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WEEKLY Cutting Edge

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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.

Founding Editor
Dr Niloufer Mahdi
Sub-Editor
Rizwan Ahmad
Communication Manager
Usman Riaz
Admin/Marketing
Muhammad Atique
Webmaster
Imran Shoukat

Editorial Office:
Treet Corporation Limited
2-H, Gulberg-II, Lahore
Phone +92-42-35817141-47,
Fax: +92-42-35817138
weeklycuttingedge@gmail.com
editor@weeklycuttingedge.com
info@weeklycuttingedge.com
Printed by Creative Works,
Plot# 203, Green Light Street,
Mughal Park, Bund Road, Lahore.

For subscription, please contact
info@weeklycutting.com

Rising inflation, declining growth

Muhammad Asim Nisar

In its Monthly Economic Update and Outlook, the Finance Ministry has reported that Pakistan's headline inflation hovered around 22.5-23.5% in March 2024. According to the ministry, major drivers of inflation include alcoholic beverages & tobacco, housing, water, electricity, gas & fuel, furnishing & household equipment maintenance, clothing & footwear, perishable and non-perishable food items and transport.

The ministry's view is that inflation in March was at a moderate level despite the upward revision of petrol prices and the onset of Ramadan. The Finance Division has based its optimistic conclusion on the "incum-

in the prices of sugar, meat, and dairy products.

Contrary to the current economic crisis and its severe impact on the lives of the common people, the finance ministry in its report has tried to paint an optimistic picture by saying that Pakistan's economic and financial position "continues to improve with each passing month of the current fiscal year, attributed to prudent policy management and the resumption of inflows from multilateral and bilateral partners". According to the finance ministry's report, the government's policies are easing out pressures on the gross financing needs. This is not true because the country is facing increased external and domestic financing demands in the midst of an uncertain external environment. The IMF too has taken a hard

been recorded at 26pc. Needless to say, rising expenditures owing to higher markup spending highlight the challenges posed by debt servicing obligations. Overall, the widening fiscal deficit indicates a persistent pressure on public finances.

There is no way out of the current economic logjam unless the government maintains strict fiscal discipline through austerity measures and revenue mobilisation efforts. The primary aim should be to balance the budget so that our dependence on domestic and foreign loans is gradually reduced. Equally important is the need to boost agriculture which is the backbone of the economy, providing employment to millions in the rural areas.

The Monthly Economic Outlook for



bent government's strong resolve of curbing inflationary pressure by instituting enhanced administrative measures". In this connection, it has cited the government's relief package for Ramadan with increased allocation from the earlier Rs7.5 billion to Rs12.5 billion, adding that the measure would cushion the impact of heightened demand during the festive season.

It is no secret that Pakistan's inflation dynamics to a large extent are also influenced by external factors. Emphasising this point, the ministry has noted that the Food and Agriculture Organization's food price index, a key indicator monitoring the prices of globally traded food commodities, registered a decrease of 0.7 percent in February 2024 compared to the revised January level. The YoY index was down by 10.5 percent from its corresponding value one year ago. This decrease was primarily driven by a decline in the price indices for cereals and vegetable oils which offset the increase

stand and is asking the government to further tighten its belt which means more tax burden on the people.

We have to evaluate the overall economic prospects in the light of current challenges. All is not well on the economic front. According to the latest report, Pakistan's fiscal deficit rose to 2.6 per cent of GDP in the first seven months (July-January) of the current fiscal year compared to 2.3pc of last year as interest payments surged by 60pc, posing severe risks to debt sustainability and pressures on public finances. The fiscal deficit has widened by 38pc during the first seven months of FY2024.

Figures show that the total expenditures increased by 49pc to Rs7.532 trillion during Jul-Jan FY2024, up from Rs5.058tr last year. Current spending rose by 45pc primarily due to a 60pc increase in markup payments during Jul-Jan FY2024. On the other hand, the growth in non-mark-up current expenditures has

March has found the agriculture sector outlook to be encouraging as compared to last year based on the production of Kharif crops 2023 and sowing of wheat aligned with the target in Rabi 2023-24. Also, the economic situation in the major export markets has improved. Another urgent need is to strengthen the industrial sector which suffers badly from rising input cost and high policy rate. These hurdles in the way of industrial growth need to be removed so that our products can become competitive in the world market.

The stark truth is that due to faulty policy making in the past, Pakistan has fallen far behind in the economic race as compared to its South Asian neighbours. Our potential for growth is immense which can be more fully exploited through judicious policy making, keeping in view the opportunities and challenges offered by a fast changing global economic situation.

An independent judiciary is the essence of true democracy

Nasim Ahmed

There have been momentous developments on the judicial front in quick succession. First, six judges of the Islamabad High Court wrote a letter to the Judicial Commission alleging interference in their working by the security agencies. The Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, instead of taking action at his level, referred the matter to the government to form a judicial commission to probe the issue. Consequently, a one-judge commission was announced with retired justice Tasadduq Husain Jilani as its head. However, the latter recused himself from the commission with the result that the case went back to the SC. Now the Chief Justice of Pakistan has taken suo moto notice and constituted a seven-member commission to investigate the matter.

The case is one that involves the seminal issue of independence of the judiciary and the hurdles and challenges facing the judges in the discharge of their onerous duties. It all started last week when six judges of the IHC wrote a letter to the Supreme Judicial Council (SJC), accusing the country's intelligence apparatus of interference in judicial affairs, including attempts to pressure judges through abduction and torture of their relatives and secret surveillance inside their homes. The letter, addressed to Chief Justice Qazi Faez Isa, Supreme Court Justices Mansoor Ali Shah and Munib Akhtar and chief justices of the IHC and Peshawar High Court, also questioned if there exists a state police to "intimidate" and coerce judges. The letter, dated March 25, was signed by Justices Mohsin Akhtar Kayani, Tariq Mehmood Jahangiri, Babar Sattar, Sardar Ejaz Ishaq Khan, Arbab Muhammad Tahir and Saman Rafat Imtiaz of the IHC.

The letter mentioned seven instances of alleged interference and intimidation "to influence the outcome of cases of interest" by the intelligence officials, pointing out that when two out of three judges in the bench hearing the plea to disqualify PTI leader Imran Khan for concealing his alleged daughter opined that the case was not maintainable, they were pressured by "operatives of an intelligence agency" through friends and relatives. The situation got so stressful that one of the judges had to be ad-

mitted to hospital due to high blood pressure, the letter said. The letter also referred to the abduction of an IHC judge's brother-in-law by armed men who claimed to be operatives of an agency. Last year, during routine maintenance, an IHC judge found that his official residence had been bugged with spy cameras concealed in his drawing room and bedroom. When data from surveillance equipment was recovered, it showed that "private videos of the judge and his family members" were stored. Along with their letter to the SJC, the six judges also attached copies of letters written to the IHC CJ on May 10, 2023 and Feb 12, 2024.

The letter caused a furor in the country, with calls emerging from various quarters for a probe into the allegations. Reacting to the situation, Chief Justice of Pakistan (CJP) Qazi Faez Isa summoned a full court meeting of the

courageous action and demand appropriate action to uphold such principles.

The lawyers also urged the Supreme Court (SC) to take notice of allegations of interference in the judiciary by the intelligence apparatus under Article 184(3) of the Constitution, adding that any government-led commission "would be bereft of necessary independence and powers" to probe the claims. In their letter, the lawyers expressed their dissatisfaction and dismay with this course of action adopted which they said was antithetical to the principle of independence of judiciary. The statement pointed out that the inquiry commission was required to conduct the probe and perform its functions in accordance with the TORs notified by the federal government. The lawyers said: "In view of such powers conferred upon the federal government, the

inquiry commission would be bereft of necessary independence and powers to conduct a transparent, impartial and meaningful inquiry to restore the public confidence in the independence of judiciary."

As pressure from the legal community and civil society in general built up, Justice Jilani declined to head the proposed commission of inquiry. In his letter he said that since Article 209 of the Constitution empowers the SJC to carry out inquiries into the capacity and conduct of Supreme Court and high court judges, it would be violative of judicial propriety

for me to inquire into a matter which may fall within the jurisdiction of a constitutional body which is the SJC or the Supreme Court of Pakistan itself. He further said that the ToRs for the inquiry were "strictly not germane to the subject matter of the letter". Pointing out that the chief justice of Pakistan being a paterfamilias may address and resolve the issues raised in the letter at the institutional level, Justice Jilani recused himself from heading the commission.

The case is now before the apex court which has taken suo motu notice of the allegations levelled by the six IHC judges and constituted a seven-member bench to probe the issue. It is a landmark case in the judicial history of Pakistan whose outcome will be crucial in upholding and strengthening the principle of independence of the judiciary which forms the basis of a just, fair and equitable society in today's world.



SC judges. A day later Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif met CJP Isa, where the two decided to form a commission headed by former CJP Tasadduq Hussain Jilani to investigate the charges of interference in judicial affairs by intelligence operatives.

Shortly afterwards, more than 300 lawyers from across the country issued a public statement to "express their unwavering commitment and wholehearted support to the principles of rule of law, independence of judiciary and access to justice" in light of the allegations made by the IHC judges. They also endorsed the resolutions passed by the Islamabad High Court Bar Association, the Islamabad Bar Association, the Sindh High Court Bar Association, the Pakistan Bar Council, the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Bar Council and the Balochistan Bar Council expressing solidarity with the six judges of the IHC, commend their

Assessing economic challenges and policy recommendations

Muhammad Hassan

An independent think tank has underscored the detrimental effects of the overvaluation of Pakistan's exchange rate, which has exacerbated the trade deficit and contributed to the accumulation of external debt.

In its report titled "Pakistan Economic Freedom Audit: The Sound Money," the Policy Research Institute of Market Economy highlights the urgent need for government accountability in adhering to fiscal responsibility laws and proposes new legislation to prevent currency manipulation. The report also sheds light on the decline in Pakistan's sound money rating, citing high inflation and monetary expansion as key factors. Additionally, it discusses the Ministry of Finance's revised projections for borrowing, reflecting a shift towards increased reliance on domestic sources.

It has also criticized the State Bank of Pakistan (SBP) for its involvement in implementing expansionary fiscal policies by indirectly extending loans to the federal government. This action has undermined the effectiveness of changes guided by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in the central bank law.

The report highlighted the negative consequences of the collaboration between the central bank and the finance ministry. This collaboration has resulted in high inflation and contributed to the accumulation of debt. Although amendments to the SBP Act have restricted the government's ability to directly borrow from it, monetary expansion has persisted. According to the report, the SBP has infused liquidity into banks through Open Market Operations, enabling these banks to subsequently lend to the government. Consequently, the SBP indirectly provides funds to the government through scheduled banks. Banking industry sources reveal that as of the first week of this month, the central bank had lent Rs10.3 trillion to commercial banks through open market operations.

It commented, "Attempting to control inflation by setting the policy rate while expanding the money supply in response to government borrowing from scheduled banks is counterproductive." During the last Extended Fund Facility (EFF) agreement, the IMF had prohibited the federal government from borrowing directly from the central bank. However, with the complicity of the central bank, the government bypassed this restriction and engaged in borrowing through indirect channels. Over the past five years, broad money has experienced an average annual growth rate of

14.6%. In the fiscal year 2022-23, Pakistan witnessed a significant surge in its annual inflation rate. While the average annual inflation rate over the past decade stood at 9.6%, the fiscal year 2022-23 recorded a rate of 29.2%, marking the second-highest rate in Pakistan's history.

The removal of borrowing restrictions has failed to curb the money supply; instead, it has increased borrowing costs for the government. The central bank prints currency notes and sells them to commercial banks, which then lend the money to the government at higher interest rates. The report observed that the SBP recently adopted a reactive approach to inflation and currency depreciation, which proved ineffective. Despite raising the policy rate from 9.75% in January 2022 to an unprecedented 22% in June 2023, the SBP's monetary policy instrument had limited success in controlling inflation and exchange rates.

During the fiscal year 2022-23, Pakistan witnessed a historically high depreciation of its currency, raising doubts about the effectiveness of monetary policy instruments, as noted in the report. Despite the substantial increase in the policy rate, market perceptions did not reflect a tightening policy stance, leading to prevailing market uncertainty. Consequently, the Pakistani rupee depreciated significantly against major currencies, accompanied by a historically high inflation rate.

The institute has emphasized that the overvaluation of the exchange rate in Pakistan has led to a trade deficit, resulting in the accumulation of external debt. These factors contribute to the current monetary fragility faced by Pakistan. The report suggests holding the government accountable for violating the Fiscal Responsibility and Debt Limitation Act and recommends introducing new legislation to prevent currency manipulation by the government. It recommended that an Act of Parliament be enacted to restrict the deliberate overvaluation of the exchange rate, for which a suitable indicator needs to be developed.

The report highlights that Pakistan's sound money rating has reached its historically lowest level due to high inflation and double-digit growth in monetary expansion. Recent fluctuations in the sound money rating were driven by inflation and its volatility, while the score on foreign currency accounts remained stable. Recent assessments indicate that Pakistan's sound money rating for 2023 is 4.6, the lowest in history, primarily due to exceptionally high inflation during the year. Pakistan's economy's sound money category was evaluated using the Fraser Institute methodology.

This score reflects a concerning state of affairs regarding the country's economic freedom. Pakistan's performance has significantly declined compared to the last two ratings, with a decrease of one quarter. This score represents the country's lowest in the past four decades.

The value of money has consistently depreciated over time. From 1974 to 2001, its purchasing power for goods and services included in the CPI basket declined by one-tenth, and from 1974 to 2023, by one-sixty-eighths. The Pakistani rupee has also experienced a similar decline in value against foreign currencies. For instance, the value of one US dollar in Pakistani rupees increased from less than 10 in 1974 to 248 in 2023, resulting in a 25-fold cumulative loss.

However, monetary growth during this period exceeded 1000 times, indicating inefficiencies in both monetary and fiscal policies that have contributed to this expansion and, ultimately, the devaluation of money.

The ministry of finance has revised its projections of borrowings from both domestic and external sources. There has been a substantial increase in reliance on domestic sources due to reluctance on the part of foreign lenders to provide new money despite an International Monetary Fund umbrella. The government has reduced its projections of gross foreign loans from Rs7.2 trillion to just Rs3.3 trillion—a reduction of 54% in rupee terms. Correspondingly, there has been an increase in domestic loans—from nearly Rs31 trillion to Rs34.2 trillion.

In dollar terms, the ministry has decreased the foreign inflow projections from \$17.7 billion to \$11.4 billion—a downward adjustment of \$6.3 billion, according to the new Annual Borrowing Plan. The revision has primarily been made on account of projections for Eurobonds and foreign commercial loans.

The findings presented in the report paint a concerning picture of Pakistan's economic landscape. The overvaluation of the exchange rate and the resulting trade deficit pose significant challenges to the country's monetary stability. Urgent action is needed to address these issues, including strict adherence to fiscal responsibility laws and the introduction of measures to prevent currency manipulation. Furthermore, the government's revised borrowing projections underscore the importance of domestic financial resources in navigating the current economic climate. It is imperative for policymakers to heed these recommendations and implement effective strategies to safeguard Pakistan's economic well-being.

A mixed picture of growth and decline

Muhammad Zain

The second quarter of the fiscal year 2023-24 saw varied performance across key economic sectors in Pakistan. Large scale manufacturing, electricity, gas, and water supply, as well as the construction industry, experienced contrasting trends, while the services sector exhibited a mixed picture of growth and decline.

In order to meet the IMF's requirement for quarterly Gross Domestic Product (GDP) figures, the government has disclosed the growth rate for the second quarter (October-December) of the current fiscal year, estimating it to be 1 percent. Additionally, the government has upwardly revised the GDP growth figure for the first quarter (July-September) of the caretaker government period, increasing it from 2.13 percent to 2.5 percent based on revised estimates.

Initially targeting a GDP growth rate of 3.5 percent, the government has revised its projection downwards to a range of approximately 2 to 2.6 percent. This announcement followed the 108th meeting of the National Accounts Committee (NAC) to review the quarterly GDP estimates for Q1 and Q2 of the fiscal year 2023-24.

The revised GDP growth for Q1 of the financial year 2023-24 stands at 2.50 percent, up from the previous estimate of 2.13 percent. Notably, the agricultural sector has seen a substantial revision to 8.58 percent growth from 5.06 percent, primarily driven by significant increases in crop production, particularly in cotton, rice, and maize.

Despite improvements in mining and quarrying, the industrial sector has experienced a downward revision to -0.24 percent growth compared to the previous estimate of 2.48 percent, largely due to declines in large-scale manufacturing, electricity, gas, water supply, and construction. Services have shown a modest improvement, rising from 0.82 percent to 0.92 percent growth, primarily due to improvements in finance and insurance.

In Q2 of the fiscal year 2023-24, the economy experienced a modest growth rate of 1.0 percent. Agriculture saw a growth rate of 5.02 percent compared to the same period last year, mainly driven by increased production of important crops such as cotton, rice, and

maize. However, the industrial sector continued to decline, with a negative growth rate of -0.84 percent compared to the same period last year, particularly in mining and quarrying.

Overall, the quarterly GDP figures reflect a mixed performance across sectors, highlighting the challenges and opportunities for economic growth in the current fiscal year.

In the second quarter of 2023-24, large-scale manufacturing, as measured by the Quantum Index of Manufacturing (QIM), experienced a modest growth of 0.35%, driven by increases in production of cooking oil, garments, and fertilizers. The electricity, gas, and water supply industry saw a more robust growth of 1.54%, attributed to higher output from independent power producers (IPPs), hydro, and nuclear plants. However, the con-



struction industry faced a significant decline of -17.59%, primarily due to reduced production of cement and iron & steel, as well as a decrease in government expenditure.

Pakistan's industrial sector is witnessing a blend of outcomes in the current fiscal year. While overall production from July to January experienced a slight dip of 0.52%, there was a favorable upturn noted in January, with a 1.84% increase in large-scale manufacturing.

Textile production notably faced a significant setback, declining by 10.41% during the initial seven months of the fiscal year. Similarly, vehicle production witnessed a sharp decline of over 46% during the same period. Nevertheless, amid these challenges, certain sectors exhibited encouraging signs. In January, large-scale manufacturing saw a modest

increase of 1.84%, hinting at a potential turnaround. Of particular note was the remarkable surge in machinery production, which spiked by 162% in January. Additionally, sectors such as chemicals, fertilizer, medicine, leather products, rubber products, and wood products demonstrated promising growth rates during this period.

The report also highlighted a significant rise in garment production, which surged by 28% in January, indicating a positive trajectory in the industrial landscape. Despite the overarching challenges confronting the industrial sector, these optimistic developments provide hope for future growth and economic recovery.

In the services sector, there was a minimal growth of 0.01% during Q2 of 2023-24. A closer examination of the industry reveals a varied trend. Wholesale and retail trade experienced a growth of 2.11%, driven by positive performance in agriculture output and large scale manufacturing. Transport and storage also showed a moderate increase of 1.13%, attributed to higher output from railways and road transport.

However, industries such as information & communication, finance & insurance, and public administration and social security faced negative real growth rates of -5.43%, -11.1%, and -16.18% respectively, largely due to high inflation. Additionally, both education and human health and social work industries recorded negative growth rates of -0.85% and -2.53% respectively.

Other private services were estimated to have grown at a rate of 3.63% based on indicators received from various sources.

In conclusion, the second quarter of 2023-24 showcased a diverse landscape within Pakistan's economic sectors. While large scale manufacturing and electricity, gas, and water supply sectors saw modest growth, the construction industry faced significant challenges. The services sector displayed a nuanced pattern, with some sub-sectors experiencing growth while others grappled with negative growth rates, largely influenced by inflationary pressures. Moving forward, policymakers and stakeholders must carefully address sector-specific issues to ensure balanced and sustainable economic development.

Persistent inflation and fiscal challenges

Shahid Hussain

The latest monthly report of the finance ministry provides insights into the projected inflation trends and fiscal challenges faced by Pakistan. Despite expectations of moderate inflation amidst upward pressures, the report underscores the government's efforts to mitigate these challenges through various measures.

The finance ministry's report projected that inflation would range from 22.5-23.5%, gradually decreasing to 21-22% in April 2024. Despite upward revisions in petrol prices and the traditional surge in consumer spending during Ramadan, the report described the inflation outlook for March 2024 as moderate. This moderation was attributed to the government's efforts to curb inflationary pressures through administrative measures, including an increased allocation in the Ramadan relief package from Rs7.5 billion to Rs12.5 billion. Additionally, the phenomenon of the high base effect and a decrease in the Food and Agriculture Organisation's food price index contributed to easing inflationary pressures.

In the week ending March 28, inflation saw a decrease of 0.09%, primarily attributed to a decline in food prices, marking the second consecutive week of deceleration compared to the previous week. According to data from the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, the weekly inflation rate remained slightly elevated at 29.41% compared to the same week last year. Weekly inflation is gauged using the Sensitive Price Indicator, which tracks 51 essential kitchen items. During the week, out of the 51 items, prices of 4 (7.84%) items increased, 18 (35.30%) items decreased, and 29 (56.86%) items remained unchanged from the previous week. Tomatoes topped the list of price drops on a week-on-week basis, decreasing by 12.04% to Rs92.71/kg. Following closely was wheat flour, which dropped by 3.80% to Rs2,628.69/20-kg bag. Prices of other commodities decreased by up to 2.59%, including garlic, LPG, onions, potatoes, bananas, pulse gram, and sugar. However, the prices of chicken, eggs, shirting, and rice Irri 6/9 increased by up to 5% during the week. The year-on-year trend shows an increase of 29.41%, with gas charges for Q1 contributing heavily to the 570% rise in its price. Other commodities witnessed increases of up to 86.05%, including chilli powder, onions,

men's sponge chappal, men's sandal, garlic, gur, chicken, salt powder, sugar, energy saver, and pulse mash.

However, the finance ministry acknowledged that the widening fiscal deficit signaled ongoing pressure on public finances. The government reaffirmed its commitment to fiscal discipline and revenue mobilization efforts, particularly in light of the ongoing IMF program and potential negotiations for a new bailout package. The ministry, unveiling its updated annual borrowing plan, outlined Pakistan's heightened gross financing needs aimed at addressing the budget deficit and debt repayments.

The latest report indicates a substantial increase in the projected federal budget deficit for the fiscal year 2023-24, reaching a record Rs8.54 trillion compared to the previously approved target of Rs7.5 trillion by the National Assembly. This revised estimate represents a



significant rise of Rs1.03 trillion or 14% above the budgeted goal, amounting to 8% of the nation's GDP—a level deemed highly unsustainable and exacerbated by existing debt burdens. The revision was necessitated primarily by earlier inaccuracies in reporting interest payments and overly optimistic forecasts regarding inflows from foreign debt. Reports in last September revealed that the ministry had underestimated interest costs by over Rs1 trillion and overestimated foreign loan disbursements by approximately \$4.5 billion.

According to the report, the allocation for interest payments has surged from the budgeted Rs7.3 trillion to Rs8.33 trillion, with domestic interest payments rising from Rs6.4 trillion to Rs7.4 trillion, and external loan interest payments climbing from Rs872 billion to Rs998 billion. As a consequence of these adjustments, and assuming all other expenditures remain

unchanged, the federal budget's size has swelled to a historic Rs15.5 trillion, compared to the Rs14.5 trillion approved by the previous National Assembly in June 2023. Crafted by the Debt Management Office of the finance ministry, the updated annual borrowing plan delineates the government's borrowing strategy to meet its gross financing needs. The report emphasizes continued engagement with both domestic and international investors to enhance coordination and information transparency.

The ministry lamented that had it heeded the advice of the debt office in June of the previous year, the latest revision stemming from debt servicing costs could have been avoided. Notably, interest expenses for the first half of the current fiscal year reached Rs4.2 trillion, with 88% attributed to interest on domestic debt. For the ongoing fiscal year, Pakistan's gross financing needs are estimated at a record

Rs25.5 trillion, equivalent to 24% of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP)—a figure significantly surpassing the sustainable financing level estimated at around 15% of GDP for a developing nation like Pakistan.

The report emphasized the importance of sustainable economic recovery through fiscal consolidation and prudent policies, alongside adequate financial inflows to meet financing needs and maintain external sector stability. Despite challenges, the report anticipated moderate headline inflation in the last quarter of FY2024, driven by

favorable domestic and global factors, including improved agricultural outlook and recovery in the Large Scale Manufacturing sector.

Moreover, the report highlighted a significant rise in net federal revenues during July-January FY2024, attributed to increased tax and non-tax collections, particularly from domestic sources. However, rising expenditures, notably on debt servicing, widened the fiscal deficit by 38% during the first seven months of FY2024, underscoring the ongoing challenges posed by debt obligations.

In conclusion, while the report anticipates moderate inflation and acknowledges persistent fiscal pressures, it emphasizes the government's commitment to fiscal discipline and revenue mobilization. With a focus on sustainable economic recovery and prudent policies, Pakistan aims to tackle these challenges and promote economic stability in the coming months.

Can Russia finally join CPEC?

Raza Khan

After securing an unprecedented fifth term as President of Russia, Vladimir Putin is poised to strengthen ties with China. Media reports suggest that President Putin will visit China in May for extensive discussions on strategic security and economic matters with Chinese President Xi Jinping. There are indications that Russia, under Putin's leadership, may fully engage in President Xi's ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which aims to economically integrate 60 countries across the Afro-Eurasian regions. Of particular interest is the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a flagship component of the BRI, where Moscow may seek involvement.

Both Pakistan and Russia have hinted at the possibility of Moscow joining the multibillion-dollar CPEC, potentially adding a new dimension to the project. Interestingly, Pakistan had unofficially extended an offer to India to join the CPEC rather than disrupt it.

Regarding Russia's potential participation in the CPEC, Moscow appears ready to join the project at the behest of Pakistan and, more crucially, China. Positive signals have been exchanged between Pakistan and Russia, with Moscow eager to fulfill its longstanding aspiration of gaining access to the warm waters of the Arabian Sea, Persian Gulf, and Indian Ocean. This ambition traces back to the era of Peter the Great and continues under the leadership of Vladimir Putin, as access to these waters is deemed essential for Russia's economic and military interests.

Although the strategic landscape has evolved since Peter the Great's time, with the United States enjoying maritime dominance, Russia perceives access to warm waters as crucial for its economic prosperity. While military advantages may not be as significant today, economic benefits for Moscow from joining the CPEC are considerable. Beijing and Islamabad, as the primary stakeholders of the CPEC, may not favor Russia gaining military advantages, but they are likely open to Moscow securing proportional economic benefits through participation in the project.

Coming back to the issue of Russia's joining of the CPEC, Pakistani decision-makers in order to take military and strategic advantage by having closer ties with Moscow so as to neutralize India's hegemony, should not go an extra mile to make Russia part of the CPEC. Rather it should leave the decision solely to China despite the fact that the latter may not have any problems with Russia joining the CPEC. The project is conceived and funded by China; therefore, it is Beijing which should

be given the control over its dynamics and stakeholders. Because Russia may not have any real military and strategic interests by joining the CPEC but with a change of command in the Kremlin a change may occur in Moscow's policy. Moreover, President Putin's agenda of making Russia once again a real power wielder or to put it simply make it a superpower again, is not so secret. For instance, how it has tried to prevent Ukraine from falling into the lap of the West and its military alliance North Atlantic Treaty Organization and its support to Bashar Al Assad in Syria in his fight with the anti-regime forces in recent years and months as well as support to Iran point towards revivalist efforts for lost Russian power and status.

second-largest economy.

The CPEC was initially conceived by Beijing to provide access to its landlocked northwestern regions, particularly Xinjiang, bordering the CARs, via the Gwadar port in Pakistan. These regions of China are relatively underdeveloped compared to the more prosperous south and east. Gwadar offers the shortest route for northwestern China to access the sea, facilitating substantial trade with markets in the Middle East, Africa, South Asia, and Southeast Asia. China's broader vision extends beyond the CPEC, encompassing multiple economic corridors across Asia.

For Pakistan, the CPEC represents a crucial economic lifeline for its future



So Pakistan must be extremely cautious regarding dealing with different aspects of the CPEC as it cannot afford to let go of any of the benefits associated with the project.

While there is mutual agreement among China, Pakistan, and Russia regarding the potential involvement of the latter in the CPEC, it's essential to note that the Central Asian Republics (CARs) must also be integrated into the project for this to materialize. Many CAR states have expressed interest in joining the CPEC, contingent upon approval from China and Pakistan. Given China's ambitious plans to revive the ancient Silk Route and its significant economic stake in linking Central and South Asia, Beijing is likely to welcome the inclusion of Russia and the CARs into the project. Ultimately, China stands to gain the most from enhanced connectivity between Central and South Asia, bolstering its status as the world's

development. Throughout its nearly 70-year history, Pakistan has not encountered a project as significant as the CPEC. Consequently, Pakistan aims to maximize the benefits derived from it. However, previous Pakistani governments, particularly under the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N), have been criticized for politicizing the CPEC and directing a disproportionate amount of funds toward mega projects in the Punjab province, neglecting smaller provinces like Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan. This led to grievances regarding the distribution of CPEC funds and changes in the project's original route. However, Beijing intervened, assuring all provincial chief ministers of a fair share of CPEC funds and projects. This demonstrated effective management by China and underscored the significance of the CPEC for Pakistan's economic, security, and developmental future.

Silent war for rights

Dr. Fatima Khan

Arooj Zahra found herself in a state of disbelief when she overheard her senior colleague engaging in a boisterous conversation filled with sexual innuendos among his male coworkers, all while she was present. She had recently joined a semi-government department under the federal government, and to make matters more challenging, she was the sole female employee in that particular section. Initially, she contemplated intervening and delivering a stern reprimand, especially to her senior colleague, regarding their lewd conversation. However, she ultimately refrained from doing so, weighed down by the awareness that she was the only woman in the large room.

The second time she had to endure this mental torment caused by the offensive remarks, Arooj decided to take action and lodged a complaint with the office in-charge. Unfortunately, her complaint yielded no results as not only did the main 'culprit' dismiss her concerns, but some other male members of the section also informed the in-charge that such conversations were commonplace and unrelated to her presence. As their crude remarks continued to wear on her nerves, she took the step of requesting a transfer to another section, even though the work there did not align with her academic qualifications.

According to a report from the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), Arooj Zahra's case falls within the category of 32% of women in Pakistan who silently endure gender-based violence without seeking legal recourse. The report underscores that gender-based violence against women is a widespread human rights violation on a global scale, representing a grave threat to both their health and safety. The report highlights that gender-based violence manifests in various insidious forms, both in the real world and on online platforms, encompassing physical, sexual, psychological, and digital violence. Any form of violence takes a toll on the survivors' physical and mental well-being, potentially leading to anxiety, depression, suicidal thoughts or behaviors, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Survivors may also experience a loss of their sense of individuality, dignity, and self-worth, as outlined in the report.

Prof Dr. Raana Malik, the head of the Department of Gender Studies at the University of the Punjab, Lahore, points out that one of the most prevalent forms of violence in today's world is digital violence or virtual abuse of women and girls. Digital violence encompasses

online sexual harassment, cyberbullying, and the non-consensual use of images and videos. Globally, 85% of women have reported witnessing digital violence, and almost 40% have personally experienced it, according to the professor. She laments that the hate and devaluation of women online result in long-term psychological, emotional, and physical distress.

Global statistics, as cited in the UNFPA report, reveal that nine out of ten women (92%) have indicated that online violence negatively impacts their well-being, with over a third (35%) reporting mental health issues stemming from online violence. Digital violence also jeopardizes the professional and economic livelihoods of women and girls who rely on online and social media spaces, according to the report's findings.

Prof Raana Malik emphasizes that women and girls have the fundamental right to feel safe in all environments, regardless of their location. It is an opportune moment for everyone to



reflect on strategies to eradicate gender-based violence, as advocated by the professor.

The UNFPA report underscores that the organization, in collaboration with other partners, is vigorously working towards this campaign by raising awareness, mobilizing advocacy efforts, and inspiring concrete actions to eliminate gender-based violence, child marriage, and other harmful practices. Their ultimate goal is to end gender-based violence by 2030, achieved through the empowerment of women and girls with knowledge about their bodies and rights, as well as engaging men and boys in changing their attitudes, with a focus on understanding the harmful nature of gender-based violence.

The report paints a grim picture of an ongoing, seemingly endless war without boundaries. Shockingly, it reveals that every 11 minutes, a woman or girl falls victim to violence at the hands of an intimate partner or

a family member. More than half of the women and girls who lost their lives last year were tragically killed by someone they knew closely, either a partner or a family member. These statistics send shivers down one's spine, particularly because they represent just the visible portion of a much larger problem. They serve as a stark reminder of the pervasive vulnerability that millions of females face, even within the supposed safety of their homes, markets, or workplaces. This violence takes a toll on their physical and mental health, disrupts their relationships, and hampers their productivity. Natural disasters and conflicts only exacerbate existing structural and gender inequalities, creating conditions like displacement, which further endanger women's safety. The Covid-19 pandemic exacerbated gender-based violence, as women and girls found themselves trapped in lockdowns with their abusers, with few avenues for escape or assistance.

The UNFPA report underscores that patriarchal societies like Pakistan, where notions of honor are often tied to how a woman behaves and appears in the eyes of others, grapple with deeply rooted issues. Domestic violence is still largely viewed as a private matter, even a male 'privilege.' Disturbingly, data shows that 34% of ever-married women in Pakistan have experienced physical, sexual, or emotional abuse at the hands of their spouses. However, due to cultural norms and limited resources, a staggering 56% of these women who reported enduring such violence have neither sought help to end the abuse nor confided in anyone about their suffering.

Prof. Dr. Raana Malik points out that every province in Pakistan now has legislation against domestic violence, but the enforcement of these laws varies from weak to practically non-existent. Nevertheless, there have been instances, particularly in response to highly publicized cases of femicide, where gender-based violence has been openly discussed, and perpetrators publicly condemned. Legislation against honor killings, a longstanding form of violence against women, has been strengthened in recent years. However, as illustrated by the acquittal of the murderer of social media star Qandeel Baloch, loopholes in the law can be exploited by those with misogynistic mindsets. Sexual harassment of women in the workplace represents a more insidious form of gender-based violence, and once again, patriarchal beliefs about public spaces being the domain of men, with women as mere intruders, often hinder the implementation of laws against it.

Extreme heat is the silent assassin of climate change

Jagan Chapagain

Twenty million people dead in a heatwave, some poached alive in a lake they hoped to cool off in. It is, for now, science fiction.

Kim Stanley Robinson's apocalyptic novel, *Ministry for the Future*, starts in an Indian town where many have not survived a summer night. By day, the survivors are choked with the fumes of generators powering air conditioners. The air is "like breathing through the exhaust pipe of an old bus", he writes.

We're not there, yet. But extreme heat, far less visually dramatic than hurricanes or floods, is claiming lives and livelihoods with a stealth that belies its impact. Climate change is dramatically increasing the probability that we will see a mass fatality extreme heat disaster soon. Extreme heat is not only an issue in the Northern Hemisphere from June to September. As I write, in March, there's an unprecedented closure of schools across South Sudan. It's due not to conflict or economic woes but an extraordinary surge in temperatures to more than 42 degrees Celsius. Parts of South America and Australia are just emerging from their two hottest summers ever. Worldwide, 2023 was the hottest on record – by a huge margin. Half the world's people – 3.8 billion in fact – simmered under extreme heat for at least one day last year.

Heatwaves across Europe killed more than 60,000 people in 2022. In the United Kingdom, roads melted and almost 3,000 people died. India sees at least 1,000 deaths a year attributable to extreme heat. In the United States, the number is similar. Extreme heat there kills more people than floods and tornadoes combined. According to *The Lancet* medical journal, China is on track to see from 20,000 to 80,000 heatwave deaths a year.

And all these figures are, in fact, probably gross underestimates. Unlike deaths in floods, most of those during heatwaves are recorded as something medical. Extreme heat is the silent assassin of climate change. It's to expose this and propose solutions that the inaugural Global Summit on Extreme Heat is convening this week. Jointly hosted by my organisation, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, and by the US Agency

for International Development, the online forum will bring together thinkers and doers. Because there's a lot to think about. And even more to do.

Climate change, of course, exacerbates extreme heat. World Weather Attribution reports like a recent one about heat in southern West Africa show – near unequivocally – that heatwaves are much more frequent and hotter because of a generally warmer world. This underscores the need to mitigate emissions. But no amount of action now will stop heatwaves in our lifetimes. What we can do is cope better when they hit by preparing before they do. How?

First, by focusing on the most vulnerable. Heatwaves have a disproportionate impact on those in cities, where heat is often trapped, and

often help with such plans. Kenya's Red Cross, for example, has worked with scientists, researchers, city authorities and community leaders to map out areas of highest heat risk in Nairobi's informal settlements. Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies have done similar studies in Cape Town, Hanoi, Mexico City and Dhaka.

Second, by prioritising early warnings and early actions. Turning science and forecasts into accessible information saves lives. People warned in advance make better decisions and take better actions. That can be through media but also through telephone calls to people registered as vulnerable months ahead of time – Australia's Telecross RED is one example. Anticipatory action – moving those who can

move, for example, or putting temporary cooling infrastructure in place – also saves lives. In Hanoi, before a recent heatwave, volunteers with Vietnam's Red Cross positioned mobile cooling centres near areas where street vendors and motorcycle riders gathered. Spain rosters more lifeguards on beaches on days projected to be the hottest, knowing that it's on them that the least experienced swimmers venture into the sea.

Third, by putting power in the hands of those on the ground. Local people know their communities best. Fellow residents trust them. Skills and resources

can be shared quickly and efficiently. Fatema Khatun and Sayma Khatun Bithi are two of many Red Crescent volunteers in Bangladesh who teach first-aid skills, including how to help someone who falls unconscious due to overheating.

Above all, though, addressing extreme heat starts with highlighting the problem. At this week's global summit, we'll be announcing a two-month campaign of action on extreme heat ahead of Heat Action Day itself on June 2. We'll be launching an online toolkit to help guide people with what they can do to spread knowledge and prepare for the Northern Hemisphere's summer, which for many has already begun.

Science fiction is deliberately scary. Reality need not be. With the right anticipation and action, the worst scenarios can remain in the realm of the imagination.



on those without the means to escape either literally or into air-conditioned cocoons. Cities need plans. City planners increasingly recognise this. Two-thirds of those who responded to a survey by *The Lancet* said they were concerned about climate change impacting public health. Extreme heat was the most frequently identified hazard, named by 72 percent of respondents. Heat action plans identify vulnerable groups and "heat island" or "hot spot" areas. They identify triggers for action and warnings and assign clear roles and responsibilities. They test innovative but simple solutions like shades over crowded outdoor areas such as markets and tree planting within informal settlements. Freetown in Sierra Leone recently launched its plan. I'm delighted Freetown's mayor will be speaking at the summit.

Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies

The problem with British policing is not ‘just a few bad apples’

Marienna Pope-Weidemann

On February 29, an independent inquiry into the abduction, rape and murder of Sarah Everard by an off-duty police constable in London published its first damning report.

The Angiolini Inquiry focused on the “career and conduct” of the murderer Wayne Couzens, who used his police warrant card and police powers to convince Sarah to get into the back of his car during a COVID-19 lockdown in March 2021. It found that he should never have been allowed to become a police officer let alone remain in the force for 20 years.

Metropolitan Police “repeatedly failed” to spot warning signs about his unsuitability to be an officer, the inquiry said. The many offences he has been accused of throughout his life include a serious sexual assault against a child before the beginning of his policing

career and multiple counts of indecent exposure. According to the inquiry, one indecent exposure charge, to which he pleaded guilty, had occurred just days before Sarah’s murder. The police force consistently turned a blind eye to Couzens’ predatory behaviour, the report found, and missed multiple opportunities to stop him. Sarah’s family said if not for these failures, she would still be alive today.

The damning picture painted in the report – one of police incompetence, institutional misogyny and systemic apathy towards sexual violence – is devastating and truly frightening but what it is not is surprising.

After all, Metropolitan Police Commissioner Mark Rowley himself admitted in September that the force readily employs “hundreds” of officers who should have been sacked for misconduct. And another independent review tied to the Everard murder, this time looking into “the standards of behaviour and internal culture of the Metropolitan Police Service” and published in March 2023, found that it is “institutionally racist, misogynistic and homophobic”.

Although multiple inquiries have been restricted to scrutinising London’s Metropolitan Police, in truth this is a national issue. As thousands of women and girls harassed, abused, victimised and failed by police across the country know too well, if we were to

broaden the scope of such inquiries and reviews, we would see many, if not most, police forces across the country are crippled by misogyny, racism and indifference to sexual violence.

Indeed, according to a 2023 report by the National Police Chiefs’ Council (NPCC), from October 1, 2021, to March 31, 2022, at least 1,483 unique allegations of violence against women and girls were recorded against 1,539 police employees. Last year, even the former head of the so-called Independent Office for Police Conduct – the watchdog we rely on to protect us from police corruption and abuse – was charged with raping a child.

Sarah was the victim of a national crisis of policing that threatens public safety and wellbeing. Police routinely fail to apprehend repeat abusers like Couzens before their behaviour escalates to murder, and this failure

discrimination and corruption from more survivors than I can count. People started sharing their stories with me when I started speaking out and campaigning for change following the loss of my cousin Gaia. She was 19 years old in November 2017 when she died of hypothermia after going missing in Dorset during a mental health crisis. This was less than two years after reporting to Dorset police that she was a victim of child exploitation. Like so many others, the police in Dorset repeatedly failed to listen to Gaia or take action to keep her safe and this paved the way for her preventable death.

They failed to fully investigate Gaia’s and others’ allegations against the known child sex offender she accused of rape, refused her a restraining order and failed to make so much as a safeguarding referral despite innumerable pleas for help. She went missing just a few hours after a police officer hung up on her, accusing

her of talking “a load of rubbish”. She was already dead when they finally agreed to start properly searching for her.

Just like London Met, Dorset Police has an appalling record of investigative failure and harbouring perpetrators. A Dorset woman was strangled to death by a serving officer in 2020.

Survivors are dying as a result of police indifference to sexual violence and a systematic refusal to thoroughly investigate abuse within communities as well as in their own ranks. These failures cannot be allowed to continue.

The routine negligence and discrimination that met Gaia

and meets so many survivors who report to the police – including many of those who tried to report Wayne Couzens’ past abuses – has been normalised to the point of routine. But if the police had really listened to survivors’ accounts, both Sarah and Gaia might still be with us today.

There is already guidance in place that, if followed in full, would vastly improve the police investigation of sexual assault. Following years of campaigning by survivors and allies, the College of Policing’s new National Operating Model for Violence Against Women presented a detailed blueprint of how officers should safeguard survivors and conduct a thorough investigation. For example, it tells officers to be “suspect focused” in their investigations, and focus on “the behaviour of the suspect to see whether they have committed a crime, not the victim’s character”.



is not limited to predators among their own ranks. On average, two women are killed by their domestic partners each week, often after contacting police or other public services and asking for help.

According to a new report by the NPCC, from April 2022 to March 2023, police recorded 242 domestic abuse-related deaths in England and Wales, including 93 suspected victim suicides. There are many ways that the trauma of abuse can change or take a life, particularly when that trauma is amplified by a discriminatory state response. Countless are lost to suicide and addiction related to the impact of prolonged abuse by their abuser(s) and neglect by the state. In this country today less than one in 100 rape cases lead to conviction; less than two in 100 are even being charged.

I have heard the same story of neglect,

Lost in Orientalism: Arab Christians and the war in Gaza

Robert Clines

On February 21, it was announced that the Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby refused to meet with Munther Isaac, a Palestinian Lutheran pastor, after Isaac had appeared at a pro-Palestine rally with former UK Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn. Isaac, whose Christmas Eve sermon went viral for its condemnation of the Israeli assault on Gaza and concomitant Western Christian silence, has repeatedly called for ecumenical peace amid Palestinian suffering.

A week later, Welby apologised and agreed to meet with Isaac. But in his apology X post, the archbishop stated it was wrong to shun Isaac “at this time of profound suffering for our Palestinian Christian brothers and sisters”, making no mention of the equal suffering of Palestinian Muslims, with whom Isaac has repeatedly stood in solidarity.

As Catholics and Protestants celebrated Easter, Palestinians of these denominations are barred from visiting their holy places in Jerusalem. Neither the Church of England nor other Western churches have denounced these restrictions on free worship by the Israeli government. Welby's refusal to meet Isaac and the continuing silence of Western churches on Israeli crimes perpetrated against Palestinian Christians and Muslims are just further reminders that, for Arab Christians, their place in the West remains tenuous because of Orientalist and Islamophobic views of the Arab world.

Rarely allowed to speak for themselves, Arab Christians are either depicted in the West as hapless victims whose numbers continue to dwindle because of “Islamic fundamentalism” or as heretical Christians whose faith is marked by its cultural proximity to Islam. Driving this is an Orientalist gaze that sees the Arab world as barbaric and uncivilised, with only Western civilising missions and the state of Israel serving as a bulwark against its “terror”.

Ignored in turn are the experiences and perspectives of Arab Christians who lived alongside their Arab Jewish and Arab Muslim neighbours in relative peace and security from the seventh century to the latter period of the Ottoman Empire and the onset of Western imperialism.

From the Crusades onward, Western Christians have seen Arab Christians as the victims of “Islamic terror” in need of rescue. One of Pope Urban II's justifications for the First Crusade (1095-1099), which resulted in the Western conquest of Jerusalem, was that

Muslims destroyed churches, raped Christian women, and forced Christian men to be circumcised.

Similarly, Western observers across the Middle Ages and into the 16th and 17th centuries claimed that the perceived theological ignorance and poverty of Christian communities, such as the Copts in Egypt and the Maronites in Lebanon, were due to the oppressive Muslim rulers who overtaxed them, refused them permission to build or repair churches, and through various means, convinced more and more Christians to convert to Islam.

When Arab Christians were not perceived as victims of “Islamic terror”, they were seen as a product of it. This attitude was apparent in letters by Catholic missionaries who had been dispatched by Rome to the Middle East in an effort to bolster Catholic numbers following the loss of large swaths of Europe to Protestantism in the wake of the Reformation.

Many of them were aghast that Arab Christians had purportedly been Islamised and



were thus in need of cultural reform. They also saw Arab Christian religious practices and theological beliefs as evidence of both ignorance and poverty as well as centuries of influence of Islam.

Catholic missionaries frequently grew frustrated when local Christian communities, like the Coptic Orthodox and the Syriac Orthodox, refused to change their beliefs to the benefit of distant Rome, referring to them as obstinate and ignorant fools who were more like their Muslim and Jewish neighbours than their European co-religionists.

In the period of European imperialism, European powers established missionary schools as part of their colonisation efforts in Egypt, Lebanon, Palestine and Syria. Europeans strove to reform and civilise these newly subjugated populations, and they saw Arab Christians as potential allies to undermine Muslim powers.

In the wake of widespread Westernisation and modernisation throughout the Ottoman Empire known as the Tanzimat reforms (1839-1876), Christian communities in the Middle East were often politicised as Western fifth columns who potentially undermined the sectarian equilibrium of Ottoman society. This resulted in 5,000 people killed in the Massacre of Aleppo (1850) and more than 20,000 killed in the 1860 conflicts in Mount Lebanon and Damascus.

While most Arab Christians rejected such Western interventions, and many Muslims protected their Christian neighbours during riots, Arab Christians nevertheless became, as historian Ussama Makdisi argues, “the most obvious symbol of the new Europe-oriented Ottoman order of things”. Yet, even when Arab Christians are Catholics, Anglicans (like the late Palestinian scholar Edward Said) or Lutherans (like Munther Isaac), they continue to be seen as Arabs first, Christians second. They are racialised, Orientalised, and erased in the European view of what a Christian should look like.

What is often absent in this Orientalist view of Arab Christians are their rich histories, cultures and traditions. Ignored are the great contributions of Arab Christians, such as Hunayn ibn Ishaq al-Ibadi (808–873), whose translations and commentaries were integral to preserving Ancient Greek philosophy across the Middle Ages and beyond, and Ahmad Faris al-Shidyaq (1805/1806-1887), a central writer of the Nahda, or the Arab Awakening, a period of immense cultural reform and modernisation within the Arab world.

Quick to comment on the purported anti-Christian and anti-Semitic violence of Islam, Western Christians have remained mostly silent on the plight of Palestinian Christians at the hands of Israel. At the root of this stance is the longstanding Orientalist belief that all Arabs are “Muslim fundamentalists” bent on murdering Christians and Jews.

But this ignores the plurality of Arab life and how religious ecumenism between the three Abrahamic faiths has long transcended differences and united people across the Arab world. Western Christian leaders like Archbishop Welby must see beyond their Orientalist views that dismiss the concerns of Arabs and Palestinians like Munther Isaac, regardless of their faith. Otherwise, the plurality of the Arab world and a truly ecumenical future for all will remain lost in Western Orientalist, moral and political apprehensions.

PMDC failure

Unfortunately, the Pakistan Medical and Dental Council (PMDC) has once again blatantly failed to include the most important stakeholders in the process of preparing the accreditation standards.

Out of 184 medical and dental colleges, 118 are in the private sector, while 66 are public-sector institutions. The Pakistan Association of Private Medical and Dental Institutions (PAMI) represents private-sector medical and dental colleges across Pakistan.

The accreditation standards made by PMDC are illogical and do not take into consideration the ground realities. Many specialities have been added whose experts are largely non-existent in the country and cannot be brought in, especially in terms of academic institutions located in peripheral and far-flung areas.

Unnecessary expenses and facilities have been added that have nothing to do with the quality and standard of medical or dental education. PAMI had reviewed the entire document, and suggested a number of changes to make it a balanced and practically applicable document. However, the PMDC ignored all such suggestions, and has, instead, notified its own document.

Such a course of actions has nothing to do with the standard of medical or dental education, and will only cause hardship to the institutions and the families of those associated with them either as students or employees. The PMDC should revisit the matter and form a task force comprising all the relevant stakeholders from all regions of Pakistan to develop a practically sound document. Thereafter, adequate time should be given to all institutions to meet those standards effectively.

Dr Arif Arfeen
Karachi

Robbers in Sindh

In the past, dacoits in Sindh inhabiting the rural hinterlands were known for their adherence to a code of conduct that was characterised by a peculiar sense of honour. They would always demonstrate a propensity to target individuals of considerable financial means, refraining from preying upon the impoverished and the downtrodden. They would respect women and would not cause undue harm or discomfort to the less fortunate. Regrettably, contemporary depictions of dacoits portray a stark departure from this erstwhile chivalrous archetype.

Present-day accounts depict dacoits as harbouring a ruthless demeanour, often collaborating with local landlords and politically influential figures to perpetrate heinous crimes, violence and brutality, thereby abandoning the 'noble' principles of yore.

A perfect example in this regard is that of Allah Rakhiyo Nandwani, the primary school

teacher who was brutally murdered recently by notorious dacoits for going to school in Nasrullah Khan Bijarani village, which was declared a 'no-go' area by the bandits. Armed with a gun for his personal safety, the teacher used to go to the school at the risk of his own life.

Unfortunately, the recent surge in kidnappings for ransom has plunged interior areas of Sindh into a state of fear, insecurity and uncertainty. With over 60 individuals having fallen victim to these heartless dacoits this year alone, there is a palpable sense of insecurity among the people. The epicentre of this epidemic is the kacho area of Kashmore district, particularly on the Kandhkot side, where criminal gangs operate with impunity, exploiting the vulnerabilities of the local population.

In a recent tragic incident in Ghouspur, Kandhkot, a man was abducted along with his colleague. He was brutally tortured and dumped near the B.S. Feeder canal, while his colleague remains in captivity, amplifying the community's distress and fuelling anger against the ineffectiveness of law-enforcement agencies.

The modus operandi of these dacoits is both cunning and cruel, exploiting potential victims through employing tactics like 'honey trapping' as well as fake job opportunities. They demand millions of rupees in ransom, imposing a heavy financial burden on the affected families, often with dire consequences for those unable to pay. The psychological toll on families is immeasurable, exacerbated by the desperation of receiving ransom demands and gruesome videos, plunging them into a perpetual state of trauma.

The Sindh chief minister had convened a cabinet meeting, acknowledging the gravity of the situation. Following a recent report from the Sindh police revealing 29 registered cases of kidnappings for ransom, the decision was made to launch operations against these dacoits. Despite sporadic grand operations by law-enforcers, the stronghold of these criminals remains intact, supported by access to sophisticated weaponry and deep-rooted corruption within the law-enforcement mechanism.

The situation has escalated to the point where almost half of northern Sindh remained paralysed by strikes and sit-ins that lasted more than a week. Continuous kidnappings for ransom have driven hundreds to migrate, particularly the members of the Hindu community. The cases have exacerbated ethnic tensions and social divisions within the region.

The government must take decisive action to combat the crisis. The authorities must address the root causes of these crimes by investigating and dismantling the networks responsible for supplying arms to these ruthless criminals.

The government must prioritise the

safety and security of the citizens by taking strict action against the criminals. Only through concerted efforts as well as effective and comprehensive strategies can Sindh rid itself of this scourge. It is time the current government demonstrated its commitment to justice and security through proper action and accountability.

Ali Gul Leghari
Johi

Overburdened students

Students often feel overburdened and stressed during Ramazan which is broadly due to the academic pressure that often compromises their ability to observe the holy month of fasting in its true spirit. Educational institutions should at least try to design their respective academic calendars in a manner that may take into consideration this very basic element. The current approach often fails to consider the unique challenges that the students face during the month. Besides, the combination of fasting, late-night prayers, and rigorous academic demands can lead to physical exhaustion, decreased concentration, and a decline in academic performance. Therefore, both the authorities and policymakers should take proactive measures to alleviate the burden on the students during Ramazan.

Bilal Ahmed
Karachi

Lawlessness

In Pakistan, not a single day goes by when we do not hear about some heart-wrenching incident involving heinous crimes. Earlier this month, a distressing incident took place in Hyderabad where a young girl, law student Yusra Batool, was gunned down in cold blood while she, along with her brother, also a law student, was returning home after appearing in examinations. They were intercepted by a man in a vehicle who opened fire, killing the girl on the spot. Her brother sustained two bullets in the head and is said to be in a critical condition. When will this brazen lawlessness end? When will the state take strict action to protect the people?

G. Akbar Paliyo
Larkana

Women's Day

The theme of the International Women's Day this year was 'Inspire inclusion'. This brought to my mind the critical role the powerful women leaders in the corporate world may play in changing the lives of countless women and minor girls in society. Women's Day should not be a one-day affair, as it currently happens to be. There should be more substance to it than mere 'celebrations'.

Mehmood Aziz
Karachi

US measles cases in 2024 already surpass last year's total

Lisa O'Mary

The U.S. has now tallied more measles cases this year than were reported in all of 2023. In newly published data, the CDC's year-to-date count now stands at 64 cases of measles, surpassing the 2023 total case count of 58. During the first 3 months of last year, there had only been seven reported cases of measles, meaning that there has been more than an 800% increase when comparing the first 3 months of 2023 to 2024. If that pace continues, the total number of measles cases in the U.S. this year would reach into the hundreds. But the increase isn't yet so large that it would shatter modern-day records. In 2019, there were more than 1,000 measles cases spread across 31 states. Nearly 90% of those cases were not linked directly to international travel, but instead spread within close-knit communities with low rates of people vaccinated against measles. So far this year, the disease has been confirmed in 17 states, including 11 cases in Florida and 33 cases in Chicago. The majority of the Chicago cases are among children ages 4 and under, but nine people diagnosed with measles were between the ages of 18 and 49, and one person was age 50 or older. Chicago's case count is rapidly rising, and health officials are urging people at a widely affected migrant shelter to get vaccinated, while also warning people of possible exposures at a suburban restaurant and at a medical center, CBS News reported. Measles is caused by a highly contagious virus that spreads through the air and by touching contaminated surfaces. The virus can remain in the air for up to 2 hours after an infected person leaves a room, and as many as 90% of unvaccinated people who come in close contact with someone who is infected will become infected also, the CDC says.



Fortified 14th-century castle and moat discovered under hotel in France

Kristina Killgrove

Archaeologists have discovered the remains of a 14th-century medieval castle, including a moat, hidden beneath the courtyard of a historic hotel in France. Jewelry, pots, pans and padlocks were among the artifacts recovered, offering clues about the nobility who used the castle for nearly a century. In spring 2023, archaeologists at the French National Institute of Preventive Archaeological Research (INRAP) excavated the courtyard and cellars of the Lagorce Hotel, which was built in the 18th century atop the ruins of a medieval castle known as the Château de l'Hermine. The castle, located in Vannes, a village on the west coast of the Brittany region, was built as a fortress and residence for John IV, Duke of Brittany, in 1381. From the 10th to 16th centuries, Brittany was a medieval feudal state, established after the Vikings were expelled from the region. Essentially a tiny country, the Duchy of Brittany was ruled by a line of hereditary dukes. When John IV came to power in 1365, he began to build numerous house-fortresses throughout Brittany, with Château de l'Hermine becoming the seat of the Duchy. But the castle was used for only a century before it fell into disrepair when John IV's grandson, Francis II, moved the capital of the duchy out of Vannes. Renovations in the 18th to 20th centuries turned the building at different times into a hotel, then a law school and finally government offices built on top of the original 14th century castle.



When were sea levels highest?

Meg Duff

Sea levels are rising as climate change rapidly melts glaciers and ice sheets and the water within the oceans expands in a warming world. But have sea levels ever been higher than they are today? And when were they the highest? In short, sea levels have easily been higher than they are today. But it's still unclear exactly when they were at their highest, although scientists have a few ideas. Within the past half-billion years, sea levels likely peaked 117 million years ago, during the Aptian age. At this time, which was part of the Cretaceous period (145 million to 66 million years ago), sea levels were around 700 feet higher than they are today, according to a 2022 study in the journal *Gondwana Research*.



"Over the past 540 million years, the highest sea levels were in the Cretaceous, at the time when the dinosaurs were walking the Earth," Douwe van der Meer, the study's lead author, an exploration geoscientist in the oil and gas industry and a guest researcher at Utrecht University in the Netherlands, told Live Science. "Beyond that, it's basically speculation," Jun Korenaga, a professor of Earth and planetary sciences at Yale University, told Live Science.

Korenaga's research suggests that sea levels were higher much earlier in Earth's roughly 4.5 billion-year-old history, when the first continents were still forming and Earth's surface was nearly devoid of dry land.

In the short term, sea level is a function of melting ice. For instance, when Antarctica's "Doomsday" Thwaites Glacier melts, the entire West Antarctic Ice Sheet may collapse, increasing the average global sea levels by around 11 feet. In the long term, shifting continents and a stretching seafloor also come into play. And then there's the curveball: Korenaga believes the early oceans held more water than they do today.

Human brains getting bigger: Good news for dementia risk?

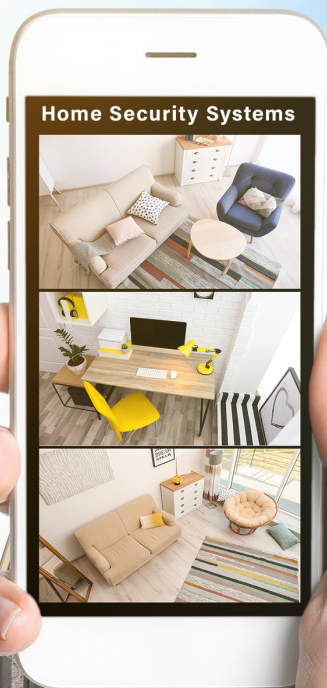
Megan Brooks

The size of the human brain has increased over time, a finding that may help explain a reported decline in cases of dementia. A trends analysis using brain imaging data from a long-running heart study showed an increase in several brain measurements in people born in the 1970s vs those born in the 1930s. Researchers believe the increased size of the brain will lead to "increased 'reserve' against the diseases of aging, consequently reducing overall risk of dementia," Charles DeCarli, MD, director of the Alzheimer's Disease Research Center and Imaging of Dementia and Aging Laboratory at the University of California at Davis, said. The study was published online in the journal *JAMA Neurology*. An earlier paper from the same study, known as the Framingham Heart Study, suggested cases of dementia are declining. The study is sponsored by the National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute and has been under way since 1948. It is generally used to study multigenerational patterns of cardiovascular and other diseases. "This difference occurred among persons with at least high school education and was not affected by differences in vascular risk. Our work was stimulated by this finding and the possibility that differences in brain size might be occurring over the three generations of the Framingham Heart Study, which might explain an increased resilience to dementia," said DeCarli. The findings are likely based, in part, on improved lifestyle and environmental factors, as well as newer evidence that there are things a person can do to lower the risk of dementia, the authors said. There are limitations to the researcher, however, namely that the Framingham study's participants are largely white, healthy and well educated and not representative of the broader U.S.





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