The rich poor gap: a disturbing trend
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Cutting Edge is an independent English weekly magazine being published from Lahore. Its founding editor, Dr Niloufer Mahdi, belonged to one of the top industrialist families of Pakistan — Packages Group. She was the daughter of Syed Wajid Ali and granddaughter of Syed Maratib Ali. In a short span of time it has gained popularity and built loyal readership throughout the country. With the contributions by renowned journalists and literary figures and diversity of issues/topics touched by our magazine, we can confidently claim that it has set not only new trends in local journalism, but has emerged as the most read and credible magazine for men, women, students and opinion leaders from different spheres of life. It also circulated in all Foreign Embassies, Libraries, Hospitals, 5 star Hotels and Government/ Private Departments. Its website, weeklycuttingedge.com, is a premier online source for the analysis of current affairs, providing authoritative insight into, and opinion on, national and international news, business, finance, science and technology, as well as an overview of cultural trends. We have commenced its publication, with an aim to bring the best to our readers; similarly, we intend to offer the best in terms of advertising and promotional impact for our valuable advertisers. The 24-page Cutting Edge is divided among different sections, and we have proportionally divided the space in each section for carrying advertisers’ message for the utmost impact.
Muhammad Asim Nisar

With the economy sinking deeper into recession and inflation at an all-time high, income and wealth inequality is also rising exponentially in Pakistan. The statistics and figures relating to wealth inequality in Pakistan are mind boggling.

According to a report by the World Inequality Database, the top 10% of households in Pakistan account for 42% of the country’s income, while the bottom 50% of households account for just 13%. This means that the rich in Pakistan earn more than three times the income of those living on the edge of the poverty line. Another eye-opening report is by Oxfam according to which the top 1% of households in Pakistan hold more wealth than the bottom 70% of the population.

According to social scientists, the widening disparities in wealth and income have far reaching dangerous consequences for the country’s economic and social development. The concentration of economic power in the hands of a tiny elite in Pakistan, coupled with the lack of access to education and job opportunities for a large segment of the population, has led to a situation characterized by the phenomenon of increased crime in urban areas, rising agrarian poverty, deepening social unrest and endless political instability. Those living in poverty are handicapped in a number of ways. They lack access to basic services such as healthcare and education, leading to a perpetual cycle of poverty.

In narrowing the rich-poor gap, Pakistan fares poorly compared to other South Asian nations. Measured in economic terms, the ratio of average income of the poorest 10% of the population to the richest 10% is 6.5. This ratio is 7.5% for Bangladesh, 8.6% for India and 11.1% for Sri Lanka. The ratio of the average incomes of the poorest 20% of the population to the richest 20% is 4.8% for Pakistan and Bangladesh, 5.5% for India and 6.8% for Sri Lanka. Gini coefficient — a measure frequently used to indicate the extent of inequality — is the worst for Pakistan: 29.6 as against 32.4 for Bangladesh, 35.7 for India and 38 for the world as a whole.

The main cause of income and wealth inequality in Pakistan is the concentration of economic power in the hands of the elite classes who control and influence government policies and regulations favoring the interests of the wealthy at the expense of the poor and middle classes. Another contributing factor to wealth inequality in Pakistan is the lack of access to education and job opportunities for a large segment of the population.

Without addressing the problem of income and wealth inequality, we cannot ensure a safe future for our coming generations. This requires removing the root causes of the problem, including increasing access to education and job opportunities for the underprivileged, promoting economic growth and development in disadvantaged areas, and implementing a progressive taxation system aimed at transferring resources from the rich to the poor. There is also an urgent need to ensure greater transparency and accountability in government and the business sectors in order to check corruption and break the concentration of economic power in the hands of a few.

While discussing the issue of income inequality in Pakistan, it is relevant to recall here the words of Nobel laureate Joseph Stiglitz who says that inequality has a number of negative consequences for a society. It can, for example, result in lower social mobility because children from lower-income families are less likely to succeed than those from higher-income families. Furthermore, as those at the bottom of the income distribution become increasingly frustrated with their lack of opportunity and influence, inequality can lead to social upheaval and even revolutions. Inequality, according to Stiglitz, also damages the economy by reducing demand for goods and services and making it more difficult for businesses to grow.

A comprehensive approach to poverty reduction should also include increased investment in education and infrastructure as well as greater access to healthcare and other services for the poor. In the UN Human Development Index Pakistan is placed at the bottom which proves that over the last 70 years, successive governments have pursued policies which have helped to make the rich richer and the poor poorer. But now we have reached a point where we can ignore the danger signals at our own peril.
The Finance Ministry has recently released a report detailing the consolidated federal and provincial fiscal activities for the first quarter (July-September) of the current year. This report paints a mixed picture, revealing some concerning trends and a few signs of potential improvement in Pakistan’s financial landscape.

The Finance Ministry has published a summary of the combined financial activities of the federal and provincial governments during the first quarter of the current year. This report indicates minimal, and in most cases, no improvement when compared to the same period in the previous year. According to the data released, the GDP for the period of July-September 2022 stood at 84,658 billion rupees. However, in the same period in 2023, it increased significantly to 105,817 billion rupees, marking a substantial rise of almost 25 percent. It’s important to note that this increase is in nominal terms and doesn’t account for inflation or the money in circulation. This raises concerns about the reliability of such a comparison, which is crucial for understanding any improvements or setbacks in key macroeconomic indicators at this stage.

Nevertheless, certain key indicators experienced changes during the first quarter of this year when compared to the corresponding period of the previous year as a percentage of GDP. Mark-up payments increased to 1.3 percent of GDP, up from 1.1 percent of GDP. Non-tax revenue rose to 0.4 percent of GDP, compared to 0.3 percent, reflecting a heavier reliance on the petroleum levy budgeted for the current year. This levy is, in essence, an indirect tax but is categorized under non-tax revenue due to the provisions of the National Finance Commission (NFC) award, despite the Auditor General’s recommendation that it be classified as an indirect tax, specifically a sales tax.

The budget deficit improved from negative 1 percent of GDP in the first quarter of the previous year to negative 0.9 percent in the corresponding period this year. This decline is attributed to a rise in total revenue, which reached 2.5 percent of GDP in the first quarter of 2023, compared to 2.4 percent in the same period of the previous year. Additionally, defence spending decreased to 0.3 percent in 2023, down from 0.4 percent the previous year. The primary balance was 0.2 percent in 2022 but increased to 0.4 percent in the first quarter of the current year.

Some indicators remained unchanged. Current expenditure remained at 3 percent of GDP, even though it has increased significantly in total terms. Tax revenue remained the same in the first quarters of 2022 and 2023 at 2.1 percent of GDP. Development expenditure and net lending remained constant at 0.3 percent. This expenditure plays a vital role in the country’s growth, particularly since government borrowing has been crowding out private sector borrowing, resulting in a decline in output.

One aspect that demands explanation is the substantial increase in the statistical discrepancy between the first quarters of 2022 and 2023, soaring from 78,203 million rupees to 193,563 million rupees, a rise of 147.3 percent. It’s worth noting that the former finance minister, Ishaq Dar, had a propensity for relying on statistical discrepancies, which are defined as untraceable expenses. These discrepancies reached 320 billion rupees in July-December 2022, and they were acknowledged by the Ministry of Finance.

In the current year, there is also a significant expected increase in the statistical discrepancy, reflecting Dar’s background in accounting. For provincial governments, the statistical discrepancy for July-September 2022 was negative 33,609 million rupees, but in the corresponding period this year, it rose to 120,032 million rupees.

The report also highlights concerning overspending by the Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) governments. The former exceeded its budgeted spending by over Rs 28 billion. However, thanks to surpluses generated by the Sindh and Balochistan governments, the federal government managed to achieve a primary surplus of Rs 417 billion, not only meeting but exceeding the IMF’s conditions. The caretaker government may be contemplating unconventional policies within their expanded terms of reference but has yet to implement them. Up to this point, the policies of the past continue to be evident in the summary of consolidated federal and provincial fiscal operations for the first quarter of the current year. This includes increased borrowing and reduced development expenditure, creating fiscal space to fund current expenses.

There is still a heavy reliance on crackdowns in various markets, such as foreign currency and staple food items, as well as on combating electricity theft. However, without accompanying appropriate macroeconomic policies, the long-term effectiveness of these measures may be limited and may erode over time.

Overall, the government has shown its determination to reduce subsidies and significantly cut development expenditure on provincial public sector projects. With a substantial 362 percent increase in the collection of petroleum levy, it has been able to achieve improved performance. However, vigilance will be required to prevent the past trend of first-quarter surpluses turning into second-quarter deficits.

As we scrutinize Pakistan’s fiscal performance in the first quarter of the year, it becomes evident that challenges persist, from overspending by certain provincial governments to the anticipated rise in statistical discrepancies. While there are encouraging signs such as a primary surplus and increased revenue collection from petroleum levy, it is essential for the government to remain vigilant and implement effective macroeconomic policies. The transition from first-quarter surpluses to second-quarter deficits must be averted. These early fiscal indicators underscore the need for a comprehensive and sustainable financial strategy to steer Pakistan toward economic stability and growth.
Unveiling the ongoing excesses

Muhammad Hassan

In a recurring pattern, yet another comprehensive study has brought to light the continued lavish allocation of trillions of rupees by the Pakistani government towards the remuneration and pensions of unproductive public servants. This study prompts a vital question: Will the public sector ever willingly adopt reforms aimed at curtailing its own privileges and perks?

A recent report from the Pakistan Institute of Development Economics (PIDE) exposes the staggering expenditure by the federal government, revealing a stark reality. It delves into the allocation of more than Rs 8 trillion, covering the salaries of 1.92 million employees, pension provisions, and a bewildering array of over 60 benefits and privileges. Furthermore, this expenditure remains shrouded in obscurity, with minimal insight into the value, outcomes, or impact on taxpayers.

Once again, the study has shed light on the government’s annual allocation of trillions of rupees toward the salaries and pensions of unproductive public servants. This raises a critical question: Will the public sector ever embrace reforms that reduce its own privileges and perks?

A report conducted by a five-member team from the Pakistan Institute of Development Economics (PIDE), a government-run institution, reveals that the federal government expends more than Rs 8 trillion on remunerating 1.92 million employees, funding pensions, and offering over 60 different types of benefits and privileges. Even more concerning is the lack of transparency regarding the impact and contributions of these public servants to the taxpayers.

Unsurprisingly, the judiciary and civil service, particularly the Pakistan Administrative Services (formerly DMG), are the primary beneficiaries of these benefits. The report highlights their tendency to manipulate these privileges instead of allowing professionals from other cadres to excel and deliver results for the taxpayers.

While this information is not groundbreaking, it quantifies the significant drain of state funds into this system, confirming what many already know: public servants receive substantial non-monetary benefits that do not appear on their paychecks.

This situation underscores two unresolved issues. First, the government sector, particularly the bureaucracy, remains mired in inefficiency and corruption, with politicians often appointing their favorites without taxpayer input, perpetuating this costly status quo.

Second, the country faces a severe current account crisis, yet it continues to squander resources on unproductive sectors under its control. This flagrant misuse of funds will likely garner international attention, especially from entities providing high-interest loans to Pakistan.

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In light of the findings, it becomes evident that two pressing issues remain unaddressed. First, the government sector, notably the bureaucracy, is plagued by inefficiency and corruption, with political favoritism dictating appointments and perpetuating an expensive status quo. Second, the current account crisis is compounded by the wanton expenditure on unproductive sectors under government control, attracting international scrutiny.

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) has offered recommendations to streamline the tax system and alleviate the burden on the less fortunate. However, the government’s reluctance to act may change if future loans are tied to these reforms.

It appears that external pressure may be the catalyst required to initiate the long-overdue reforms in public sector compensation. In any scenario, there is no justification for such reckless spending, especially when the current account is in dire straits. Failure to address these issues means that honest taxpayers will continue to bear the brunt of others’ excesses, corruption, theft, and incompetence.

It is imperative that the government takes meaningful steps to rectify this situation and uphold the trust and financial stability of the nation.
A murky political scene

Nasim Ahmed

Ahead of next elections, former political allies are at loggerheads, accusing one another of foul play. For the past several weeks, Bilawal Bhutto and other PPP leaders have repeatedly complained of lack of a level playing field and charged that the PML-N is being unduly favoured by the incumbent government.

With their common rival — the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) — seemingly out of the field, the PML-N and PPP have reverted to their traditional rivalry after remaining allies during the last PDM government’s tenure. The PPP has also expressed its concerns over bids to delay elections — a stance that has put it at odds with its former allies — JUI-F and PML-N. Since some former bureaucrats close to the Sharif brothers have been appointed to the caretaker federal cabinet, and the PML-N has maintained an ambiguous silence on the issue of holding elections within 90 days after the dissolution of the assemblies, the PPP thinks that their erstwhile allies are hands in glove with the Establishment.

During the CEC meeting held in Lahore last week, some PPP members accused the PML-N of becoming a ‘darling of the powers that be’ and conspiring to capture power by hook or crook. On the other hand, the JUI-F has also demanded a level playing field for all stakeholders, including the PTI.

In many of his public statements, PPP chairperson Bilawal Bhutto has reiterated his demand for a level playing field in the lead-up to elections, saying the Election Commission of Pakistan instead of favouring a particular political party should keep the interests of the whole nation in mind. He has also alleged that development projects in Sindh have been put on hold to damage his party. He has also indicated that talks with the PTI ahead of elections were possible. He made these comments during his visit to Jacobabad. The PPP chairperson said his party wanted polls on time as per constitutional provisions.

PPP leader Nadeem Afzal Chan voiced similar concerns recently, underlining the need for a level playing field for all parties. He also had a dig at the Sharifs saying they were hiding behind institutions and had already abandoned their “vote ko izzat do” narrative for political motives.

As of now, the PML-N has at least five pro-Sharif members in the federal government, including Fawad Hasan Fawad, Ahad Cheema and Tauqeer Shah. PPP leaders have also questioned some decisions of caretaker Punjab Chief Minister Mohsin Naqvi. “Mohsin Naqvi is not our man. He is with those who had placed him on the chair of the CM,” PPP senior leader Khursheed Shah said in a media talk.

The PML-N leadership has, however, dismissed PPP’s criticism as being nothing more than a political stunt. In the opinion of some PML-N leaders, including Rana Sanaullah, the PPP was speaking against the PML-N to fulfil its political ambitions in Punjab. PML-N’s Khawaja Saad Rafique in a Twitter message criticised Bilawal Bhutto, saying the reactivity, saying “they are losing their trust.”

According to the latest media reports, PPP leader Asif Zardari has approached the powers that be to convey the ‘serious concerns’ expressed by his party over the preferential treatment being meted out to the PML-N by the caretaker governments in Punjab and Centre. “Zardari sahib has held some meetings regarding the level playing field and will soon brief the party on it,” PPP leader Qamar Zaman Kaira told the media a few days ago. Regarding delay in announcement of the polls date, it is said that the PPP would wait till November 30 and might approach the Supreme Court if the date was not announced by the ECP by then.

In the midst of the ongoing controversy, there has been some talk of electoral alliances among political parties but the picture is not yet clear. The PML-N has its base in Punjab but it is seeking seat adjustments with parties in Sindh. The JUI-F is also in contact with the MQM in Karachi and some other parts of Sindh, while there are chances of seat adjustments with the PML-N and Qaumi Watan Party, led by Aftab Sherpao in some parts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. After detailed consultations, the Muttahida Qaumi Movement-Pakistan (MQM-P) and the JUI-F agreed to work together and cooperate with each other as part of measures to forge an anti-PPP alliance to free the province from what they called feudal domination. All in all, it is a murky political scene, full of doubts and uncertainties about the future.
Impressive economic performance: Will it endure?

Shahid Hussain

The remarkable economic performance observed in recent times has generated considerable interest and optimism. However, this success has inevitably given rise to important questions concerning its potential for long-term sustainability. While economic achievements can be cause for celebration, understanding the factors underpinning this performance and evaluating whether they can be maintained is crucial for informed decision-making and forecasting. In this context, it becomes imperative to delve deeper into the current economic landscape, identify the drivers of this impressive growth, and assess the challenges and opportunities that may influence its endurance in the future.

In the second quarter of 2023, Pakistan’s economic landscape presents a mix of achievements and challenges. The government appears to have made significant strides in meeting its fiscal and revenue targets, garnering international confidence in the process. However, a closer examination reveals potential pitfalls and political implications, urging us to consider the sustainability of these outcomes.

Pakistan appears to have outperformed its initial economic goals for the July–September quarter. The interim government seems poised to secure a $710 million IMF tranche in December. However, the road ahead will present challenges, as the IMF review team is suggested to demand additional, possibly unpopular, targets for the ongoing quarter. The results released by the finance ministry paint an optimistic picture. With a fiscal deficit of just 0.9 percent of GDP in July–September, a subtle yet significant improvement from the previous year’s 1 percent, the country appears to be making positive economic strides.

This success has also allowed Pakistan to surpass another target: achieving a primary surplus of Rs417 billion, exceeding the IMF’s requirements. Nevertheless, some economic experts express doubts about the sustainability of the outcomes. Upon closer examination, the experts identify two primary factors contributing to the attainment of the fiscal deficit target: substantial cash surpluses from Balochistan and Sindh and a significant increase in the petroleum development levy during the July–September quarter.

Other fiscal adjustments include substantial cuts in federal subsidies and developmental spending. While these achievements may appease the IMF, they are likely to have political repercussions. The surge in the petroleum levy will directly impact provincial finances derived from the federal divisible pool, and the introduction of higher fixed monthly charges on gas bills challenges the spirit of federal devolution. These measures could generate billions for the federal government but come with potential political costs.

However, political parties, particularly the PPP, the main advocate of provincial autonomy, have remained silent on these developments. Regional fiscal dynamics also warrant attention. During the rule of the Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM) led-government, finance ministers from Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa expressed concerns about achieving cash surpluses under the IMF agreement. The top leaders of the PDM and the PPP, which was part of the coalition government but not the multi-party alliance, publicly suggested filing cases against those finance ministers for their statements.

However, in the July–September quarter, Punjab exceeded its expenses by Rs28.6 billion, and KP by Rs10.31 billion, while Balochistan and Sindh maintained commendable cash surpluses. Such fiscal disparities amidst upcoming elections raise suspicions, suggesting potential political maneuvering. The silence of the beneficiaries in response to these peculiar developments is conspicuous.

Another significant challenge was keeping the circular debt below the agreed limit with the IMF. In July–September, it reached Rs2.54 billion, which remained within the limit. It is anticipated that the overall circular debt will decrease further during this quarter. Moreover, there were no additional grants in the first quarter, and the government’s salary bill increased at a rate lower than inflation. Achieving these targets indicates that the finance and energy ministries are likely content with their performance.

On the revenue front, the government successfully met both its tax and non-tax targets in the July–September quarter. Total revenue for this period reached Rs2.68 trillion, equivalent to 2.5 percent of the GDP. Within this, tax revenue amounted to Rs2.21 trillion (2.1 percent of GDP), representing a slight improvement from the previous year’s Rs1.78 trillion (2.1 percent of GDP). Non-tax revenue in the first quarter amounted to Rs468.81 billion (0.4 percent of GDP), a notable increase from Rs234.9 billion (0.3 percent) in the same period last year. The Federal Board of Revenue (FBR) also exceeded its revenue target by collecting Rs2.04 trillion in the first quarter, surpassing the goal of Rs1.98 trillion. Furthermore, the pending refund ceiling was reduced from Rs247 billion to Rs198.5 billion.

All structural objectives were successfully achieved, with no tax amnesty, preferential tax treatment, or exemptions. Additionally, the processing time for imports and exports was reduced to 32.8 hours from 98 hours, and banks gained access to civil workers’ asset declarations. The FBR is confident that the upcoming IMF review will reflect positively on tax collection.

The forthcoming monetary policy review by the central bank is expected to confirm compliance with the IMF’s conditions. The State Bank of Pakistan (SBP) has also expressed confidence in meeting all other IMF conditions, including targets for the forward book, net international reserves, and net domestic assets. A recent crackdown on exchange rate manipulators and illicit trades has further reinforced this influence, resulting in the stabilization of the rupee at around Rs277 per dollar, down from a peak of Rs335 in September. This has immediately provided relief, particularly through a significant reduction in fuel prices.

To sustain these fiscal achievements, policymakers must address the challenge of monitoring cash repositories such as bank lockers, which are estimated to hold around $10 billion. Currently, there is no law in Pakistan that requires locker holders to declare the assets stored within. Policymakers are also considering the gradual phasing out of the Rs5,000 banknote. However, implementing these measures is expected to be challenging, a reflection of the broader complexity involved in fixing the entire economy.

While Pakistan’s recent economic accomplishments, including revenue surpassing targets and improved currency stability, are commendable, policymakers face crucial challenges ahead. Ensuring the continuity of fiscal successes demands vigilance over unregulated cash repositories and potential currency reforms. The true test lies in the ability to navigate these hurdles and sustain the positive momentum in the broader context of fixing the country’s entire economic framework.
The shifting global power dynamics

Raza Khan

Since February 2022, when Russia launched a full-scale attack on its neighboring Ukraine, to the surprising attacks by the Palestinian armed resistance group, Hamas, on Israel in early October 2023, and the massive response by Tel Aviv to the attacks, resulting in the deaths of thousands of Palestinians and Israelis, international power dynamics have undergone significant changes.

In the case of Russia’s attack on Ukraine, Russia aimed to demonstrate its superpower status and discourage Ukraine, which was once part of the Soviet Union dominated by Russia, from moving closer to the United States-led North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and posing a strategic threat to Moscow. Meanwhile, the United States has been attempting to expand NATO eastwards, including Ukraine, to assert its dominance alongside its allies in the world.

In the case of the Hamas attack on Israel, a non-state actor sought to challenge the existence of a state created in 1948, leading to a fierce Israeli response.

It is essential to understand that since the end of the Cold War, many major powers have shifted their foreign policies towards geo-economics, focusing on economic tools like trade, aid, and investment to achieve geopolitical objectives. This approach involves using economic means to influence the behavior and policies of other states, as well as using geopolitical tools such as war, diplomacy, and border management to attain economic goals, such as GDP growth and improving living conditions.

China is a prominent advocate of this geo-economic approach, exemplified by initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which aims to economically integrate around 60 countries across the Afro-Eurasian landmass. China’s focus on geo-economics positions it as a significant global power and a potential center of influence in the world.

In contrast, Russia remains deeply involved in traditional geopolitics, possibly due to President Vladimir Putin’s long-standing leadership. Rather than prioritizing economic improvement, Moscow has been focused on expanding its territory, particularly by maintaining control over Crimea, which historically belongs to Ukraine. While Russia may have some geo-economic motives, its strategy is predominantly geostrategic.

Following the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union, the world transitioned into a unipolar system with the United States as the dominant player in international politics. This dominance had both advantages and disadvantages. During this period, the most significant challenge to U.S. power came from non-state actors, particularly Muslim militant organizations like Al Qaeda. In response to the September 11, 2001, attack on American soil, the U.S. initiated the Global War on Terror against these organizations, primarily in Afghanistan, the Middle East, and South Asia.

The Global War on Terror officially concluded after nearly two decades, as the U.S. was unable to defeat the Afghan Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan and withdrew in August 2021. Peace talks with the Afghan Taliban had been ongoing for years, leading to a historic deal between the two sides in February 2020. Notably, the Afghan Taliban started as non-state actors but eventually established themselves as a state actor in Afghanistan through the use of force.

Significantly, the transformation of non-state Taliban militias into state actors provided sanctuaries, recruitment grounds, and launching platforms for non-state global militant organizations like Al Qaeda, as well as various Central Asian and South Asian militant and terrorist groups. Their activities precipitated the Global War on Terror. This underscores the danger posed by ruthless non-state actors, even when they evolve into state actors, to both regional and global stability. For example, the Islamic State, which emerged suddenly in 2014 and asserted control over large areas in Iraq and Syria, declaring it as an Islamic Caliphate, profoundly disrupted international peace and stability.

Notably, the American revolutionaries in the late 18th century, led by figures like George Washington, acted as armed militias. However, the difference between today’s non-state actors and those of the past is that the latter were often motivated by articulate intellectual movements. The American Revolution had its intellectual underpinnings in the founding fathers, while the French Revolution had intellectual leaders like Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Voltaire, and Montesquieu.

Regarding the threat posed by non-state militant organizations to U.S. power and dominance in the post-Cold War era, it has been both ideological (though inarticulate) and financial. Non-state actors, given their limited resources compared to state actors, could not present a substantial financial threat, unlike the Soviet Union during the Cold War. Consequently, the United States has largely been successful in countering the threat from non-state actors.

On the other hand, the international political landscape has been gradually shifting toward a new Cold War scenario, primarily due to China’s rise as a new global power center. China has also adopted soft economic expansionist policies, exemplified by President Xi Jinping’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Through this initiative, as previously mentioned, China aims to economically integrate the Afro-Eurasian landmass, with Beijing at its core, to maximize its benefits. As a result, American global dominance is once again challenged, primarily by state actors, with China posing the most significant threat. The growing trade tensions between China and the United States, occasional confrontations in the South China Sea, and disputes over Taiwan and Hong Kong are symptomatic of this new Cold War.

In this global context, India, aspiring to be another power center, aligns itself with the United States because China, its neighbor, not only represents a strategic rival to Washington but also a potential economic adversary. Russia, as the successor state to the Soviet Union, closely observes the situation and refrains from taking sides, seeking to maximize its gains from the rivalry between the United States and China. Small countries like Pakistan, Iran, Egypt, and Turkey are aligning themselves with one side or the other based on their economic and security needs.

The global power dynamics have shifted significantly, with China emerging as a prominent power center, presenting both opportunities and challenges. In contrast, the United States, after an unsuccessful 20-year occupation of Afghanistan, has withdrawn from the country. Policymakers must tread cautiously to seize opportunities while safeguarding the nation from the repercussions of the situation.
Cultivating sunflower: A solution to Pakistan's oilseed production dilemma

Dr. Zaheer Ahmad Babar

Pakistan’s oilseed production is facing numerous challenges, with soybean cultivation remaining at low levels due to harsh climate conditions and limited seed varieties. As a result, experts in the agricultural field are advocating for an alternative—sunflower cultivation. However, the transition to sunflower as a cash crop requires special efforts from both federal and provincial governments.

Typically, farmers prefer Rabi crops like wheat over oilseeds, even though sunflower and soybeans, which can be grown during the Kharif season, hold great potential. Experts emphasize the critical need for change, warning that food security in Pakistan is at risk if the country continues cultivating less suitable crops. In this context, it’s essential to incentivize sunflower production and take concrete steps to bridge the gap between local production and soaring import demands.

The term ‘cash crop’ is commonly associated with cotton farming in Pakistan, but it holds a broader significance in the global agricultural sector. According to agronomists, any crop, whether it’s a grain, legume, fruit, or another plant, grown not for consumption by the farmers but specifically for sale to generate profit, falls under the category of ‘cash crops.’ Some crops exhibit higher density and productivity than others, making them attractive choices for farmers. These crops offer substantial returns on investment, requiring relatively small plots of land to yield significant results.

Among the local agricultural community, there’s a belief that oil-producing plants, such as sunflowers, can be more profitable than any other cash crop, including cotton, in Pakistan. This is due to their essential role in global trade and contemporary food consumption.

A research study conducted by the Agricultural Research Institute in Tarnab, Peshawar, reveals that sunflower cultivation as a cash crop has witnessed a significant increase over the past two decades. The study aimed to analyze trends in sunflower acreage, production, and trade patterns while identifying its potential to enhance oilseed production in the country. It also aimed to pinpoint factors and obstacles contributing to fluctuations in sunflower acreage and production.

The study’s findings indicate that sunflower crops have gained popularity among farmers in Pakistan due to their last growth and the ability to be planted between regular planting seasons. They also thrive in diverse soil conditions and produce high yields. With a substantial demand for sunflower oil in Pakistan, this crop has become a reliable source of income for farmers, contributing to sustainable community growth. Remarkably, sunflowers mature in just three months.

Given the rapidly growing population and changing climate patterns, the need for altering crop patterns has become increasingly critical. Despite Pakistan’s agricultural nature, food imports surged by 82 percent in August 2021 compared to the previous year, as reported by the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics. Official data indicated a nearly 40 percent year-on-year increase in ghee and cooking oil prices in September 2021. Notably, palm oil imports, a major component of food imports, more than doubled in dollar value in August 2021 compared to 2020. This oil, which averages around $2 billion in imports annually, is a staple sourced from Malaysia and Indonesia, both countries with trade agreements with Pakistan. During the first half of 2021, edible oil prices reached multi-year highs, rising by as much as 62 percent. A combination of adverse weather conditions in key producing countries and the growing use of biofuels had strained supplies.

The declining oilseed production in Pakistan is a cause for concern, primarily due to the decrease in cotton production, which leads to reduced cottonseed availability. In the past, the federal and provincial governments initiated oilseed promotion efforts, offering growers a subsidy of Rs. 5,000 per acre for planting up to 20 acres of canola and sunflower. While this initiative led to some increased planting, it didn’t bring a substantial breakthrough, largely due to competition from major crops like wheat and sugarcane, which benefit from support prices. This situation should raise alarm bells for relevant government departments.

Agricultural experts point out that soybean production remains at a very low level in Pakistan, primarily due to harsh summer conditions and a lack of suitable seed varieties for cultivation. In this scenario, those involved in agriculture need to explore alternatives, with sunflower emerging as a top contender in Pakistan.

However, both federal and provincial governments must implement specific measures to encourage farmers to adopt sunflower as a ‘cash crop.’ Most oilseeds are typically Rabi crops, leading farmers to prioritize wheat over oilseeds. Even for sunflower and soybeans, which can be grown during the Kharif season, farmers often find cotton, rice, corn, and sugarcane more financially appealing.

Imran Nasrullah, Chief Executive Officer/Country Lead of Cargill Pakistan, warns that Pakistan’s food security situation will deteriorate if the country continues to cultivate less suitable crops. Imran, who holds an MBA from Imperial College London and is a Fellow of the Institute of Chartered Accountants in England, highlights that Pakistan is among the largest importers of soybeans, palm oil, and various other food ingredients. Palm oil, in particular, ranks as one of Pakistan’s most significant imports. He points out that Pakistan produces approximately 0.7 million tons of oilseeds, including canola, rapeseeds, mustard seeds, sunflower, sesame, but not cottonseed. However, the country imports 3.5 million tons of oilseeds, while the total requirement stands at 4.2 million tons. This gap is widening due to population growth and a 2 to 2.5 percent annual increase in meat consumption. Imran believes that the government needs to incentivize oilseeds production, particularly sunflower, which is well-suited to the local climate and soils.

Muhammad Aftab, Chief Scientist at the Oilseed Research Institute in Faisalabad, underscores the significance of sunflower as one of the world’s most important oilseed crops and the third most important in Pakistan after cotton, rapeseed, and mustard. He reveals that Pakistan only produces 18 percent of its required edible oil locally, while the rest is imported. Sunflower contributes 11 percent to the local oil production. A government subsidy program has been initiated to boost sunflower production in Pakistan. Sunflower seeds contain 40 percent oil and are rich in vitamins A, B, and K. Sunflower oil is considered heart-healthy as it contains 90 percent unsaturated fatty acids, including 30 percent monounsaturated Omega-9 and 59 percent polyunsaturated Omega-6. The crop has a short growth period (100-120 days), can be grown twice a year, and can fit well into various crop rotations.

Aftab urges farmers to maximize sunflower cultivation, suggesting that local sunflower planting could significantly reduce the country’s annual import bill, which currently amounts to about Rs300 billion. The Agriculture Department has divided Punjab into three zones for sunflower cultivation, with specific timelines for each region. He recommends that farmers in Dera Ghazi Khan and Rajanpur start cultivating sunflower in the last week of December, completing it by January 31. Meanwhile, those in Bahawalpur, Rahim Yar Khan, Khanewal, Multan, Muzaffargarh, Layyah, Lodhran, Bhakkar, Vehari, and Bahawalnagar should undertake cultivation from January 1 to January 31. Similarly, farmers in Faisalabad, Mianwali, Sargodha, Khushab, Jhang, Sahiwal, Okara, Sialkot, Gujranwala, Lahore, Mandi...
In dehumanising the Palestinians, Biden has surpassed Trump

Haidar Eid

When Joe Biden won the presidential election in the United States three years ago, there were some hopes within the pro-Palestinian movement that there would be a positive change in US policy on Palestine. Biden’s predecessor, Donald Trump, had headed a fascist administration that had fully adopted the programme and vision of Israel’s far right. It was believed to be the worst American government for Palestinians... until now.

Today, Biden has fully embraced Israel’s genocidal aggression on Gaza, approving of the complete blockade that has cut off electricity, water, food, and medicine, and justifying the daily slaughter of hundreds of Palestinian civilians.

He has covered up Israel’s war crimes and parroted Israeli propaganda, including the claim that its army did not target al-Ahli Arab Hospital, where more than 470 Palestinians were killed. He even questioned the death toll in Gaza, atrociously implying that Palestinians are lying. Biden has truly surpassed Trump in the fascist dehumanisation of Palestinians.

But let us be realistic here. The US has never been an honest broker in what it calls “the Palestinian-Israeli conflict”. On the contrary, it has always maintained pro-Israel policies and completely disregarded the fundamental rights of the Palestinian people.

Washington has never tried to exercise its leverage to make any substantial progress towards achieving peace based on justice. Meanwhile, it has showered Israel with military aid to help its army strengthen its grip on occupied Palestine. Even the administration of US President Barack Obama, thought to be the most “progressive” American government headed by a person of colour, gave Israel a $38bn in military assistance package, the largest in US history.

Unconditional support for Israel has been a steady feature on both sides of the political divide in the US. During every presidential election season, there has always been a vicious competition between candidates to prove their “pro-Israel” credentials.

Even when US administrations have attempted to appear to attend to Palestinian demands and needs, they have never done so in the Palestinian interest. The Biden administration, for example, reversed its predecessor’s decision to deny funds to the Palestinian Authority, close the Palestinian mission in Washington and fund the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA). But it did that with the aim of sustaining a multi-tiered system of oppression created by the Oslo Accords to relieve Israel of its responsibility under international law to provide for the Palestinian population it occupies.

That the life and wellbeing of Palestinians is none of its concern was also made clear by the Biden administration’s decision to get directly involved in the unfolding genocide by financing it, arming apartheid Israel, vetoing any UN Security Council resolution calling for a ceasefire, and even sending aircraft carriers to the region.

The US position vis-a-vis the Palestinians is, unsurprisingly, reminiscent of the attitude of its first European settlers towards the Native Americans. The US does not care about the Palestinians. They are not seen as relevant to US foreign policy. Disturbing a core US alliance with the only nuclear power in the Middle East is not in the cards, certainly not over some “sordid little human rights issue”. The US does not imagine that Palestinians will ever get justice on their own terms.

The US does not care about the Palestinian people. They are only acknowledged as “troublemakers”. Hence, the US has never aimed to “solve” the “Palestinian problem”, but to get it out of the way.

So, while the US does realise that the “Palestinian problem” is destabilising the region, this is, in the view of its political elite, only because the Palestinians just won’t shut up and go away – in much the same way that Native Americans, Aboriginals, and other native nations were seen as a “problem” by European settler colonialists.

The US view is that Palestinians are fundamentally a pesky little native population that will not accept “reality” (colonisation) quietly so that the US-Israeli alliance can proceed undisturbed. That is why support for the genocide of the Palestinians is an acceptable policy in Washington. After all, the American nation was itself founded on the genocide of a native population.

Undeniably, the US is entirely pragmatic about its foreign policy interests and pursuits. It does not think it needs the Palestinians who are, after all, poor, weak and geographically microscopic. Until the US is forced to see the situation differently, it will continue to disregard the Palestinian rights to life, justice and freedom.

Shifting the US policy towards Palestine requires two things: changing the international environment that shapes and steers US foreign policy options and prerogatives; and bringing pressure on the US government from within by strategically mobilising those pressure groups that have real leverage over the two main political parties.

As for us, the Palestinians, like any other people suffering from colonialism, occupation and apartheid, we should send a strong message to the colonialists, headed by the US, that the rules of the game have changed, and that we will return to the negotiating table only after apartheid Israel abides by international law.

First, Israel must withdraw its troops from the lands it occupied in 1967; second, it must revoke all laws discriminating against the native Palestinian population, including the Nation-State Law; and third, it must implement United Nations Resolution 194 allowing for the return of Palestinian refugees. Israel is not expected to respond positively, as it has never done to these lawful demands. But neither did the apartheid regime of South Africa until the international community intervened and imposed sanctions against it and boycotted it.
Israel is forcibly disappearing Gaza

Belén Fernández

On October 28, Israeli military spokesperson Daniel Hagari took to X – the platform formerly known as Twitter – with an “urgent message” for the residents of the Gaza Strip. For their “immediate safety”, Hagari said in a message entirely in English, residents of northern Gaza and Gaza City were urged to “temporarily relocate south”.

The performance was grotesquely preposterous for a variety of reasons, not least of them that English is the official language of neither Israel nor Palestine – which suggests that the intended audience was not, in fact, the population whose “immediate safety” was supposedly of such concern to Hagari & Co.

Indeed, if safety were actually a concern, the Israeli army would not have slaughtered more than 9,000 Palestinians in three weeks, among them more than 3,000 children. Nor would Israel have continued to carpet-bomb both northern and southern Gaza following its previous warning to Palestinians in the north of the enclave to evacuate south.

Just as critically, it is not clear how anyone in Gaza was supposed to see this “urgent message” from Hagari given the total communications blackout that Israel had orchestrated the day before, leaving the territory without telephone or internet service. Anyway, the evacuation warning was presumably appreciated by the section of the online anglophone world that insists on believing that Israel tries really hard to keep the internet off in Gaza than to, say, stop funding Israel’s genocide of Palestinians.

The temporary blackout was, however, long enough to induce an all-penetrating sense of helplessness in a whole lot of people worldwide, particularly those with family in Gaza. The torturous uncertainty was captured in many social media posts such as this one from my Facebook friend Majed Abusalama: “Mama, Baba, Mohammed, Naya, Eliya, Asmaa and the rest are may be killed or alive.”

Majed, an Al Jazeera contributor who hails from Gaza’s Jabalia refugee camp but currently resides in Berlin, is himself a survivor of repeated Israeli aggression against Gaza, including having his school hit with illegal white phosphorus munitions. Eliya is his six-year-old niece; his other niece Naya is just two months old, meaning she has spent nearly half of her life under Israeli bombs.

When my father died of cancer in August of this year, Majed sent me a moving note expressing his heartfelt condolences and his own fear of losing his parents – a distinctly constant possibility given their place of residence. Once during an Israeli bombardment, he said, his mother had phoned him from Gaza to say goodbye.

Now, of course, the phone lines were down, and I found myself manically checking Majed’s Facebook page to see if any news had managed to pierce the void. He had already lost numerous relatives and friends to the Israeli onslaught, but his immediate family had thus far survived. When communications were partially restored on Sunday, they were still among the living – although many Palestinians were not.

The 36-hour blackout likely proved especially deadly as it hindered the work of rescue teams, who could not be contacted to extricate folks from the rubble and otherwise respond to those in need. Meanwhile, the communications shutdown naturally only further inhibited the efforts of journalists and Gaza residents – who already contend on a daily basis with shaky phone and internet service – to transmit the truth of a genocide happening in real time.

Communications in the Gaza Strip have since been partially restored, a turn of events that The Wall Street Journal attributes to the United States’ pressure on Israel. To be sure, it is far more ethically important to keep the internet off in Gaza than to, say, stop funding Israel’s genocide of Palestinians.

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When my father died of cancer in August
Arab leaders must walk the talk on Palestine

Marwan Bishara

The response of Arab governments to Israel’s war on Gaza, like their response to its previous four wars on the besieged Palestinian enclave, has been feeble and flimsy, to say the least. But unlike Israel’s past assaults, this unravelling genocide – if not stopped – will have dangerous repercussions for the entire Arab world.

Caught by surprise, Arab leaders sprung into action only after the Arab public made it clear it would not tolerate Israeli atrocities against Gaza’s 2.3 million Palestinians. Although Palestine has been and remains the foremost Arab issue, speaking up is all they have done, mostly in babble and cliches.

In their Arab League meeting in Cairo on October 11, Arab foreign ministers condemned the killing and targeting of civilians “on both sides”, equating the occupied and the occupiers, a Palestinian resistance group and the Israeli occupation army. They spoke vaguely about the need for peace, as Israel set off to re-enact the 1948 Nakba (catastrophe) with another round of violent ethnic cleansing.

The bombing of al-Ahli hospital on October 17, in which some 470 Palestinians were massacred, enraged the Arab and international public, forcing the Arab regimes to react with a bit more resolve.

A few days later, Arab foreign ministers succeeded in lobbying UN member states to pass a United Nations Generally Assembly resolution condemning both the October 7 attacks and Israel’s atrocities and calling for an “immediate, durable and sustained humanitarian truce leading to a cessation of hostilities”.

The overwhelming support for the resolution, albeit watered-down and non-binding, has demonstrated Israeli isolation within the international community. But the Israeli authorities ignored it altogether, clearly moved by the principle of “the world says what it wants, Israel does what it must”. They nonchalantly proceeded to launch a devastating land invasion of the Gaza Strip, cutting off telecommunications in the territory for 36 hours and sowing even more death and destruction.

Israel believes that the Arab states are too divided, impotent and indifferent to Palestinian suffering to respond adequately. It is not wrong, alas.

Official Arab support for the Palestinian cause has persistently waned over the years. It started with Egyptian President Anwar Sadat’s decision to sign a peace treaty with Israel in 1979. Three years later, no one tried to stop the Israeli invasion of Lebanon, which expelled the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) from the country and paved the way for the emergence of Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Palestine. In the following four decades, Arab regimes continued to show less and less interest in rallying behind the Palestinian cause, as the Arab world was ravaged by multiple wars, including the Iraq-Iran conflict and the Iraq invasion of Kuwait, two US-led Gulf wars, as well as multiple civil wars following the 2011 Arab Spring revolutions.

Today, Arab leaders may be willing to speak out for Palestine, but few are ready or capable of walking their talk. Those with the means to influence events do not mean what they say, and the few who mean what they say lack the means to follow through.

Truth be told, Arab leaders have generally been at odds with Israel as a divisive colonial enterprise in their midst, but they have also been indifferent to the plight of the Palestinians, just as they have been towards the suffering of their citizens. In fact, some regimes have treated their people almost as badly as Israel has treated the Palestinians. Many have spoken for Palestinian rights only because that has given them a semblance of legitimacy in the eyes of their people.

Arab impotence has opened the way for other regional players, Iran and Turkey, to flex their muscles and expand their influence at Arab expense, creating another layer of regional complexity and division. Iran’s deepening influence and reckless policies in a number of Arab countries have pushed some frantic regimes to openly ally themselves with Israel in return for greater American support.

But that has proven shortsighted as neither Israel nor the United States can or is willing to guarantee their security.

Today, these regimes tacitly blame Iran and Hamas for the ongoing escalation in Gaza that is meant to undermine their new partnerships with Israel and drag them into a regional war. Indeed, government-associated preachers, journalists and pundits in countries like Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have condemned what they consider to be Hamas’s attempts inspired by Iran to push the region into war, inflicting unbearable suffering on the Palestinian people.

But such positions have not swayed Arab public opinion. Wherever they have been allowed to, Arabs have taken to the streets en masse to protest against Israel’s atrocities and to call for an international intervention to stop the mass killing of Palestinian civilians. Protest may turn into mass upheaval that can threaten regional stability if no action is taken.

As Israel continues to decimate Gaza and commit massacres of Palestinian children, women and men, its Arab partners must reconsider their normalisation and cooperation agreements before they are forced to do so under heavy public pressure.

This de-normalisation process must start with the Palestinian Authority itself, whose insistence on maintaining relations with Israel has allowed it to deepen its military occupation and accelerate the theft of Palestinian land.
Deepening miseries for eye patients

The Avastin injection was banned in Punjab late last month after it was reported that it had caused blindness in more than 70 patients to whom it had been injected. The decision by the provincial government in Punjab was in haste because it made the lives of people more miserable. The injection was available at authorised laboratories for Rs1,200 to Rs2,000. Some top-ranking hospitals used to administer it for up to Rs6,000 to Rs15,000. But after the injection was banned, the only alternative available to the patients was, and remains, an imported injection available for Rs70,000 to Rs100,000. One can imagine the misery of those who needed it, and still do, desperately. Those who could not dish out such fantastic amounts — and there were many — had to suffer. The suffering is continuing to date. The inquiry has made it clear that there was nothing wrong with the injection contents; it was a matter of a few people not following the standard operating procedures (SOPs) related to the transportation and distribution of the medicine. With such a clean bill of health, what is stopping the government from lifting the ban immediately? People in these trying times are suffering from financial hardships compounded by unprecedented inflation and unemployment. By not doing away with the ban on the local injection, the government is only aggravating the situation, making people’s lives more miserable. The decision to reverse the ban may be considered at the earliest.

Rifat Parvez
Islamabad

Palestinian struggle

It is considered a legitimate right of any nation/country to wage a liberation struggle against the occupation forces. World history is replete with liberation wars fought heroically by individuals and masses. From French resistance forces during World War II to the bloody struggle of the Vietnamese, and from the Afghan gallantry against the invading Russians to the freedom movement in India-occupied Jammu and Kashmir valley, the world has been a witness to the tendency among human beings to fight the best fight when the odds are heavily negative. It is in the same category that one has to see the struggle of the Palestinian people who are fighting courageously against the occupation Israeli forces that have been there since 1948. And, courage is not merely physical; it has emotional, psychological and mental connotations as well. Since it is an internationally recognised and legitimate right of any and all subjugated people to make efforts to liberate their land, Hamas deserves to be given that status and seen in that light. All that Hamas has ever done is to fight against an occupation force. Can anybody anywhere deny this simple piece of fact? The recent flare-up in the region is due to the passive silence of the powers that be, who were so satisfied with the status quo in terms of occupied territories that they were shaking hands with the occupier. It is disappointing, though not at all surprising, that the West is calling recent Hamas activity a ‘terrorist act’, which is not true. If the Palestinian struggle against Israeli occupation is an act of terrorism, what does the West think about French resistance against Hitler’s army that had occupied almost the whole of France during World War II? If the West, led by the United States, insists on calling the Palestinian struggle an ‘act of terrorism’, it should first rewrite the history of resistance against Nazi Germany’s occupation of France and Europe at large. Shifting the goalpost does not work in history. The West may win this battle of minds in the short term, but history will make sure that the West will lose this war in the long run.

Abid Mahmud Ansari
Islamabad

Pakistan’s wheat crisis

Pakistan’s wheat crisis stems from low production and high consumption. Wheat is vital for food security and poverty reduction. The government has been importing wheat from Russia and Ukraine to meet the demand, but this has not been enough to stabilise the market and prevent hoarding and profiteering by some unscrupulous elements. According to some reports, the country faces a shortage of 2.6 million tonnes of wheat. Private-sector wheat import will boost wheat supply and create competition among the sellers, benefiting the consumers. However, this will not solve the problem in the long run. The government should also take steps to increase wheat production and reduce dependence on imports. The government should announce a fair and attractive support price for wheat by mid-October each year to encourage farmers to grow more wheat. The federal government should also ensure timely provision of quality seeds, fertilisers, pesticides, and other inputs to farmers at subsidised rates. Pakistan’s national average yield per acre is 28 maunds. If our farmers make a little effort to increase the national yield to 31 maunds per acre, they can eliminate the shortage of 2.6 million tonnes of wheat that we face. Relevant experts in the field believe Pakistan has the potential to produce 60-70 maunds of wheat per acre by using improved seeds and modern techniques. However, one of the major challenges that farmers face is the rising prices and scarcity of fertilisers. Fertiliser prices have tripled in two years and yet the commodity is scarce in the market. This hurts those who need fertilisers for wheat cultivation. The crisis could worsen the wheat shortage and make imports costly. The government should launch a crackdown against fertiliser hoarding, and ensure that fertiliser is available to farmers at a fair price. The federal government should also provide subsidies to farmers to help them afford all these essential inputs.

Azeem Hakro
Umerkot

Shikarpur in search of lost splendour

Shikarpur used to be one of the most significant cities across the subcontinent. It was popular for its literary luminaries, excellent education system, the opulence of its palaces, gardens, as well as its cuisine and friendly citizens. Today, the city lies in ruins, and the architectural wonders built centuries ago have all but vanished. Most of the educated families have migrated. While nobody expects the government to restore the lost splendour of Shikarpur, it is not too illogical to expect the government to make sincere efforts to preserve the architectural masterpieces and rehabilitate the city to the extent that it can.

Nasir Soomro
Karachi

KE bill delivery

In addition to the inflated electricity costs, the process for delivery of residential K-Electric (KE) bills is a cause of great concern for the consumers. The bills are delivered at residences openly, and domestic staff, including security guards, are the first ones to have a look at it. The problem is that the monthly bills have started to beat the monthly salaries of these people rather consistently. This naturally has the potential to create a feeling of resentment among the staff members towards the occupants of the house. This may lead to unsavoury consequences, especially because of the presence of armed personnel among the domestic staff. The KE should consider delivering the bills in a sealed envelope. The cost of the envelope can be recovered through the bill just as the recovery of so many other costs mentioned on the bill.

Moin Mohajir
Karachi

Public servants’ privileges

Public servants in the country are hardly ever seen using public transport or public healthcare services. Their children go to schools in official government vehicles instead of routine transport used by millions. This official vehicle, which provides the pick-and-drop facility to the children, is paid for by the taxes we pay. It runs on the fuel that is paid for by the taxes we pay. We, the people, are paying for the lavish lifestyle of the public servants, and we, the people, are being discriminated against. How much more wrong can the system go? Why should we accept this injustice? Why should the public servants not be asked to behave like normal human beings? The current lifestyle is unquestionably unethical.

Rakhshanda Abbas
Gilgit

Your View

There is no need to overhaul the country’s education system. There is no need to change the school curriculum. There is no need to introduce new teaching methods. There is no need to cope with an unregulated private sector. If the country is to be saved, it is absolutely necessary to put a check on the public servants’ privileges.

Umerkot
At the foot of a melting glacier in Peru, llamas helped revitalize the land

Saima S. Iqbal

When glaciers melt, they leave behind barren landscapes that can take decades to support plants and animals. But a new study found that within just three years, such exposed land was revitalized by llamas, whose activity nourished the soil and fostered plant growth. By the foot of Peru’s shrinking Uruashraju glacier, researchers partnered with local farmers to capture and herd llamas on four designated plots. For three days a month from 2019 to 2022, the llamas (Llama glama) grazed the plots, fertilizing them with dung and dispersing viable seeds from droppings and fur. By the end of that time, the otherwise arid and easily eroded soil stabilized, grew richer in nutrients and supported 37 percent more plant cover than before, geographer Anaïs Zimmer and colleagues report September 24 in Scientific Reports. Such a revival of the ancestral Andean practice of camelid herding could potentially cushion the crops, animals and livelihoods of local communities from the impacts of climate change, says Zimmer, of the University of Texas at Austin. As is the case worldwide, glaciers are disappearing in Peru’s Cordillera Blanca mountains at an unprecedented rate. And as the ice shrinks, nearby ecosystems wither: They lose access to summertime supplies of freshwater and sometimes encounter harmful acidic minerals in rocks once covered by the glaciers. Llamas may help counter some of these effects. Their transformation of the land, as seen in the new study, could reduce rock weathering and help the soil hold onto more moisture, thus limiting the acidic runoff that can poison farmers’ crops.

A new look at Ötzi the Iceman’s DNA reveals new ancestry and other surprises

Tina Hesman Sacey

A new look at the Iceman’s DNA reveals that his ancestors weren’t who scientists previously thought. In 2012, scientists compiled a complete picture of Ötzi’s genome; it suggested that the frozen mummy found melting out of a glacier in the Tyrolean Alps had ancestors from the Caspian steppe. But something didn’t add up. The Iceman is about 5,300 years old. Other people with steppe ancestry didn’t appear in the genetic record of central Europe until about 4,900 years ago. Ötzi “is too old to have that type of ancestry,” says archaeogeneticist Johannes Krause of the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology in Leipzig, Germany. The mummy “was always an outlier,” Krause and colleagues put together a new genetic instruction book for the Iceman. The old genome was heavily contaminated with modern people’s DNA, the researchers report August 16 in Cell Genomics. The new analysis reveals that “the steppe ancestry is completely gone.” But the Iceman still has oddities. About 90 percent of Ötzi’s genetic heritage comes from Neolithic farmers, an unusually high amount compared with other Copper Age remains, Krause says. The Iceman’s new genome also reveals he had male-pattern baldness and much darker skin than artistic representations suggest. Genes conferring light skin tones didn’t become prevalent until 4,000 to 3,000 years ago when early farmers started eating plant-based diets and didn’t get as much vitamin D from fish and meat as hunter-gatherers did, Krause says. As Ötzi and other ancient people’s DNA illustrate, the skin color genetic changes took thousands of years to become commonplace in Europe.

More parents turning to acupuncture for kids’ pain, anxiety

Saundra Young

Eleven-year-old Evan Hines is a typical pre-teenager. He loves fishing with his dad, chess club, and of course video games. He’s passionate about taekwondo and loves to bake. He also has hard-to-manage migraine headaches. Evan was diagnosed about a year ago. He was admitted to Johns Hopkins All Children’s Hospital in St. Petersburg, FL, because his migraines were not responding to any medication. During his hospital stay, the family was told about the hospital’s acupuncture clinic. “I checked with Evan,” said his mother, Kathryn. “And I said this is what acupuncture is, are you game? And he said, ‘I’ll do whatever; it can’t be worse than having this kind of pain.’” “I thought it might hurt, but it really doesn’t.” Evan said. “I don’t really have a word for it, but it will tingle sometimes, and it makes me feel very relaxed.” Evan Hines, 11, started acupuncture for his migraine headaches. Acupuncture is a traditional Chinese medicine practice that has been used in some form for at least 2,500 years. Very fine needles, some as thin as a human hair, are placed into the skin at various points to stimulate the body to heal itself. It’s often used for pain management, digestive issues, emotional conditions, and stress, taking a “whole body” approach rather than treating each symptom individually. And parents are beginning to turn to acupuncture as a safe, effective, and holistic way to treat their children’s anxiety and physical ailments. “It’s given him the opportunity to feel like he’s doing something where he has some control, like he’s made the choice to do acupuncture,” Kathryn Hines said.

Just 22 minutes of walking can offset health risks of all-day sitting

Lisa O'Mary

To combat the health risks of sitting at a desk all day or indulging in an all-day Netflix binge, head out for a brisk 22-minute walk. New research shows that people who do at least 22 minutes of physical activity each day reduce their risk of early death. The findings were published in the British Journal of Sports Medicine. Most people in Western countries spend between 9 and 10 hours being sedentary when they’re not sleeping, most of which occurs during a person’s workday, the researchers noted. Sedentary time is linked to early death, while it is well-established that physical activity has wide-ranging health benefits. This latest study sought to examine just how much sedentary time it takes to trigger the risk of early death, and just how much physical activity it takes to reduce that risk. The researchers examined physical activity level that is, at a minimum, equal to a brisk walk or gardening. For the analysis, the researchers in Norway combined data from four previous studies of 12,000 people who were age 50 or older who wore hip-mounted fitness trackers to measure their active and sedentary time. Data was excluded from midnight to 6 a.m., when people are usually sleeping. The analysis showed that having more than 12 daily sedentary hours can offset health risks of all-day sitting.

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