cases. Defamation claims related to holders of constitutional office, such as the prime minister, chief justices and military chiefs, will be heard by special one-member tribunals comprising a judge of the Lahore High Court.

Journalists' bodies rejected the law, terming it an attack against freedom of the press. The Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists (PFUJ) held protests outside press clubs in cities including Karachi, Lahore, Islamabad, Rawalpindi, Quetta, Hyderabad, and Abbottabad, among others, and hoisted black flags.

"The sole purpose of this bill is to strike fear in anyone who may be contemplating criticizing or expressing their frustrations with those in power," the PFUJ said.

The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) also expressed concern, saying the bill is troubling on several counts. Among other issues, the HRCP criticized the bill's provision allowing tribunals to issue preliminary decrees of up to 3 million rupees without trial, "immediately on receiving a defamation claim." The ability to assume guilt and issue huge fines "will be a huge blow to freedom of expression and dissent," the HRCP said. The human rights body also warned that mandating all claims must be resolved within six months could threaten due process and the right to a fair trial.

The HRCP expressed concern over the speed used to rush the bill through. "Five days is too short a period for any meaningful consultation with civil society and digital and mainstream media stakeholders on what is a complex legal proposal affecting an entire digital ecosystem of opinion makers," the statement said.

The bill was presented by Punjab Minister for Law and Parliamentary Affairs Mujtaba Shujaat Rehman on May 13 and passed on May 20.

In a statement on May 16, a Joint Action Committee comprising the Pakistan Broadcasters Association, All Pakistan Newspapers Society, Council of Pakistan Newspapers Editors (CPNE), PFUJ, and Association of Electronic Media Editors and News Directors said the media bodies are not against strengthening the defamation laws in principle, but argued that the bill appeared "draconian" in its current form. It had emphasized the need for a "detailed and purposeful" consultation between stakeholders, but to no avail.

According to media representatives, only one meeting was held, after which they had expected the government would postpone the passing of the bill. Instead, it was bulldozed through without warning – "passed in the dark of night without consultation," as the JAC put it.

In its readout on Tuesday after an emergency meeting, the Committee rejected the law, and resolved to challenge the law in court, in consultation with political parties, rights organizations and other stakeholders. The JAC said all options including coverage boycotts, sit-ins, protests and other measures would be adopted step by step to oppose the law.

Kazam Khan, the president of CPNE, called the legislation a "black law," adding that it is the "achievement" of the party that in 2016 passed the controversial Pakistan Electronic Crimes Act (PECA), a law criticized for limiting digital rights. He was referring to the Pakistan Muslim

League-Nawaz (PML-N), which currently rules the country's largest province and is also in power in the center. Critics also argue that the law could create jurisdictional issues as it is only meant for Punjab, whose chief minister, Maryam Nawaz, opposed media regulation in the past.

Punjab's Information Minister Azma Zahid Bokhari in a press briefing last week said there is a broad consensus over the need for a new and effective defamation law since under the one put in practice over two decades ago, "no case could go beyond the issuance of a notice." She cited a suit filed by Shehbaz Sharif, the current prime minister, against incarcerated former premier Imran Khan, who in 2017 alleged he was offered a 10 billion rupee bribe to drop pursuing the Panama Papers corruption case against Nawaz Sharif. "Until today, neither that person [Imran Khan] nor any of his lawyers have bothered to respond," Bokhari said.

She said the government had no political motives in passing the bill, but claimed it would save people from facing reputational damage on the basis of false allegations. Bokhari argued that many of the news stories that got published in Pakistan could not be published in other countries, which have strong defamation laws.

Insisting it would not compromise freedom of expression, Bokhari said the law is not against professional journalists, but those who lie and have a "specific agenda will face the music."

"Disgracing others and making money out of it would not be tolerated," she said.

In particular, Bokhari pointed to the problem of "fake news" on social media sites. "No one is afraid of social media, but there is a concern over disrespect, defamation and allegations on social media," the minister said.

Layoffs due to dwindling advertising revenues and censorship led many journalists to try their luck on social media platforms such as YouTube. Many have a huge fan following and thus a flow of regular income in foreign currency, without editorial checks.

Bokhari also defended the law on multiple television channels on Tuesday, claiming two amendments were made in the original draft after consultations. Asked why the legislation was passed in such haste, Bokhari implied a need for immediate action, saying that for "years" people have been disrespected and accusations have been made without evidence. She downplayed the law by saying defamation charges would be "simple civil suit," which does not involve police, detention or chance of highhandedness.

The profession of journalism in Pakistan involves security risks, intimidation, online abuse, as well as financial woes. In Reporters Without Borders' annual press freedom ranking released this month, Pakistan fell to 152 of 180 countries, down from 150 last year. Arbitrary detentions and forced disappearances have increased, while X, formerly Twitter, has been banned in the country for three months due to "national security concerns." The government is also deliberating on establishing a digital media authority to regulate online content.

Analyst Aamir Ilyas Rana said there may never be a consensus between journalists' unions and the government, but there should be a system in place that holds YouTubers accountable for fake news, citing the flow of disinformation during recent riots involving international students in Kyrgyzstan. He said protests will continue and stakeholders have legal avenues to challenge the

law. That was the case with PECA amendments passed through a 2022 presidential decree by Imran Khan's government, which were later quashed by the Islamabad High Court.

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India

Modi's 400-Seat Dream In Doubt as India Opposition Gains Steam (Bloomberg)

[Bloomberg](#) [5/23/2024 11:08 AM, Sudhi Ranjan Sen and Swati Gupta, 24454K, Neutral]
Before India's marathon election kicked off in April, Prime Minister Narendra Modi was promising to come back to power with an even bigger majority than he won five years ago.

With less than two weeks to go before election results are announced, the picture is looking less certain for the popular leader.

Party insiders, opposition members and analysts who have traveled across the country to speak to voters say there's little evidence of a "Modi wave" that allowed his Bharatiya Janata Party to sweep the polls in 2019. Then, the BJP won 303 of the 543 seats in the lower house of parliament, the Lok Sabha. Along with its allies, the BJP-led coalition had about 351 seats.

Modi targeted more than 400 seats for his coalition this time around, a goal emblazoned on campaign posters and one the prime minister frequently plugged in his campaign speeches. But a notable shift in Modi's tone after the first phase of voting — where he began using divisive, anti-Muslim language and ramped up attacks against the main opposition group's welfare policies — fueled speculation the BJP may have been spooked by early voting trends and needed to fire up its support base.

Election rules don't allow for any result polls to be published during the six weeks of voting, so it's difficult to know with any certainty whether the BJP's support has indeed declined. India's first-past-the-post electoral system means even small margins can decide the winner. Exit polls won't be published until June 1 with results expected on June 4.

Muddying the waters even further is the fact that both the ruling party and opposition are claiming publicly they have the upper hand. Modi himself told The Economic Times this week that the BJP has already won a majority of the seats in the parliament based on voting in the first five phases of elections so far.

However, behind closed doors a picture is emerging of an opposition alliance that's slightly more optimistic about their likely gains, and a ruling party that appears to be bracing for some losses. The Indian National Congress, the main opposition group, expects to win between 90-110 seats in total, up from 52 in 2019, according to a senior party leader, who asked not to be identified as the discussions are private. The estimates were based on internal polling, the person said.

Three BJP officials from Uttar Pradesh and Haryana states privately admitted that the party is unlikely to match its 2019 figures, although they still expect to win a majority of the seats in parliament. The officials asked not to be identified in order to speak freely about internal matters.

Nalin Kohli, a spokesman for the BJP, said there's no reason why the ruling party and its allies won't significantly increase their results from five years ago given the performance of the Modi government and his leadership. Congress party spokespeople weren't immediately available to comment when contacted for further information.

Political analysts and economists also see a possible drop in BJP support.

Rahul Verma, a fellow at the Centre for Policy Research, a New Delhi-based think tank, expects the BJP to stay in power, winning between 282 to 310 seats nationally. Shumita Deveshwar, chief India economist at TS Lombard, was more pessimistic, saying anecdotal evidence during her recent travels from India's east to west coast suggests the BJP could possibly fall below the majority mark of 272 seats. With the help of its allies, though, the party will still be able to form the government, she said in a report on May 16.

Reasons for the BJP's slide in support are varied, according to party officials and analysts. Modi has been in power for a decade and has delivered on several of the BJP's key pledges, a key one being the building of a temple in honor of the Hindu god Ram on a site where an ancient mosque once stood. The inauguration of the temple in Ayodhya in January fulfilled a key promise made to the BJP's Hindu nationalist base for decades.

"Anecdotal evidence from our travels on the election trail from India's east coast to its west suggests that Modi's popularity has waned somewhat since the Ram temple inauguration in January, when a BJP wave seemed to have swept across India," Deveshwar said. "Although multiple factors at play in a country as vast as India make the national mood difficult to read, common themes we picked up on the road include the lack of job creation and rising demand for welfare schemes."

Beyond those, voters' concerns have been dominated by the high cost of living and caste identity, observers say. The opposition's heavy focus on improving the welfare of the poor, especially those who belong to the lowest social groups, have resonated with voters, they say.

Modi's 400-seat target may have been counter-productive, too, since it might have led to complacency in the BJP's ranks while fueling a belief among lower-caste voters that the BJP will use its parliamentary super-majority to push through changes that reduce affirmative action policies for lower socio-economic groups. Home Minister Amit Shah has consistently denied the party has any such plan, although that hasn't stopped the opposition from exploiting voters' anxiety around this.

The shift in momentum was in some evidence in the electorally important state of Uttar Pradesh, considered a stronghold for the BJP after it swept the region with 71 out of 80 seats in 2014 and won 62 in the 2019 elections.

Akhilesh Yadav, leader of the Samajwadi Party, the biggest opposition group in Uttar Pradesh, has been drawing significant crowds to political rallies, where he campaigns alongside alliance members, like the Congress party and the Trinamool Congress. The alliance parties have agreed not to contest seats against each other, allowing them to consolidate the opposition vote against the BJP.

Yadav and Rahul Gandhi, the face of the Congress party, were due to address a rally together earlier this week in a town in Uttar Pradesh, but were forced to leave after throngs of supporters rushed the stage to see the two leaders, pushing through police barricades.

The two men, relatively young leaders in their 50s, represent change for the voters who are disillusioned with the decade-long rule of 73-year-old Modi. Heading into a third term, the “brand value of Modi isn’t there” and the opposition is putting up a strong fight in Uttar Pradesh, said Sunita Aron, an author of three books on Indian politics, including a biography on Yadav.

“The body language between Akhilesh Yadav and Rahul Gandhi shows they’re friendly, they share a camaraderie,” said Aron, who was an executive editor for the Hindustan Times in Uttar Pradesh for more than two decades. “If the two leaders are standing on a stage, holding hands, that sends a message to the cadres on the ground that we’re coordinating, we’re working together.”

Uttar Pradesh was once again seen as a walkover for the BJP when the election began, but Aron said there’s now at least 25-30 seats in contention for the opposition.

“The BJP has an edge, but the alliance is giving it a good fight,” she said.

The clamor for change was evident on Tuesday at a rally in the rural town of Bhadohi, in eastern Uttar Pradesh. Flying in on a helicopter that sent dust clouds high up in the air, Yadav was cheered on by more than 8,000 supporters, predominantly young men, waiting in 40-degree heat to catch a glimpse of the leader, campaigning there on behalf of a candidate from the Trinamool Congress.

Yadav told his supporters the alliance will increase government jobs and waive loans for farmers, prompting huge roars from the crowd. In an interview after his speech, he criticized the Modi government for its policies and said the ruling party was losing support because of rising joblessness and inflation. He said the opposition alliance was aligned on its priorities, including improving affirmative action policies for the lowest caste groups.

He predicted the BJP will lose its majority and the opposition will form the government.

“The BJP route to power was through Uttar Pradesh, now they are losing all seats and that will be their end,” Yadav said.

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Modi rival freed from jail shakes up India election campaign (Financial Times)

[Financial Times](#) [5/23/2024 8:21 PM, Jyotsna Singh and Benjamin Parkin, 13.5M, Neutral]

The dramatic release of one of India’s top opposition leaders has shaken up the final stretch of the country’s election campaign, giving a much-needed boost to Narendra Modi’s rivals in their quest to unseat the prime minister next month.

Arvind Kejriwal, the chief minister of Delhi and head of the Aam Aadmi party, was released on bail this month, seven weeks after he was arrested by India’s economic crime agency on allegations that he masterminded a scheme to siphon money from liquor licence grants in the

capital.

Kejriwal, who has denied the allegations, has immediately returned to the campaign trail, holding back-to-back rallies in poll-bound states such as Haryana, Punjab and Delhi, which votes on Saturday.

The 55-year-old former tax official has railed against Modi, accusing the prime minister of weaponising corruption probes to discredit rivals and deflect attention from how inflation and high unemployment have hurt low-income Indians during his decade in power.

“Did you miss me?” Kejriwal asked a crowd packed into narrow alleys at a recent stop in a working-class Delhi neighbourhood. “I am a small man with a small party . . . so why did the prime minister put me in jail? It was to stop the work that I am doing.”

The marathon election, which began in April and is taking place in phases until June 1, is widely expected to return Modi’s Bharatiya Janata party to power for a third term in charge of the world’s most populous country. Results will be announced on June 4.

While the BJP remained the favourite, analysts said Kejriwal’s release had helped invigorate the multi-party opposition alliance known as INDIA — which includes AAP, the Indian National Congress and dozens of regional parties — as they hope for a shock upset.

Kejriwal’s return “has definitely given a boost to the opposition campaign — the question is whether it will change the outcome or not,” said Rahul Verma, a political commentator at the New Delhi-based think-tank the Center for Policy Research.

“It doesn’t seem like a cakewalk for the BJP as it did, say, in mid-March,” he added. “There is serious economic anxiety in the bottom half of the social pillar, with unemployment, price rises and not seeing very bright prospects on the economic front, [from which] the opposition might be benefiting.”

Exit and opinion polls are banned during the election, meaning there is little data to indicate who is in the lead, but turnout through the first five phases of the polls has slightly trailed the 2019 election, prompting the opposition to claim voters are disaffected with the ruling party.

On the campaign trail, Modi has hailed what he calls a “wave of support” for the BJP, playing up his development record and doubling down on divisive rhetoric towards India’s Muslim minority.

He has also dismissed the INDIA alliance as “totally discredited” by corruption allegations. Other senior members of Kejriwal’s party have been jailed while another opposition chief minister, Hemant Soren from Jharkhand, was arrested earlier this year on corruption allegations.

Kejriwal, who is out on interim bail until June 2, has called the allegations a sign of desperation by the BJP. The AAP, which was founded as an anti-corruption party in 2012 and controls the state governments of Delhi and Punjab, has also touted its record of building neighbourhood health clinics and revamping the capital’s school system.

“Why am I at fault? Because I built good schools and good hospitals for your kids?” Kejriwal told the rally.

His message has resonated with voters such as Mohammad Abid, 52, the owner of an auto-parts shop. “People are fed up of the last 10 years of the Modi government,” said Abid. “The whole country wants to see a change.”

Others, however, said they have little doubt that Modi would return — whether they want it or not. “Our low incomes cannot cope with high prices of everything,” said Monisha Kumari, a 35-year-old. “But no matter what, Modi is coming back.”

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India seeks to extend influence in Middle East, Africa: Jaishankar (Nikkei Asia)

[Nikkei Asia](#) [5/24/2024 3:26 AM, Yuichi Shiga, 13.5M, Neutral]

India is pushing the boundaries of its cooperation and interests further north and west with links to Central Asia, the Middle East and Africa, External Affairs Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar said Friday in a speech that played up the Asian power’s growing global role.

"The transformation of India is critical to strengthening multipolarity in Asia itself, a prerequisite for a multipolar world," Jaishankar told Nikkei’s Future of Asia forum in a video message.

Vying with China, India has sought to rally the Global South around its rising economic clout. The International Monetary Fund forecasts India to surpass Japan as the world’s fourth-largest economy in 2025.

India began "the "Neighborhood First Policy for the Subcontinent" under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, providing aid for projects ranging from infrastructure to health to women’s empowerment. But it also has wider connections.

"India’s extended interests now reach out to Central Asian states in the north and the Indian Ocean ones to the south," Jaishankar said. "Its engagement with Africa has also intensified, especially along the East African coastline."

"India’s focus on its extended neighborhood is also expressed westward by intensifying cooperation with Gulf nations," which are some of its biggest partners in terms of trade, investment and energy.

These ties are on top of its longstanding relations with ASEAN nations.

Jaishankar also touched on relations with Japan, a key economic partner and fellow member of the Quad security dialogue with Australia and the U.S.

"De-risking the international economy by promoting more centers of production should be our main focus" in various areas including industrial competitiveness, clean energy, digital partnership and semiconductor supply chains.

He said "our economies complement each other in many respects and we must explore those

opportunities more seriously."

Jaishankar added that India and Japan, as major Asian economies, "have a particular obligation to enhance its stability and security." He expressed India's openness to "building defense cooperation and interoperability and committing ourselves to supporting peaceful resolution of disputes and respect for international law."

Last year's G20 president is now in the final stretch of the world's biggest general election. "India seeks to lead by example," he said. "The ongoing Indian elections underline that democracies can really deliver."

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Farmers in India are weary of politicians' lackluster response to their climate-driven water crisis (AP)

[AP](#) [5/23/2024 10:22 PM, Sibi Arasu, 27514K, Negative]

On a stifling hot day this May, farm worker Shobha Londhe is reminded of the desperate conditions that led her husband to take his own life. It's the hottest and driest summer in years, she said, and for farm workers that often means little to no income, rising debts and intolerable heat.

Londhe, a resident of Talegaon village in western India, knows well the toll these climate change-induced droughts can take on farmers. Three years ago, she said the family's financial situation was untenable as crops failed from too much heat and not enough water. Her husband Tatya went out to the fields one October day, and never returned.

"He was struggling because we were always in debt," said Londhe, a framed picture of her husband beside her. She partly blames his death on the increasingly hot and dry weather in their home region of Marathwada in Maharashtra state. "We are completely dependent on rainwater for agriculture," she said.

Londhe is one of India's 120 million farmers who share fast-shrinking water resources as groundwater is pumped out faster than rain can replenish it. Drought-prone areas like Marathwada are at the sharp end of the shortage, making life unbearable for many. As the country continues to vote in its marathon six-week election, farmers are looking for longer-term solutions to the water problem, like building canal networks from distant rivers. But politicians have promised and done little to secure water for them, with activists saying that big businesses and large farms are being prioritized instead.

In western Maharashtra state, successive droughts caused in part by human-caused climate change have compounded the problems for farmers, forcing them to take out loans to buy crops. Community members say that when those crops also fail, it drives some farmers to take their own lives. According to government estimates, 1,088 farmers died by suicide in Marathwada last year, and federal government records show the number of farmers and farm workers dying by suicide across India has been increasing in recent years.

Debt, crop failure, alcohol addiction and lack of jobs are some reasons for the high rate of suicides among farmers, says local politician and head of Dhondrai village, Shital Sakhare. "We

are trying to help young people get more jobs outside of farming so they don't take such drastic measures," she said.

Londhe said the heat, failing crops and money problems are only getting worse since her husband's death. "This summer, we can't even find work as laborers, it is becoming difficult for us to survive," she said. Scientists say that the frequency and intensity of the droughts are being driven by human-caused climate change, with overextraction of groundwater and a lack of conservation adding to the crisis.

In most villages in the region The Associated Press visited, local government-funded water tankers were stationed around main squares to provide drinking water for residents. But villagers still had no water for their dying crops: the Sindhphana tributary that runs through the region was dry, as were most of the reservoirs. Election campaigning in the region on the issue was virtually non-existent.

That's despite the fact that farmers in the area are politically active, and "do vote every time there's elections," said 76-year-old Sarjerao Gholap, a resident and retired head of Talegaon village. But when politicians don't act on their promises, many lose faith in the process, he said.

Gholap said politicians from various parties in the past promised to set up a canal to supply water to their village, ensure better prices for their produce and supply running water through hand pumps. Gholap said none of these have been implemented, and no water comes from the hand pump that was installed a year ago in the village.

Manisha Tokle, an activist based in Beed, said most politicians in the region favor those who already have economic power, like the upper caste, large land-holding farmers, sugarcane factory owners and pesticide manufacturers. "They are never thinking about small farmers, women workers and farm laborers," she said.

The average wage for farm workers has remained at about \$3 to \$4 per day for at least 15 years according to Indian government data, despite repeated calls by farmers groups from across the country to increase it on par with rising costs. Vegetable prices rose by 27% this year compared to the previous year with tomatoes and onions seeing an increase of 38% and 29% in their costs.

Atul Jadhav, 26, a smallholder farmer in Kambi village in the region, said returns on farming are so dire that he "won't allow" his children to take it up when they're older.

He spends 5,000 rupees (\$60) every day to water his five acre field of sweet lime and sugarcane, but the soil is still bone-dry, and most plants are dead or wilted. "I don't know if anything will remain if this heat continues, but I have to try," said Jadhav.

Village head Sakhare said farmers frustrated with the water shortage need to vote in big numbers to get the issue on the table, admitting that it's not high on politicians minds.

But she warned that while politicians can do more to help on finding alternative water sources, promoting less water-intensive crops or giving financial support to farmers, "they can't reverse the effect of climate change."

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Former India PM urges lawmaker grandson to surrender in rape case (Reuters)

[Reuters](#) [5/23/2024 9:56 AM, Sakshi Dayal, 45791K, Negative]

A former Indian prime minister, an ally of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, urged his lawmaker grandson on Thursday to return to India and face the law in connection with rape and sexual harassment cases filed against him, amid a general election.

Prajwal Revanna, 33, the grandson of former Prime Minister H.D. Deve Gowda, is a member of parliament from the Hassan constituency in the southern state of Karnataka and is seeking re-election in the ongoing national elections.

He was suspended from his Janata Dal (Secular) party - an ally of Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party - after the allegations against him surfaced last month, and his father, who is a former Karnataka minister, was arrested for alleged involvement in the abduction of one of the women linked to the cases.

Multiple women have accused Revanna of sexual assault and recording sexual acts, with several videos surfacing days before the vote in his constituency, according to local media reports.

Urging his grandson to face the law, Gowda, in a statement posted on X, said that if Revanna did not heed his warning he would face the anger of all his family members.

"The law will take care of the accusations against him, but not listening to the family will ensure his total isolation," Gowda, 91, said, adding that there would be no interference from his family in the investigation.

"There is no emotion in this regard in my mind...there is only the cause of justice for those who have suffered as a result of his alleged actions and misdeeds," he said.

The foreign ministry has said Revanna travelled to Germany last month and it is considering Karnataka state's request to cancel his diplomatic passport.

His relatives and officials say his current whereabouts are unknown.

The case became a flashpoint in the country's seven-phase elections, which will conclude on June 1, with opposition leaders criticising Modi and his government for allowing Revanna to flee.

Modi has said he has "zero tolerance" for such crimes. On May 1, Revanna posted on X that he needed time to return to India and face investigators, adding "truth will prevail".

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Fire at chemical factory in India kills at least 9, with searchers looking for more victims (AP)

[AP](#) [5/24/2024 2:21 AM, Staff, 456K, Negative]

An explosion and fire at a chemical factory in western India killed at least nine people and 64 were injured, officials said Friday.

The explosion Thursday in the factory's boiler led to a fire that affected nearby factories and houses in Maharashtra state's Thane district, administrative official Sachin Shejal said.

Shejal said the blaze has been extinguished but rescuers were combing through the debris to find more bodies.

The cause of the explosion, which sent a huge cloud of grey smoke over the area, is being investigated.

Shejal said the explosion sent huge shockwaves that damaged adjacent factories and shattered glass windows in nearby houses.

Indian police on Friday filed charges of culpable homicide, including negligence in handling toxic substances, against the owners of the factory.

The factory produced food coloring and used highly reactive chemicals that can cause explosions, India's National Disaster Response Force said.

Fires are common across India because of poor safety standards and lax enforcement of regulations. Activists say builders often cut corners on safety to save costs and have accused civic authorities of negligence and apathy.

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Seven dead in south India after heavier than normal pre-monsoon rains (Reuters)

[Reuters](#) [5/23/2024 10:36 AM, Jose Devasia, Mubasher Bukhari, and Ariba Shahid, 45791K, Neutral]

At least seven people have died in India's southern state of Kerala after heavier than normal pre-monsoon rains, authorities said, even as much of South Asia grappled with a heatwave.

Pre-monsoon rains were 18% above normal in Kerala this year, causing flooding in parts and disrupting flights at the Kozhikode airport, officials said.

According to the state's Disaster Management Authority (KSDMA), a 70-year-old man died in a lightning strike in Kasaragod district on Wednesday, while brothers aged 18 and 21 died after falling into a quarry filled with water in Palakkad on Tuesday.

Four people also died in Idukki and Pathanamthitta districts after falling into water, said an official at the SDMA.

The local weather department has issued a red alert, warning of extremely heavy rainfall in three districts on Thursday.

In contrast to Kerala, most of India and Pakistan faced heatwaves, with India's capital New

Delhi ordering the closure of schools earlier this week.

Temperatures often peak during May, but India's weather department was predicting seven to ten heatwave days in northwestern regions this month, compared to the usual two to three days.

New Delhi will vote on Saturday, along with the nearby states of Haryana and Uttar Pradesh among others, in the penultimate phase of a seven-stage national vote, with temperatures predicted to touch 46 degrees Celsius (115 Fahrenheit) on the day.

In neighbouring Pakistan, authorities advised people to stay indoors and avoid non-essential travel, as temperatures were predicted to go beyond 48 C in some parts.

"The soaring temperatures across South Asia can put millions of children's health at risk if they are not protected or hydrated," the U.N. children's agency UNICEF said.

Extreme temperatures in Asia have been made more likely from human-driven climate change, international scientists said earlier this month.

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NSB

'It's in our rivers and in our cups. There's no escape': the deadly spread of salt water in Bangladesh (The Guardian)

[The Guardian](#) [5/24/2024 1:00 AM, Thaslima Begum, 83.6M, Negative]

Shadows dance across large, concrete chambers while the sound of dripping water echoes in the distance. A rusty metal staircase leads up to an empty water tower overlooking Bangladesh's mighty Rupsha River. This water treatment plant was once a beacon of hope for the community; today the site lies abandoned, the only sign of life the daily activity of its resident caretaker, Sayed Ahmed.

Commissioned by the local government division for rural development to recycle contaminated water, the plant on the outskirts of the city of Khulna was designed to supply fresh water to 5,000 people. When construction began in 2005, Ahmed was offered employment as a security guard.

"I was excited when I first got the job," he says. "The new water plant was the talk of the town and everyone was hopeful about the benefits it would bring." But the project stalled in 2010 – due to high costs and internal politics, according to an engineer involved who did not want to be named – and shortly afterwards, everybody left. Only Ahmed remained; he has been guarding the derelict site for nearly two decades.

The site has since been handed over to Khulna City Corporation which did not respond to requests for comment.

As their children grew up and moved out, Ahmed and his wife, Amena Khatun, enjoyed spending their afternoons down by the river, watching the world go by. But six months ago, their quiet life was turned upside down.

After her hands and feet became swollen, Khatun was diagnosed with chronic kidney disease (CKD) – a serious, progressive disease that involves a gradual loss of kidney function. The couple were shocked to learn that Khatun’s kidneys hadn’t been working properly for nearly seven years and that her heart, lungs and central nervous system were already severely affected.

Although the 65-year-old already had high blood pressure and showed symptoms of fatigue, achy muscles and shortness of breath, neither she nor her doctor had been concerned about her kidney health. But further tests revealed high levels of protein in Khatun’s urine.

The consumption of saline water in coastal Bangladesh has long been associated with various health risks, including hypertension, respiratory problems and pre-eclampsia, but its effect on kidney health remains relatively unknown.

Chronic kidney disease is a major public health issue worldwide but studies suggest a higher prevalence (22%) among Bangladeshis than the global average (10%). “Most people with CKD don’t even know they have it,” says Dr Abu Mohammed Naser, an environmental health professor at the University of Memphis. “Many miss early diagnosis, as often they don’t experience symptoms until the disease has already advanced considerably.”

As Bangladesh’s third-largest city, Khulna, on the banks of the Rupsha and Bhairab rivers, was once the economic heartland of the south-western region, known for its jute mills, shipyards and thriving fishing industry. But frequent floods, cyclones and tidal surges are having an adverse effect on the city’s freshwater resources, with saline intrusion resulting in a shortage of clean and safe water. Meanwhile on land, a booming shrimp-cultivation industry – which has earned Khulna its reputation as Shrimp City – is contaminating remaining freshwater repositories.

For people like Ahmed and Khatun, there is no choice but to continue using contaminated water. Around Khulna’s Notun Bazar area, residents regularly use saline water for cooking, drinking and bathing. “Salt water surrounds us,” says Ahmed. “It’s in our rivers, in our tubewells and in our drinking cups – there’s no escaping it.”

In 2017, Naser investigated the effects of water salinity on kidney health in coastal areas of south-western Bangladesh, including Khulna. Measuring urinary sodium and total protein in the urine samples of 1,185 trial participants from 532 households, as well as their salt intake from drinking water sources, Naser found that 37% had mild proteinuria (elevated levels of protein in their urine) while 20% had moderate or substantial proteinuria.

“This shows that drinking-water sodium and urinary sodium are associated with increased protein excretion, which is a powerful marker for kidney disease,” he says. More recently, Naser conducted a further study comparing the effects of extreme heat on kidney health between men and women in Bangladesh. Using urine biomarkers, his team linked ambient temperature data from local weather stations to participants’ health outcomes.

“Various studies have reported that men globally are particularly at high risk of developing kidney disease since a large number involved in outdoor work have direct sun exposure for a prolonged time,” says Naser. “But our findings suggest that women in tropical regions are just as susceptible to the effects of high ambient temperature exposure as men.”

New research on river water salinity in coastal Bangladesh looked into records spanning the past three decades from a network of 86 monitoring stations, the largest dataset analysed to date, and found that the increasing salinisation of freshwater resources in the region is putting the livelihoods and health of local populations under greater threat.

“The global climate crisis is essentially a water crisis,” says Dr Mohammad Shamsudduha, a scientist and associate professor at University College London’s institute for risk and disaster reduction, who was involved in the research. “Although water salinity in south-western Bangladesh is highly seasonal and varies substantially between wet and dry seasons, in recent times, there has been a trend in rising salinity.”

This April was Bangladesh’s hottest on record, with average temperatures of 40-42C across all districts. Khulna was particularly affected, with extreme heat resulting in a rise in hospital admissions, forcing patients to occupy corridors and stairways as wards ran out of beds.

“These coastal communities are suffering the double burden of climate change,” says Naser. “On one hand, high temperatures cause profound sweating, loss of body fluid, and dehydration – and on the other, there’s no suitable water for them to drink and rehydrate. This water crisis has become a major health hazard with deadly consequences.”

Sitting up in her bed, wrapped in a red shawl, Khatun flicks through her medical notes, trying to make sense of her situation. “The pain is so intolerable, I’m not able to sleep or eat,” she says. The food her daughter brought remains untouched on the bedside table among scattered papers and pills.

Since her diagnosis, her health has deteriorated. She was told she needed to start dialysis immediately, and continue up to three times a week. To avoid the long waiting list at the local government hospital she went to a private clinic where each dialysis session costs 5,000 taka (£34). The family have now used up all their savings and have had to take out a loan. To cover the additional costs of medication, Khatun has been skipping dialysis sessions.

Dialysis capacity across health facilities in Bangladesh remains inadequate to meet the current and projected needs of CKD patients, according to research.

As the evening draws to a close, Ahmed walks Khatun to the riverbank, where they watch the sun set over the river. Behind them looms the forlorn structure of an abandoned water plant that once showed promise but now tells a story of neglect.

Although the Bangladesh government and local partners have introduced initiatives to improve access to safe drinking water in south-western Bangladesh, the situation in Khulna is expected to worsen.

“There is seriously not enough vigorous research being done in this area. A deeper understanding of the links between heat, water salinity and kidney health can enable timely interventions and better health outcomes,” says Naser. “If we don’t see an improvement in water quality, we can expect an increase in kidney-related diseases in the future.”

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‘We have failed economically’: Bhutan turns to ‘Gross National Happiness 2.0’ as crisis deepens (CNBC)

[CNBC](#) [5/23/2024 8:07 PM, Monica Pitrelli, 42129K, Positive]

Bhutan’s governing philosophy of “Gross National Happiness” has been heralded the world over for balancing economic growth with the well-being of its citizens.

But recent discussions of “Gross National Happiness 2.0” by its newly elected Prime Minister Tshering Tobgay suggest that change on some level is underway as the country struggles with an economic crisis that’s left it — as Tobgay has said— “teetering on the brink of collapse.”

GNH, as it’s known, has been the guiding principle of Bhutan since it was introduced by the former king Jigme Singye Wangchuck in the early 1970s.

But with youth unemployment rates of nearly 30% and about one in eight people living in poverty, has Bhutan reached a point where its quest for national happiness must change?

“Yes and no,” Tobgay told CNBC in an interview on May 10. “Yes, because we’ve got to grow our economy.”

But the tenets of GNH will not be abandoned, he added.

“Should we throw caution to the wind? No. We can grow, and we can grow in a manner that is balanced.”

Finding a new equilibrium

Bhutan will continue to strengthen its economy in ways that are sustainable, equitable and “balanced with social progress, environmental protection, cultural protection and good governance,” he said.

“In these areas we have succeeded, like nobody could have imagined,” he said.

But he also signaled that the principle applied in the past may have been too one-sided.

“We’ve been extremely cautious, very conservative, so we have lagged,” he said. “We have failed economically.”

Tobgay also said that Bhutan has been similarly guarded in its approach to tourism.

“We’ve been extremely cautious in how we have opened ourselves to the rest of the world as far as tourism is concerned,” Tobgay told CNBC. “We’ve been very conservative, very cautious.”

If Bhutan erred, it was on the side of sustainability and conservation, he added.

“We are paying for caution right now.”

Doubling down on sustainable tourism

Bhutan's tourism industry is recovering slower than other countries in Asia. In 2023, international arrivals in the country were a third of 2019 levels.

The country has changed its controversial "Sustainable Development Fee" three times since it reopened in September of 2022 — first increasing it to \$200 per adult per day, then lowering it twice.

Those changes created "a lot of confusion," said Tobgay. "Even as we speak, tourism is now beginning to pick up, but not to pre-pandemic levels."

Yet despite the economic windfall that mass tourism can bring, Bhutan is not retreating from its "high value, low volume" approach to tourism, Tobgay told CNBC.

Today, its Sustainable Development Fee is \$100 per adult per day, but Tobgay said, "Truth be told, I think \$200 per day as a sustainable development fee many tourists are willing to pay."

He said Bhutan is still focused on increasing tourism "while at the same time controlling the numbers."

The country's burgeoning tourism industry is one avenue to "generate the type of jobs that our able, our very capable youth aspire for," he said.

Thousands of young Bhutanese workers have left the country in search of employment opportunities abroad, according to Reuters. In the 11 months preceding May 2023, some 1.5% of Bhutan's population moved to Australia alone for jobs and skills training, the report said.

"We hope that this is a temporary development ... and will give us time to strengthen our economy, through tourism, but through other interventions as well," said Tobgay. "Then our children will remain here, those who are working outside, who would have gained valuable experience, would return back home."

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Central Asia

Thousands of Pakistani students flee Kyrgyzstan amid attacks on universities, hostels (VOA)

[VOA](#) [5/23/2024 10:56 AM, Iftikhar Hussain, 4186K, Negative]

Hoor Mehtab, a Pakistani medical student in Kyrgyzstan, was among the first students to return to Pakistan following Kyrgyzstani mob attacks on foreign students, including Pakistanis and Indians, in various Bishkek universities and hostels May 17.

Mehtab said she and others were dining in a cafe serving Pakistani food when they received messages from classmates at their hostel that a mob had attacked the hostel and Avicenna

International Medical University where they were students.

Mehteb said the cafe owner offered her and 59 other Pakistani and Indian students refuge in the basement, where they stayed for 14 hours.

“It was suffocating,” she told VOA.

Mehtab was among nearly 4,000 Pakistani students who left their studies in Bishkek and returned to Pakistan after the violence, which lasted for several hours over May 17 and 18.

Kyrgyzstan’s Interior Ministry said in a statement on its website the day after the attack that the violence was triggered by the appearance of a social media video purportedly showing a group of “persons of Asian appearance,” said by eyewitnesses to be Egyptians, harassing foreign students on the night of May 13. The statement said the police charged four foreign students with hooliganism and detained them. Police did not release the students’ identities.

Kyrgyz Deputy Education Minister Rasul Abazbek, speaking to reporters Monday in Bishkek, called the mass attacks on Pakistani and Indian students “shameful.”

“We must not lose this reputation to be hub of education,” Abazbek said.

Parents of students who are still in Bishkek say they are worried about the safety of their sons and daughters.

“My family is worried. I have to borrow \$320 to send it to my daughter and son to buy air tickets so they can come back home,” Sardar Asif Ali, a Pakistani father in Mardan city, in Pakistan’s northwest, told VOA.

According to official estimates, there are 11,000 Pakistanis in Kyrgyzstan, mostly students.

Pakistani Foreign Minister Ishaq Dar was in Bishkek this week to ensure the safety of the Pakistani students. At a press briefing Wednesday in Islamabad, Dar said about 4,000 Pakistanis are expected to return from Kyrgyzstan.

Pakistan has launched special flights to repatriate its citizens. A flight arranged by the Pakistani government arrived at Bacha Khan International Airport in the northwestern city of Peshawar early Wednesday, carrying 200 students from Bishkek.

Among them was Azra Alam, a Pakistani student in her third year of medical studies in Bishkek.

“We were stuck in our rooms for six days and scared every minute,” she told VOA. She said she is uncertain about her future studies at Bishkek.

Medical schools in the former Soviet republics are popular among South Asian students because of lower costs, proximity and lower qualification requirements. Students and parents say the cost for a year of tuition for a medical school in Kyrgyzstan is roughly \$3,000.

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Anti-Migrant Protests Expose Problems in Kyrgyzstan's Evolving Migration Landscape (The Diplomat)

[The Diplomat](#) [5/23/2024 8:52 AM, Asel Murzakulova, 847K, Neutral]

On the night of May 17-18, in Bishkek, the capital of Kyrgyzstan, there were extensive attacks on dormitories housing foreign nationals. As a result, over 40 people, primarily citizens of Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, and Egypt, sustained injuries.

The Pakistani government pledged to arrange more than a dozen charter flights to repatriate affected citizens between May 19-21. In the initial days of evacuation, 3,100 students out of the 11,000 Pakistani citizens in Kyrgyzstan, predominantly enrolled in medical universities across the country, departed the country.

Currently, there are 42,620 individuals in Kyrgyzstan classified as foreign students.

Pakistani Interior Minister Mohsin Naqvi personally greeted the first batch of repatriated students from Bishkek at Lahore airport. Subsequently, Pakistani Foreign Minister Ishaq Dar highlighted Kyrgyzstan's status as a friendly nation and stated that the incident would be addressed at a previously scheduled Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) meeting in Astana on May 21. On May 22 Dar arrived in Bishkek en route back to Pakistan, where he visited victims and met with government officials. Deputy Prime Minister of Kyrgyzstan Edil Baisalov visited the affected community and offered apologies to the victims. Dar said 4,000 Pakistani students are expected to return home.

The brunt of the attacks targeted legally residing students, while the primary grievances of the spontaneous rally, which rapidly amassed approximately 1,000 young participants on the city streets from two to six in the morning, revolved around issues of illegal migration. The rally attendees asserted that illegal migration diminishes employment prospects for local youth in the labor market and propagated ethno-nationalist slogans. Notably, there was a glaring absence of dialogue between the authorities and the youth; the demonstrators demanded government representatives address their concerns directly.

The conflict has laid bare acute challenges in Kyrgyzstan's migration policy, exposing neglected aspects of the evolving migration landscape. Traditionally regarded as a labor migrant-sending nation, Kyrgyzstan has seen a notable transformation in the last decade, transitioning into a migrant-receiving and transit country. Following the reopening of borders with Uzbekistan in 2016, Kyrgyzstan witnessed a resurgence in circular migration of construction workers from neighboring countries. Moreover, in 2022, amid the conflict in Ukraine, Central Asian countries actively began accepting migrants from Russia. The events of May 18-19 have underscored numerous governmental deficiencies and laid bare the unpreparedness of key institutions to address the array of challenges stemming from these shifting dynamics.

Historically, the focal points of the country's migration policy have centered on diversifying labor markets for Kyrgyzstani migrants and attracting capital from migrants and the diaspora to Kyrgyzstan. However, scant attention has been directed toward understanding how migration dynamics impact the domestic labor market and rural economy, and the emerging security challenges posed by the rapid transformation of the country's migration profile.

In political discourse, outward labor migration has conventionally been framed as a poverty

alleviation mechanism, with potential for broader economic development. Nevertheless, the ramifications of labor migration on various sectors of the local economy remain ambiguous. Studies indicate that labor migration from rural areas of Kyrgyzstan abroad has resulted in a significant exodus of labor from the country's unproductive agricultural sector, transforming Kyrgyzstan from a net food exporter into a country heavily reliant on imports.

Domestic labor shortages are also evident in numerous sewing workshops, another vital economic sector. Due to wage disparities, many workers in light industries, having gained experience in Kyrgyzstan, migrate onward to Russia where hourly wages are higher. Consequently, labor migration from Kyrgyzstan to more lucrative labor markets has led to the displacement of remaining local workers by migrants from nearby and even distant regions.

Since 2020, the government has consistently increased the quota for foreign labor migrants; in 2024, the quota reached 25,000, up from 16,610 the previous year. Foreign labor is predominantly sourced from Bangladesh, Pakistan, and China. Industrial, construction, and transport sectors received 63 percent of the quota, while 13 percent went to the mining industry, and 14 percent to the service and trade sectors.

The preference for foreign labor is partly attributed to alleged deficiencies in the work ethic of local workers, as articulated by President Sadyr Japarov. Reflecting on the engagement of foreign labor for the construction of a new government complex in 2023, Japarov cited instances of local workers' purported laziness, justifying the decision to recruit 800 workers from Bangladesh.

During the rally on May 18, several key demands were voiced, including the expulsion of illegal foreign workers who create competition in the labor market and depress wages for locals, and urging authorities to engage in dialogue with the demonstrators.

Official figures from the Ministry of Internal Affairs suggest a low incidence of illegal migration; for instance, in the first quarter of 2024, approximately 60 individuals were identified, with 264 criminal cases initiated at the start of the year. However, the second demand from the rally participants appears to be a response to the president's assessment of local prospects in the labor market for young Kyrgyz men made a year prior.

Japarov and the head of the State Committee for National Security, Kamchybek Tashiev, issued statements regarding the recent events. The president suggested that prompt action by law enforcement agencies and transparent communication with the public could have averted the violence. Meanwhile, Tashiev acknowledged the validity of some demands made by the protesters and affirmed the government's commitment to intensifying efforts to identify illegal immigrants.

Japarov attributed the events to an alleged attempt to foment unrest by opponents of the government, indicating a readiness to employ force to quell future such rallies. This narrative of conspiracy detracts from addressing the genuine challenges within the labor market and the significant shifts in the country's migration landscape.

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Kyrgyz Activist On Trial Says He Was Tortured In Detention (Radio Free Europe)

[Radio Free Europe](#) [5/23/2024 8:49 AM, Staff, 1299K, Negative]

Kyrgyz activist Askat Jetigen, who is on trial on a charge of calling for mass unrest which he rejects as politically motivated, said in a courtroom on May 23 that police tortured him with an electric shocker for one hour after his arrest on March 20. The chief of the State Center To Prevent Torture, Bakyt Rysbekov, confirmed that his entity is investigating a claim filed by Jetigen with the agency in early April. Jetigen, who is known for his criticism of Kyrgyzstan's government, was arrested days after his last video criticizing reforms by the Culture Ministry was posted online.

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A Remote Kyrgyz Village Fights for Survival as Mining Start Looms (The Diplomat)

[The Diplomat](#) [5/24/2024 1:00 AM, Emilia Sulek, 847K, Negative]

When Kulchoro Ramanov took his Kyrgyz language exam, required for the members of Kyrgyzstan's state administration, he left the examination board in a state of bewilderment. "I don't know how to use a computer," he told them. "In my village there is no electricity and never has been." The board shook their heads, but made an exception. Ramanov was allowed to answer on paper. He passed with flying colors. Kyrgyz is the only language he knows.

Situated in Jalal-Abad province in south Kyrgyzstan, the village of Kyzyl-Beyit used to be well connected to the outside world. However, in the 1960s, the Kyrgyz Soviet Socialist Republic embarked on an ambitious hydropower project. On the Naryn River, which flows from the Tian Shan Mountains to the Syr Darya and then onward to the Aral Sea, the so-called Naryn hydropower cascade was built. The Toktogul, Kürpsay, Tash-Kömür, Shamaldy-Shay, and Üch-Korgon hydropower plants (HPPs) continue to supply the country with energy.

Driving the highway along the eastern side of the Kürpsay reservoir, it is difficult to imagine that anyone lives in the rugged mountains on the opposite shore. But they do. A small self-made ferry takes passengers across the 800-meter-wide reservoir, created after the river was dammed up. After another 15 kilometers of winding uphill road, one reaches Kyzyl-Beyit, one of the most isolated villages in Kyrgyzstan.

43-year-old Ramanov is its head. He has no office, even the phone doesn't always work. But Ramanov has more serious challenges to deal with.

The Village

335 people live in Kyzyl-Beyit, comprising 66 families. Their houses look like the set of a period film. No new ones are being built, as building materials would have to be ferried in. The cars are well worn, too. Why buy new ones when there is nowhere to drive? The road to the village has not been maintained for years. It used to link up with the highway that runs from the capital Bishkek to the south of the country, but at one point the highway was flooded, taking with it the turn to Kyzyl-Beyit.

The Kürpsay HPP is only 5 kilometers from the village.

"It feels no closer than the moon," Ramanov says. In the evening, his village plunges into

darkness. Only the moon shines in the sky. Solar panels work only during good weather.

Much more threatening than the lack of electricity is the lack of healthcare. There is not a single nurse, let alone a doctor, in the village. In case of an emergency, one can try to get a telephone consultation, but in this rugged terrain the signal is often very weak, if it works at all. Pregnant women travel to a nearby town once they've reached eight months. Ramanov was born on the other side of the Naryn River. He was brought home by boat after the reservoir was filled in 1981.

"Our curse was that the Soviet Union collapsed. If not that, the authorities would have built what they promised: a bridge, a road, an electricity line," Ramanov's mother, Toktoyim Temirbekova, believes.

After Kyrgyzstan became independent in 1991, the country was engulfed in an economic crisis. Still, the families of Kyzyl-Beyit were offered land in Razan-Say, a village on the opposite side of the reservoir. But there was neither electricity nor running water there either, and the land was of much worse quality. Only three families decided to move.

Cashmere and Walnuts

The picturesque mountains around Kyzyl-Beyit are covered with one of the largest wild walnut forests in Kyrgyzstan. In good years, villagers collect several hundred kilograms per household. "We survive thanks to walnuts and goats," says Ramanov.

Goats from Kyzyl-Beyit are used for the popular Kyrgyz horse game kok-boru, inscribed on the UNESCO list of Intangible Cultural Heritage. Known in nearby Afghanistan as buzkashi, the game centers on horse riders fighting over the headless carcass of a goat. As the game is played all over Kyrgyzstan demand for goats is high. A large animal can cost \$150. From their hundred goats, the Ramanovs can also collect some 50 kilograms of cashmere, which brings in around \$1,600 a year. Poorer households rely on remittances from family members working abroad and material aid from the state.

People keep horses for transportation, but only a few, because fodder would have to be ferried in to support more. There is not enough grass to raise sheep. For cows, one has to bring in hay by ferry.

The woods around Kyzyl-Beyit also full of other species. Rowan tree, or Persian mountain ash (*Sorbus persica* Hedl.), is listed in Kyrgyzstan's Red Book of endangered species. There are wild apple, pear and apricot trees, barberry and peanuts. Scholars from the Academy of Sciences started documenting the local flora. Ramanov invited them, hoping that it will help him solve his main problem: the nearby gold mine.

Gold

Gold was discovered in the vicinity of Kyzyl-Beyit in 1974. However, only in 1987 did serious geological mapping begin. Those efforts were interrupted by the collapse of the Soviet Union and Kyrgyzstan's independence. In the 1990s, under the first president of independent Kyrgyzstan, Askar Akayev, a Chinese company received a license to continue the exploration

work. For many years, nothing happened, and the license passed from company to company. Finally, in 2020, Oriel Gold LCC, another Chinese-owned company, arrived in the region.

“We were told that they’re only taking samples and sending them to China,” says Ramanov. But the villagers report that a processing plant has already been constructed in the mountains above Tokhtazan, a place where they used to graze their livestock.

The Tokhtazan deposit is not the largest gold deposit in Kyrgyzstan. That title belongs to Kumtor, one of the highest elevated open pit mines in the world, where over 300 tons of gold are said to have been depleted since 1996. Tokhtazan is believed to have at least 30 tons gold.

“We cannot prohibit them from mining, but we ask: please refrain from open pit mining. And do not process the ore here, but elsewhere, where it causes less environmental damage,” Ramanov pleads.

The villagers fear that cyanide used in processing gold will spill into the waters that people and their animals drink. In 2022, the Kyrgyz Ministry of Ecology promised that the ore would be processed at a facility in Karabalta, in northern Kyrgyzstan. But it doesn’t seem they will keep their word.

Taking the job of village head in 2015, Ramanov thought he would only have to deal with local issues. But Oriel Gold’s arrival pulled him into big politics.

“Dirty politics,” he stresses.

Invited to a meeting with the investor company in 2020, the villagers were asked to sign an attendance list. Ramanov says that the company took their signature and claimed later that the villagers had signed their agreement to the company’s operations.

When the ferry broke, the investor donated \$4,500 to build a new one. The villagers collected the other half of the necessary funds. “Accepting this money is presented now as a sign of our good will,” Ramanov says as he shakes his head.

When Ramanov appealed to provincial and state authorities to revoke the company’s license or at least guarantee that damage to the environment will be minimized, he heard back: “You signed you agree.”

When he argued that he had evidence that the Chinese investor cut down several hectares of protected rowan trees, he was told: “In our documents they are not listed as endangered.”

The Chinese company says it would be willing to build a road or even an electricity line to the village.

“What’s the sense of such investments, if we’re soon going to drink polluted water?” Ramanov asks.

In Kyrgyz, Kyzyl-Beyit means “red cemetery.”

“Before we die, we would like to live a healthy life here.”

Ramanov hoped to talk to President Sadyr Japarov, who gained popularity as an opposition figure agitating against the mismanagement of the Kumtor gold mine in the 2010s.

But Japarov’s view of environmental activism has changed since he rose to power in 2020 and was elected president in January 2021. In 2022, a teenage blogger was arrested after questioning the legality of the government’s plans to develop iron-ore mining in Jetim-Too (he was tried on charges of calling for mass unrest but acquitted in December 2023). Also in 2022, peaceful protesters opposing a land swap with Uzbekistan involving the Kempir-Abad reservoir were charged with “attempting to violently overthrow the government.” In January 2023, the case was classified, and in April that year new charges added against 26 defendants.

Mining the Tokhtazan deposit will reportedly start this year and the license extends to 2038; eight tons of gold are expected to be extracted. Ramanov appealed to a local court. A preliminary hearing has already taken place in Ak-Jol village. Ramanov is now awaiting a date in the Aksy district.

“I will go to Bishkek if needed, but I’m just a head of a small, isolated village. Without support our chances are low.” Ramanov has received threats from the State Committee for National Security, pushing him to drop his activism. “How am I do it? I’m responsible for this village,” he says.

Tourism

Ramanov’s survival strategy for the community, beyond highlighting its endangered flora and environmental importance, has looked toward emphasizing its culture through tourism. Thanks to financial support from the Korea International Cooperation Agency, new showers and toilets were built, and workshops in community-based tourism organized.

But the first visits were a disappointment.

Even though the village was advertised as a place to “forget the hustle and bustle of the city and feel united with nature,” the tourists appeared unprepared for the extreme reality of remote village life. They turned up their noses to the food, and complained that the solar panels didn’t produce enough electricity for their devices.

“I felt that some tourists should be trained about how not to offend the indigenous population of places like ours,” Ramanov says.

In Kyzyl-Beyit people eat what they produce. If bread, then corn bread. If meat, then goat meat. Butter is mostly home-made, vegetables home-grown. The village diet is simple, and it’s organic.

“This is not a place where you can satisfy your every whim in a short walk to the shop,” Ramanov says. To go shopping one has to cross the reservoir, wave down a bus to Kara-Köl or Tash-Kömür (40 and 46 km away), and do the same back.

Geographical isolation has an upside, however.

“No thief would ever bother to sail across the reservoir,” Ramanov smiles.

For him simple life means freedom, but he understands that the village can attract only tourists who truly want a detox from the madness of modern life. And hardly anyone speaks Russian in Kyzyl-Beyit, let alone English. Children, when they reach school age, move to one of the nearby towns. Ramanov’s wife, with their seven kids, comes to Kyzyl-Beyit only during holidays.

Stormy Waters

The stormy waters of the Kürpsay reservoir are dangerous to sail on. Twenty-five people have drowned since the reservoir was built. Today, at least, they don’t have to take a boat. There is the ferry.

The ferryman, Talant Kozhekeev, lives in a hut between the highway and the reservoir. Every half hour he checks with his binoculars whether passengers are waiting on the opposite shore. In good weather, a voice carries across the water. Most often, it is drowned out by the wind.

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Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan taking action to curb sorcery and charlatanism (EurasiaNet)

[EurasiaNet](#) [5/23/2024 4:14 PM, Staff, 57.6K, Neutral]

Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are Central Asian states with teetering economies. The Economist Intelligence Unit, for instance, says “the risk of sovereign default” in Kyrgyzstan is high, while adding that “poverty, unemployment, austerity, power shortages and political oppression are possible sources of destabilization in 2024-25” in Tajikistan.

Despite the two countries’ myriad economic challenges, lawmakers and law-enforcers in both Central Asian states are making time to crack down on sorcery and fortune-telling.

In Tajikistan, authorities literally went on a witch hunt, resulting in the arrest of more than 50 alleged practitioners of dark arts in the remote Ghafurov District alone, the Asia-Plus news agency reported May 21, citing an Interior Ministry statement. Earlier in May, the government approved amendments that criminalized sorcery, fortune-telling and similar services, characterizing their practitioners as grifters. Prior to the revision, such offenses were treated as administrative offenses.

“Each [of those arrested] provided services to residents of the district and neighboring territories, using various tricks and techniques to make money,” said the Tajik Interior Ministry statement about the security sweep. At least one of those detained is facing a criminal charge of fraud.

In Kyrgyzstan, MPs similarly cracked down on conjuring, adopting amendments to ban public advertising by those professing to be healers and psychics, or anyone else claiming to be in possession of a crystal ball or eye of newt. The ban extends not just to print and broadcast media, but also covers social media. The measure is designed to prevent “unscrupulous citizens” from taking advantage of vulnerable segments of society, said Marlen Mamataliev, one of the sponsors of the amendments.

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Twitter

Afghanistan

Amrullah Saleh

[@AmrullahSaleh2](#)

[5/24/2024 1:11 AM, 1.1M followers, 3 retweets, 33 likes]

Under the Taliban militias smell & culture of Pakistani madrasa system is gripping the higher education environment in Afghanistan.. The cultural unit of @AGTAfghanistan has profiled the leadership of higher education ministry under the Taliban. It has found nothing but half cooked "graduates" from madarasa networks of Pakistan particularly Akora Khatak. Afghanistan is already brain drained and what is in the pipeline isn't brain but venom for for the brains. Read more.

Bilal Sarwary

[@bsarwary](#)

[5/23/2024 8:57 AM, 253.7K followers, 15 retweets, 52 likes]

The Taliban love social media, which may not be a bad thing. However, photoshopping pictures of Mullah Beradar's meeting with the Amir of Qatar and officially sharing them via their foreign ministry undermines their credibility. They could have just said they met the Amir of Qatar. There was no need for poor-quality photoshopping. This, however shows how the Taliban have got their priorities wrong and how they conduct diplomacy during the funeral of a deceased president in Iran. They should rather be mourning the death of their key ally. Honesty and focus on genuine diplomacy could go a long way in building credibility leading up to recognition.

Jahanzeb Wesa

[@Jahanzi12947158](#)

[5/23/2024 12:41 PM, 2.5K followers]

At least 37 female students at a religious school in Yakwlang district of Bamyan province have been poisoned, according to multiple sources. The incident occurred in the Sare Qol area of the district on Tuesday: <https://rukshana.com/en/37-female-students-poisoned-at-religious-school-in-bamyan-cause-remains-unknown>

Jahanzeb Wesa

[@Jahanzi12947158](#)

[5/23/2024 10:32 AM, 2.5K followers]

The Taliban-controlled Examination Authority has announced the date for the nationwide Kankor exam for the year. However, there is no mention of girls participating in this Kankor exam. More than two years Afghan girls banned from education. #LetAfghanGirlsLearn #WomenRights #UN

Pakistan

Shehbaz Sharif

[@CMShehbaz](#)

[5/23/2024 10:33 AM, 6.7M followers, 574 retweets, 1.6K likes]

Honored to meet my dear brother, His Highness @MohamedBinZayed, President of the UAE. Grateful for his warm hospitality and affection towards Pakistan. We had a most productive exchange of views on important aspects of our bilateral cooperation as well as an exchange of views on the regional situation. Grateful to His Highness for UAE's consistent support for Pakistan. We agreed to continue working closely to further strengthen the brotherly and cooperative ties between Pakistan and UAE.

Anas Mallick

[@AnasMallick](#)

[5/23/2024 7:29 AM, 73.4K followers, 25 retweets, 110 likes]

Pakistan's Prime Minister @CMShehbaz to visit China, next month, on a 3 day visit starting 4th of June where he will be meeting Chinese President Xi, Premier and other senior leadership, he is expected sign MoU's advancing CPEC. #Pakistan #China

Hamid Mir

[@HamidMirPAK](#)

[5/23/2024 12:28 PM, 8.5M followers, 185 retweets, 816 likes]

We are not living in Pakistan. We are actually living in censoristan. ANP President Senator @AimalWali claimed that his speech yesterday in the Senate was muted not only on the state Television but some part of his speech was removed from the official record of Senate.

Amnesty International South Asia, Regional Office

[@amnestysasia](#)

[5/24/2024 12:32 AM, 80.6K followers, 492 retweets, 776 likes]

Pakistan: Kashmiri journalist and poet Ahmad Farhad was abducted from his home over a week ago, on 15 May 2024. His whereabouts remain unknown. Ahmad has spoken fearlessly about state oppression and enforced disappearance in the past. #ReleaseAhmadFarhad

Amnesty International South Asia, Regional Office

[@amnestysasia](#)

[5/24/2024 12:32 AM, 80.6K followers, 12 retweets, 18 likes]

Amnesty International demands that information regarding Ahmad's whereabouts be made known, and he be released immediately. The authorities must ensure an effective, prompt, thorough, independent and impartial investigation is conducted into the circumstances of Ahmad's disappearance. #ReleaseAhmadFarhad

Amnesty International South Asia, Regional Office

[@amnestysasia](#)

[5/24/2024 12:32 AM, 80.6K followers, 7 retweets, 13 likes]

Sign our Urgent Action and call on the Government of Pakistan to ensure his immediate release: <https://amnesty.org/en/documents/asa33/8072/2024/en/> #ReleaseAhmadFarhad

India

Narendra Modi

[@narendramodi](#)

[5/23/2024 12:33 AM, 97.9M followers, 1.8K retweets, 7.7K likes]

Sharing my interview with @TheStatesmanLtd on the upcoming polls, our efforts to ensure good governance and the roadmap to further strengthen India's growth trajectory.

<https://thestatesman.com/exclusive-interviews/india-needs-a-strong-government-definitive-vision-pm-modi-1503303229.html>

Narendra Modi

[@narendramodi](#)

[5/23/2024 11:34 AM, 97.9M followers, 9.3K retweets, 27K likes]

A special 'Salaam India' programme with @RajatSharmaLive on @indiatvnews. Do watch.

<https://x.com/i/broadcasts/1rmGPMYVvLmJN>

Narendra Modi

[@narendramodi](#)

[5/23/2024 8:31 AM, 97.9M followers, 3.8K retweets, 12K likes]

Do watch my interview with @TheNewIndian_in where I discuss a range of subjects.

@rohanduaT02 <https://x.com/i/broadcasts/1eaKbgzyEbrGX>

Narendra Modi

[@narendramodi](#)

[5/23/2024 7:29 AM, 97.9M followers, 3.8K retweets, 13K likes]

Exuberant atmosphere at the rally in Patiala! There is great support for the NDA across Punjab.

Vice-President of India

[@VPIndia](#)

[5/23/2024 12:15 PM, 1.5M followers, 27 retweets, 241 likes]

Deeply pained to learn about the loss of lives in the tragic incident at a chemical factory in Thane district of Maharashtra. I express my heartfelt condolences to the bereaved families and pray for speedy recovery of the injured.

Vice-President of India

[@Peter Leonard](#)

[5/23/2024 6:25 AM, 1.5M followers, 3 retweets, 7 likes]

Kyrgyzstan's president records irritated video message to deny Kazakhstan-based blogger's allegation that "famous British Rothschilds family"/British intelligence intend to develop uranium in Issyk-Kul region and cause harm to local residents

Dr. S. Jaishankar

[@DrSJaishankar](#)

[5/23/2024 1:27 PM, 3.1M followers, 424 retweets, 2.7K likes]

The last decade has been truly transformational, not only for lives of so many at home but for the stature of the nation across the world. Prime Minister @narendramodi explains in this 'Salaam India' programme. A #mustwatch for all who want to know what we have achieved and what our plans are for achieving our goal of a Viksit Bharat.

Dr. S. Jaishankar

[@DrSJaishankar](#)

[5/23/2024 12:52 PM, 3.1M followers, 181 retweets, 774 likes]

My interview with @Zakka_Jacob @CNNnews18. <https://x.com/i/broadcasts/1OdJrjWQgVOJX>

Dr. S. Jaishankar

[@DrSJaishankar](#)

[5/23/2024 11:48 AM, 3.1M followers, 106 retweets, 385 likes]

Joined @surjitbhall and Manish Sabharwal for @NDTV's Battleground Finale with @sanjaypugalia. Do watch <https://x.com/i/broadcasts/1ZkKzjmozEyKv>

NSB

MOFA of Nepal

[@MofaNepal](#)

[5/23/2024 10:49 AM, 257.7K followers, 12 retweets, 55 likes]

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs celebrated Foreign Service Day, 2081 in the presence of both serving and retired foreign service officials today. @sewa_lamsal @nksthaprakash @amritrai555

MOFA of Nepal

[@MofaNepal](#)

[5/23/2024 10:49 AM, 257.7K followers, 2 retweets, 5 likes]

Also joined virtually by officials in the Nepali Missions abroad, it was a moment of reunion, celebration, as well as recognition of the veteran diplomats.

Embassy of Nepal, Washington, D.C.

[@nepalembassyusa](#)

[5/23/2024 6:06 PM, 3.3K followers, 1 retweet, 4 likes]

On May 23rd, 2024, Ambassador Sridhar Khatri joined the Vesak Day, also known as Baisakh Poornima, celebrations at the White House together with the Second Gentleman Douglas Emhoff, Ambassadors of Buddhist countries, other dignitaries, and monks from various countries.

Embassy of Nepal, Washington, D.C.

[@nepalembassyusa](#)

[5/23/2024 6:06 PM, 3.3K followers]

On the occasion, the Second Gentleman lit the special lamps to commemorate Lord Buddha's birth, enlightenment and Nirvana. Monks from Theravada, Vajrayana and Mahayana sect of Buddhism prayed separately for the universal peace, love and compassion.

Embassy of Nepal, Washington, D.C.

[@nepalembassyusa](#)

[5/23/2024 6:06 PM, 3.3K followers]

This is the second occasion the Embassy participated in the Vesak Day ceremony at the White House.

Central Asia

Navbahor Imamova

[@Navbahor](#)

[5/23/2024 10:58 AM, 23K followers, 1 retweet]

2023 UZ trade with US consisted of around \$660 mln - \$501 import and \$155 mln export.

Saida Mirziyoyeva

[@SMirziyoyeva](#)

[5/23/2024 11:31 AM, 17.9K followers, 11 retweets, 48 likes]

Today, we met with the EU delegation led by @TerhiHakala the EU Special Representative for Central Asia. We discussed enhancing cooperation between #CA and the #EU promoting cultural exchanges, advancing education, and supporting women's rights.

Shavkat Mirziyoyev's Press-service

[@president_uz](#)

[5/23/2024 1:23 PM, 170.9K followers, 1 retweet, 11 likes]

President Shavkat Mirziyoyev assessed advancements in Uzbekistan's pharmaceutical industry, emphasising its critical role in the country's economy and healthcare infrastructure. This year's projections include ramping up production to 400 million dollars and boosting exports to 200 million dollars. Additionally, there are plans to kickstart 147 projects valued at 2 billion dollars, with 28 set to become operational this year. The localization of 450 new product types is also on the agenda.

Shavkat Mirziyoyev's Press-service

[@president_uz](#)

[5/23/2024 12:01 PM, 170.9K followers, 6 retweets, 13 likes]

President Shavkat #Mirziyoyev reviewed preparations for hosting the Futsal World Cup across Tashkent, Andijan, and Bukhara from September 14 to October 6, anticipating over 30,000 spectators and featuring 24 teams. The briefing included updates on the Olympic Village in Yashnabad, set to accommodate the Youth Asian Games and the State Sports Academy. Plans for Kurash mastery schools and the structured training of athletes for the Paris Olympics were also discussed.

Fran Olmos

[@fran_olmos](#)

[5/23/2024 4:29 PM, 5.3K followers, 3 retweets, 6 likes]

More worrying news for Uzbekistan's historical heritage. Two archaeological sites in the Surkhandarya region were damaged to the tune of \$17 million. The sites are 5-7th century Korabogtepa-1 and 3-1st century BC Haivontepa

{End of Report}

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