

WEEKLY Cutting Edge

INDEPENDENT • INCISIVE ANALYTICAL



**Rising debt burden is at the
core of our economic crisis**

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About Us

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.

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Rising debt burden is at the core of our economic crisis

Muhammad Asim Nisar

According to the latest figures released by the State Bank of Pakistan, the government's public debt rose by 6.6 percent to Rs64.842 trillion in the first seven months of the fiscal year ending in June. The debt increased by Rs4 trillion from July to January, as the caretaker government borrowed heavily to finance ballooning administrative expenditure and a widening budget deficit.

In January, the central government debt rose by 17.8 percent on a year-on-year basis. By the end of January 2023, the debt was Rs55.022 trillion. The State Bank of Pakistan's data revealed that between July and January of FY2024, the domestic debt of the federal

burden is mainly due to a rise in domestic debt — from 38.3 trillion rupees in June 2023 to 42.62 trillion rupees by January 2024 or a rise of 3.8 trillion rupees. This is because the budgeted amount of 6.1 billion dollars under the head of borrowing from the commercial sector abroad and issuance of sukuk/Euro-bonds was not realised due to the three major international rating agencies leaving Pakistan's rating unchanged in spite of the Stand-By Arrangement (SBA) loan approval by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) board in July last year and the success of the first review on 15 November 2023.

A major setback is that the caretaker government miserably failed to contain the budgeted current as indicated by the 43

\$25 billion in external debt payments it has to make in the next fiscal year, beginning in July.

The problem is two-fold: One is reducing the size of large, costly borrowings and the other is containing an unaffordably high budget deficit. So, how to go about it? The country's new Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif has given the go-ahead to expedite talks with the International Monetary Fund in the light of the impending expiration of the \$3 billion loan programme in April. A final tranche of \$1.1 billion is yet to be released under the current stand-by arrangement.

It is time we realized that debt unsustainability is the core of our economic woes and taking more loans to repay previous loans is no solution to the problem. But this we are



government grew by 9.8 percent to Rs42.626 trillion. As of January 2024, the debt had increased by 24.1 percent. The external debt rose to Rs22.216 trillion as of January 31, 2024, up 7.4 percent from the previous year. Foreign debt increased by 0.8 percent in July-January FY2024.

It may be added here that as per the Ministry of Finance's monthly economic review and outlook released last month, Pakistan's unsustainable public debt position is the primary cause of the country's current economic difficulties. Since 2013, Pakistan has violated the Fiscal Responsibility & Debt Limitation Act (FRDL). The highest interest rates since 1972, declining state-owned enterprises' profits, and poor tax collection all make it more difficult for the government to pay off the nation's debt.

The expanding debt burden brought on by the enormous financing needs of the cash-strapped government is at the root of the current economic woes. A detailed analysis of available data shows that the spike in debt

percent rise in fiscal deficit in the first half of the current year compared to the same period last year as noted in the Finance Division's February Economic Update and Outlook. The caretaker set-up also slashed development expenditure by 5.9 percent during the first half of the current year compared to the same period the year before, with negative effects on the growth rate.

As can be seen from the above analysis, financing risks remain exceptionally high due to large public-sector external rollover needs, a persistent current account deficit, a difficult external environment for Eurobond and Sukuk issuance and limited reserve buffers in case of delays to anticipated inflows. Without doubt the new government faces a formidable challenge setting things right. Due to Pakistan's precarious external position, one of the top priorities for the new PML-N government will be obtaining funding from both bilateral and multilateral partners. As of now, the nation's foreign exchange reserves are far less than the

continually doing and coming to grief again and again.

The long term solution lies in undertaking overdue structural reforms, including revamping of the taxation system which relies heavily on indirect taxes - to the tune of over 75 percent - whose incidence on the poor is greater than on the rich. Instead, the emphasis should be on direct taxes based on the ability to pay principle which would necessitate widening the tax net and removing all exemptions currently enjoyed by the wealthy and the powerful.

Urgent reforms needed should include raising provincial farm tax on the rich landlords, the builders, the traders, the aarhtis and enforcing professional tax in the urban areas. The objective should be to shift the burden away from the relatively poorer sections of society towards the rich and influential. The economic crisis facing us today has deepened over decades due to flawed policies of successive governments. We need to change the current mindset if we have to survive as a nation.

Women's day: a call for action against gender disparity

Nasim Ahmed

The observance of International Women's Day last week brought into sharp focus the sad plight of women in Pakistan, especially those living in the rural areas. The plight of women in Pakistan is a multifaceted issue involving cultural, social, economic, and political factors. Women in Pakistan face discrimination in various aspects of life, including education, health, employment and decision-making processes. Traditional gender roles and societal norms and expectations contribute to this inequality.

The preamble of the Constitution of Pakistan guarantees fundamental rights of all citizens. Yet women in Pakistan face serious social, religious, economic and political obstacles, which prevent them from realizing their full potential. There is no appreciation of the contribution our women make, particularly in the rural areas. They work day and night not only in farms and fields but also make significant contributions to the enhancement of agricultural productivity by engaging in seed-bed preparation, weeding, harvesting, threshing, food storage, cottage industry and multiple related tasks.

Pakistan has over 24 million primary school-age children out of school of which 63 per cent are girls. While the government of Pakistan has legislated education for all, education remains drastically under-funded at only 2.5 per cent of the country's GDP, despite oft-repeated official commitment of 4 per cent. Notwithstanding the constitutional provision of fair and equitable education for all citizens, female education in the country leaves a lot to be desired. Girls still face severe challenges to get even basic education. Due to a patriarchal attitude and rampant gender inequality in the country, women in Pakistan have to struggle hard for their basic primary education.

Successive regimes in Pakistan have been woefully negligent in solving the problems women in our society face. At the political-cum-social level, there is little realization of the importance of the role of women in society - a fact which is borne out by the indifferent attitude of all past governments to the issue of girls' education in the country as well as the poor state of health facilities and opportunities for employment for women.

The gender gap report of the World

Economic Forum ranks Pakistan 131 out of 142 countries. The latest Global Gender Index places Pakistan as the second lowest country in the world for gender equality. Pakistan has been placed near the bottom of both the regional and global rankings. Only Iran, Algeria, Chad and Afghanistan are below Pakistan in this context.

In all fields of life women are given lower positions as compared to men. Women are generally excluded from decision-making forums both in the public and private sectors. Recently, there has been some progress, an example being the adoption of the Punjab Protection of Women against Violence Bill. But the law is far from satisfactory and very limited in its scope, especially on the issue of domestic violence. Violence against women

times restrict women from participating fully in the workforce. Forced marriages, particularly involving young girls, continue to be a concern. This practice is linked to cultural traditions, economic factors, and societal expectations. Some NGOs have done good work to discourage the practice but their efforts have met with little success because of entrenched societal prejudices and traditions.

The status of women in Pakistan varies considerably across classes, regions and the rural/urban divide due to the uneven socio-economic development and the impact of tribal and feudal social formations on women's lives. In recent years the government has made efforts to address these issues through legal reforms and initiatives. For example, legislation has been enacted to criminalize certain forms of violence



is a recurrent phenomenon as the law on the issue has not been enforced with the vigour the situation demands. Incidents of domestic violence, honor killings, and other forms of violence against women remain rampant. Legal frameworks have been developed to address these issues, but implementation and enforcement is inconsistent.

Although there have been improvements in recent years, women in some parts of Pakistan still have limited access to education. Factors such as poverty, cultural norms, and security concerns hinder girls' education. Women also face economic challenges, including limited job opportunities and wage disparities. Cultural norms and habits some-

against women, and steps have been taken to promote women's participation in politics.

Lately steps have been taken to raise public awareness about women's rights. An increasing number of Pakistani women are getting education and joining government job and entering into various professions like banking and law. Religious groups and civil society are increasingly denouncing violence against women. In response to calls by women's rights groups, courts are delivering harsher punishments for crimes against women. All these are encouraging signs but there is still a long way to go before women in Pakistan can take their rightful place alongside men in all sectors of national life.

Energy challenges imperil exports

Muhammad Ali

Pakistan, with its rich economic potential, faces a significant hurdle in its pursuit of boosting exports – the challenge of ensuring a reliable and viable energy source. The intricacies of energy-related issues have far-reaching consequences, affecting not only domestic industries but also playing a pivotal role in determining the competitiveness of Pakistani exports on the global stage.

Recently, the All Pakistan Textile Mills Association (APTMA) issued a stark warning to the Special Investment Facilitation Council (SIFC), signaling the imminent threat of further declines in exports due to the lack of a financially viable energy source for the industry. This predicament, rooted in economic principles, was destined to surface as a depreciating rupee and escalating energy costs reached unsustainable levels, impacting manufacturing and global competitiveness.

To understand the severity of the situation, it's crucial to examine the context. The export sector had previously enjoyed regionally competitive energy tariffs in 2021-22. This favorable situation resulted in a remarkable 54 percent growth in textile and apparel exports, surging from \$12.5 billion in FY20 to an impressive \$19.3 billion in FY22. However, the optimism was short-lived as power tariffs for export firms surged, causing a contraction in textile and apparel exports to \$16.5 billion in FY23.

The current state of affairs reveals that tariffs for industrial consumers have now escalated. This surge is attributed to quarterly tariff adjustments (QTA) prompted by declining power consumption, a fuel price adjustment (FPA) of Rs7.056/kWh for January 2024, and the anticipation of higher QTAs in subsequent quarters due to the ongoing reduction in power consumption.

These tariffs now stand at more than double the average faced by similar industries in competing regional economies, such as Bangladesh (8.6 cents/kWh), India (average 10.3 cents/kWh), and Vietnam (7.2 cents/kWh). Understandably, production becomes financially unfeasible at these elevated rates. Adding to the industry's woes, gas prices for industrial consumers have skyrocketed by a staggering 223 percent since January 2023. This surge has obliterated the financial viability of captive generation, a method widely relied upon by a significant portion of the industry in the absence of competitively priced grid electricity. Consequently, textile and apparel exports are now stagnant at around \$1.4 billion per month, significantly below their installed capacity of \$2 billion per month.

In response to these challenges, the APTMA has presented a comprehensive set of recommendations to the SIFC. The proposals include the removal of cross-subsidies on non-productive sectors of the economy and the operationalization of the Competitive Trading Bilateral

Contracts Market. The latter aims to facilitate business-to-business (B2B) power contracts at a Use of System/Power Charge of 1-1.5 cents/kWh, excluding cross-subsidies and stranded costs. The overarching goal is to empower the industry to procure green energy at competitive end-use prices through captive generation from sources like geothermal plants in depleted oilfields, hybrid solar/wind plants, or other green power producers.

While these recommendations hold promise, their successful implementation rests on the collaboration between the SIFC and the finance ministry, especially considering the constraints imposed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) program. The urgency of finding solutions to this pressing issue cannot be overstated. The looming threat to the textile industry's competitiveness in the international market necessitates immediate attention to avoid dire consequences for export revenue and the overall reform process. The forthcoming weeks and months are poised to unfold critical discussions and decisions in the pursuit of resolving this complex and urgent crisis. The country has grappled with persistent issues such as power shortages, blackouts, and an overall energy deficit. This predicament has posed a formidable obstacle for industries reliant on consistent and affordable power, hindering their ability to meet production targets and fulfill export demands.

The significance of a reliable energy source for Pakistani exports cannot be overstated. Industries, especially those involved in manufacturing and processing, are heavily reliant on continuous power supply to maintain seamless operations. Uninterrupted energy supply is not only crucial for meeting production schedules but is also a determining factor in the quality and consistency of goods produced for the export market.

The repercussions of the energy deficit resonate deeply across various sectors contributing to Pakistani exports. Industries such as textiles, garments, and manufacturing, which form the backbone of the country's export portfolio, find themselves at a disadvantage when grappling with erratic power supply. Meeting international standards for quality and timely delivery becomes a challenging task, ultimately affecting the competitiveness of Pakistani products in global markets. The energy-related challenges are particularly acute for industries engaged in perishable goods and time-sensitive manufacturing processes. In such cases, even a brief interruption in power supply can result in substantial losses, affecting not only the economic viability of individual businesses but also denting the overall reputation of Pakistani exports.

Several factors contribute to Pakistan's ongoing energy crisis. Aging infrastructure, insufficient investment in the power sector, and the circular debt issue have collectively led to a situ-

ation where the demand for energy consistently outpaces the available supply. The overreliance on non-renewable energy sources and the lag in adopting sustainable alternatives have further exacerbated the problem.

The circular debt issue, characterized by a vicious cycle of non-payment and delayed payments in the energy sector, has resulted in financial constraints for power producers. This, in turn, hampers their ability to invest in infrastructure upgrades and maintain a consistent energy supply. Addressing these root causes is imperative for the sustainable resolution of Pakistan's energy challenges. To bolster Pakistani exports and enhance the competitiveness of its industries, a multipronged strategy is needed to address the energy conundrum. The government must prioritize substantial investments in upgrading and expanding the energy infrastructure. This includes modernizing power plants, incorporating renewable energy sources, and implementing smart grid technologies to improve the efficiency of energy distribution.

Moreover, fostering a conducive environment for private sector participation in the energy sector can catalyze innovation and efficiency improvements. Encouraging the development and adoption of renewable energy solutions, such as solar and wind power, can not only mitigate the current energy deficit but also align Pakistan with global sustainability goals.

Pakistan's quest for a viable energy source requires collaboration on the international stage. Engaging with foreign investors, technology providers, and international organizations can bring in the expertise and financial support needed to revamp the energy sector. Multilateral initiatives, partnerships, and funding mechanisms can play a pivotal role in supporting large-scale energy projects that align with Pakistan's economic and environmental objectives.

In conclusion, the quest for a viable energy source is undeniably the most pressing challenge for Pakistani exports. The current energy deficit not only hampers the day-to-day operations of industries but also impedes the nation's ability to compete in the global marketplace. Addressing this issue requires a comprehensive strategy that encompasses infrastructure upgrades, adoption of renewable energy sources, and collaboration with international partners.

The resolution of Pakistan's energy challenges holds the key to unlocking the full potential of its export-oriented industries. It is not merely a matter of economic development but a crucial step towards establishing the country as a reliable and competitive player in the global market. The path forward necessitates decisive action, strategic investments, and a commitment to sustainable practices, laying the foundation for a brighter economic future for Pakistan and its export-driven industries.

Economic challenges and realities

Husnain Shahid

In the intricate landscape of economic governance, the new government faces formidable challenges in meeting the stringent conditions for the final release of the IMF tranche.

The upcoming government faces a daunting challenge in meeting the stringent prerequisites for the final release of the IMF tranche, which may badly impact the common people, who are already facing the worst periods of inflation in the country's history. The economic impasse can only be resolved by implementing structural reforms, a move consistently resisted by previous political administrations.

The new government's task is made even more challenging by the increased size of the Ramazan package by the new Punjab government. This decision may be based on a lack of awareness that the Punjab caretakers had committed to reducing the Rs115 billion overspend from the previous year, aiming for budget neutrality. Despite this, the sole solution to the current economic deadlock lies in embracing structural reforms, a measure opposed by all political governments thus far.

The Economic Update and Outlook for February 2024 presented a notable disparity between analysis and statistical data. For instance, the report claimed that the caretaker government took measures to reduce unproductive expenditure. However, data at the report's conclusion revealed a 5.9 percent decline in the Public Sector Development Programme during the first half of the current year compared to the previous year. Surprisingly, the fiscal deficit increased by 4.3 percent, primarily fueled by a rise in budgeted current expenditure.

Additionally, the report noted the caretaker government's efforts to boost tax and non-tax income, with FBR revenue rising by 29.8 percent and non-tax revenue by 116.5 percent in the first half of the year. However, the report failed to acknowledge that the actual inflation rate of 28.7 percent (July-January) exceeded the budgeted 21 percent, impacting tax collections. Although the caretakers proposed FBR reforms, these were deferred by the Election Commission of Pakistan to the next elected government, and the reforms mainly focused on administrative changes rather than restructuring the tax system.

The report also highlighted a positive trend in large-scale manufacturing (LSM) activity since April 2023. LSM increased by 3.54 percent in December 2023, and month-on-month growth reached 15.7 percent from July to December 2023. However, the analysis overlooked the fact that LSM remained in negative territory (negative 0.40), albeit with a reduction from the previous year's comparable period (negative 2.10).

Exports experienced a 9.3 percent rise from July to January 2023 compared to the same period the previous year. However, this increase was attributed not to a surge in volume but to the higher international prices of exported items. Furthermore, during Dar's tenure, from end September 2022 until the conclusion of the Shehbaz Sharif-led government, his decision to artificially control the rupee-dollar parity resulted in multiple exchange rates, contributing to lower-than-projected exports

cease by the program's end in April 2024, rather than any significant increase in export volume. Remittances continued their downward trajectory, dropping from 16.3 billion dollars in July-January 2022-23 to 15.8 billion dollars in the corresponding period this year.

Reserves increased to 7.9 billion dollars on February 27, 2024, compared to 5.4 billion dollars on the same day last year. However, it's important to note that Dar's flawed policies were responsible for the cessation of all pledged assistance from multilaterals and bilaterals. Additionally, the rise in reserves reflects incurred debt rather than any improvement in the country's earning capacity in dollar terms.

The caretakers' claim of placing the economy on the path to stabilization is confined to the successful completion of the first review under the SBA, with no discernible improvement in key macroeconomic indicators.



in the preceding year.

Two critical indicators directly affecting the general public depicted a deteriorating trend. Inflation averaged 28.7 percent compared to 25.4 percent the previous year. While caretakers attributed this to the conditions agreed upon with the IMF in the ongoing Stand-By Arrangement, they overlooked the heavier-than-budgeted reliance on domestic borrowing for current expenditure. This, in turn, led to a higher-than-budgeted deficit, fueling inflation.

Although the current account deficit saw a substantial 71.2 percent decline, it was primarily due to import restrictions. The Fund acknowledged that these restrictions might

As we dissect the economic scenario under caretaker governance, a mixed bag of successes and challenges emerges. Despite a commendable reduction in the current account deficit, the decline is attributed to import restrictions rather than a robust surge in exports. Inflationary pressures, exacerbated by domestic borrowing, underscore the need for strategic fiscal management. Remittances and reserves paint a contrasting picture, reflecting the aftermath of past policies. While the caretakers claim progress in stabilizing the economy, the real test lies in sustained improvements in key macroeconomic indicators, signaling a path towards enduring economic resilience.

Debt dilemmas and IMF negotiations

Shahid Hussain

The economic situation in Pakistan for the current financial year holds promises of marginal growth, buoyed by projections from international financial institutions forecasting a potential decrease in inflation from 29% to 23%. However, beneath the surface of this optimistic outlook lie pressing concerns about the efficacy of this growth in addressing the multifaceted challenges faced by millions, especially in terms of unemployment. Complicating matters, doubts arise about the feasibility of achieving price reductions given the stringent conditions imposed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) under an existing loan package.

Compounding the economic intricacies is the stark reality of a debt-to-GDP ratio surpassing 70%, with domestic debt constituting 60% of the total debt and a staggering 85% of the interest burden. The external debt, predominantly in dollars, is owed substantially to bilateral and multilateral creditors, with China holding a substantial 13% share, primarily directed toward infrastructure projects. Pakistan's reliance on tax and gas tariff hikes, coupled with a sharp depreciation of the rupee, has contributed to a significant 30% year-on-year inflation rate, further straining the local currency.

With the current \$3 billion IMF package drawing to a close, the government's immediate focus is on securing a larger financial arrangement. Analysts underscore the pivotal role that debt negotiations will play in upcoming talks with the IMF, aiming to garner support for revitalizing the struggling economy. Discussions are poised to encompass the release of the final tranche of the expiring loan package and the initiation of talks for a new three-year arrangement, this time worth \$6 billion.

The IMF has shown eagerness to engage with the new government on both financial packages. As the upcoming finance minister of Pakistan prepares for the foreign task at hand, representing the nation at the IMF and World Bank's annual spring meetings in the coming month, the stakes are high. These meetings, scheduled from April 17 to 19, will play a pivotal role in shaping Pakistan's negotiating stance

and soliciting international support to steer the country towards economic recovery.

Notably, India has entered the fray, expressing concerns to the IMF about ensuring that any financial assistance to Pakistan is not diverted for defence expenses. While the influence of India's plea on the IMF's decision remains uncertain, the prevailing political stability or instability in Pakistan is expected to significantly mold the country's position in negotiations for loans with international lenders. The unfolding intricacies of these discussions will shape the trajectory of Pakistan's economic resurgence in the weeks to come.

Meanwhile, Moody's Investors Service has upgraded the outlook of Pakistan's banking sector from 'negative' to 'stable' as macroeconomic challenges and fiscal pressures show signs of easing. The report highlighted the banking sector's solid profitability, stable funding, and liquidity, which collectively

Moody's emphasizes the substantial exposure of Pakistani banks to the government through large holdings of government securities, constituting approximately half of total banking assets. This connection links the credit strength of the banks closely to that of the sovereign. External pressures, persistent against a challenging operating backdrop, are expected to slightly weigh on the performance of Pakistani banks' loan portfolios.

While the credit rating agency anticipates continued strong profitability for the banking sector due to wide net interest margins (NIMs), it predicts a decline from 2023 peaks owing to subdued business growth, increased funding costs associated with higher rates, and elevated taxes. Operating expenses are expected to stabilize in line with easing inflation and banks' cost-control efforts. However, persistently high tax rates and potentially higher loan-loss provisions may impact

bottom-line profitability, with the return on average assets hovering around 3%, according to Moody's.

Moody's anticipates that Pakistani banks' modest capital ratios will remain stable, with strong earnings offsetting high dividend payouts. The stable deposit-based funding of banks is expected to continue supporting financial stability. For the top five largest banks in Pakistan, namely the National Bank of Pakistan (NBP), HBL, UBL, MCB, and Allied Bank Limited, Moody's

assigns a baseline credit assessment of Caa3.

In conclusion, Pakistan finds itself at a critical juncture, facing economic challenges, formidable debt burdens, and crucial negotiations with the IMF. The prospects of marginal growth are underscored by concerns about its impact on unemployment and the feasibility of achieving price reductions. As the nation grapples with a high debt-to-GDP ratio and external pressures, the upcoming talks with the IMF will determine the course of Pakistan's economic recovery. The involvement of India adds a geopolitical dimension, further emphasizing the delicate balance required in navigating both internal and external factors. The weeks ahead promise significant developments, offering insights into Pakistan's resilience and determination to chart a sustainable economic path.



provide a sufficient buffer against the country's macroeconomic challenges and political uncertainties.

According to the report, the forecast for the Pakistani economy suggests a return to modest growth, projecting a 2% expansion in 2024 after subdued activity in 2023. Additionally, it anticipates a decrease in inflation to around 23%, down from 29% the previous year. Despite this positive outlook, the report cautions that high-interest rates and inflation will continue to restrain private-sector spending and investment. Moreover, banks are found financing the government's wide fiscal deficits, leaving limited room for lending to the real economy. The report notes that initiatives to deepen financial inclusion and support key sectors will only partially alleviate credit demand.

Unfolding crisis after elections

Raza Khan

After the successful conduct of national elections on February 8, widespread instability continues to grip the country and the chaos will persist due to extensively a controversial post-poll process and results. The process of formation of new governments at the federal and provincial levels has been completed as Shehbaz Sharif has become the prime minister once again. Whereas, the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) has been able to form a government in the Punjab as Maryam Nawaz's long-cherished desire to become the chief minister has ultimately seen the light of the day.

On the other hand, the most popular political party, Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), has got only the government of the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) province. Whereas, the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) has got away with the governments in Sindh and has been able to make its nominee, Sarfaraz Bugti, as the Chief Minister of Balochistan.

The February 8 elections were greatly expected by everyone to bring much-needed stability in the country. However, this was greatly dependent upon the transparency and fairness of the entire electoral process and more importantly the smooth transfer of power. Insofar as the polling process was concerned it was relatively fair. However, the results were rigged in a bizarre way to turn the nearly two-thirds majority of the PTI in the National Assembly as well as the provincial assembly of the Punjab into a big minority. Obviously, the aim of this electoral result management has been to deny the PTI return to power. The powers-that-be have been able to achieve this objective of keeping the PTI at bay from the power corridors. It is fine if it could bring stability to the country. But this has not brought stability because there is widespread chaos in the country, rather anger among the people who argue that their mandate has been stolen. More perturbingly, a large number of Pakistanis are ready to come out on to the streets against the electoral fraud. The PTI has already been staging protests against the alleged massive manipulation of electoral results and the trend would continue in the foreseeable future.

It is very important to note that the Corps Commander meeting has clearly

distanced itself from any controversy erupted in the country regarding rigging of election results. The forum said that it was the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) that was solely responsible for holding elections and announcing the results. After this meeting the onus is now fully on the ECP to address the massive controversy regarding electoral fraud. If the ECP is able to address this controversy to the satisfaction of Pakistanis then the February 8 elections could prove a source of stability in the country. But this would require completely changing the already announced results and giving the majority party the government in the National Assembly as well as in Punjab. But this will not seem to happen because it would open the floodgates of controversies and violations of the Constitution which would require punishments for persons occupying constitutional offices. So the ECP would not address the issues of electoral fraud and try to focus on what is done that cannot be undone.



But as the PTI and other parties have already filed cases in elections tribunals and the courts against electoral fraud, ECP officials and the judicial officials now have a huge responsibility on their shoulders. Because it is a matter of people's mandate and this cannot be easily ignored. So if the electoral tribunals and courts announce their verdicts on the basis of form 45 or the initial compiled results from the polling stations, then a large number of already declared winning candidates would be declared unsuccessful. This would definitely have an impact on the composition of the governments at the Centre and provincial levels particularly the Punjab and Balochistan.

On the other hand, the PTI, which has formed its government in KP province, seeing its substantial concerns regarding electoral fraud not being addressed, would resort to a collision course. Already the PTI CM of KP, Ali

Amin Gandapur, has unequivocally announced that his government would fully participate in the protest against electoral fraud. This is indeed a very dangerous situation for the country. Because not only a majority of Pakistanis think that massive electoral fraud has taken place in the elections but also a very sizable and strategic province officially is a part of the protest. In this situation no political stability could be expected in the country.

This situation will further push the country and people into economic misery and the economic woes of Pakistanis would further aggravate. Already, the country is facing the worst inflation of its history and a majority of Pakistanis have been forced to live their lives below the poverty line. Pakistanis were expecting that elections would bring some political stability and as a result the economic crisis in the country could be addressed by genuine representatives of people. But due to massive controversy

emerging after quite substantial charges of electoral fraud the expectation of Pakistanis that the new genuine government would address the economic crisis on a war-footing has vanished into thin air. Hypothetically speaking, if one expects Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif could address this complex economic crisis in the country, then it is hope against hope, because his performance as prime minister in his first stint, from April 2022 to August 2023, was pathetic. In April 2022, the economic situation was relatively very good, then what is now? One thinks that Shehbaz Sharif does not have what it takes to

address the economic crisis. The only way Pakistan could start addressing its economic woes immediately is by getting more than \$10 billion unconditional financial aid from any international financial institutions or friendly countries and more importantly to use that money for key system reforms. But due to electoral fraud the legitimacy of the government has become very questionable. In this backdrop, international financial institutions like the IMF would be reluctant to provide the required funds to Pakistan. So the coming months and years are going to be very tough for Pakistan. The only solution is to bring all the political forces and civil society for a new social contract but not before first making a truth and conciliation process in which everyone must acknowledge their mistakes, with a pledge not to repeat them. Otherwise the writing is already on the wall.

Education in crisis: A personal narrative

Rasheed Ali

Muhammad Zubair was shocked to know that his son was made to stand all day as he had committed the “sin” of telling a member of the Chief Minister’s Monitoring and Evaluation team, in reply to a question, that he had been failing his eighth grade exams for the last three years “because of two teachers”. He is a student at a government boys high school on Multan Road in the suburbs of Lahore.

Sulman Zubair had told the visiting officials that the mathematics and English subject teachers mostly did not take their classes. And whenever they come to the class, they beat him and other students badly. The next day when he reached school, his class in-charge ordered him to stand in a corner of the classroom. He was not allowed to sit all day though other teachers also came to his class.

Muhammad Zubair, a security guard at a local market, when reached the school the next day to lodge a complaint, he was given a very cold response by the headmaster as well as the class teacher. They rejected the “allegation” that Sulman was made to stand all day for complaining to the visiting official about the “inefficient teachers”.

“If you are not satisfied with his education in this school, take him to some private school. We have up to 50 students in each class and we can’t give him lessons exclusively and individually,” the father was told in a bitter tone.

The teachers’ harsh tone and various people’s good opinion about a better teaching environment in private school forced Zubair to admit his son to a private school. Within a week, he found another part-time job for him and admitted his son to a local private school the next month. Working 16-18 hours a day was really hard for Muhammad Zubair, but he was happy as his son was quite satisfied with the new school environment.

“This year, I will pass my examination on my own and get very good marks in all subjects,” Sulman made a pledge to his father.

How much improvement the boy will show in his upcoming exams is yet to be seen, but a World Bank (WB) report on education in Pakistan, as well as other South Asian nations, makes two clear references to his story. The WB report says that the poor quality of

education is holding back the regional nations, including Pakistan.

The report recommends handing over the educational sectors of Pakistan, India and other states to the private education sector. The Bank believes that the South Asian governments could not afford improving educational standards and they cannot afford to improve educational quality by themselves.

According to one of the five recommendations, the private sector is already playing a major role in education and governments should encourage greater private-sector participation by easing entry barriers and encouraging well-designed public-private partnerships.

The report says that the poor quality of education in South Asia, as reflected in low learning levels, traps many of its young people



in poverty, stunting economic growth and prosperity. The Bank says the governments in the region have recognised that they should now do more to improve the quality of education in schools, after having achieved tremendous progress in increasing schooling access over the past decade. “Just spending time in school is not enough. There has to be a significant gain in skills that require an improvement in the quality of education,” said a WB official. “This will help countries in the region to reap the full expected returns on their investments and generate gains in productivity and economic growth.”

About the quality of education in most South Asian nations, the report says that students are poorly prepared in practical competencies such as measurement, problem-solving and writing of meaningful and grammatically-correct sentences. One quarter to one third of those who graduate from primary school lack basic numeracy and literacy skills that would enable them to further their education.

It is no surprise that employer surveys confirm that inferior education systems and the shortage of skills are constraining private sector investment. “The poor quality of education in South Asia is a major obstacle to the region’s future economic prospects,” said Halil Dunder, an education specialist at the World Bank. “Raising education quality in South Asia is an urgent priority that could transform the region’s economic landscape,” he believes.

In concluding paragraphs, the report recommends a multi-pronged strategy that includes initiatives outside the education sector to address education challenges in South Asia.

The first recommendation is about improving school-going children’s health. It is mostly observed that children of poor families attending government sector schools are weak and suffering from malnutrition. The report stresses the need to ensure that young children get enough nutrition. South Asia has the world’s highest rates of childhood malnutrition and this has a damaging effect on their ability to learn. “Investing in early-life nutrition, with appropriate coverage and age targeting, is critical to offset those disadvantages and can be a highly cost-effective investment in the quality and efficiency of education,” the report says.

The second recommendation is about raising the teacher quality. Many South Asian teachers barely know more than their students. For example, surveys from India and Pakistan show that teachers perform poorly in math and language tests based on the curriculum they are supposed to teach. The report says that higher and clear standards must be enforced, absenteeism curbed, and non-merit-based promotions halted among teachers.

The report also suggests using financial incentives to boost education quality. When extra resources have been available, they have gone to higher pay for teachers, reducing class sizes or improving facilities. This has not always brought learning improvements. A better use of the resources would be to link them to need and student performance, adds the report. The last recommendation is about improving the measurement of student progress: Governments have already begun moving in this direction but need to do more to improve the quality and reliability of assessments and benchmarking national learning outcomes against international standards, says the report.

Gender pay gap and parity challenges

Dr. Fatima Khan

Anza Nafeesa is a qualified dental assistant and hygienist, and working with a private healthcare centre in Allama Iqbal Town of Lahore. When she was hired three years back by the centre administration, she was offered at least 50 per cent less wages, being given to a male working in the same capacity. She was promised a 'substantial' raise in her salary after completion of her one-year service at the facility. She was in need of a job, and the health facility was situated at a walking distance from her house, therefore, she accepted the offer. However, the 'substantial raise' promise was not met even after the completion of the second and third year of her job.

This wage discrimination is not specific to Anza Nafeesa's case, a report jointly prepared by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and the World Health Organisation (WHO) revealed that women in the healthcare sector in Pakistan face a larger gender pay gap than in other fields. They are getting at least 24 per cent less than men, working in the same capacity in the health sector of the country, claimed the investigative report.

The report found a raw gender pay gap of 20 percentage points, but it jumped to 24 percentage points after accounting for factors such as age, education and working time. Much of the wage gap is unexplained, perhaps due to discrimination against women, even though they account for 67pc of health and care workers worldwide.

The study, conducted under the major world bodies, found that wages tend to be lower overall in the health and care sector than other sectors. This is consistent with the finding that wages often are lower in sectors where women are predominant. The report finds that even with the Covid-19 pandemic and the crucial role played by health and care workers, there were only marginal improvements in pay equality between 2019 and 2020.

The report, titled "The gender pay gap in the health and care sector: a global analysis in the time of Covid-19", finds a wide varia-

tion in gender pay gaps in different countries, suggesting that pay gaps in the sector are not inevitable and that more can be done to close the gaps.

Another report, released by the World Economic Forum ranked Pakistan as the second-worst country in terms of gender parity. The latest Global Gender Gap Report placed Pakistan at 145th place out of 146 states. The report ranked 146 countries, of which the top five are Iceland, Finland, Norway, New Zealand and Sweden, while the five worst ones are Afghanistan, Pakistan, Democratic Republic of Congo, Iran and Chad.

The report said that the global gender gap had been closed by 68.1 per cent in 2022. "At the current rate, it will take 132 years to reach full parity. This represents a slight four-year improvement compared to the 2021

opportunity, 143 on health and survival, 135 on educational attainment and 95 on political participation.

The World Economic Forum report said that while wage equality carries the highest gender gap score among economic indicators, advances were also reported in estimated earned income, where women's earnings increased 4pc compared to 2021. However, the report noted, women's participation in the labour force declined in 2022 and the shares of both men and women in senior and professional categories also saw a downturn.

Also, the gender parity scores for literacy, secondary and tertiary education enrolment all rose, the report noted. Pakistan is the country where women have the smallest share of senior, managerial and legislative roles at a mere 4.5pc, according to the report. Pakistan was

also ranked as the second-worst country in the region. According to the report, Bangladesh, which is ranked 71 globally, is the top country in the region, followed by Nepal, Sri Lanka, Maldives, Bhutan, India, Iran, Pakistan and Afghanistan.

South Asia has the widest gender gap on the economic participation and opportunity subindex, having closed only 35.7pc of it, the report stated. While the overall score improved compared to last year, "considerable country divergences" downgraded South Asia's ranking among regions.

Highly populated countries are for the most part driving variation within this subindex. For example, increases in the share of women in professional and technical roles were most notable in Nepal, Bangladesh and India. On the other hand, the shares in Iran, Pakistan and Maldives regressed, with less impact on overall regional performance. South Asia has one of the lowest regional gender parity scores for the health and survival subindex, at 94.2pc, the report stated.

(The writer is a physician by profession. She worked as an intern at the Capital Health (New Jersey) & the Mount Sinai St. Luke's Hospital (New York). Rights and gender issues are the areas of special interest to her. She can be reached at:fatima23393@hotmail.com)



estimate (136 years to parity)." However, the report noted that in the trends leading up to 2020, the gender gap was set to close within 100 years.

According to the report, Pakistan is among the five countries with a gender gap greater than 5pc, with the other countries being Qatar, Azerbaijan, China and India. The report stated that Pakistan has closed 56.4pc of the gender gap in 2022 — the highest overall level of parity the country has posted since the report launched in 2006.

However, Pakistan has made "significant improvement" across three subindexes, with the highest positive variation on economic participation and opportunity. The country ranked 145 on economic participation and

Why Afghan women are leaving Afghanistan

Maryam Ahmadi

It was 4:15am when I arrived at the gate of the passport office. The weather was cold and it was still dark.

There was already a line of women who had come before me. Some were sleeping under a blanket, others were just sitting or standing. I stood in the line and asked one woman how long she had been waiting for. She told me she and her family members had arrived at 1am.

I could understand why they had come that early. I had heard that it would get very crowded at the passport office and if you do not come early, you would be at the end of the line. Soon another family joined the line behind me: a mother with three girls. We started chatting. The mother, Zarghona, told me her three daughters could not go to school any more after the Taliban ban on secondary education for girls. The eldest was supposed to be in grade 12, the middle one – in grade 10 and the youngest – in grade seven.

The mother told me that they were trying to leave Afghanistan for another country where her daughters could get an education. She told me that they had initially planned to go to Pakistan but after the Pakistani authorities started to expel Afghan refugees, they decided to go to Iran. She was a kind and outgoing woman; she even invited me to join her and her daughters under their blanket to stay warm.

As dawn began to break, I started to see the faces of the women who were gathering in the long line. I could see many different women: school teachers and university professors, rich and poor, young and old. As we waited, it started to rain. At 8:30am, the passport office employees arrived which immediately triggered a commotion. All of a sudden, the line broke as the women rushed to the gate and the crowd somehow moved me farther away. I had no word of complaint and did not feel upset with these women. I knew they were desperate and they would do anything to get their passports.

After the initial chaos, the line took shape again and I stood waiting again, although much further from the gate than I had initially been. As I waited, I started chatting

with Fahima, a young widow. She had lost her husband many years ago and had moved with her 14-year-old daughter to live with her mother. Then last year, her mother left with her brother to go live in Iran. Fahima and her daughter could not join them because they did not have any passports and it takes a long time to get these documents.

Having nowhere to go, she had to move in with her sister and her family. She told me she feared being identified as a widow with a young daughter and the two being forced to marry Taliban fighters. On top of that, she felt she was a burden to her sister. “I feel deeply embarrassed every time my sister makes food and my daughter and I eat. But there is no job to do to have an income,” Fahima said.

So she decided to leave and seek a safe haven where she and her daughter would be free to work and study. “As soon as we get our

found out that we did not have any burqas, so my brother went to a relative’s house to borrow one. I donned the borrowed burqa and rushed to the post office but by the time I arrived, the office was closing and the employees were leaving.

Since the Taliban regained power in 2021, women have gradually and systematically discriminated against, humiliated, criminalised and denied women and girls their rights. Half of the Afghan population are women and girls; this means half of the people in the country do not have equal rights. UN experts are calling it “gender apartheid”. It is very difficult for every Afghan mother and father to watch the suffering of their daughters as they are being deprived of education, an income and a future. It is painful to see their growing trauma and mental health problems as they are removed from society, are no longer able to socialise and



passports, we will leave for another country where my daughter and I can live and breathe,” she told me. After standing in line for many hours, I finally was able to pass the gate. I told one of the employees who was a Taliban member what I needed to do at the passport office and he responded that I needed a burqa in order to enter the building and do the paperwork. I almost cried. I was wearing a hijab and a mask. Why was that not “modest enough” to do my paperwork? I rushed home where I

are forced to stay at home, out of fear of arrest for “improper hijab” or some other new offense.

The life under this regime is no longer bearable. Women and girls feel they live in a countrywide prison. There is no hope that things will change for the better. That is why the passport office was crowded and has been crowded for many months now. The women of Afghanistan want to leave because they do not see any future for themselves or for their daughters in this country.

This is not 'Netanyahu's war', it is Israel's genocide

Ahmad Ibsais

I do not blame Benjamin Netanyahu. I do not blame the Israeli prime minister for what is happening to my people. I do not blame him today, as Israeli bombs destroy every corner of Gaza, and children die under the rubble. I did not blame him back in 2013, when I had to watch the slaughter of my people in Gaza on the evening news, either.

My mother did not blame him when snipers perched on rooftops shot at her as she tried to make her way to work in the West Bank. My grandfather, God rest his soul, did not blame him as he died without ever returning to the land settlers stole from him in the 1980s, either.

For me, for my family, for my people, what we are witnessing in Palestine today is not "Netanyahu's war". It is not his occupation. He is nothing but another cog in the relentless war machine that is Israel. Yet if you were to ask senators Bernie Sanders or Elizabeth Warren, the supposed champions of Palestinian rights and progressive humanitarianism in the United States, everything that has happened to us in the past 75 years, and everything that is happening to us today, can be blamed on one man, and one man alone: Netanyahu.

Sanders insistently calls the ongoing Israeli assault on Gaza "Netanyahu's war", and demands that the US "not give Netanyahu another nickel". Meanwhile, Warren denounces "Netanyahu's failed leadership" as she calls for a ceasefire. For these progressive senators, the cause of all the pain and suffering in Palestine is clear: a far-right, hawkish prime minister hell-bent on continuing a conflict that keeps him in power. Sure, Netanyahu is evil. Sure, he committed countless crimes against Palestinians and against humanity, throughout his long career. Sure, he is continuing to fuel the carnage in Gaza today in part for his own political survival. And he should be held accountable for everything he has said and done that caused harm and pain to my people. But the racism, extremism and genocidal intent that is on display in Gaza and across the occupied Palestinian territory today cannot and should not be blamed on Netanyahu alone.

Blaming Israel's blatant human rights abuses, disregard for international law, and open celebration of war crimes on Netanyahu alone is nothing but a coping mechanism for liberals like Sanders and Warren. By blaming Netanyahu for the suffering and oppression of the Palestinian people, past and present, they keep alive the lie that Israel was built on progressive

ideals, rather than ethnic cleansing.

By blaming Netanyahu, they white-wash their seemingly unconditional support for a state blatantly committing war crimes and crimes against humanity. By blaming Netanyahu, and casting Israel as a progressive, well-meaning state that would respect international humanitarian law but is currently taken over by a bad leader, they are absolving themselves – and the US at large – of complicity in Israel's many war crimes.

Of course, Sanders, Warren and all

The same is true for Netanyahu and Israel. The suggestion that Netanyahu betrayed Israel's progressive, democratic foundations and caused the "humanitarian catastrophe" we are witnessing in Gaza today, ignores the systemic oppression that is inherent to Israel as a settler colony. Sanders and others may want to believe the Zionist myth that Israel is an essentially progressive country with socialist foundations, built on a "land without people" by a people without land. But they cannot escape the fact that Palestine has never been a "land without a



the others pushing this line know well that the "conflict" in Israel-Palestine would not magically disappear and Palestinians would not immediately achieve liberation and justice if Netanyahu were gone. After all, they've seen a similar scenario play out in the US only a few years ago. People had said if only Trump was removed from the White House, problems that he fuelled and provoked would disappear. The American democracy would be saved and everything would be just fine.

But did that happen? It has been almost four years since the eventful end of Trump's presidency, but we can still see rampant racism, inequality, gun violence and poverty across the country. These problems have not been magically fixed after Trump's presidency, because they were not created by Trump. These were never "Trump" problems, but American ones. Furthermore, there is a very real chance that Trump will return to the White House next year because millions of Americans support him and his agenda.

people". Indeed, the founding of Israel required the expulsion of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians who are Indigenous to the land, and the survival of Israel as a "Jewish Nation", as stated in its Nation State Law, requires the continued oppression, disenfranchisement and abuse of Palestinians.

Today, millions of Palestinians continue to live and die under Israeli occupation, and they – alongside Palestinian citizens of Israel – are subjected to what is widely described as an apartheid system. This untenable and unjust dynamic is hardly the creation of Netanyahu and his government.

From the very beginning, the state of Israel tied its long-term survival to the ethnic cleansing of Palestine, complete erasure of the Palestinian identity, and the oppression of Palestinians who remained on their lands. Former Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir wrote in a Washington Post op-ed that "There is no such thing as Palestinians" in 1969, decades before the beginning of Netanyahu's reign.

Woman emancipation

Civilised nations never fail to empower their women, knowing that they can contribute to the nation just as much as their male counterparts can. They consider their women valuable human resources. Empowering women is aimed at setting higher, greater goals for the nation to achieve. In the pursuit of building a more equitable and progressive society, women empowerment is a tool that can bring social enlightenment. Empowering women goes beyond mere rhetoric; it is a commitment that involves dismantling barriers, and providing opportunities to women to thrive in various spheres. A society that actively empowers women reaps the benefits of enhanced social, economic and cultural vibrancy.

Moreover, empowering women is pivotal for economic development. Women constitute a significant portion of the global workforce, and their contribution is essential for a thriving economy. By providing equal opportunities in employment, education and entrepreneurship, nations make sure that women have the space to unleash their full potential, and attain economic growth. Gender diversity in the workforce not only enhances productivity, but it also brings forth diverse perspectives that are crucial in today's interconnected world.

As such, educated, empowered women lead the march towards improved health outcomes for entire communities. When women have access to education and healthcare, the overall wellbeing of families and societies gets upgraded. Educated women tend to make informed health choices that lead to healthier lifestyles for themselves and their families.

Beyond the economic and health dimensions, women empowerment plays a pivotal role in shaping the cultural fabric of society. When women are given the needed space to express their voices, ideas and creativity, it enriches the culture. Art, literature and various forms of expression flourish when diverse perspectives are embraced. Besides, when women participate in cultural and artistic endeavours, societies gain a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the larger human experience.

To gain such an experience in society, governments, businesses and communities must work together to break down systemic barriers that hinder women's progress. Equal pay, access to healthcare, and protection against discrimination are crucial components of this effort. Moreover, cultural norms and stereotypes that promote gender inequality must be challenged and transformed to create a more inclusive and equitable society.

Only by ensuring that women have equal opportunities and rights can we build a more prosperous, healthy and harmonious world for ourselves and our future generations. Women are not just a moral compass; they are a strategic need for the betterment of society as a whole. A society that values and supports the

empowerment of women is more civilised. As we celebrate the International Women's Day today, it is quintessential to recognise that true societal advancement is intrinsically linked to the empowerment of half of its population — women. There is no reason for us not to ensure that our womenfolk have all the rights and opportunities that Pakistani men have.

Mujeeb Ali Samo
Larkana

US hypocrisy

The hypocrisy of the United States today stands exposed. All lives are not equal in the eyes of the self-proclaimed champion of human rights. It practices double standards when it comes to saving lives in two different regions. Washington has an entirely different approach towards the conflict in the Middle East and the Russia-Ukraine war. Former US secretary of state Henry Kissinger at least had the guts to state publicly that the US has no permanent friends or enemies, only interests. Today, the US has the same practices, but keeps covering it up with hollow rhetoric.

Ironically, calling itself the champion of democracy and the global protector of human rights, the US has failed the people of Gaza. More than 30,000 people have been killed so far in the Gaza Strip by the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF), but the American government, with its vetoes, and media outlets, with their biased coverage, continue to take a stance that is mind-boggling for people across the world. On the other hand, the US, along with its Western allies, has condemned Russia for the killing of people in Ukraine. It has even imposed a number of sanctions on Russia. Gaza has faced six times more casualties than Ukraine, but the White House has chosen to treat the Palestinian lives differently from Ukrainian lives. Gaza has no army to fight back, while Ukraine has a standing army, which is also being supported by the West. Americans and their geopolitical interests are bound to take the world to troubled waters. America's relentless support for Israel indicates the Zionist state's importance in a region that meets 30 per cent of the global crude oil demand. It implies that the US global hegemony rests on oil supply from the Middle East. Washington, therefore, wants absolute control in the Middle East, and Israel is its proxy.

Saving Ukraine from a Russian onslaught has its own background. While the US needs to serve its interests in the Middle East through Israel, it is backing Ukraine to protect its interest in Europe, enhancing its presence through expansion of Nato that threatens Russia. All in all, neither Gaza's unfolding humanitarian crisis nor the loss of lives in Ukraine matters to the US; it is only its interests. But the big question is about the consequences of American pursuits for the world at large.

While the world understands what

is going on, there is apparently no one good enough to put an end to the growing thirst of US hegemony just yet. There may well be countries with the power to do that, but they happen to be less cutthroat in their approach towards global affairs. What the world needs is an entity more, not less, merciless to put an end to the US hegemony that is destroying everything.

Tariq Zafar
Wahi Pandhi

Political chaos

Various political parties have been talking of holding mass protests against alleged rigging in the recent elections. In a nation already teetering on the brink of political and economic turmoil, such allegations and protests could deepen the fault lines within society. Grievances must be addressed through established legal channels and transparent investigations, not through the disruptive spectacle of mass protests blocking roads and streets, causing inconvenience to the common man. It is incumbent upon all parties to uphold the rule of law, rather than resorting to theatrics that serve only to undermine the very foundations of our democracy.

Qazi Jamshed Alam Siddiqui
Lahore

Governance issues

As the first-ever female provincial chief minister has set a landmark in national history, I would like to draw the attention of the Punjab chief executive towards the crisis that is currently hounding the country; both the centre and the provinces. She should work to transform the old model of governance into a modern one. I am sure she has plenty of ideas to do that. Change is surely needed.

Mumraiz Khan
Karachi

Jubilation firing

All over the world, festivals bring pleasure to the people. However, in Pakistan, firing happens to be the hallmark of festivities. Despite an official ban, many people continue to follow the troublesome tradition. All of us, as a nation, must change our way of thinking.

Adeel Ahmed Malik
Rawalpindi

Public safety

In a recent incident, armed assailants shot dead two cousins, a teacher and a farmer, near Bukshapur in Kashmore. The criminals easily escaped police pickets without resistance, which has eroded public confidence in the law-enforcement mechanism. An urgent action is needed against such brazen lawlessness.

Jamaluddin Bangwar
Kashmore

We're finally close to a universal antivenom, say researchers

Stuart Ainsworth

If you're bitten by a venomous snake, the medicine you need is antivenom. Unfortunately, antivenoms are species specific, meaning you need to have the right antivenom for the snake that bit you. Most of the time, people have no idea what species of snake has bitten them. And for some snakes, antivenoms are simply not available.



New research my colleagues and I conducted provides a significant step forward in enabling the development of an antivenom that will neutralize the effects of venom from any venomous snake: a so-called "universal antivenom". In our paper, published in *Science Translational Medicine*, we describe the discovery and development of a laboratory-made antibody that can neutralize a neurotoxin (a toxin that acts on the nervous system) found in the venom of many types of snake around the world. Venomous snakes kill as many as 138,000 people each year, with many more survivors suffering from life-changing injuries and mental trauma. Children and farmers make up the bulk of the victims. The active ingredients in antivenoms are anti-toxin antibodies. They are made by injecting horses with small quantities of snake venom and harvesting the antibodies. This method of making antivenom has remained the same for over a century — and it has substantial drawbacks.

In addition to antivenoms being species specific, they are also not very potent, so you need lots of antivenom to neutralize the venom from a bite. Also, because antivenoms are made in horses, you are highly likely to experience severe side-effects when administered, as your body's immune system will detect and react to the "foreign" horse antibodies circulating in your bloodstream.

COVID virus can remain in the body over a year

Ralph Ellis

Scientists at the University of California San Francisco have discovered that remnants of the COVID-19 virus can linger in blood and tissue for more than a year after a person is first infected.



In their research on long COVID, the scientists found COVID antigens in the blood for up to 14 months after infection, and in tissue samples for more than 2 years after infection.

"These two studies provide some of the strongest evidence so far that COVID antigens can persist in some people, even though we think they have normal immune responses," Michael Peluso, MD, an infectious disease researcher in the UCSF School of Medicine, who led both studies, said in a statement. Scientists don't know what causes long COVID, in which symptoms of the illness persist months or years after recovery. The most common symptoms are extreme fatigue, shortness of breath, loss of smell, and muscle aches. The UCSF research team examined blood samples from 171 infected people and found the COVID "spike" protein was still present up to 14 months after infection in some people. The antigens were found more often in people who were hospitalized with COVID or who reported being very sick but were not hospitalized. Researchers next looked at the UCSF Long COVID Tissue Bank, which contains samples donated by patients with and without long COVID. They found portions of viral RNA in the tissue up to 2 years after people were infected, though there was no evidence of reinfection. Those viral fragments were found in connective tissue where immune cells are, suggesting that the fragments caused the immune system to attack, according to the researchers.

Can you really lose weight with two workouts a week?

Denny Watkins

It turns out there may be something to the "weekend warrior" mentality after all.

A recent study suggested that concentrating all your exercise into just 1 or 2 days could work as well for fat loss as spreading it throughout the week. The research builds on growing evidence that the weekend warrior exercise pattern can aid your health. A 2023 study of nearly 90,000 people found that weekend warriors were less likely to have a heart attack, stroke, or heart failure than inactive people. Another study of nearly 351,000 adults found no difference in risk of early death between weekend warriors and those who exercised three or more times a week.

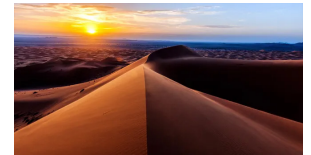
The new study was the first to examine the weekend warrior pattern and body fat, which was measured using dual-energy X-ray absorptiometry (DXA scan). "In [our] fast-paced society, we are interested in exploring alternatives to stay fit for individuals who cannot meet the recommended frequency," said study author Lihua Zhang, MD, PhD, a healthcare scientist at Fuwai Hospital's National Center for Cardiovascular Diseases in Beijing. Using the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES), Zhang and colleagues analyzed data from 9,600 people. About 4,000 reported exercising for at least 150 minutes a week — the minimum amount of exercise recommended for adults. Most spread it out over 3 or more days, but 772 people, the weekend warriors, crammed it all into just 1 or 2 days.



Mystery of enormous Saharan 'star dune' finally solved

Stephanie Pappas

A towering, star-shaped dune in the Sahara desert formed in less than a thousand years, new research finds.



The study, published in the journal *Scientific Reports*, is one of relatively few to look at these so-called star dunes, which are the tallest dunes on Earth. Named for their multiple-armed shapes, star dunes form in places where the winds change direction throughout the year, according to the National Park Service.

Although star dunes are found all over the world, there is only one confirmed star dune in the rock record, from about 250 million years ago in Scotland. Charles Bristow, a professor emeritus of sedimentology at University College London, told *Live Science*. That may be because researchers don't know what to look for to identify an ancient star dune, he said.

These dunes are difficult to study because they're usually in remote locations, and slogging up a few hundred feet of shifting sand is not easy. The dune is in Morocco in a dune field called Erg Chebbi. Luckily for the researchers, the area has become a popular tourist stop, so there are good roads and hotels around the edges of the dune field.

The dune itself is about 330 feet (100 meters) tall. It's known as Lala Lallia by locals. To collect data on the dune, Bristow, study co-author Geoff Duller of Aberystwyth University and research students used ground-penetrating radar, which can detect small differences in sand grain sizes and water content beneath the dune's surface. This technique allowed the researchers to build a picture of the dune's interior layers.



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