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WEEKLY Cutting Edge

INDEPENDENT • INCISIVE ANALYTICAL

TACKLING THE CHALLENGE OF RISING FOOD INSECURITY

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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
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 Vorks,
Plot# 203, Green Light Street,
Mughal Park, Bund Road, Lahore.

For subscription, please contact
info@weeklycutting.com

Tackling the challenge of rising food insecurity

Farhan Khan

The world faces the growing spectre of hunger due to war, conflicts, climate shocks, economic slowdown and shrinking humanitarian aid. According to the Food and Agriculture Organisation's latest report on global food insecurity, worldwide more than 295 million people faced acute hunger last year. This is a new record, marking the sixth consecutive annual increase in the number of people affected by "high levels" of acute food insecurity.

In the early sixties, the world had a population of 3.5 billion who were fed by cultivating 1.37 billion hectares of land. By 2011, the global population had doubled to seven billion, but cultivated land had increased by just 12 per cent to 1.53 billion hectares. Despite this, agricultural productivity nearly doubled, resulting in a global food surplus. As of 2025, the global population stands at 8.1 billion, and food production has tripled compared to 1961 levels.

This was due to the Green Revolution, which introduced high-yielding varieties (HYVs), chemical fertilisers and improved irrigation systems. Pakistan participated in the Green Revolution in the mid-1960s but gradually lost touch with ongoing global innovations. Global food production has largely kept pace with population growth, primarily due to advances in technology and the introduction of high-yielding seed varieties. But Pakistan later failed to keep pace with this progress in agricultural productivity. Mechanised farming has a limited reach in Pakistan which has one of the lowest numbers of tractors per hectare, and mechanised harvesting is minimal, resulting in significant post-harvest losses due to manual collection

According to FAO, an estimated 11 million people in Pakistan faced acute food shortages between November 2024 and March 2025, caused by multiple adverse economic factors and climate-related stresses. The crisis was particularly severe in 68 flood-affected rural districts in Balochistan, Sindh, and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP).

Erratic weather patterns emerged as the leading factor contributing to acute food insecurity in the country, with unusually heavy monsoon rains between July and September triggering floods in parts of Balochistan and Sindh. These climate shocks not only disrupted agricultural production — causing widespread

crop losses and extensive damage to homes, water systems and farming infrastructure — but also deepened economic vulnerabilities for rural populations. At the same time, rising inflation has eroded the common man's purchasing power, making access to food increasingly unaffordable for tens of millions of Pakistanis.

Due to acute food insecurity Pakistan also faces the threat of severe malnutrition. According to a report, between March 2023 and January 2024, acute malnutrition affected 2.1 million children in the age bracket six months to five years, with the crisis stemming from not just worsening food shortages, but also from inadequate dietary quality and quantity. Food insecurity has pushed up the rates of maternal under-nutrition, particularly in Sindh and KP, severely impacting pregnant women and lactating mothers, with dire consequences for child health. According to a 2024 report documenting the malnutrition crisis in the country, a staggering 1.4 million infants are born



under-weight each year. And with malnourished mothers often struggling to breastfeed, newborns become even more susceptible to inadequate nutrition, entrenching a vicious cycle of intergenerational poor health.

It goes without saying that extreme hunger and food insecurity are crises that we must tackle on an emergency basis. A predominantly agricultural country like Pakistan should have achieved sustainable food sufficiency long ago but we neglected this task. Our systems for climate resilience and agricultural stability are in clear need of an urgent overhaul, with policies geared toward ensuring food security for all, including the most vulnerable segments of the population. With India's suspension of the Indus Waters Treaty now jeopardising our agricultural lifeline, we are in an even more precarious position.

We need to promote and encourage

greater use of fertilisers and pesticides which previously boosted yields in Pakistan, but rising costs have made them unaffordable for many farmers. So their costs should be brought down through targeted subsidies. On the other hand, scientific breeding and genetically modified seeds can improve crop resistance to drought, pests, and disease. The adoption of hybrid seeds, particularly for IRRI-rice varieties and maize, has raised productivity. Such seeds should also be adopted for wheat which is our staple food.

The increase in agricultural productivity in Pakistan has lagged behind global benchmarks. Average wheat yields in Pakistan range from 2.8 to 3.1 tonnes per hectare, compared to over 3.5 tonnes globally and 5.5 tonnes in China. Another major hurdle is lack of storage facilities and efficient logistics which results in higher post-harvest losses. Another issue is that of unequal distribution of food which leads to hunger in some areas. Pakistan pro-



duces enough food to feed its population, but a significant portion of the population faces food insecurity due to unequal access. This requires making the food supply chain more efficient and equitable.

To address the issue of food insecurity on a long-term basis, we must develop an integrated policy framework that embraces all the causative factors - environmental, economic, or geopolitical. Several factors contribute to Pakistan's sluggish growth in agriculture, including outdated seed varieties, poor water management, and insufficient extension services. Housing developments, and industrial encroachments have also reduced arable land. Climate change also now poses a serious threat to Pakistan's agricultural productivity. All these issues need to be tackled in a comprehensive manner to overcome the challenge of food insecurity.

Pakistan lags far behind in human development

Nasim Ahmed

According to the latest Human Development Report, recently released by the United Nations' Development Programme (UNDP), the state of human development in most parts of the world is poor and worsening. Pakistan ranks 168th out of 193 countries on the Human Development Index (HDI). A detailed analysis shows that the country attained an HDI score of 0.544 out of 1.00. This means that Pakistan is in the bottom-most category, with Afghanistan being the only other South Asian nation placed in this category.

The HDI measures a country's achievements in three basic areas of human development: health, education and standard of living. The HDI sets a minimum and a maximum for each dimension, called 'goalposts', then shows where each country stands in relation to these goalposts. This is expressed as a value between 0 and 1. The higher a country's human development, the higher its HDI value. The HDI is used to capture the attention of policy-makers, the media and non-governmental organizations, and to change the focus from the usual economic metrics to human-centred outcomes. HDI emphasizes that people and their capabilities should be the ultimate criteria for assessing the development process in a society.

In the latest HDI Iceland has replaced Norway at the top of the list. Norway comes second, with Switzerland third and Denmark fourth. Sweden shares the fifth place with Germany and Finland is number thirteen. The other Nordic countries are all high on the list. Australia, Hong Kong, the Netherlands and Belgium are number seven to ten on the list. The UK shares number 13 with Finland, the USA is number 17 and France 26. The countries with least human development are, according to the index, the Central African Republic, Somalia and South Sudan.

Unfortunately, Pakistan's overall HDI score has been stagnating over the last two years. Pakistan was ranked 161st in 2022 and 164th last year, which means that its ranking has dropped four places over the period. The core indicators paint a dismal picture: life expectancy is 67.6 years; expected years of schooling are just 7.9; mean years of schooling are a mere 4.3; Gross National Income per capita stands at \$5,501; the inequality-adjusted HDI

drops further to 0.392; and the Gender Inequality Index is at a low 0.536. These statistics point to the long-standing trend of underinvestment in key sectors such as education and health, persistent income inequality, and deep-rooted structural economic weakness. Pakistan fares poorly even within its own region. Among South Asian peers—India, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka—Pakistan consistently ranks lowest across nearly every human development metric, from income and life expectancy to gender equity and educational attainment. The country is also reportedly ranked among the bottom 12 per cent when it comes to mobile and broadband

more urgent than ever, so no one is excluded from emerging possibilities. AI requires massive amounts of electricity and water to move forward. But, sadly, Pakistan is currently short of both basic needs.

The 2025 Human Development Report is a clarion call to Pakistan's policy makers who seem to be caught up in time warp. Countries that have achieved high levels of human development have done so through massive investment in the education and healthcare of their citizens. As is well-known, Sri Lanka, despite its economic difficulties, has ensured near-universal access to education and healthcare. Vietnam



internet speeds.

The UNDP lists rising trade imbalance and a worsening debt crisis among the major challenges facing 'low' HDI category nations. In the opinion of UNDP, the aggressive and short-sighted trade policies and aid cuts by the US and other Western nations will further damage the Global South. On the other hand, institutions like the IMF have burdened developing nations with massive debts, curtailing their ability to invest in human development sectors.

According to UNDP, the gap between 'low' and 'very high' HDI countries continues to increase, an indicator of rising global inequality. While the report emphasises the potential for the rise of AI and a human-centric AI approach to reaccelerate development and close development gaps, it notes that the growing importance of AI makes closing electricity and internet gaps

has employed digital tools to expand public services and empower marginalized populations. These examples show the power of well thought out, people-focused policy decisions in driving transformative development.

Pakistan needs to learn from the experience of other countries. It is time we transitioned from an elite-dominated system to a new national development paradigm that is people-centred. This can be achieved through channelling investments into education and healthcare to promote inclusive growth. Pakistan must also tackle the challenge of rising inequality through necessary tax reforms that ensure more equitable income and wealth distribution and equitable access to services. This requires institutional capacity building, better governance, digital innovation, and quick service delivery.

IMF's new conditions: Risk for fragile recovery?

Muhammad Hassan

In a move that tightens the screws on Pakistan's economic revival, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) has introduced a set of unconventional benchmarks under its ongoing bailout program. From removing import restrictions on used vehicles to making the captive power levy permanent and lifting caps on energy surcharges, the latest measures mark a shift from routine compliance to deeper structural reforms. While these actions are intended to bolster transparency and improve financial governance, they come with higher stakes — altering fiscal targets and reshaping long-standing industrial protections.

In its relentless pursuit of economic coherence, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) has unfurled an ensemble of eleven freshly-minted structural benchmarks under the ongoing \$7billion Extended Fund Facility (EFF) enveloping Pakistan. These stipulations — spanning fiscal rectitude, institutional transparency, societal safeguards, energy recalibrations, and trade liberalization — are engineered to fortify Pakistan's economic scaffold and steer it toward sustainable solvency.

A linchpin of these imperatives is the mandated parliamentary sanction of the fiscal year 2026 budget, meticulously tailored to echo the IMF staff-level concord. This statutory endorsement must be sealed no later than June 2025, embodying the fiscal contouring required to attain macroeconomic equilibrium. Concomitantly, the Fund insists on the promulgation of fresh Agricultural Income Tax statutes — complete with an intricate blueprint for taxpayer profiling, systemic enrollment, and fortified enforcement apparatus — to be deployed by mid-2025.

In matters of governance, the IMF has demanded the public unveiling of a Governance Action Manifesto, synthesized from an incisive Governance Diagnostic Evaluation. This disclosure is slated for no later than October 2025, marking a pivotal step in administrative probity. On the societal frontier, the blueprint mandates a yearly recalibration of the unconditional cash transfer (UCT) disbursements, to neutralize inflation's erosive touch — a mechanism due to be activated by January 2026. This ensures that the economically vulnerable do not find their sustenance hollowed by economic tremors.

Turning to the monetary and fiscal firmament, the IMF has etched in stone the requirement for a post-2027 financial sector blueprint — a codified strategy meant to embolden financial equilibrium — with a publishing deadline of June 2026. Within the energy realm, the IMF's com-

pass points toward pragmatic tariff modulations in both electricity and gas domains. Legislative mandates are to be introduced, extinguishing inefficiencies and scrapping ceilings on debt service surcharges — a move intended to cleanse the sector of fiscal sediment.

The trade and investment landscape is not spared either. The benchmarks sketch a gradual discontinuation of privileges offered within Special Technology Zones, with a sunset clause by 2035. Moreover, prohibitions strangling the importation of used vehicles are set to be rescinded by July 2025. While the government has aligned with several Quantitative Performance Criteria (QPCs) and Indicative Targets (ITs) for FY2024-25, the report underscores shortfalls in sectors such as public health, education allocation, revenue mobilization, and the implementation lapse in the Tajir Dost initiative. Nevertheless, the Fund concedes headway in pivotal domains and underscores the indispensable nature of ongoing recalibrations. A noteworthy clause within the IMF's dossier pertains to the exigency of amicable closures to high-stake litigation — especially those tethered to thinly-capitalized financial institutions and independent captive power producers — which are considered vital to rekindling economic momentum. Should these calibrated prescriptions be translated into action with requisite fidelity, Pakistan stands poised to reanchor its fiscal compass and lay the groundwork for a resilient economic horizon that harmonizes with IMF's expectations.

Still, a curious juxtaposition lingers: many of these so-called "new" conditionalities — from tariff notification rituals to the routine indexing of aid to inflation — are, in fact, standard procedural echoes of bureaucratic continuity. A far cry from innovation, yet formally enshrined benchmarks nonetheless. The IMF's latest tranche of conditions includes a trio of particularly striking stipulations: tabling legislation before June's end to lift quantitative curbs on commercial imports of used vehicles, enshrining the captive power levy into permanent law, and scrapping the ceiling on debt service surcharges applied to consumer electricity bills. These are not mere bureaucratic rituals; they signal a move towards enhanced fiscal candour and a recalibration of governance standards within the economic and financial frameworks of the state.

Further, the IMF has recalibrated certain quantitative performance indicators for the current fiscal cycle. Notably, the gross foreign exchange reserves target has been hoisted from \$12.75 billion to \$13.9 billion, while the ceiling for net domestic assets has been trimmed from

Rs15.8 trillion to Rs15 trillion. Simultaneously, the floor for new tax return filers has seen a significant hike — from 450,000 to a more ambitious 850,000. Encouragingly, Pakistan has surged past these updated thresholds in the first half of the fiscal year, and the road ahead for meeting these benchmarks appears relatively navigable. At a broader level, these amplified program targets are not ad hoc impositions — they form part of a strategic architecture designed to embed key policy priorities. These include fortifying fiscal discipline, phasing out unsustainable subsidies, protecting the economically marginalized, bolstering market competition, enhancing productivity, and ensuring the financial viability of the country's teetering energy sector.

Interestingly, several of the new structural goals target entrenched privileges enjoyed by select industries — the automotive sector being a case in point. Under the new framework, preferential treatment is to be gradually withdrawn between FY27 and FY30. The logic underpinning this move is to catalyze market competition — in part, by liberalizing the import of used vehicles. Yet, a lingering question remains: does expanding access to fossil-fuel-based used cars truly align with the nation's long-term ambition of transitioning to an electrified, low-carbon transport ecosystem? The answer isn't as straightforward, and opinions diverge.

Nevertheless, one truth stands out: Pakistan's recent macroeconomic performance — under IMF surveillance — has been unexpectedly solid. But this veneer of stability rests on fragile underpinnings. Much of it has come at the cost of economic dynamism, achieved through a growth compression that may not be sustainable in the long term.

The IMF's own assessment echoes this cautionary note. It underlines that only through continued, consistent adherence to the agreed reforms can Pakistan cement its nascent economic stability and nurture genuine, lasting growth. Any deviation or policy relapse could rapidly unravel the gains made — a descent Pakistan can scarcely afford, economically or politically.

Pakistan's recent performance under the IMF program has been unexpectedly resilient, outperforming several revised targets. However, this stability is precarious — won not through expansion, but by compressing economic growth. As the IMF warns, sustaining this hard-earned equilibrium demands unwavering commitment to reforms. Any deviation could undo the fragile progress, risking a return to economic vulnerability. In this high-wire act of recovery, reform is not just an option — it's a necessity.

Cautious optimism: Business sentiment rises amid persistent challenges

Muhammad Zain

The latest Business Confidence Index (BCI) survey conducted by the Overseas Investors Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OICCI) reveals a notable shift in sentiment across Pakistan's key economic sectors. Conducted in March and April 2025, just before heightened tensions with India, the survey reflects a rare return to positive territory for business confidence—a first in three years. While macroeconomic stability and expectations of improved government policies have fueled cautious optimism, lingering structural issues continue to cloud the overall outlook.

The chamber unveiled the findings of its Business Confidence Index (BCI) – Wave 27, exposing a 16-point swing in outlook, moving the needle from a discouraging -5% to a cautiously optimistic +11%. This marks the index's first re-entry into affirmative terrain since May 2022, when it last peaked at +17%. From that point forward, the index had languished in a pall of pessimism, registering sequential negatives of -4%, -25%, -18%, -14%, and -5%—until now.

Commissioned by global market intelligence firm AC Nielsen, this diagnostic was administered across Pakistan in March and April 2025, preceding the geopolitical friction with India. The resurgence in optimism appears tethered to improving macroeconomic fundamentals: decelerating inflationary currents, perceived policy recalibrations, and the anticipation of a stabilised business climate over the ensuing half-year.

At the forefront of this renaissance, the manufacturing segment saw its confidence metric surge from -3% to a spirited +15%, suggesting a robust recalibration in industrial sentiment. The wholesale and retail domains followed suit, vaulting from -18% in the previous survey to a modestly positive +2%, denoting a cumulative swing of 20 percentage points. Meanwhile, the services sector displayed a tempered but encouraging ascent, climbing from +2% to +10%.

The study also illuminated forward-facing optimism: 45% of participants envisioned buoyant conditions in the next six months. This guarded optimism was fuelled by expectations of economic consolidation, improved administrative maneuvering, a friendlier investment milieu, and an increasingly stabilised security architecture.

Despite these affirmative signals, nearly

53% of contributors recounted bleak experiences over the preceding semester—though this is a notable contraction from the prior 66% in Wave 26. Enduring apprehensions persist around political turbulence, the erratic rupee-foreign exchange dynamic, erratic energy policies, and unsteady trade regulations. Encouragingly, foreign investors—specifically a cross-section of OICCI affiliates—reported an uplift in sentiment from +6% to +17%. This leap has been ascribed to an ameliorated global commercial atmosphere, a more inviting domestic industrial climate, and expectations of revived capital infusion over the next two quarters.

As for impediments ahead, respondents spotlighted inflationary weight, convoluted tax regimes, wavering governmental strategies, and the chronic erosion of the rupee. The hierarchy of these concerns remained unchanged from previous iterations, reflecting



structural issues demanding urgent redress. Conducted biannually, the OICCI's survey encapsulates the sentiment of pivotal economic actors who collectively represent close to 80% of Pakistan's GDP, making it a significant bellwether of business sentiment in the nation's economic bloodstream.

According to the findings, the modest macroeconomic calm, albeit fragile and susceptible to both internal derailments and external headwinds, has nudged business sentiment into positive terrain for the first time in three years. The forward-looking mood among respondents also improved, with 45% expressing optimism for the half-year ahead. This uplift was largely credited to visible economic expansion, enhanced governmental direction, a friendlier investment climate, and an increasingly secure environment.

However, the sheen of this optimism is dulled by persistent anxieties: inflationary pressures, erratic tax policies, inconsistent governance, and the ongoing erosion of the

rupee remain dominant threats. Notably, inflation and taxation once again stood as the primary concerns—unchanged from the previous round of interviews conducted in late 2024.

Yet beneath the surface of this cautiously buoyant narrative lies a more sobering reality. A majority of participants still voiced pessimism over prevailing business conditions, and many remain reluctant to initiate fresh capital deployments—held back by the shadow of political volatility, the rupee's unpredictable path, and convoluted energy and trade frameworks.

This should not escape the notice of economic stewards. While business sentiment surveys offer a snapshot of prevailing moods, they are inherently limited by the subjectivity of perception. A policy shift or economic metric that appears advantageous to one segment might simultaneously be detrimental to another. For instance, currency depreciation might favor exporters but injure import-dependent sectors and exacerbate inflationary burdens for consumers.

In truth, the genuine barometers of economic health are far more tangible: new investments in infrastructure or enterprise, surges in productive output and exports, upward mobility in household incomes, an expanding middle class, sustained job generation, and meaningful reductions in poverty levels. On these fronts, there remains a discernible stagnation. The current BCI results, while encouraging in tone, cannot yet be construed as definitive proof of successful economic stewardship. The pathway to durable confidence lies not in sentiment alone, but in the material transformation of economic fundamentals.

Despite the positive momentum in sentiment, the broader economic reality remains tethered to deep-rooted uncertainties. More than half of the respondents still reported negative experiences, with hesitancy toward new investments tied to political instability, currency volatility, and inconsistent policy frameworks. While the government celebrates the survey as an endorsement of its economic strategy, true validation lies in measurable outcomes—investment inflows, job creation, poverty reduction, and sustained growth. Until these indicators show real progress, the resurgence in business confidence should be seen as a hopeful signal, not a final verdict.

Pakistan's economic growth: doubts and structural reforms

Shahid Hussain

Pakistan's economy recorded a 2.4% growth in the third quarter of the fiscal year, as reported by the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (PBS). However, revised estimates for prior quarters and persistent concerns about data reliability cast shadows over this figure.

Coupled with stringent IMF conditions, rising input costs, and the phasing out of industrial and agricultural incentives, the economic outlook remains uncertain. Efforts to strengthen statistical frameworks and enhance data transparency are underway, but challenges like political interference and fiscal constraints continue to hinder Pakistan's path to sustainable growth.

Pakistan's economy grew by 2.4% in the third quarter of the current fiscal year (July–March 2025); however, questions linger about the reliability of this figure, as the PBS recently adjusted its estimates for the prior two quarters. The growth for July–September 2024 was revised upward to 1.37% from an earlier 1.34%, while the October–December 2024 estimate was lowered to 1.53% from 1.73%. Efforts are underway to strengthen the country's statistical framework, as outlined in documents from the International Monetary Fund's first review, published on its website. The PBS has taken a significant step by releasing quarterly expenditure-side estimates for the first time in December, aiming to improve the quality of national accounts data.

The IMF also highlighted a key condition in its Memorandum of Economic and Financial Policy, noting that data collection for three major surveys—the Agriculture Census, Labour Force Survey, and Household Integrated Economic Survey—is progressing. The PBS is expected to finalize and publish these reports by December 2025, making the results available on the National Summary Data Page portal. These surveys will offer deeper insights into macroeconomic trends and help evaluate the effectiveness of social spending.

Additionally, work on a new Producer Price Index (PPI) is advancing, with agreements in place with provincial statistics agencies to begin monthly data collection in July

2025. Preparations are also underway for three surveys in FY26: the Census of Manufacturing Industries, the Survey of Small and Household Manufacturing Industries, and the Family Budget Survey, which will, for the first time, account for spending on digital platforms. Improved accuracy and credibility in these statistics could empower the Ministry of Finance to make proactive, data-driven decisions. Ideally, this will help Pakistan avoid the reactive cycle of seeking IMF assistance only when a financial crisis looms.

Pakistan's reliance on its 24th IMF bailout package underscores a persistent issue: the lack of reliable data to guide timely policy decisions. Many independent economists argue that successive governments have deliberately manipulated data, a practice that has fueled the country's mounting debt crisis.



The IMF's recent report acknowledges ongoing efforts to bolster Government Financial Statistics (GFS), including the formation of a dedicated GFS team and a multi-year plan to adopt the GFSM 2014 framework and integrate data from state-owned enterprises. While these steps aim to strengthen the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (PBS), the critical challenge lies in eliminating political interference in data reporting to ensure its integrity.

The reported 2.4% growth for the third quarter (July–March 2025) raises doubts for two key reasons. First, administrative measures to achieve full-cost recovery for underperforming utilities, as mandated by the IMF, have driven up input costs across industries. Coupled with a tight monetary policy—marked by

an 11% discount rate, higher than the regional average—this has led to negative growth in the large-scale manufacturing sector.

Additionally, the IMF's requirement to phase out industrial incentives, including export-specific and broader subsidies, alongside the federal and provincial governments' decision to stop announcing support prices for major crops, is likely to suppress output in the next fiscal year. The Public Sector Development Programme remains a potential driver of growth, but it is often drastically cut when budget deficit targets are missed, a recurring issue in Pakistan's fiscal management.

The IMF's full-year growth projection of 2.6% for the current fiscal year, down from an earlier 3.2%, appears overly optimistic. With first-quarter growth at 1.37%, second-quarter at 1.53%, and third-quarter at 2.4%, achieving this

target would require an ambitious and unlikely surge in the final quarter.

While Pakistan's reported 2.4% growth in Q3 2025 signals cautious optimism, doubts about data accuracy and structural challenges temper expectations. The IMF's push for improved statistical frameworks and transparency is a step toward better policymaking, but eliminating political interference and ensuring robust data collection remain critical. With tight monetary policies, rising costs, and reduced incentives threatening output, achieving the IMF's 2.6% full-year growth target appears ambitious. Pakistan must prioritize credible data and proactive fiscal management to break free from its cycle of reliance on IMF bailouts and foster sustainable economic stability.

The high-stakes gamble of Indo-Pak conflict

Raza Khan

The most significant casualty in the recent armed conflict between Pakistan and India is the overall stability of the South Asian region. Although South Asia has long been marred by instability, the current tensions between its two largest nations have intensified regional volatility to an unprecedented degree. This new wave of instability is deeply concerning because it carries not only tangible consequences—such as strained diplomatic ties and disrupted trade—but also intangible ones, including increased mistrust, fear, and polarization.

If reason does not prevail in the decision-making corridors of New Delhi, the existing instability in South Asia risks becoming entrenched. In such a scenario, reversing the damage—particularly in terms of economic development—will prove extraordinarily difficult. The greatest victims of this instability are the more than two billion inhabitants of the region, which accounts for roughly one-fourth of the global population. South Asia, while being the most densely populated region in the world, also suffers from widespread poverty and underdevelopment. Further destabilization would be catastrophic, not only for the people of this region but also for global peace and economic progress.

Given these high stakes, it is imperative that the leadership of both Pakistan and India reassess their foreign and defence policies to avoid escalating tensions. So far, both sides appear more interested in posturing for domestic political gain than in pursuing meaningful de-escalation. In particular, Indian leadership—most notably Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Home Minister Amit Shah—has played a controversial role in aggravating the situation.

The crisis began with a terrorist attack in Pahalgam, located in Indian-occupied Kashmir, which resulted in the tragic deaths of 26 Indian tourists. Pakistan swiftly condemned the attack and extended condolences to the Indian leadership. Nevertheless, India wasted no time in blaming Pakistan-based groups such as Lashkar-e-Taiba, alleging official complicity. This narrative gained traction within India but raised eyebrows internationally, especially given the speed with which these conclusions were drawn.

India's refusal to consider Pakistan's offer of joint investigation into the Pahalgam

incident further weakened its diplomatic standing. Despite India's significant global influence—owing to its economic growth, educated workforce, and expansive media apparatus—the hasty and unsubstantiated accusations damaged its credibility. The conduct of Indian officials and the sensationalism of Indian media coverage during and after the conflict led to widespread criticism, both globally and within India.

In essence, the leadership on both



sides must rise above political theatrics and prioritize the well-being of their people. Without restraint, diplomacy, and foresight, South Asia risks plunging deeper into a crisis from which recovery will be long and painful. India's position during the recent conflict with Pakistan weakened significantly due to the immature and ideologically rigid approach adopted by Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his associates. Rooted in the fundamentalist Hindu nationalist ideology of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), their worldview is shaped by a narrow, radical lens that distorts regional and global realities. This ideological rigidity is at the heart of the current dilemma facing Indian leadership.

One of the clearest indications of India's faltering stance was the unexpected intervention by U.S. President Donald Trump. Despite initially displaying indifference—re-marking flippantly that “they've been fighting for over a thousand years”—President Trump later took the lead in announcing a ceasefire between the two nuclear-armed neighbors, while the Modi administration showed reluctance. His involvement, though surprising at first, was perhaps inevitable given the gravity of the situation and Washington's vested interests in South Asia.

Trump's intervention can be attributed to several strategic considerations. First, the United States views both India and Pakistan as important regional players. India, as Wash-

ington's primary ally in South Asia, was not only behaving irresponsibly but was also reportedly suffering tactical setbacks against the Pakistan Air Force (PAF). On the other hand, Pakistan remains a key partner whose further entanglement in conflict would jeopardize broader U.S. interests. Moreover, the spectacle of Pakistani pilots successfully operating Chinese fighter jets like the J-10 highlighted Beijing's growing influence—a development that would not sit well with Washington.

Strategically, the U.S. had strong reasons to rein in both countries. India is among the top three trading partners of the United States, and any destabilization there could negatively impact American businesses. A weakened India could open more space for China's regional dominance—something Washington is keen to avoid, especially under the Trump administration's confrontational stance toward Beijing. Simultaneously, Pakistan remains a major exporter to the U.S., giving Washington significant diplomatic leverage through trade ties with both nations.

Even for China, prolonged instability in South Asia is undesirable. While the conflict showcased the capabilities of Chinese defence exports—an economic win in the short term—Beijing values long-term regional stability. China shares borders with both Pakistan and India and cannot remain immune to the fallout of regional conflict. Moreover, peace in South Asia aligns with President Xi Jinping's flagship Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which depends on secure and stable corridors. Notably, India is a significant trading partner for China, with bilateral trade amounting to around \$115 billion, heavily tilted in China's favor.

Thus, both superpowers—the United States and China—are unlikely to support prolonged or deepening instability in South Asia. While they may tolerate limited skirmishes that serve their strategic goals, neither is willing to risk a full-blown conflict that disrupts trade, investment, or diplomatic alignments.

Ultimately, it is the leadership of Pakistan and India that must demonstrate wisdom and foresight. The fate of over two billion people—and the future of a region fraught with poverty, potential, and nuclear capability—hangs in the balance. Responsible governance, not ideological posturing or geopolitical brinkmanship, is the only path forward for lasting peace and prosperity in South Asia.

Pakistan's water time bomb ticks louder

Dr. Zaheer Ahmed Babar

As blistering heat melts glaciers and rivers dwindle, Pakistan's water crisis is no longer a distant threat—it's a ticking time bomb.

The World Bank's chilling warning of water riots looms large, a hauntingly real possibility if the nation doesn't act fast. This isn't just about dry taps or thirsty fields; it's about a government failing its people, letting neglect and inaction push a vital lifeline to the brink. The clock is ticking, and empty promises won't cut it anymore—Pakistan needs bold moves to dodge a disaster that's already knocking at the door.

The uproar over canal projects in Pakistan has stirred up a storm, especially in Sindh, where people are worried sick about water shortages and unfair distribution. It is a stark reminder of just how fragile Pakistan's water situation is—and how quickly tensions can flare when folks feel their lifeline is at stake.

The World Bank recently dropped a bombshell, warning that water disputes could spark serious conflict here. That is not just a distant prediction—it is a slap in the face to Pakistan's leaders, who've let this crisis fester. When global experts start talking about water riots, you know the government has dropped the ball big time. It's a mess decades in the making, born from neglect, sloppy planning, and a knack for kicking the can down the road.

This isn't some sudden shock. Pakistan's been wrestling with water scarcity for ages, but you'd hardly know it from the way past governments acted—like it was no big deal. They've poured energy into flashy projects for quick political points, leaving the real problems to rot. Now, the water table is sinking fast, irrigation is a leaky mess, and the country is stuck relying on creaky old canals that can barely keep up.

Take Punjab, for example. Nearly 40% of water vanishes in local watercourses—lost to crumbling channels and shoddy upkeep. Down in the Indus Basin, it is even worse: unlined canals let 64% to 68% of water slip away through seepage and spills. It is like pouring your paycheck into a bucket with holes.

Then there is the Indus Water Treaty. Once a proud win for diplomacy, it is starting to feel more like a liability. India's upstream moves are messing with the flow downstream, but instead of getting ahead of the game with smart tech or tough talks, Pakistan's leaders just puff out their chests and shout. With climate shifts and regional power plays in the mix, that has left the country wide open to a water crisis that's

only getting uglier.

The fallout is hitting hard. In cities, water is so scarce that tanker mafias are cashing in, charging an arm and a leg for something everyone should have. Out in the countryside, farmers are watching their crops wither, stuck with dry fields and empty hopes. Food is getting scarcer, and people are feeling the pinch. This isn't just about policy anymore—it is about lives unraveling.

As heatwaves intensify and glaciers vanish, Pakistan's water woes are set to spiral out of control. The World Bank's talk of water riots isn't some far-fetched scare tactic—it is a grim reality barreling toward us unless we slam on the brakes and act now.

The government's do-nothing attitude isn't just a misstep; it is a gut punch to the basic dignity and survival of its people. Leaders need to

no one knowing who is responsible for what. Streamline it, set clear rules, and make sure someone is held accountable. Water prices should make sense too—crack down on waste without leaving the poorest high and dry.

On the global stage, Pakistan has to step up its game with India and the neighbors. We need straight talk and firm deals to keep the water flowing fairly, especially when upstream tinkering threatens to choke us downstream. And don't forget the people—everyone needs to know what is at stake. Get the word out with campaigns that hit home, teaching folks how to use water wisely. Let communities take charge of their own backyards, pitching in to save every drop they can.

The World Bank isn't crying wolf here. Water isn't just a resource—it is the backbone



answer for this reckless neglect—it is borderline criminal. Pakistan can't afford to sit around twiddling its thumbs until the pot boils over. We're done with hollow speeches and broken promises.

Real action is the only way out of this mess. For starters, the government needs to pour money into cutting-edge water-saving tech and solid infrastructure. Think new dams, patched-up canals, and farming tricks that don't guzzle water like it is going out of style. Things like drip irrigation, scooping up rainwater, and recycling wastewater need a big push—make them easy and cheap for everyone to adopt.

Next, the whole water management system is a shambles and needs a top-to-bottom overhaul. Right now, it is a jumbled mess with

of our security. If the government keeps ignoring this, we are not just looking at suffering; we are talking chaos that could badly harm the country. Pakistan's at a crossroads: act fast and smart, or brace for a future of desperation and turmoil. Time is running out.

Pakistan teeters on the edge of a water abyss—one where suffering and unrest could define the future if the government keeps shrugging off the crisis. The World Bank's alert isn't just noise; it is a blaring siren that water security is national survival. This is the moment to choose: roll up sleeves for decisive action or brace for a storm of deprivation and chaos. Time is not on our side—every second wasted is a step closer to the breaking point.

Democracy, propaganda and media

Faheem Amir

Democracy is generally considered “government of the people, by the people, and for the people.” However, it is very hard to reach a universally agreed definition. As George Orwell observed, “not only is there no agreed definition (of the word democracy), but the attempt to make one is resisted from all sides.”

While democracy is often built on the promise of an informed and equal public, where citizens actively participate in politics and decision-making to shape their future, in reality, this ideal is rarely achieved. It often becomes a carefully constructed illusion sold to the masses.

Walter Lippmann, an American journalist and political thinker, believed that equality among people was unrealistic. He argued that the general public, which he referred to as the “bewildered herd,” was incapable of understanding complex political affairs and therefore had to be guided—or rather managed—by a “specialised class” through the control of information. Noam Chomsky, in *Media Control*, expands on this idea by offering two contrasting definitions of democracy. The first—the ideal—is a system where people meaningfully participate in managing their own affairs, and where information flows freely. This is the version most people associate with democracy: one grounded in participation, empowerment and transparency.

The second version, however, is the one Chomsky argues actually exists in practice. In this model, the public is excluded from real decision-making, and access to information is tightly controlled. People may vote, but after electing someone from the specialised class, they are expected to stay quiet and not play any role in policy formation. In such systems, the public is allowed to lend their weight to elect one or another member of the specialised class. But once elections are over, citizens retreat into silence—remaining spectators, not participants. This is how what Chomsky calls a “properly functioning democracy” operates.

In societies that appear democratic, the media does not primarily inform the public. Rather, it is used to shape public opinion in ways that serve the interests of political and economic elites. Instead of enabling people to think critically and participate meaningfully, the media distracts, simplifies, and narrows acceptable thought—making people believe they are thinking freely while feeding them a curated narrative. This, according to Chomsky, is how consent is manufactured in a democracy.

The ruling elite controls the people to maintain its rule through propaganda, using me-

dia and education. In the UK, Eton College has produced nineteen prime ministers. Chomsky says that if someone wants to serve the powerful, they must do it quietly. To join the “specialised class,” a person must adopt beliefs that protect the interests of those who truly hold power, like corporations and media owners.

If someone supports the values of people like Rupert Murdoch, who owns major outlets like Fox News and The Times, they are welcomed into this elite group. Their education is designed to keep them loyal to private interests, not the public good. Propaganda and media are indispensable tools for keeping the public in check. In modern history, the first major state-led propaganda campaign was launched under U.S. President Woodrow Wilson to change public opinion for political gain. Though elected in 1916 on a peace platform, Wilson soon sought support to enter World War I. His administration created the Creel Commission—a body that, as Chomsky notes, turned a pacifist American public into a war-hungry population within six months.

Chomsky identifies this as a classic case of propaganda: creating fear through invented threats, stirring emotion with tales of suffering, and rallying the public with patriotic slogans—all to manufacture consent for war. Walter Lippmann played a central role in the Creel Commission.

Propaganda is the lifeblood of “democracy.” Chomsky explains: “In what is nowadays called a totalitarian state, it’s easy. You just hold a bludgeon over their heads. But as society becomes more democratic, you lose that capacity. Therefore, you have to turn to propaganda. The logic is clear. Propaganda is to a democracy what the bludgeon is to a totalitarian state.”

Chomsky argues that in democracies, propaganda is used to control public perception, falsify history, and shape opinion without force. American media downplayed the Vietnam War’s true death toll—in the millions—to rewrite history and portray the war as a noble cause. Similarly, the media gave massive praise to Armando Valladares, a Cuban dissident describing torture under Castro, while ignoring detailed reports on mass torture in U.S.-backed El Salvador.

The “specialised class” is trained from a young age to think differently. While the public is taught to consume and stay distracted, the elite are taught to lead. At elite schools like Eton, students are not just taught subjects; they’re trained to be decision-makers. Meanwhile, the public spends hours watching shows or reality TV, living through others instead of taking

action in their lives. Chomsky says this is not an accident—it is a way to keep people distracted. Media trains us to stay quiet and cheer from the sidelines while the “specialised class” runs the show. When people start noticing real problems—like poverty, healthcare, or joblessness—those in power create distractions. One tactic is to invent or exaggerate an enemy. This keeps people scared and focused on fake threats. Hitler used fear of Jews and gypsies. Today, governments use the media to create enemies—terrorists, immigrants, or foreign countries. Each new threat replaces the last. After the Paris attacks, the media focused on terrorism and Syria. Soon, the public forgot as new headlines took over. These fear cycles help keep people distracted and under control.

Chomsky says the powerful do not want the public to organise. That is why the media and PR push certain values. They want a society where the elite serve the wealthy, and ordinary people stay isolated and quiet. The goal is to make people focus on buying things, watching TV, and dreaming of a middle-class life. If someone feels something is missing, they are made to think it is just them—because there is no space for collective thinking.

Governments even label unions or protesters as “troublemakers.” By turning them into enemies, the system crushes efforts at real change.

Chomsky explains that the powerful keep the public scared on purpose. When people are afraid, they stop thinking clearly. This fear-based control is called amygdala hijacking. It works in four ways: It keeps people distracted; It stops clear thinking; It makes them dependent on the elite; It shapes their emotions and choices.

This manipulation not only affects opinions, but it also holds people back from reaching their true potential. Media in democracies highlights or hides stories selectively—not to inform, but to serve political and ideological interests.

Following the Pahalgam incident, Indian media used propaganda to stir patriotic and religious emotions against Pakistan, airing false stories of bombed cities and military victories without evidence. Facing unrest and economic decline, the Modi government weaponised the media to construct external threats and divert public anger. The “bewildered herd” was distracted from real issues and pushed to support a strongman image. Indian media became a tool of manipulation, suppressing dissent and distorting facts. But the truth surfaced. Journalists like Karan Thapar, along with global outlets such as The Washington Post, AFP, and Al Jazeera, exposed the lies, leaving the credibility of Indian media deeply tarnished.

Forgotten voices of the animal kingdom

Dr. Fatima Khan

Pakistan's diverse ecosystems are home to a vast array of wildlife, yet animal welfare remains a neglected issue. Despite laws designed to prevent cruelty, mistreatment of both domesticated and wild animals persists due to weak enforcement and societal indifference.

While legal frameworks such as the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act (1890) exist, gaps in implementation and outdated regulations hinder effective protection.

A small group of individuals gathered near Tibba Badar Sher Chowk in Bahawalpur, drawn to an unusual and troubling sight—a donkey-cart, with its unfortunate animal left dangling in the air. The overloaded cart, burdened beyond capacity by its owner's attempt to maximize profits, had lifted the donkey off the ground. Despite the owner's desperate efforts to bring the animal down without offloading some of the cargo, bystanders viewed the scene with indifference, treating it as an everyday occurrence.

For Sania Waheed, an A-Levels student visiting her maternal grandparents in Bahawalpur from Islamabad, the sight was deeply unsettling. She was disheartened by the apparent lack of empathy shown by those around her toward mistreated animals, whether domesticated or stray. Sania questioned the moral fabric

of society, wondering how people could claim to uphold religious and ethical values while neglecting the welfare of innocent creatures.

Islamic scholar Allama Abbas Shirazi emphasized that Islam places great importance on the compassionate treatment of animals. Citing the Holy Qur'an, he reminded believers that every living being, from creatures on land to birds in the sky, forms a community just as humans do. He highlighted that the teachings of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) strongly advocate for kindness toward animals, with numerous Hadiths illustrating the gravity of cruelty and the virtue of mercy. The Prophet (PBUH) personally intervened in cases of animal mistreatment, setting a powerful example of compassion.

Even small acts, such as removing eggs from a bird's nest, were addressed in Islamic teachings, underscoring the need for justifiable

reasons when taking the life of any creature. True adherence to Islamic principles means rejecting all forms of cruelty—whether overburdening animals, neglecting them, hunting for sport, or subjecting them to unnecessary suffering.

Beyond religious teachings, Pakistan's legal framework also provides protection for animals. Senior Supreme Court lawyer Agha Intizar Ali Imran pointed out that laws such as the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act (1890) and the Punjab Animals Slaughter Control Act (1963) criminalize acts of abuse, with offenders facing fines, imprisonment, or even the forfeiture of their animals.

Agha Imran recalled a landmark case that captured national and global attention—the plight of an elephant in Islamabad Zoo. The Islamabad High Court ruled that animals have



inherent rights under the Pakistani Constitution, condemning the mistreatment of the elephant, the exploitation of a bear forced to perform tricks, and the inhumane culling of stray dogs. The judgment reaffirmed the legal recognition of animal rights, challenging anthropocentric views and emphasizing the moral and legal duty to safeguard all living beings.

Agha Intizar Ali Imran highlights that individuals can report incidents of animal cruelty by dialing 1819. The law calls for the formation of an animal ethics committee, ensuring stricter enforcement against abusers. Pakistani legislation explicitly bans the shooting and poisoning of animals, reinforcing legal protections for their welfare.

Despite its rich biodiversity, with 177 species of mammals and 660 species of birds, Pakistan struggles with conservation and animal

welfare. The country received a low ranking on the World Animal Protection Index, earning an overall grade of 'E,' with an alarming 'F' in government accountability and a 'G' in animal protection. This places Pakistan below India and only slightly above nations with severe human rights violations.

Imran points out that animals kept in zoos and those privately owned as exotic pets both live under captivity. While the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act (1890) provides legal protection, the responsibility for wildlife management rests with provincial governments, as Pakistan lacks a unified national zoo policy.

The lawyer expresses concern that most provincial wildlife laws fail to address adequate animal welfare regulations. When it comes to privately owned wild animals, the Northern Areas

Wildlife Preservation Act (1975) mandates permission from the Chief Wildlife Warden for scientific study or placement in a recognized zoo.

Regarding domesticated pets and companion animals, Articles 3 and 5 of the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act (PCTAA) may apply, but no specific laws directly govern their treatment. Although Article 429 of the Pakistan Penal Code criminalizes harming animals valued above Rs50, cruel practices such as the mass culling of strays continue unchecked.

Imran acknowledges that the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act (1890) serves as a foundational framework recognizing that animals experience pain and suffering. However, he notes that this fundamental principle has yet to be effectively integrated into broader legislation to ensure stronger protections for animal welfare.

Although Pakistan has laws aimed at protecting animals, the lack of enforcement and inadequate policies leave many vulnerable to cruelty and neglect. The country's low ranking on the World Animal Protection Index underscores the urgent need for reform. Strengthening legal provisions, ensuring provincial governments take responsibility, and fostering public awareness are essential steps toward improving animal welfare. Recognizing animals as sentient beings and integrating this principle into legislation can pave the way for a more compassionate and ethical society.

In Gaza, selling or serving food can get you killed

Sumaya Mohammed

On April 27, my brother-in-law, Samer, was killed in Deir el-Balah in central Gaza when his vegetable stall was bombed. He wasn't armed. He wasn't a political figure. He was a peaceful man trying to earn a living to feed his children in a place where food has become more expensive than gold.

Samer wasn't a vendor by profession. He was a lawyer who defended the rights of the oppressed. But the war forced him to change his path. During the ceasefire, he was able to buy vegetables from local wholesalers. After the war resumed and the crossings into Gaza were closed in March, supplies dwindled dramatically, but he maintained a small stock of vegetables. He continued selling day and night, even as buyers became scarce due to the high prices. He often tried to give us vegetables for free out of generosity, but I always refused.

When I heard about Samer's killing, I froze. I tried to hide the news from my husband, but my tears spoke the truth. He looked like he wanted to scream, but the scream remained trapped inside his throat. Something held him back – perhaps his burdened soul could no longer bear even the expression of grief. Samer left behind three little children and a heartbroken family. No one

expected his death. It came as a shock. He was a good and pure-hearted young man, always cheerful, loving life and laughter, even in the toughest times.

I still remember him standing in front of his vegetable stall, lovingly calling out to customers. Samer is among countless food sellers who have been killed in this genocidal war. Anyone employed in providing or selling food has been targeted. Fruit and vegetable vendors, grocers, bakers, shop owners and community kitchen workers have been bombed, as if they were dealing with weapons, not food. Bakeries, shops, farms and warehouses have been destroyed, as if the food they were providing was a threat.

Ten days after Samer was killed, a restaurant and a market on al-Wahda Street, one of the busiest in the Remal neighbourhood of Gaza City, were bombed. At least 33 people were killed. Two weeks before Samer's martyrdom, the vicinity of a bakery in Jabaliya was bombed. Days before that, a food distribution

centre in Khan Younis was targeted. According to the Government Media Office in Gaza, more than 39 food and distribution centres and 29 community kitchens have been targeted since the beginning of the war.

It is clear by now that in its campaign of deliberate starvation, Israel is not only blocking food from entering Gaza. It is also destroying every link in the food supply chain. As a result of the repeated targeting of vendors and markets, all that is available now to buy – for those who can afford to buy food – are scraps. Death has become easier than life in Gaza.

The starvation is affecting babies and little children the worst. On May 21, the Euro-Med Human Rights Monitor reported at least 26 Palestinians, including nine children, died within a 24-hour period due to starvation



and lack of medical care in Gaza.

On May 5, the Ministry of Health in Gaza said it had registered the deaths of at least 57 children caused by malnutrition since the aid blockade began in early March. As a mother, I often go days without eating just to feed my children whatever little food we have left. My husband spends the entire day searching for anything to ease our hunger but usually comes back with mere scraps. If we're lucky, we eat a piece of bread – often stale – with a tomato or cucumber that I divide equally among our children.

The hardship Samer's wife faces is even more unbearable. She tries to hide her tears from her children, who keep asking when their father will return from the market. The loss forced her to become a father overnight, pushing her to stand in long queues in front of community kitchens just to get a bit of food. She often returns empty-handed, trying to comfort her children with hollow words: "When Dad comes back, he'll bring us food." Her children fall asleep hungry, dreaming of a bite to fill their

stomachs – one their late father will never bring.

Israel has claimed that it is blocking aid to Gaza because Hamas takes it. The Western media, fully complicit in distorting the truth, has parroted the claim. Yet it is clear that Israel is not just targeting Hamas but the entire population of Gaza. It is deliberately using starvation as a weapon of war against civilians, obstructing the flow of humanitarian aid – a war crime, according to international law.

Recently, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu made the true aim of his government more than apparent by demanding all Palestinians be expelled from Gaza as a condition for ending the war. His decision to allow food through the crossings is nothing but a PR stunt. Enough flour was let in to have images of bread distributed at a bakery circulating in the media

and to reassure the world that we are not starving. But these images do not reflect the reality for us on the ground. My family has not received any bread and neither have the majority of families. Flour – where available – continues to cost \$450 per bag.

While Israel claims that 388 aid trucks have entered since Monday, aid organisations are saying 119 have. An unknown number of these have been looted because the Israeli army continues to target anyone trying to secure aid distribution.

This tiny trickle of aid Israel is allowing is nothing compared with the needs of the starving population. At least 500 trucks are required every single day to cover the bare minimum. Meanwhile, some Western governments have threatened sanctions and made some symbolic gestures to supposedly pressure Israel to stop starving us. Why did they need to wait to see our children dying of hunger before doing this? And why are they only threatening and not taking real action?

Today, our greatest wish is to find a loaf of bread. Our sole concern is how to keep surviving amid this catastrophic famine that has broken our bones and melted our insides. No one among us is healthy any more. We've become skeletons. Our bodies are dead, but they still pulse with hope – yearning for that miraculous day when this nightmare ends.

But who will act to support us? Who still has a shred of compassion for us in their heart? And the most important question of all – when will the world finally stop turning a blind eye to our slow, brutal death by hunger?

Karachi's public hospitals

As a medical student, I have often witnessed overcrowding and mismanagement in government hospitals in Karachi. Leading public-sector tertiary care hospitals are overwhelmed, leading to long waiting times, insufficient beds, and overburdened doctors and paramedics. Emergency wards often lack essential equipment. This situation not only compromises the quality of healthcare, but also endangers lives. The root causes include lack of funding, poor planning, shortage of staff, and limited infrastructure. The provincial government should allocate more funds, improve hospital management systems, while expanding healthcare facilities. Additionally, launching an online appointment and triage system could help reduce pressure on the system.

Muhammad Aayan ul Haque
Karachi

Restoring order on Quetta's Zarghoon Road

Zarghoon Road, Quetta's central artery, often remains blocked as it has become a favourite spot for those who want to get their protest noticed. While the protesters exercise their democratic rights, the rest of the city suffers. Schoolchildren miss classes, patients struggle to reach hospitals, employees remain stuck in traffic for hours, and daily life comes to a painful standstill. As such, the right to protest must not override the right of the people to move freely and live in peace. The provincial government should designate specific protest zones away from all busy roads, implement proper traffic management, and restore balance between civil rights and civic order.

Muhammad Rahim
Quetta

Stroke and misguided advice

When my father had a stroke recently, it was as tough a situation as one can imagine. That moment changed me, and taught me a big life lesson. Many people call their fathers 'superheroes', but, for me, my father is a real-life hero. He has taught me everything about everyday life. When people used to tell me to 'be a son', my father would interrupt them immediately. "A daughter, too, can protect her family. Why should we call our brave daughter a 'son'? A daughter can be strong in her own way." When he suffered the stroke, I saw his blood pressure rising and his hand becoming weak and fragile. Because I have the relevant academic background, thanks to my father, I realised that he was having a stroke. I did not wait. I gave him the right medicine, and rushed him to hospital. I made that decision on my own. I did not ask my relatives because I knew they would only make me feel weak. That was the beginning of our journey with an ischaemic stroke. While, as a family, we are

busy with the recovery process, we continue to hear unhelpful advice from people who do not even understand the condition. There are always a hundred people giving us thousands of different suggestions. We are under stress, and all the advice coming our way makes it worse. One month on, people still come with bottles of oils, weird homemade medicines, and all kinds of strange ideas. Every day, we hear something new. We are exhausted not from caring for my father, but from dealing with all the myths and concoctions. At a time when we need mental peace and support, we are bombarded with confusion.

Hani Wahid Baloch
Karachi

Post-ceasefire reflections

Now that hostilities between Pakistan and India have ceased and talks are scheduled, I have a couple of suggestions for the Indian side. The first is that they should teach their school-children that there is no seaport in Lahore. The one they claimed to have bombed exists only in the imaginations of their hate-filled and venom-spewing television anchors. Second, there are some Indians, including retired army officers, who think that Pakistan is a nation of beggars. One of them even used the word 'phateacher' to describe Pakistanis. They should know that the per capita debt of India is nearly twice that of Pakistan; in 2024 it was \$2,504 vs \$1,130. So, who is the beggar?

It is amazing to see the Indian media claiming even now that it was Pakistan that capitulated, even though international media houses have reported more than once that it was India that approached the United States for a ceasefire. Finally, Donald Trump should take over the India-occupied Kashmir and make it the 51st American state. India, in such a scenario, will no longer have to maintain 700,000 troops there, and, so, it should have no objection to it.

Shakir Lakhani
Karachi

Narcissism: A silent social epidemic

The growing social illness of narcissism deserves serious attention. Narcissistic people are deeply obsessed with themselves. They think they are always right, better than others, and deserve special treatment. This self-obsessed syndrome is damaging relationships, workplaces, and family environments. Such people want full control in every situation, and never accept their faults. In families, they ruin peace by demanding constant attention and praise. In offices, they take credit for others' work and blame others for mistakes. In relationships, they show no care or empathy, only selfishness.

Unfortunately, people often confuse this behaviour with confidence or leadership. But

the truth is that it is a mental and emotional issue. Narcissism leads to stress, anxiety and emotional harm to those who deal with such people frequently. We must stop ignoring this. Society should treat narcissism as a real issue. We need to promote respect, empathy and humility. Awareness through education, media and even counselling can help both narcissists and their victims. Narcissists may appear strong, but they are emotionally weak inside. They need help. Their behaviour is not just unhealthy for others, but also for themselves. It is time we recognised narcissism as a serious social problem, and addressed it with due care.

Wasif Khaliq Dad
Rawalpindi

How community farms can tackle poverty

Small community-based farms can be a pretty viable way of reducing waste and preventing future poverty. As food security becomes a growing concern, it is imperative that we build sustainable local food systems. Community farming can significantly reduce rural and urban waste by promoting local food production and reducing reliance on large-scale agriculture.

One of the primary benefits of small farms is the minimisation of transportation. By producing food locally, the need for long-distance transportation, which contributes rather heavily to fuel consumption and excessive packaging, is significantly reduced. Additionally, small farms can adopt composting systems that convert food scraps and organic waste into valuable fertilisers. This reduces landfill waste, and enhances soil fertility. Implementing diversified crop rotation and integrated pest management further lessen dependence on synthetic fertilisers and pesticides. Beyond all the environmental benefits, community farms serve as educational hubs where residents can learn about sustainable farming practices and waste reduction strategies. They can also help establish local food systems that minimise food waste by ensuring fresh, seasonal produce is readily available, reducing reliance on long-term storage and excessive transportation.

Economically speaking, these farms offer significant benefits by creating jobs and fostering economic independence in rural and urban communities alike. Encouraging small-scale farming initiatives can help alleviate poverty by providing sustainable livelihoods and reducing dependence on external resources.

All our policymakers and community leaders should support and invest in community farms for a sustainable future. By doing so, we can work together to reduce waste, enhance our food security, and create economic opportunities that will benefit our generations to come.

Anoosha Hussain
Karachi

Jupiter is shrinking and used to be twice as big, mind-boggling study reveals

Skyler Ware

Jupiter, the solar system's largest planet, used to be even bigger, according to a new study.

The cloud of gas and dust from which the sun and planets formed dissipated around 4.5 billion years ago.

At that time, Jupiter was at least twice its current size, and its magnetic field was about 50 times stronger, researchers found. The findings, which the team described in a study published in the journal *Nature Astronomy*, could help scientists develop a clearer picture of the early solar system.

"Our ultimate goal is to understand where we come from, and pinning down the early phases of planet formation is essential to solving the puzzle," study co-author Konstantin Batygin, a planetary scientist at Caltech, said in a statement. "This brings us closer to understanding how not only Jupiter but the entire solar system took shape."

Jupiter's immense gravity — along with the sun's — helped fashion the solar system, shaping the orbits of other planets and rocky bodies. But how the giant planet itself formed remains opaque. To gain a better picture of Jupiter's early days, the researchers studied the present-day, slightly tilted orbits of two of Jupiter's moons, Amalthea and Thebe. The paths these moons chart are similar to what they were when they first formed, but the moons have been pulled slightly over time by their larger, volcanically active neighbor Io.



Lift lighter weight, get just as strong: Here's why

Jen Ator

Too often muscle is a show. "Muscle" and "strength" and "lifting" as it all happens in your average local gym is what makes strength training intimidating for some. "Instatrainers" and showoffs and pseudoscientists on social media only make it noisier with conflicting research, elaborate workout protocols, and stunt exercise videos to get eyeballs. But strength training is critical for health. We all need it. Keeping our bodies strong and functional is how we maintain health and achieve, hopefully, longevity.

So let's get away from the show of muscle. Some facts based on the most recent science: You don't have to lift heavy weights to get great results (unless you want to). You don't need complex equipment and workouts to get great results (unless you want those things).

In fact, lighter weights can give you the same muscle-building results as heavier weight if you know how to do it. You can also lift those lighter weights to achieve more muscular power, which, as you'll see, is something worth striving for as you get older. When it comes to building and maintaining muscle, two factors matter more than anything else: volume and loading.

Brad Schoenfeld, PhD, is a professor in exercise science at CUNY Lehman College in the Bronx in New York City. He's also a researcher who has published more than 300 studies in the field of exercise science and sports nutrition. His studies have consistently found that total training volume — that is, the sum of all the sets performed per muscle group per week — is a key driver of muscle hypertrophy (a.k.a. growth).

Individual differences such as training experience, recovery capacity, and even genetic factors can influence how much volume is optimal for you.



Face tattoos on 800-year-old mummy baffle archaeologists

Kristina Killgrove

An 800-year-old mummy donated to a museum in Italy a century ago has revealed new clues about ancient face tattoos. But the mummy's origin remains shrouded in mystery. Some time prior to 1930, the mummy of an adult female was donated to the Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography (MAET) at the University of Turin, with no records of its archaeological context. The mummy recently caught the attention of a team of researchers due to the surprising presence of tattoos on her face. In a study published in the *Journal of Cultural Heritage*, the international team of researchers detailed their analysis of the mummy and her tattoos, noting that they were extremely unusual both in their location and in the composition of the ink used to make them. The mummy has straight black hair cropped short and is tightly flexed into a seated position, typical of mummy burials in the Andes. Researchers carbon-dated textile fragments stuck to the body and determined the woman died between A.D. 1215 and 1382. "On the basis of current evidence — particularly preservation, body placement, associated materials and documents — a South American origin is strongly supported," study lead author Gianluigi Mangiapane, an anthropologist at the University of Turin, told Live Science in an email. But while looking closely at the mummy using infrared reflectography, a technique often used to "see through" paint layers of artwork to find older brush strokes, the research team noted a series of unusual tattoos: three lines on the mummy's right cheek, one line on the left cheek and an S-shape on the right wrist.



Just how bad is it to microwave or freeze plastic?

Jamie Ducharme

Many plastic dishes and storage containers are marked "microwave safe," but a recently filed class action lawsuit raises questions about such claims.

ClassAction.org. Ziploc lawsuit claims 'microwave safe' storage freezer bags, containers leach microplastics into food. Specifically, the lawsuit alleges that S.C. Johnson, the company that makes Ziploc products, has misled consumers about the safety of certain Ziploc bags and containers by failing to adequately warn them that these products could release microplastics when microwaved or frozen. Despite what their labels say, these items are "fundamentally unfit for microwave and freezer use" due to the danger of microplastic exposure, the complaint claims.

"We believe Ziploc products are safe when used as directed and that the lawsuit is without merit," an S.C. Johnson spokesperson said in a statement to Health.

Regardless of brand, is it really that bad to microwave or freeze plastic? Here's what to know.

Microplastics are generally defined as fragments of plastic less than five millimeters long. When larger pieces of plastic degrade, microplastics are the result. People are exposed to microplastics in all sorts of ways, from the food and water we consume to the air we breathe. As we come in contact with microplastics, they accumulate inside our bodies. Modern human brains may contain the equivalent of a plastic spoon's worth of microplastics, according to one recent study.





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